Sports leagues and fans bow in reverence to tradition and history, but the fact is that much in the world of sports has radically changed. The Manchester United football (soccer) team can claim not only the expected 7.5 million fans in the United Kingdom, but 14 million fans in Thailand as well.

In creating a university’s sports-communication program, I have had to wrestle with the many changes in sports and its role in culture and the economy. I see the future of the sports industry being shaped by the following 10 controversial issues. The way that these controversies are managed will make a major impact on the prosperity of the games we so enjoy.

1. The Turbulent Brand

Sports leagues and events have learned that unifying as a singular brand in the marketplace can increase wealth. A singular brand such as the National Football League (NFL) can put media rights out to bid from major networks, attract lucrative sponsorships, and sell licensed fashions and merchandise. Everything moves in lockstep—under a tight political organization and unified identity—to reach out for national and, increasingly, international revenues. Sports organizations have learned to cooperate and organize, just as McDonald’s learned that there is a lot of money to be made by organizing hamburgers and fries together. Unlike with McDonald’s, however, the “hamburgers” and “fries” in sports are rivals who’d like to humiliate and defeat each other.

Prosperity will be won by those who can brand themselves not only with a recognizable logo, but also with a genuine attitude of cooperation. The NFL currently does it best and the results are obvious. The League leads in television ratings and gets $3 billion a year in media rights, another $3 billion in licensing, average attendance of nearly 70,000 a game, and leading sponsors like Motorola paying over $20 million a year to associate with the League.

The simple question is, Who will do it better in the years ahead? Who will avoid the feuds, lockouts, strikes, and business soap operas that keep fans and revenues away? It may be another league or perhaps newly formed groups, such as the National Thoroughbred Racing Association—the brand name for more than 70 racetracks. Another successful brand story could be for an entire sport, like Strike Ten Entertainment for bowling. The future belongs not just to those who understand branding, but to those able to achieve the enormous political discipline necessary to make it work.

2. The Shattered Media

Sports have the power to unite communities, both locally and, increasingly, globally. But competition for media attention and increasing incidents of fan-betraying controversies could overwhelm the joy of competition on the field of play. A sports-communications scholar examines the 10 key trends shaping the future of the sports industry.
networks that reached an entire nation with programming. Today, the vast power and influence of the three broadcast networks has been diluted by hundreds of cable networks, satellite channels, pay-per-view choices and video-on-demand options. More jockeying for attention would come from new technologies for increasingly specialized audiences, such as VCRs, DVDs, cell phones, home computers, Internet sites, and videogame consoles. Even more threatening to broadcasters’ dominance are inventions like Tivo that challenge the entire advertising-revenue model of broadcast media.

Naturally, the shattering of media also extends to magazines, newspapers, radio, and other media. In the United States, magazine racks made space for 5,000 new titles between 1998 and 2006 and now offer more than 18,000 choices.

The new world of sports will be one where a passionate group of fans can band together commercially far below the audience requirements of broadcast television networks. Few people would consider skateboarding a major commercial sport, yet renowned skateboarder Tony Hawk has transformed his championship image into a $10 million annual business.

3. The Women’s Revolution

The bad old days for women’s sports were indeed pretty bad. One study of network television’s coverage of women’s sports between August 1972 and September 1973 showed that NBC devoted just one hour to women’s sports out of 366 hours of athletic coverage, while CBS was only slightly more generous with 10 out of 260 hours. Participation was little better: Fewer than 300,000 women were participating in high-school sports at that time, compared with 3.5 million men.

The numbers have changed dramatically. Today, more than 2.5 million women participate in high-school sports. Women purchase more than half of health-club memberships, and leagues such as the Ladies Professional Golf Association and the Women’s Tennis Association are successful organizations with a national television schedule. Women’s events in the 1996 Olympic Games sold more tickets than did men’s events, and the 1999 Women’s World Cup sold out the Rose Bowl for the final game and was a ratings smash on television.

However, the women’s revolution has not fit the model of men’s sports in terms of marketing. The Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) has stalled in television ratings and declined in attendance. Women’s United Soccer Association (WUSA)—the startup league that evolved from the World Cup—suspended operations in 2003. Sports Illustrated and Condé Nast started—and ultimately shelved—women’s sports publications.

Internet-based ventures such as Nike Goddess may prove successful for women’s sports, especially if they focus on fitness rather than competition. Nike’s dual-platform approach offers a “personal stylist” (online catalog) for buying Nike gear as well as a “personal trainer” (videos) for working out with a virtual coach.

While the revolution in participation is clear, there is as yet no clear appetite for women’s sports as commercial media products that in any way parallels that of men’s sports. This is not a criticism. The commercial expression of women in sports is only beginning. It will be through experimentation in the years ahead that the real place of women in athletics will be decided and it will be enormous.

4. Heretic Games

Baseball dominates the historical memory of the United States in a powerful way that is mirrored by football in Europe. However, the fastest-growing sports are snowboarding and mountain biking, and the leading sports in terms of new media coverage are bull riding and bass fishing.

Not only are sports dramatically different but the entire culture surrounding them can seem more like a rock song than an inspirational anthem. In many sports, uniforms are now more individualistic and the attitudes of leading performers are far from the reverent, wholesome persona of the Olympian.

In terms of established sports, many sacred traditions have become a historical footnotes. Imagine basketball without a shot clock and three-point line or baseball without interleague play and the designated hitter. Each of these was an innov-
tion in its day that seemed heretical to old-time fans.

The big sports won’t be put out of business, but niche sports may join the major leagues, as NASCAR did in the 1990s, or an offbeat activity may find a launching pad on a small network and explode across the mainstream. How about taking 10 characters playing poker and call it a sport?

5. The Haves and Have-Nots of Sports

In sports, as in so much of national life, wealth is becoming increasingly concentrated. The payrolls for teams in Major League Baseball recently ranged from $180 million at the top to just $31 million at the bottom. The top six conferences in college football made ten times the income as the second six. A top NASCAR team requires a budget of more than $20 million a year to be competitive. Those without deep pockets need not dream.

The Olympic Games were conceived as a festival celebrating athletic endeavor, but the poor performance of the United States in the 1988 Winter Olympics led to the creation of the Podium Program, which supported athletes with the best chance to win medals. The United States won just six medals in 1988 and an impressive 25 in the 2006 Torino Games, second only to Germany. While this is a nice result, the Olympic spirit was not founded on the domination of the wealthiest countries based on their ability to subsidize athletes.

The concentration effect also goes to those who can benefit from the rare impact player. Golfer Tiger Woods has been known to bring more than a million households to a Sunday television broadcast. This audience only tunes in when he is in contention. Similarly, basketball superstar LeBron James’s arrival to the Cleveland Cavaliers created a 50% increase in sponsorship and attendance and more than 200% increase television ratings. Little wonder James was paid $80 million by the Cavaliers to extend his contract.

6. The Lost Mission

The endless summer days that youth once spent on the neighborhood sports field have been replaced by countless hours sitting before a computer screen playing a game about a sport rather than a sport itself. And this virtual sport is far more exciting than the real thing. The afternoon soft drink has been re-

Add a few celebrities and poker becomes a watchable “sport.” Shown here at a World Poker Tour event are (left to right) actors Tom Everett Scott, Mimi Rogers, and Hill Harper.

The extreme-sport diet? While extreme sports’ popularity might suggest a growing interest in more-active lifestyles, spectators are instead loading up on supersized refreshments while merely watching other people participate in more exciting sports.

Popular pro golfer Tiger Woods maintains the role of hero in contemporary culture by lending his name to charitable endeavors, such as Target’s Start Something youth program.
There is a fundamental belief that sports both reveal and enhance character.

7. The Environmental Tightrope

Sports take place on many of the most extraordinary landscapes and seascapes on our planet. For this reason, environmentalism will play an increasingly important role in the management of golf courses, ski resorts, and coral reefs.

The leading golf course architects are working to design courses with minimal needs for chemicals and greater protection of wildlife diversity. This isn’t a matter just of good will, but of survival as well, since many communities now passionately oppose all development.

Ski resorts are working to restrict the pollution from snow-making equipment and minimize the impact on rivers and streams. They are also trying to walk the thin line between extravagant resort construction and the original spirit of the wilderness that remains the essence of the sport.

Reefs and mountains face growing threats from climate change, as well as from the increased number of divers and climbers. Both reefs and summits have been made far more accessible for the average tourist through breakthroughs in scuba gear and the rise of mountain guide companies. The results have been harsh for many fragile destinations.

The Caribbean country of Bonaire declared all its surrounding water up to a depth of 200 feet to be a protected national park. Nepal put strict environmental rules on Everest expeditions as a move to save the mountain from remaining “the world’s tallest garbage dump.”

Policies that promote environmental sensitivity—whether “catch and release” for marlin fishing or a camera replacing a gun for safari—will be a fundamental priority for sports tourism, regardless of the beliefs of individual customers.

8. The Engineered Athlete

The revolution in technology has complicated the purity of athletic pursuit in a variety of ways. Some uses of the new technologies will continue to scandalize traditionalists. The ability of “designer” drugs to escape detection with current testing will put the temptation of doping in front of every player in certain sports. It will also force organizations to confront uncomfortable questions about random testing and punishment.

Technology’s uses, though, are not always negative. The development of amazing new surgeries have extended careers and given top athletes the ability to recover from injuries that once destroyed players’ futures in a flash. The breakthrough application of arthroscopic surgery to sport injuries earned Robert Jackson, M.D., accolades as one of “40 for the ages” in a Sports Illustrated commemorative issue.

Technology will remain controversial because it affects performance, but innovation will continue to accelerate. From metal composite golf clubs that challenge the classic designs of old courses to powerful graphite rackets that eliminate long rallies in tennis, innovation will continue to force every sport to define the nature of competition—and even its very soul.

9. The Global Destiny

Satellites can bring the world together virtually in an instant. Thanks to satellite transmission of its games, the National Basketball Association can claim audiences in nearly every country of the world. Moreover, more than half of its Web hits are from users outside the United States.

A global event such as the Volvo Ocean Race, in which boats travel the world over eight months, can claim a cumulative television audience of more than 800 million viewers, plus 15,000 published articles reaching 686 million readers.

In 2006, England’s tradition-bound, 119-year-old Wimbledon tennis championship hired a two-year-old firm in San Francisco for its first global Internet broadcast. The innovative X-Games have become a major event for action sports and, like the Olympics, have been held all over the world, from Los Angeles to Dubai, Seoul, Bangkok, and Kuala Lumpur.

New events such as the World Baseball Classic and golf’s President’s Cup show the capacity to invent sports as a global enterprise, connected by communication in a way virtually unimaginable in 1960. As we enter the world of global sports, new questions emerge: Can America’s NASCAR challenge Europe’s Formula One in auto racing? Will Major League Soccer in the United States survive when European professional soccer is just a click or remote button away?

10. The Moral Connection

It is a cliché in sports marketing to use the language of entertainment to discuss the sports business. While it is true that both spectator and participatory sports are leisure pursuits, there is a reason why sports are integrated into universities and varsity metal bands are not. The difference is the fundamental belief that sports both reveal and enhance character.

There is a moral connection that ties an 8-year-old child to the glory
and traditions of a sport in a way that is more than the tie to a comic book character. It is why the best leagues are continuously reaching out to the community to promote involvement and participation. Yes, part of the success of the PGA Tour is due to Tiger Woods’s popularity, but significantly more is due to the $1 billion that PGA tour events have raised for charity throughout the organization’s history. Now it is commonplace for celebrity athletes to support charities or establish their own. For example, skateboarder Tony Hawk has a foundation for youth recreation programs, and Olympic champion speed skater Joey Cheek donated his entire gold medal bonus ($40,000) to the Right to Play organization devoted to using sport and play in the development of children. Cheek earmarked his money to go to the refugee children of Darfur.

The almost spiritual belief in the redemptive power of sports to bring out the best in human beings is one that is constantly challenged in a time of millionaire prodigies and drug scandals. While no major sport will go out of business, it is instructive to see the declines in television and attendance that follow a league when it shows a cynical reality behind its athletes. Major League Baseball lost an estimated 20% of its audience due to the 1994 strike and slowly drew them back.

The undoing of this great belief in the greater meaning of sport does not mean the industry will disappear with the next mismanaged scandal. But teams and leagues that disregard this special connection with the culture and communities that support them will see that support erode. This will translate into cutting off funds for taxpayer-supported stadiums, boycotting increasingly expensive sky-boxes, and searching for alternative viewing from among literally hundreds of choices.

Sports are not just entertainment. If the industry makes the mistake of acting like it is, the future will see more organizations subtly troubled and caught in decline.

About the Author
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