Overall Impressions

In *The Elusive Fan: Reinventing Sports in a Crowded Marketplace*, the authors, Irving Rein, Phillip Kotler, and Ben Shields, demonstrate unequivocally that success in the business of sports requires highly skilled foresight. We may yearn for a time *(if it ever existed!)* when the competition itself and seeking the Olympic ideals of faster, higher and stronger were enough to assure success in any sport, but the authors conclusively show we are far from such a utopian time now and likely will be light years away from it in the future. This is good news for professional futurists because sports has become, and is likely to remain, another huge business field whose practitioners we can help prepare for a very uncertain future.

The authors explain in great detail with theory and case studies what sports businesses should and should not do for success. They give readers a real world understanding of the risks and rewards of the multi-billion dollar global sports business. Thus the book is a good tool for consulting futurists whether their client is a totally new sports venture, a sports league faced with declining attendance or a city government deciding whether to support a new stadium with public funds. Of course, if futurist readers are also sports fans, the book gives them plenty of material with which to second guess the managements of their favorite teams and add realism to their fantasy sports games.

Abstract

In Part 1, “Reaching the Elusive Fan”, the authors lay the foundation for their prescription for what sports businesses must do to connect to the elusive fan and survive in their highly competitive and fast changing world. They define the elusive fan and show how today’s sports business environment came to be, and how fans connect to sports. They argue in many ways that the sports fan of today and tomorrow is elusive because he or she has a continually growing number ways to spend his or her leisure time and discretionary income. Most poignantly for futurists, the authors say in their closing paragraph, “The most Elusive Fans are just now being born.”

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“The Elusive Fan” is a member of a dynamic marketplace with seven major characteristics:

- **Pressurized Competitive Environment** consisting of multiple sports that have retained, or are attempting to regain, market share as well as new sports popularized by the mass media.

- **Higher Fan Expectations**, such as a wide choice of food and beverages at sports stadiums, which sports businesses must meet or lose market share.

- **The Paradox of Commercialization**—the conflict between sports as a business and sports as a game.

- **New Technology**, which gives fans 24/7 access to a variety of sports but carries the risk of fans at sports venues becoming mere staged backdrops for the more important television audience.

- **Individualism**—the growth in individual sports such as marathon running, triathlons and swimming that compete with team sports for in-person attendance and television audiences. Also, people of all ages and abilities can and do participate in these sports and therefore can devote less attention and money to team sports.

- **Changes in Family Structure and Behavior**—the phenomenon of parents’ forcing their children’s participation in organized sports. When they grow up, these children could rebel and quit sports altogether.

- **Time Pressure.** Not only does the time spent at a sporting event but also time spent in transportation to and from it matters greatly in the time-pressured fan’s calculation of whether to attend or not.

The authors show that the current situation in which sports enterprises must attract and retain the elusive fan arose throughout modern sports history as the number of communications media grew and became increasingly involved in the business of sports.

- **In The Monopoly Generation** from 1900-1950, there were “a limited number of sports products, a requirement for fans to attend the event to see it, and media-driven sports teams and celebrities emerged. Sports grew rapidly but were confined to specific markets by their lack of access and reach for broad numbers of people.”

- **In the Television Generation** from 1950-1990, people could see the same action at home as at the game. Fan interest declined in some dominant sports of the previous generation like boxing and horse racing, but television expanded those sports and attracted greater audiences for other sports like tennis and golf.
Television revenues made a sharp rise in player salaries possible, and, because of television and other media scrutiny, players could no longer carry on questionable or illegal behavior without being noticed and off-the-field image became important. The free-agency system in baseball and lengthening and overlapping of sports seasons were other important changes of this period.

- **In the Highlight Generation** from 1990 to the present, the sports industry “has had to furiously adjust to the rapidly shifting behaviors of youth culture…The only certainty is that an enigmatic, technologically savvy and highly lucrative youth generation has now emerged, and it will continue to affect how the sports industry thinks, plans and executes”. At the same time, the authors recognize the simultaneous need to reach Baby Boomers. They say, “*There is nothing more frightening to a sport than to imagine 50-year olds deciding that basketball is no longer of any interest and bass fishing and hang gliding are going to dominate the majority of their time.*”

After defining and showing how the sports world became populated with the elusive fan, the authors examine the connections of sports fans, connection entryways, how fans make decisions and the levels of fan intensity.

- Fan Connection Points” are essential connectors (star and place), communication connectors (social currency and family), and search connectors (vicarious experience and utopian). The highly successful Arena Football League (AFL) used three fan connection points. Owners, John Elway and Mike Ditka, former NFL stars, were its star connection point. The family connection was its understanding of the financial constraints of its fans in a ‘Fans Bill of Rights’ and keeping ticket prices affordable, and its utopian connection was that “It has at its roots the feel of a sandlot pickup game…”

- Participation, on site experience, media, word of mouth and mentoring are the “entryways” by which fans are introduced to a sport. Participation is actually playing the sport. For example, children gain knowledge of baseball by playing it and then become fans as adults, and adults play golf and tennis and appreciate professional competition in those sports. On-Site Experience is fulfillment of fans’ expectations about their experience at sports venues. The authors coin the term “gameness” to encompass fan expectations. “‘Gameness’ includes a broad range of expectations: cheerleaders, sideline markers, booming announcers, flashing scorecards, and batters pounding on their cleats. Strip away some of these gameness elements and fan satisfaction will inevitably drop.” Media, particularly television, are a dominating entry point. Sports cannot hope to succeed without media coverage, but they get it at the cost of a crush of inquiries. New Internet media make Word of Mouth more powerful than ever. In “guerilla marketing”, sports promoters hire professionals to stimulate Internet communication about the sports product. Mentoring is no longer just the parent-child or gym teacher-student relationship. It now includes “…sophisticated and targeted sports camps. America is dotted with these breeding-ground camps that
discover kids at early ages, connect them to coaches, and ultimately feed them into the college and professional sports world.”

• Fans consider a variety of factors like team record, affordability, and seat comfort when they decide how to spend their limited time and money on sports. Table 3.1 Assessing Fan Decision Factors, is a quantitative tool to help sports enterprises judge how well they are doing in attracting “The Elusive Fan”.

• “The Fan Involvement Ladder” divides actual and potential fans into 7 categories:
  o **Indifferent Fans** would rather do something else with their leisure than watch or play sports. This is a potentially lucrative audience. The sports business cycle dictates whether sports enterprises should spend scarce resources trying to attract these non-fans rather than get sports fans to spend even more money on sports.
  o **Eyeballs**, the largest group of fans, watch sports on television and go to live events only occasionally. Their attention determines the all-important media rating level. “Enticing them to come to a game”, the authors say, “is important and needs to be addressed aggressively.”
  o **Collectors** buy merchandise that reminds them of the sport.
  o **Attachers** want to interact with a team and its stars. “Teams in response have offered hot-stove leagues, fantasy camps, community involvement campaigns, cruises with legends, town hall meetings, and autograph days… Sports properties have begun to realize that these attachment-seeking fans can also be relatively inexpensively accommodated through online chat groups, blogs and message boards.”
  o **Insiders** “are considered to be in the upper echelon of fan commitment. They often buy courtside seats, make investments in teams, or donate to university athletic programs… The second insider category is the people who work in the industry.”
  o **The Ensnared**, the most involved of all sports fans, center their identity on the team or player they follow and “often attempt to become a part of the team’s identity, and they perceive their fandom to have an effect on the team, and, in the process, they become an additional fan attraction.”

Part 1 concludes with a section on intensifying fan involvement in which the authors say, “The task for sports decision makers is to move the fan from lower to higher levels of involvement.” They offer a range of new strategies for doing this including fantasy sports, encouraging stars to explore non-traditional media outlets, having sports stars participate in reading and other educational programs in schools, and holding sports participation clinics.
Part 2 “Connecting to the Elusive Fan” covers reinventing the sports brand, generating the sports brand transformation, implementing the sports brand transformation, and communicating the sports brand. A brand is “a synthesis of facts and images that comprise a sports product and is often defined by slogans, themes, positions, symbols product characteristics, and a number of tangible and intangible attributes. The attributes that arise in one’s mind when a brand is mentioned constitute its identity. The brand helps us distinguish one product from another.” Branding is important because it involves developing a larger number of platforms with which to connect with the fans and because branded sports products command a premium price over their unbranded competitors. The authors forecast, “As the stakes become even higher, branding will spell the difference between successful products in the industry and those that fold under competitive pressures.”

- The key components of sports branding are segmentation, involvement, ethos, and transformation.
  
  o Segmentation includes dividing people not only by familiar demographic groups like age and race, but also by perceptions, needs, and preferences within a demographic group. The authors argue that the sports industry must break down audiences into more specific segments to identify connections of different groups to the brand, prioritize market segments in order to create long-standing connections and relationships with the highest priority segments, and select a set of compatible target markets.
  
  o Involvement strategies connect sports intimately to the fan. The Boston Red Sox issuing Red Sox Nation identification cards and video games like one featuring professional golfer Vijay Singh or Formula 1 racing are examples of how to create such intimate connections.
  
  o “Ethos” is all about trust. If a sport’s credibility is jeopardized, fans may find other sports more trustworthy and therefore appealing. Players using performance-enhancing drugs or gambling, unethical judging practices, or even lack of loyalty to a place, team, or commitment can jeopardize a sport’s Ethos. Now that sports businesses are increasingly operating their own network (e.g., the NFL network). They face the growing potential Ethos problem of having stories they disseminate in their own media be perceived as biased or planted.
  
  o Transformation is “the purposeful changing of a sports industry product into a brand to heighten strengths, reduce weaknesses and address competitive pressures”. Transformation cannot go too far or it will alienate large groups of fans. Part of the reason for failure of the XFL was that it attempted too much of a transformation by, among other things, not permitting a fair catch of a punt or kickoff and thus creating needless risk of injury. Sports enterprises have four brand transformation choices:
- Be content and make no changes
- Make minor changes to what is perceived as a successful product
- Make major changes but retain some core concepts
- Completely overhaul the product and start from scratch. Japanese professional baseball is a sport needing either major changes or complete overhaul because Major League Baseball games are now televised in Japan and Japanese players are increasingly jumping to Major League Baseball.

- The five sports brand transformation drivers are Leadership, Crisis, Cultural Trends, Market, and Media.
  - Former NFL commissioners Burt Bell and Pete Rozelle were Leadership Drivers who transformed the NFL into the powerhouse we know today.
  - The book Out of Bounds: Inside the NBA’s Culture of Rape, Violence and Crime and incidents such as the Detroit Pistons-Indiana Pacers fight were Crisis Drivers that prompted the NBA to institute changes such as a dress code, raising the minimum age of players to 19, and increasing fines and punishments for bad behavior.
  - The WNBA was a culturally driven transformation of women’s professional basketball. The NBA recognized that the growth of women’s college basketball programs and the acceptance of women in professional sports made a women’s league feasible.
  - The transformation of the Los Angeles Angels was market driven. They successfully appealed to the growing Hispanic population of their region by signing high-profile Latino players such as Vladimir Guerrero and Bartolo Colon.

- Transforming sports products requires brand concept generation, brand testing, brand refinement and brand actualization.
  - The five steps of brand concept generation are audit (assessing the need for brand definition or redefinition, examining the competition, accounting for cultural trends, and determining the vision for the sports property), inventory (evaluating the brand assets by defining the product’s brand forming moments such as the famous 1958 NFL playoff game between the New York Giants and the Baltimore Colts, and understanding the brand’s values, such as power, respect, and perseverance), target (defining the segments of a market to which the sports product will appeal and
designing delivery of the language, style and material of the sports product to appeal to those segments), plan (determining whether the transformation will be minimal, moderate or extensive transformations) and build (building the brand for the target segments by selecting an appropriate brand type (e.g., tough guy such as Ray Lewis or phenom such as Michelle Wie for people or gentility such as The Masters or Holiday such as The Super Bowl for events), and developing the type with a multi-dimensional character (i.e., there can be different types of tough guys depending on the sport)).

Several methods are used to test sports brands such as focus groups to generate feedback on a concept, word associations (i.e., what a person thinks of when he or she hears a word), and projective techniques in which participants are given an incomplete stimulus and asked to complete it or an ambiguous stimulus and asked to make sense of it, so people will reveal their true thoughts and feelings. The Internet is also used to receive input from online panels that are like focus groups but are far larger. Focus group work is often followed up with casual surveys in which fans are stopped on the street and asked a few questions and scientific surveys that assess the true state of mind of the target population. Informal observation techniques provide a different perspective and often supplement focus groups and surveys with in-depth information (e.g., following the fans in purchasing seats for sports events, commuting to the stadium, and to where they eat and drink). The authors say, “We are now in an era when experimenting and digging deeper for previously uncovered cues to fan behavior has become an essential part of the sports decision process. It will not go away as the fan becomes more difficult to define and harder to find.”

Refining the brand defines its core attributes to make it consistent and believable with the new brand identity. The brand’s name should evoke its desired associations and attributes. The name “WNBA” was chosen to show association with the established NBA, and team names were chosen to be close to the names of NBA teams in each WNBA city (e.g., Houston Rockets, Houston Comets). Appearance is the visual expression of the brand that symbolizes and reinforces the brand concept. Appearance must fit the positioning of the brand; a brand can be refined through personal, organizational or structural appearance attributes. (e.g., The atmosphere inside Minute Maid Park in Houston exudes the spirit of Houston.). Material is the content of the sports brand. Material refinement must respond to fan expectations of what the sports brand ought to be or represent. Behavior, the actions of the sports brand participants, must reinforce the promise of the sports brand, the ethos of the sports brand, and the cues of the sports brand.
Brand actualization is when all aspects of the change process become second nature to the sports brand that has been altered. Key is putting together an actualization plan that includes all the various brand constituents. All must be informed of the brand’s positioning, standards and visions. Actualization involves behavior modification, mentoring, role modeling and calculated risk transformation. Media training is an important part of behavior modification. In many sports, the most common mentor for competition is an older player who encompasses the values of the sports property. Role modeling is a strategy that uses leaders who personify the brand’s core attributes to actualize the sport’s brand. **Calculated risk is probably the most prevalent brand actualization strategy.**

- The most important task in communicating the sports brand is to place the fan in the center of the message. Accessibility, interactivity and responsiveness are core components of being fan centered. The three major sports communicators are sports brand participants, media and sponsors. Traditional sports media are the most important of the three. They now compete with many sports brands that are developing and distributing their own media, and an ethos issue arises when information coming out of the sports’ owned media is excessively positive. Sponsors are also sports brand communicators. By providing financial support and exposure through the advertising and marketing of their products, they meet many fan connection points; capitalize on the strong affinity of sports fans to their athletes, players and leagues; and sell their products and services with messages that don’t appear as manipulative as conventional advertising. However, there can be problems if the sponsor’s product or service does not fit the brand values of the sports property or the sponsor becomes so dominant in promotion that fans begin to see its involvement as exploitation. “Tools of the trade” sponsors like Reebok or Prince often fit seamlessly within the sport itself.

- Sports brands should use “dramatic reality” which is the restructuring of reality into a narrative format to strategically heighten the drama of real events in formulating the sports brand story. There are six components of a sports brand story drama, adversity, crisis, mentors, persistence, and a final reward or climax. Star communication is the most important and effective strategy to communicate dramatic reality. One problem with this is that fans often like the star who is most unlikeable to management. Cultural trend communication capitalizes on the behaviors and rituals of fan cultures. Community communication builds fan support by involving community members; key to this strategy is that community members feel invested in the sports brand. Experience communication is essential for fans to be convinced that leaving their television sets and computers for a trip to the venue is worth it.
In Part 3 “Surviving in the Sports Fan Marketplace”, the authors address sustaining the fan connection, provide examples of successful sports branding and the future of the fan connection. A successfully established sports brand must be kept fresh and adapt to new conditions such as audience changes and emerging distribution channels. To avoid decline, the sports brand needs to identify the decline problem and determine its causes, understand the specific challenges and devise sustaining strategies to ultimately retain and grow the fan connection. The two types of decline are falls in measurable indicators like attendance and television ratings and in less quantifiable indicators such as media coverage or diminished connection with the fans. The most common cause of decline is underperformance, which occurs when athletic performance expectations are unmet, but underperformance is not necessarily related to wins and losses. A participation downturn can signal a major problem for a sports brand such as a decline in the number of golf participants. When a sports brand experiences eroding financial support from political or economic decisions, one common solution is to cut budgets and create additional causes of decline. Weak leadership can also be a cause of decline because it can affect all aspects of a sport including internal brand operations and brand ethos. Overpricing can cause decline when the price does not reflect the fan’s willingness to pay for the sport. Missing star power is devastating to a sports brand. Shifting demographics in both the sports brand and the audience can cause a decline (e.g., reduced number of African-American baseball players). Cultural shifts can affect a sports brand’s market position. Scandals can destroy or severely damage a sports brand.

- In sustaining themselves, sports brands can face several different types of challenges.
  - The participation challenge is getting children to play so that they will learn the rules of the game, experience the difficulty of mastering it, form bonds with family and peers involved in it, and become adult fans. Parents have a wide choice of sports to select for their children. Entry points can be for children as young as two and continue throughout childhood. Sports have to be mindful of the disconnect between forcing children to play a sport and the inevitable counterforce that leads youth to rebel against parental direction. A forward looking sport might position as a countersport that would appeal to a 12 or 13-year-old rebelling against traditional sports or heavy institutional control, or sports decision makers might consider institutionalizing and supporting pickup games such as the NHL’s sponsorship of the North American Roller Hockey Championships that appear less championship based. Organizations like the Maine Center for Sport and Coaching are actively promoting good sportsmanship, civic pride and a more value and less winning-centered experience. There is a growing movement toward opening and refining new markets for participation (e.g., women in hockey). A new definition of what constitutes sports participation for children and adults is essential. New sports media technologies such as fantasy leagues can be just as powerful in bonding to potential fans as playing a sport.
The attendance challenge is that attendance is becoming less attractive as a barometer for the popularity of a sporting event and its athletes because of things like pricing, transportation to and from, and other entertainment options. The sports industry must start planning for the communication issues that will inevitably impact the fan’s willingness and ability to attend sporting events (e.g., integrate transportation into all facility design plans or bring the event to the fans at satellite venues, construct venues with many of the advantages of the new media technologies).

The media challenge is that sports that lose or cannot receive major market penetration on television have to use state of the art new media (e.g, CSTV.com manages the websites for over 250 college and university sports programs and provides exposure for previously anonymous sports like equestrian events, fencing and cross-country running). It is no longer sufficient to consider only game attendance relationships between the sport and the fan.

The crisis challenge is that the number of crises that affect sports brands continue to grow as the financial stakes rise and the media seek more access and information. A quick guide to Fan-Centered Crisis Communication on pages 251-252 would be a good guide for resolving any kind of crisis when intense media scrutiny is a problem.

- The authors offer the following rules for sports brands to sustain themselves in The Highlight Generation.
  - The more competitive and fragmented the industry, the more dependent the sports brand is upon fan connections.
  - Sports brands must prioritize and manage their core markets.
  - Sports brands must understand fan expectations and be reasonable in setting them and consistent about meeting them.
  - Sports brands must stay within their “gameness” by maintaining core values and controlling the change process.
  - Sports brands must understand the dynamics of a constantly evolving marketplace and be proactive in forming new connections.
  - Sports brands must balance best practices with a willingness to experience and reach out to new relationships and concepts.

- The following are strategies for sustaining a brand.
  - “Eventize”—The NFL draft.
o **Ride a Star**—Larry Bird of the Boston Celtics

o **Venture into Foreign Markets**—NBA telecasts in China

o **Connect with new segments**—Female boxing

o **Appeal to nostalgia**—1941 game day uniforms

o **Create a rivalry**—North Carolina vs. Duke in basketball. The ACC-Big Ten Challenge in basketball

o **Develop synergistic experiences**—Market not just a product but a lifestyle. The Citgo Bassmasters Classic

- The penultimate chapter provides examples of successful sports brands.

  o **The branded event**—The Kentucky Derby takes place on Derby Day which creates enduring fan connections and commands a premium for the experience.

  o **The branded athlete**—Maria Sharapova merges the attractiveness and storyline of a film star with the competitiveness and focus of a professional athlete. She appears on magazine covers and stars in television commercials for her many clients.

  o **The branded owner**—Mark Cuban of the Dallas Mavericks, unlike traditional sports team owners, was an avid fan and signaled to players and fans that he loved being in the arena and could cheer and jeer like everyone else.

  o **The branded coach**—Tom Brennan, basketball coach of the University of Vermont, became an iconic figure well-known for his poetry readings, political rants and phone calls to opposing coaches on the day of the game.

  o **The branded executive**—Billy Beane of the Oakland Athletics built a countercultural baseball brand by adopting computer-based analysis.

  o **The branded program**—Southlake Carroll High School football program benchmarked itself against college and pro programs. It boasts a $15.3 million football stadium that seats 10,000 people and an adjacent indoor practice field.

  o **The branded league**—The Professional Bowlers Association (PBA) identified a younger demographic as its target market and chose stars, story
lines, and distribution channels that would make bowling relevant in pop culture.

- The branded facility—Daytona International Speedway established a Fan Zone where for a more expensive ticket a fan could gain access to the infield, view the pits for an observation deck and watch pit crews work on their cars.

• The Future of the Fan Connection is the final chapter. This quote aptly sums up the authors’ message about the situation facing sports businesses today. “The participation ideal of a child starting to play basketball at the age of six, joining a number of school and park basketball leagues and playing the game through high school, watching the sport on television with peers and attending a few games with parents, continuing to follow and play the game while at college, and finally as an adult becoming a lifelong season ticket holder for a professional franchise is increasingly disappearing. While there are still sports that rely upon a platform of participation such as basketball and baseball, which then lead to spending money to watch games at college and professional levels, there are an increasing number of sports and sports-related activities that have no end game that could be defined as spectatorship. Sports such as dodge ball, table hockey, marathon running and sports-related entertainment activities do not necessarily lead to becoming a spectator of that sport. Furthermore, there is an additional category of consumers, which includes people who are watching sports in media or Internet-generated environments that vary from 30-second highlights to intense fantasy games that may or may not lead to attending a sporting event. In the United States, there are also sports such as soccer that have high participation rates that do not translate into fan interest at the higher levels of the sport and sports that have comparatively smaller participation rates but higher fan popularity such as American football. All these various configurations of fan involvement present challenges to sports that need to generate revenue and an ardent fan base in order to survive. In evaluating what the most important drivers and implications for the next generation of sports decision makers are, there is a necessity to not only understand the technological and cultural trends that are creating such powerful forces in sports, but to begin to see them in a larger and more productive light that will allow for more prediction and profitability.”

• The authors conclude by stating what they believe will be the six successful drivers of sports brands in the future.

  o Increasing fan interaction: Interacting with the fan, forming a personal relationship, on an emotional level are now key objectives of sports brands.

  o Expanding star power: Star power differentiates the brand in the marketplace, can communicate a competitive advantage and is historically one of the most powerful connectors.
o Connecting to the ever-changing youth market: Reaching and connecting to young people will continue to be a central challenge for sports brands. Ideally, sports brands connect to young people while they’re young and keep them as paying customers for the rest of their lives.

o Delivering a global sports brand that is profitable and fan centered: Sports brands from all parts of the world are invading one another’s markets; international matches are played in almost every sport, and barriers to becoming a fan of a sports brand in a country other than your own have been significantly reduced.

o A fan base that is easier to reach and harder to engage: Sports decision makers now benefit from knowing more about their fans, but along with that knowledge comes the burden of making tough choices about which segments to target.

o Sports and fan relationships are ever changing: The danger of trying to compete in the volatile sports marketplace is always complacency.

Comments

Futurists should take note of this forecast by the authors, “As the stakes become even higher, branding will spell the difference between successful products in the industry and those that fold under competitive pressures.” The authors could have developed this point a little more. What they are saying is that “generic” sports businesses unlike “generic” drugs or supermarket brand foods have no future. Since most people, except possibly the Ensnared Fans, regard expenditures of time and money for sports as purely discretionary, brand development is essential for economic survival. The brand is essential because it, rather than the actual competition, is increasingly the value of the sports product to consumers.

The authors pay scant attention to the need to attract and retain older as well as younger fans. They do allude to the need to attract Baby Boomers, although not to the many fans still alive, healthy and born before World War II, when they say, “There is nothing more frightening to a sport than to imagine 50-year olds deciding that basketball is no longer of any interest and bass fishing and hang gliding are going to dominate the majority of their time.” Washington Post editor Abigail Trafford in her book My Time³ and other social commentators have well described the emergence of a new stage of life in which people free of the burdens of child raising and with money to spare are taking advantage of newly found freedom to explore new paths before the onset of frail old age. The market potential for any industry serving people in this new life stage is huge. Yet, it could also be relatively short-lived and confined to people born before World War II and older Baby Boomers, who enjoy traditional retirement benefits. The sports industry

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could benefit from studying the implications of alternative scenarios for how people enjoying this new life stage affect the sports marketplace now and in the future.

Along with neglect of older people as sports fans, the authors neglect the growing phenomenon of older people’s participation in sports. They say, “All of this is compounded by a continuing trend in American life that shows a drop in participation across almost every recreational sport.” Actually, National Sporting Goods Association data show Americans’ participation has been growing in 21 recreational sports and fitness activities including basketball, bowling, climbing, and golf since the early 1990s and declining in 13 including badminton, baseball and tennis. Moreover, participation by Americans over age 45 has been growing in the 13 sports in which total participation has been declining as well as in the 21 in which it has been growing. As people age more healthily, they may well prefer to participate personally in sports rather than watch them on television. The time busy Americans of all ages spend participating in sports could well detract from the time they spend watching them on television, and the money they spend on sporting goods could reduce the funds they have left for high priced tickets and premium sports cable television packages, but the authors never directly address this issue.

The authors correctly call attention at several points in the book to the professionalization of children’s and youth sports, but they do so in a matter-of-fact way. They say:

*It is clear from research studies that spontaneous and unregulated play, which was often the traditional entry into a sport has declined dramatically. This trend is stronger in middle and high-income areas and less so in lower-income communities. In the last two decades, according to Dr. Alvin Rosenfeld, author of The Over-Programmed Child, programmed sports time has increased twofold, while children’s sports free time has been cut in half...Sports have turned into somewhat of a predictive science as breeding and developing new athletic talent has become a necessity to regenerate and reload the talent base. The industry’s high stakes have trickled down to lower sports levels as the desperate search for the next superstar occurs in summer development camps, specialty training centers, foreign countries, and the complex databases of computer scouting programs. Scouts from colleges and professional leagues blanket the country looking for the next Wayne Gretzky who is often a fifth grader...Mentoring is no longer just the parent-child or gym teacher-student relationship. It now includes sophisticated and targeted sports camps. America is dotted with these breeding-ground camps that discover kids at early ages, connect them to coaches, and ultimately feed them into the college and professional sports world.*

The authors’ extensive research and knowledge of the sports world gives them a good foundation for analyzing the pros and cons of this phenomenon. Without it, the modern Olympic Games, professional and major college, and, increasingly, high-school sports would either be non-existent or much more low-key than we know today, and top athletes, institutions of higher learning, and professional sports leagues and teams and those dependent for a living on them would not reap the huge financial rewards. But, the societal cost is huge in terms of childhood obesity, psychological damage to children who don’t make the team, physical damage to children and youth who do make the team but
burn out their bodies prematurely, subvention of higher education standards to winning college athletics and diversion of funds from pressing public needs to build fancy sports stadiums. The authors note attempts to make youth sports more values and less winning oriented, but this is still in a highly organized framework. Could we return to a less organized time and let kids be kids and play games by their own rules again and what would such a world look like? There is a pressing need for a book or long journal article exploring this question.

Readers are left wondering if the synergistic relationship between the media and sports that has produced the world of The Highlight Generation can ever be fundamentally changed and whether a fundamental change would be desirable. More and more media need more and more sports content, and that content is created more and more imaginatively using the branding techniques described in The Elusive Fan to such an extent that even the once solitary pursuit of bass fishing is turned into a way of life and huge television event. And, the sports industry becomes more and more dependent on media financial support with the stadium audience in many sports being merely a backdrop for the far more important television and Internet audiences. And, while fans may be elusive, in total there are enough of them steering their children into high pressure organized sports from which only a few will feed into the college and professional ranks, paying high ticket prices, buying memorabilia, and keeping up the television ratings to form a solid base for the media-sports pyramid. One can imagine a “Frolic in the Park” scenario in which such a fundamental change occurs. In it, people of all ages would participate in sports for pure enjoyment and for the good health promoted by physical activity and turn away from made-for-and-manipulated-by-television extravaganzas. The forces creating this scenario would be disgust with professional and college sports scandals and tomorrow’s adults rebelling against the forced participation in organized sports they endured as children. Much to their credit, the authors warn the sports industry of the possibilities of disgust with high-powered sports and rebellion of today’s children when they become adults.

On the other hand, one can also imagine a “Media Room” scenario, especially if strong economic growth allows most people, at least in the developed world, to have plenty of leisure time and discretionary income. In this scenario, the media assume near complete control over the sports industry, and sports become merely television and Internet entertainment. Technology and affluence permit most people to enjoy better-than-stadium sports viewing in their home theaters, and the sports industry, following, and even elaborating on, the branding principles in The Elusive Fan, weaves continually improving quality of competition into a total home sports viewing experience. Sports participation then becomes an endeavor only for the highly talented because they provide the best entertainment, and people rely on high tech medicine to counter their increasingly sedentary lifestyles.

My own view is that people very gradually are coming to the realization that modern society has engineered physical activity out of their lives, that they must devote some part of their leisure time to bringing it back in for good health, and that sports and fitness participation can be an enjoyable way to do so. However, they increasingly see from
childhood on that organized sports are open only to a talented few and that the bar to entry at each level gets higher. So they find ways to participate outside the media/sports pyramid and devote more leisure time and money to participating in ways open to them such as bicycling, running, and walking on the nation’s growing network of recreational trails; joining in walks, runs, and bicycle rides for charity; practicing yoga; and meeting the challenge of cardio-tennis\(^4\). They also quickly take up new sports like paintball and pickleball\(^5\) and resurrect active childhood games like dodgeball and kickball. But, the dynamic of the media/sports pyramid coupled with the branding and marketing techniques so well documented in The Elusive Fan is so powerful that even these activities get sucked into it. For example, there is now a National Professional Paintball League with its own World Series. Can a US or world cardio-tennis challenge be far behind? So, ordinary people have to keep finding new ways to participate in sports and fitness within their abilities, and Frolic in the Park and The Highlight Generation exist side by side. The outcomes of their interaction will be a fertile field for futurist inquiry and discussion in the years ahead.

\(^4\) Cardio Tennis is a group activity featuring drills to give players of all abilities an ultimate high-energy workout. It includes a warm-up, cardio workout, and cool down. The workout phase lasting 30-50 minutes includes fast-paced drills in which the professional feeds balls to players based on their ability and fitness level. (See http://www.cardiotennis.com)

\(^5\) Pickleball is a mini-tennis game played by 2 or 4 people on a badminton-sized court using wood paddle racquets and a plastic, poly baseball with holes (See http://www.pickleball.com). Although originally a family game, it has become popular in retirement communities.