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In your position as one of the leaders of women's sport in the country, what trends and or changes have you seen over the past decade in the marketing of women's sports?

I think there is still a lack of commitment at the high school and college level to put the same kind of marketing or promotional dollars into women's sports as men's sports. Things as simple as schedule posters and cards to newspaper and TV promotions are simply not there. With the exception of maybe women's basketball at some Division I schools, we still have a long way to go.

On the other hand, I think you can point to the tremendous success of the WNBA. That probably is going to turn out to be a future model for women's professional sport. In this day and age, if you want to approach big time in a relatively short time, a couple of things have to be in place. The way the WNBA piggy-backed on the NBA teams was a smart move. When the WNBA used the NBA leverage to get a TV deal for its whole season, albeit summer, it was a major accomplishment that no other women's professional league has been able to reproduce. The tremendous marketing and advertising dollars have also been important. Also, league-central ownership initially put a restraint on expenditures in terms of player salaries. Those are all very important pieces of the puzzle that future leagues are going to have to look at. And to add one more thing, when you share a central league office and venues with your men's team the effect that that has on cost is significant. Therefore, owners are going get a return on investments sooner than if they had to build everything from scratch.

When you look at other women's professional sports, there are two categories, the established entities and the new ones. The WTA and LPGA are really on very solid footing but it's all very different. When you look at the LPGA and see the amount of TV dollars that are coming from Europe and Asia, that is a terrific indicator for future women's leagues. I think that the way to respond to the clutter of men's sport TV created by the Big 4 men's leagues is probably not to whine about it or lament over the absence of commitment from US domestic TV for women's sports. It is probably to take it where it is wanted. So, you have an international league with international players with tremendous interest in other countries. So there are no rights fees available in the US for the LPGA but there are rights fees available in Europe. I have great admiration for Ty Votow, Commissioner of the LPGA, and the way he has seen the lay of the land and taken what the land will give him. Obviously, the WTA is riding high still with the Williams sisters, but I think that we have to recognize that no women's league in the US is able to stand on its own without TV.

Among the new leagues, WUSA sent the message that it takes a really sound business plan and hard-nosed business acumen to make any professional league, male or female, a going proposition. The WUSA's first rendition was rushed, it was banking on the euphoria of the World Cup, and it really didn't have a solid business plan behind it. Will they re-launch? Yes. Will they be successful? Yes. They'll go through the same kind of experience as all the men's pro leagues. It's going to take multiple tries for women's leagues to make it also.

Some people blamed the demise of WUSA on soccer or on women sport, but you are saying it was a business model problem.

Oh yes, women's sports has exactly what it takes to be successful, just like men's sports do. There are separate markets in terms of who watches. It's just more of an underdeveloped product and it will go through the same process as men's professional leagues only it won't take the women half as long as it did for the guys to figure it out. Not because they are women, but because great lessons are out there already and it's stupid if women don't learn from the mistakes of the past.
So, it’s no accident that it took the NBA 30 years to average 10,000 in attendance and only two for the WNBA to do that.

You’ve talked in terms of the success of the leagues and tours. Has corporate America bought into or do they realize the potential of the women’s sport leagues and the women athletes to help them promote their products?

Yes, I think they do, but what’s limiting the business model is not the absence of corporate investment, but the absence of a TV package that garners more sponsor dollars. Corporations are going to put money into women’s sports just like they put money into men’s sports, but they’ve got to look at their return on investments and cost per thousand, and say it’s worth it. And when you can’t put a TV package together because of the clutter of the Big 4, where you don’t have primetime, you don’t have the consistency of time and place, and you don’t have solid promotion, then you can’t garner the biggest chunk of change, which is from those corporate advertising budgets. So that is the biggest challenge that faces women’s professional sports, and that may be alleviated when we move on to a more digital, broadband platform as opposed to pure network cable. So, I see that changing, but very slowly.

On a local level, it appeared that the WUSA offered an incredible opportunity for sponsorship in terms of the demographic that was drawn. It seemed like great local sell, but as you mentioned the exposure in the millions wasn’t there at the national level.

That’s exactly it... it was an upside down model in the sense that if you want to drive professional sports from national or league packages, then you’ve got to have TV. Because that’s the only way you get the numbers. And they tried to drive it from the top down and couldn’t because the package wasn’t there. In contrast, when you look at all other professional sports and how they evolve gradually from minor league to major league operations, they always start from the ground up. They start 90-10 local. That’s how the ball is going to get fixed, I’m sure, in due time.

Earlier you mentioned Ty Votow with the LPGA. What were your feelings about the LPGA highlighting some of the physical features of the players on the tour?

I think he did two things that were really smart. One is he reduced the number of tournaments in order to ensure that he had all of the superstars at the tournaments, which is something that the PGA should take a lesson from. Ultimately, your sponsors and your viewing audience want to see your top players. There’s a diminishing return when adding too many tournaments, so I thought that was very insightful. And with regard to promotion, I think what Ty is trying to do, without the Nancy Lopez or the Michael Jordan of women’s golf right now, is look for celebrity entertainment pizzazz, which is true in most professional sports. I think he was looking at every angle to figure out how to get a charismatic figure to the top. Michelle Wie coming of age could be that person. Annika Sorenstam started to and I think the publicity surrounding her playing in the Colonial [PGA tour event] helped people to see Annika as a personality. She’s not one of those outgoing types like Nancy Lopez. That’s not to take anything away from her as a person. She is a terrific person, but she is not a showperson. I think what Ty was looking for was celebrity. Could he manufacture a celebrity and make this an entertainment as well as an athletic venue? Which is welcome to professional sports.

I think back to the Billy Jean and Bobby Riggs tennis match that brought tennis and women’s sports to the forefront. But more recently, has there been an event that had helped define women’s sport and has brought it to the forefront?

I think there are many of them. They’ve come around serendipitously. I think the backdrop is what’s important. In the US, we live in a 90% + male [sports] journalist culture and with the combination of the fact they more highly value men’s sports and the clutter of the Big 4, in terms of every electronic and print media landscape, you’ve got only 8% of all televised sports and print coverage of sports that’s focused on women’s sports. It’s a drop in the bucket. There’s no regular coverage; there’s no commitment, so the only thing you see is the unusual. Women’s sports almost have to wait for the serendipitous or the unusual to get the kind of coverage that you would wish it would get regularly and there are dangers to that. Just like the stabbing of Monica Seles or Marge Schott on the cover of SI. It’s a double-edged sword when that’s the nature of the beast.

But, given that, I think Annika at the Colonial, and the rise of the Williams sisters are good examples. In the case of the Williams sisters, this was also a story about African-Americans breaking through in predominantly white tennis. That was about a whole lot more. Also, the Olympic Games every four years always manage to capture the attention of the American public because the Big 4 isn’t there. No pro baseball, football, it’s a yawn with the pro basketball players and ice hockey has been a shame. So, who are the superstars? It’s women’s sports every four years at the winter and summer games.

I’m hopeful that some platform is going to embrace women’s sports. It can’t be the men’s platform. If you look at ESPN—80% male—they’re gonna dance with...
who brought them. They're not really expanding into the women's sports market - with the exception of basketball and some NCAA sports coverage is still really uneven and yet, ESPN is doing the most of anybody. College sport TV has some product. Still, the most women's sports product is at the regional level on cable. You'd expect that the women's stations might step up to the plate, WE, Lifetime, Oxygen, but unfortunately, all three have an older demographic, 45+, so those are the people who missed out on Title IX, and who don't embrace sport yet. Also, they are undercapitalized and not being given money for regional programming in sports, which can be very expensive.

It's a funny place where women's sports is percolating right under the surface and every once in a while that bubble pops and you see its potential. The 1999 World Cup Soccer was an example. The 1996 Olympics with softball, soccer, basketball... all the women's team sports coming of age. There's going to have to be another explosive leap somehow, but I don't know where it's coming from. The only thing you know is there's too much pressure for it not to happen.

People in the soccer world in America talk about evolution as opposed to revolution. Would you say that is the same for women's sports becoming mainstream?

No question. It took one full generation, 20 years, for 1996 to happen. It couldn't have happened before then because you don't make an Olympic athlete in less than 15 or 20 years. The first Title IX babies were in 1996. And if you ask, what does it take to have the American public come of age as a viewing audience, it's probably three generations. It'll take 70 more years to crack the public understanding. I think you are right - that there is a process there. But you have to remember, it never takes as long for the second generation of a product as it does for the first generation of a product. The learning curve for women's sports is going to be quicker. Think about it, men's sports didn't really come of age until the 1970s.

So in 10 years do you see viable women's professional leagues, along with the tours, being vibrant?

Yes, I really do and I'm hopeful that the TV dilemma gets solved with digital TV and broadband. Digital carriage really reduces costs and broadband increases access and allows appointment viewing. There's a whole technology of TV now that's creating a new paradigm. But there's not enough of it out there yet to reach critical mass. We're still waiting on that digital universe.

Talk about individual women athletes now. It seems to me that they would have more appeal as a positive sponsor match. Do you think the women get the opportunities that they should?

Corporate America, like the media, is still pretty much male run. I think female athletes are undervalued. I think they're being used more because of some of the dilemmas that have faced corporations in terms of male athletes running into trouble. I think they're being used more but they are undervalued. They think most of the women can be gotten cheap. I think there's a real challenge there for a female athlete that the guys running the show in corporate America still don't value women in the same way they value men.