The Economics of Television and Sport: Creating a New World

Roone Arledge, former president of ABC sports once said, “There have been comparable times in history when sports have been at the center of a culture and seemed to dominate the landscape, whether in Greek society or in what used to be called the Golden Age of Sport. But everything…everything is magnified by television” (Abelman, 1998, p. 255). In conjunction with the broader changes that have characterized western economics and culture since the 1940’s, television has been a major contributor in the transformation of the sports landscape – impacting everything from salaries to number of teams, and the behaviour of players and coaches.

The context of North American sport is one shaped by what Rowe terms the “Unruly Trinity” of commercial sport, the entertainment media, and late capitalist culture (Andrews & Jackson, 2001, p. 4). Underlying the numerous changes that have occurred in high school, university, and professional sport is this powerful trinity within which television is an active participant. More specifically, the revenue flowing from television has fundamentally altered the worlds within which athletes, ranging from the professional to grade school ranks, play. Most notably, television has provided the medium for a synthesis of economic and promotional forces, turning sport into a vital arm of both the entertainment and the advertising industries: players have become brand names unto themselves; major leagues and big sporting events such as the Olympics generate extraordinary revenues and cities all over the world fight to get major league teams and to sponsor “hallmark” events.
There is little doubt that North Americans love sports. They have a seemingly unquenchable thirst for more and more. Despite the growth of new media, such as the Internet, television continues to be the major medium which provides sports coverage. From the time they are in grade school athletes are groomed to be professionals. Coaches also become celebrities as their salaries escalate into the millions. Using basketball as our focus, we will outline the environment in which players are raised, as well as the situation in the NBA currently.

*Television Revenues and the Sports Business*

Roone Arledge may have said it best when he explained of his ABC Wide World of Sports programming, “we are going to add show business to sports” (Barnett, 1990, p.105).

Professional sports and the media, especially television, have become mutually dependent institutions. Although both had independent origins, their relationships now make it hard to imagine one without the other. By the early 1990’s, 98 percent of all American homes had television sets, with TV on an average of 7 hours and 51 minutes a day (Sage, 1998, p. 12). Spectators consume sports to a far greater extent indirectly through television than directly through personal attendance at events. More than 2,100 hours of televised sports are programmed per year by the four major U.S. networks, and cable television provides an additional 6,000 hours. ESPN, which reaches 70 percent of American homes with televisions, broadcasts more than 8,000 hours of sports each year. Regional sport cable networks and direct satellite broadcasts are growing rapidly, and broadcast countless thousands of hours of sport each year (Sage, 1998, p. 14). Also notable with the international expansion of North American professional sport is the rise
in television sets around the globe which doubled between 1981 and 1997 to 23.4 per hundred people (LaFeber, 2002, p. 17).

These figures demonstrate that viewership of professional sports is an important business. From the billions of dollars that the networks receive from sports broadcasting, the professional teams receive a piece of the pie. In 2002, the NFL received $2.2 billion in television revenue alone, while the NBA received $989 million, MLB received $558.8 million, and the NHL received $120 million (Chun & Lee, 2002). The NCAA has a six-year television deal in place worth $11 billion (Brown, 2002, p. 1). *All figures are in U.S. dollars

There is a positive correlation between the rise of television revenues and player salaries. Other factors contributed to this rise in salaries, such as the emergence of player unions, but television revenues were a critical component. In 2002 the average NBA salary was $4.7 million which represents a staggering growth since 1986 when the average salary was $370,104. The same trend can be noted in other professional sports as well. In the NFL, the average salary went from $288,000 in 1986 to $1.1 million in 2002. In the MLB, the average salary grew from $412,520 in 1986 to $2.3 million in 2002. Finally, the NHL’s average salary went from $271,000 in 1990 to $1.64 in 2002 (LeBrun, 2003, p. 11).

The role of media revenue in franchise proliferation is an interesting phenomenon. Professional sports have become extremely reliant on media revenue, and have used it as a fuel for expansion. “The most striking feature of the modern sports business is how dependent it has become on broadcasting and cable industry revenue growth. Indeed, in the absence of this electronic-media coverage and the fees so generated, many fewer
professional teams and probably fewer fans would have been created” (Vogel, 1998, p. 265).

Media revenues impact the ability of many teams to compete on a level playing field. In many respects, television revenues have become more important than gate revenues. In 1997, the average gate revenue for NBA teams was $23.3 million while media revenue was $21.2 million. In the NFL, the ratio was 22.6 million to 43 million and in the MLB it was 25.7 million to 25.2 million (Greater Louisville Inc., 2001). These ratios show that media revenue are on par with, if not greater than, gate revenues. An example from the NBA helps to exemplify the situation. For the 1999 season, the New York Knicks had an operating income of $92.9 million. That figure was $25 million higher than any other team, and was attributable largely to the lucrative local television rights the Knicks sold. The Denver Nuggets, at the other end of the spectrum, had an operating income of $23.2 million (Forbes, 1999). The financial disparity places an enormous burden upon management of the smaller market teams to draft the right players, and make intelligent financial investments. One mistake could place the franchise in difficult circumstances.

Perhaps nothing demonstrates this better than Ted Turner and the Atlanta Braves. When he bought the franchise, Turner already had control of WTBS superstation. Although the team was struggling, he felt that they could be a successful franchise due to the television connection. WTBS sold television rights for Braves games to 4000 cable systems throughout all 50 states, reaching as far as Valdez, Alaska. The fan base and allegiances to the Braves were expanded. The Braves became, what Turner liked to call, “America’s team.” Turner’s strategy demonstrates the power of television in sports.
According to Turner, "the other big league owners thought I was a dumb rich sucker, who stepped up with $10 million to buy a losing franchise...But I'm giving Atlanta to the nation — to the world...When they [the Braves] start to win, and get into some playoffs, they're going to take America by storm" (Rader, 1984, p. 199). The Braves did start winning and have not stopped. They are now one of the most popular, if not the most popular, teams in all of the MLB.

Within this economic context, franchises have undergone change. For examples Vogel (1998) has noted how the NBA has instituted new salary cap restrictions which enable teams to re-sign their players for more than other teams can offer. They have also created a luxury tax system where teams over a certain payroll threshold must pay the league for every dollar that they are over the limit. This revenue is then re-distributed to other teams that are below the tax. Even MLB, which is notorious for its lack of salary control, has implemented some semblance of salary control with a luxury tax system in its latest collective bargaining agreement.

Vogel (1998, p. 273) points to three trends in sports franchises. The first is that franchises located in areas with high drawing potential have stronger teams than franchises in low-drawing-potential areas. This holds true in all sports with only rare exceptions. The Milwaukee Bucks are unlikely to do better than the Los Angeles Lakers, and the Edmonton Oilers are unlikely to field a better team than the Colorado Avalanche. Baseball is particularly plagued by this problem. In economic terms, the Montreal Expos will not beat the New York Yankees. There simply isn't sufficient revenue to be had in Montreal for the Expos to compete consistently. In fact, in 1999 the difference between
the combined media and gate revenues of the Yankees and Expos was $129.14 million which resulted in a payroll difference of $76.64 million (Levin, 2000, p. 20).

The second trend noted by Vogel (1998, p. 273) is that franchises in low-drawing-potential areas sell players to franchises in high-drawing-potential areas. The Expos have long been the “farm club” for other major league teams selling players like Pedro Martinez and Larry Walker once they reach a level of play where the franchise can no longer afford them. In the NBA the Milwaukee Bucks were involved in one of the most significant trades at the 2003 trade deadline acquiring Gary Payton from Seattle for Ray Allen. Both players were established all-stars with salaries above $11 million. Payton’s contract, however, was set to expire after the season which would mean a significant reduction in the Bucks payroll. This is especially enticing for the Bucks who are up for sale and were struggling to turn a profit with their payroll at its current levels.

Touching on an issue we addressed earlier, Vogel (1998, p. 274) notes in his third trend that the higher share of television and radio revenues accruing to the home team, the higher the costs of players, and the smaller the chance of survival for low-drawing-potential franchises. With uneven television revenues, teams in larger markets have a better chance of surviving and succeeding. How can a team from a smaller market compete with larger market teams whose media revenues are significantly greater? The best opportunity for these small market teams is to build a good team from within their organization. The difficulty here is the almost inevitable situation where small market teams serve as developmental teams for the larger markets.

The term “centralization” is applicable here. From the three trends noted by Vogel, we can see they are all related to the growth of teams in high-drawing-potential
markets and the struggling of teams in low-drawing-potential markets. Success in professional sports is associated largely with market size. There are obvious exceptions to this, but it is certainly a trend. Gate revenues are a reason for this trend, but more important in this is media revenue. Los Angeles teams can attract larger television audiences than Vancouver teams. This allows them to get onto national television, while at the same time, charging more for their local broadcasting rights because “television...of sports aroused expectations among fans of seeing only the best” (Rader, 1984, p. 200). With the increased revenues, teams in larger markets can afford to have higher payrolls and thus win more games. Though a high payroll does not guarantee success, there is a definite correlation between finances and success in competition.

Because of the revenue producing potential of television there have been numerous pressures on major league sport to be “entertaining.” For example, over the past two decades, rule changes to ensure that games televise better are commonplace. In the past few seasons, the NBA alone has moved its three-point line in and then back out, permitted the use of zone defenses, and implemented stricter rules for contact by defenders. There is also the TV timeout which places set breaks into games for advertisements (Barnett, 1990, p. 122).

To fully consider the situation of franchises and leagues the buzzword for the twenty-first century must be invoked. “Globalization” has arrived for professional sport, in particular the NBA. LaFeber (2002, p. 67) argues that sport is something that links the people around the globe. Advancements in communications technologies, as well as the de-regulation of the communications industries, can be seen at the root of this trend. During the 1990’s when Michael Jordan’s Chicago Bulls teams were dominating the
NBA, their games could be seen on television sets in ninety-three countries (LaFeber, 2002, p. 69). Phil Knight, founder and CEO of Nike explained that “now the experience of sports is everywhere. It’s all-encompassing, and instantaneous. It’s right there beside you from cradle to grave...the culture of the world” (LaFeber, 2002, Index).

The NBA provides a particularly interesting case-study in North America as it transformed from a struggling league which was criticised for being too black and drug-infested by much of the United States into the leader in the race to expand globally. From the time of Michael Jordan’s arrival in 1985, which coincided with David Stern becoming league commissioner, the NBA has gone from a struggling sports league to a multifaceted marketing and entertainment conglomerate incorporating over 20 divisions, including NBA properties, NBA entertainment, NBA international, and NBA ventures to name a few (Andrews & Jackson, 1999, p. 103).

Andrews and Jackson (1999) draw a comparison between the NBA and Disney. “The NBA became a commodity-sign, an imaged commodity created, and is, in turn, nurtured by, a cast of simulated characters. David Stern freely admits, indeed, he celebrates, the similarities between the NBA and Disney. ‘They have theme parks and we have theme parks. Only we call them arenas...Disney sells apparel; we sell apparel. They make home videos; we make home videos’” (p. 103).

The Globalization of the NBA has not been through any franchise location, but rather through simulated expansion. Teams do not call Asia or Europe home, but the residents of these continents are inundated with images of NBA stars from the United States. The vital link between communication technology, most notably television but also the Internet in recent years can be seen. Television enables the NBA’s stars to be
everywhere, but also nowhere, at once (Andrews & Jackson, 1999, p. 106). The NBA’s simulated expansion was predicated on the media in terms of images and economic dissolution of regional and national boundaries thus paving the way for the NBA’s commodities, be it apparel, videos or whatever to travel (Andrews & Jackson, 1999, p. 106). Further emphasising the entertainment industry focus of the NBA, Stern stated, “We’re really going to be going global. We’re not just in the sports business. It’s the media entertainment, licensing, brand names, home videos, and a broad base of other businesses” (Andrews & Jackson, 1999, p. 106).

_Selling Stars and Celebrities_

“Its drama, its personalities and its worldwide appeal mean sport is the new Hollywood” (Bell and Campbell, 1999, p. 22).

Perhaps the most important result of television revenue has been the centrality of the star (Boyle, 2000, p. 90). Much like the big-name star provides credibility as well as marketability to a film, the superstar athlete verifies the sport in which they compete. Michael Jordan sells out every arena in which he performs. The Washington Wizards without him would not be attracting such crowds. The team is not the commodity which is being promoted, but rather the individual star.

Before we delve too deeply into our analysis of sports stars and celebrities, it is important to have a grasp of what exactly is implied by the term celebrity; the social processes and forces which shape the term and the people who are characterised by it.

According to Marshall (1997), the contemporary celebrity is an embodiment of the twinned discourses of late modernity: neo-liberal democracy and consumer capitalism. Indeed, Western liberal democracy represents a political system preoccupied with “the personal, the intimate, and the individual;” incorporates an equally
solipsistic regime of economic (re)production (consumer capitalism); both of which are nurtured by the supreme technology of hyper-individualization (commercial television) (Andrews and Jackson, 2001, p. 1).

Celebrities are everywhere. We are encouraged by their prevalence in the media to develop a sort of relationship with them, be it one of familiarity or even obsession. Though the majority of people are unlikely to ever meet the celebrity actors or sport-stars they see on television, the relationships that people have with celebrities can greatly influence the manner in which individuals live and understand their daily lives. It could be argued that celebrities are significant actors in the process of structuring meaning, crystallizing ideologies, and offering contextually grounded maps for people to navigate the contemporary conditions of their existence (Marshall, 1997).

Much of the literature to date has been critical of these-superstar athletes. Rader (1984, p. 176) argues that we no longer have sports heroes, but rather sports celebrities. He longs for what used to be – a time when Ted Williams, the hall of fame baseball player widely regarded as the best hitter ever to play, wanted less money than he had earned the previous season because he did not feel his play had warranted his salary (Klatell, 1988, p. 46).

Critics argue that television has eroded older values associated with sportsmanship and civility. The individual ego must no longer be suppressed to support team success. Incivility, self-indulgence, and blatant attempts to "get yours" are now commonplace. Athletes who want to maximize their earning potentials must obtain attention. To do this, they must be number one. A declining respect for authority, sense of duty, and self-restraint are the results (Rader, 1984, p. 197). Abelman (1998) summarizes the situation by saying that "today, halfbacks rarely hand the ball to an official after a
touchdown when they could rip off their helmets, perform an endzone dance, and play to the nationwide TV audience” (p. 250).

It appears that the players are often more interested in the cameras which are recording their play, than the game itself. The behaviour of players is altered by television. The attention of the camera is of utmost importance. “Everyone from the spectators at the games to the owners of the franchises scrambled for the attention of the cameras. The media spawned outrageous behaviour…wide smiles, wanes, and endless repetitions of ‘Hi Mom’ by the players” (Rader, 1984, p. 202). Following a touchdown in professional football, it is almost ritual for the player who scored to return to the sideline and talk to the camera. Meanwhile the play is ongoing.

It would be foolish to question the increase in individual play, or the associated behaviour of players because it is easily noticeable. What is not considered however, in the types of analyses outlined above are the root causes (Klatell, 1988, p. 14). Sport has become a powerful example of capitalist business (Whannel, 1992, p. 7). Wenner (1989, p. 137) argues that in a consumer society, there is an inevitable focus on individual achievements.

Television promotes and plays to this preoccupation with the individual. Televised sport strongly resembles other forms of televised programming. Much like the sitcom has its stars so too must the sports broadcast. Stars provide easily recognisable figures which helps in attracting the casual fan. (Barnett, 1990, p. 127). In the case of the Washington Wizards, it is Michael Jordan’s ability to attract those fans who would otherwise stay home which makes him such a marketing and ticket-selling machine.
Those fans who are not season-ticket holders would be unlikely to purchase tickets to watch the Wizards play without Jordan.

TV sports have to be exciting (Barnett, 1990, p. 77). If the games are blowouts, or lack star players then the audience size quickly dwindles. Using the ever-popular Wizards as our example once again, they appear frequently on nationally televised games despite being a non-playoff team. In this sense, TV acts as a gatekeeper or agenda-setter providing validity to certain teams and players not necessarily based solely on talent, but also marketability (Fortunato, 2001, p. 4).

The phrase, “the best player you’ve never heard of” is commonly applied to a player from a small market team that rarely appears on television. TV can be seen as producing and reproducing a star/personality system (Whannel, 1992, p. 122). During the 1998-99 season the Los Angeles Lakers were struggling. Though a talented team, they were underachieving in the win-loss column. Bob Costas, a commentator for NBC at the time, remarked that despite their struggles the Lakers were “NBC’s team.” Even though their record was poor, because they had recognisable stars in Shaquille O’Neal, Kobe Bryant, and even Dennis Rodman for a portion of the season, and a large home market, the Lakers were featured prominently in NBC’s national telecasts.

O’Neal’s move from Orlando to Los Angeles as a free agent in 1996 is symptomatic of the conditions outlined thus far. Los Angeles is a major media market, offers great potential for cross-promotion, as well as a winning team. At the root of all these traits is television and the associated revenue.

Television broadcasting of sports focuses on individuals. Events draw better ratings when they involve some sort of feud. For promotion, individual feuds are the most
effective. Thus, televised sports focuses on individual duels, even in team sports (Rader, 1984, p. 205). Abelman (1998) states that television advertising has not only
“transformed the player into a personality by revealing the person under the hat or helmet, but it has turned that personality into a marketable commodity, a merchandising dream, and a commercialized icon” (p. 250). Players are aware of how the system works. Individuals are marketed and receive large salaries and endorsement deals, not teams. Therefore, they adjust their behaviour to the context within which they work. Players are no longer selling simply their athletic labour power, but also their entertainment value.

Players are entertainers. To understand their behaviour we must see them in the same manner that we look at musicians or actors. “No difference. A sports star is a rock star. They’re all the same” (Quirk & Fort, 1992, p. 214). This is because the same factors are at work in determining the size of player’s incomes as other entertainers. These factors are associated with supply and demand. The public wants to watch the players both on television and at the arenas. There is a limited number of skilled charismatic individuals with star qualities. Moreover, since the 1970s the bargaining power of players in relation to owners has changed. Free agency has factored into this changing bargaining power, but another aspect more relevant to our analysis is media revenues. The importance of media revenues in franchise operations must be considered. Without entertaining players, teams can not receive the same amount of media revenue. Also, players have a claim to the money as their labour power generated it (Quirk & Fort, 1992, p. 214). Owners know that without the best players, the fans will not watch. One need only look at the now defunct XFL or USFL for an example of this.
Narratives of Heroes and Villains

Television not only focuses on individual stars but also heroes. There is an important distinction between the two as for every hero there must be a villain (Cantelon & Harvey, 1988, p. 189). Televised sport is no different. Like Law & Order or Boomtown, two hit drama series which have good guys and bad guys, so too must televised sport if at all possible. Michael Jordan’s rise to stardom coincided with his battles with the NBA’s roughest and most physical team, the Detroit Pistons. Larry Bird had Magic Johnson and vice versa depending on which side of the United States you resided at the time. Yao Ming’s arrival onto the NBA scene has created a stir for many reasons, including his status as a hero to the Asian market, but also due to the potential he offers as a serious rival for Shaquille O’Neal who has been unstoppable in recent seasons.

Daniel Boorstin explains the important distinction between celebrity and hero.

The celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness...The hero was distinguished by his achievement; the celebrity by his image or trademark. The hero created himself; the celebrity is created by the media. The hero is a big man [sic]; the celebrity is a big name (Andrews & Jackson, 2001, 2).

Izod (2001, P. 125) notes that triumph through conflict or contest is a pre-requisite to becoming a hero. Winning players and teams serve as ideal heroes because they have excelled at the highest level. Much in the same manner as the star system helps to generate excitement in fans, casual ones in particular, so to does the hero play a strategic role. When Michael Jordan’s Chicago Bulls would face the hated “Bad Boys” from Detroit, it was quite easy to know which team, outside of Detroit, was the fan’s choice. It was the “good guys.” We want our sports heroes to function as their comic book counterparts. We want them to win because we feel good when we cheer for them.
As fans, we are right there with them diving for loose balls or shooting jump-shots. Had the rivalry and hero versus villain theme not been so dominant in the television coverage of the Chicago/Detroit games, it is questionable as to whether or not the games would have drawn the television audiences they did.

The challenge for many athletes does not end once they have reached hero status. Professional athletes are placed on pedestals from which they can easily fall off (Boyle, 2000, p. 106). A contract dispute, poor play or an arrest can quickly knock an athlete from the ranks of the admired to the vilified. Sports news can be quite critical (Klatell, 1988, p. 214). When Allen Iverson was arrested in the summer of 2002 for allegedly attacking his girlfriend and threatening to injure her brother, the headlines were intense. His story was the lead topic on almost every sports hi-light show as well as virtually every sports-related web-site. The fact that he was cleared of all charges only weeks later received much less attention. In a similar vein, Michael Jordan was widely criticised in the media for taking a trip to Atlantic City to gamble the day before a 1993 playoff game against the New York Knicks. Once his team had won the game, and eventually the series, the discussion of his Atlantic City trip was dropped.

The point is that narratives of heroes and villains in the media – especially in television – are good business. These narratives have helped to increase the value of television rights fees and have pushed professional sports to the forefront of North American society. Nothing sells as well as famous heroes and villains. This aspect of television coverage of sport has altered the manner in which athletes perceive both the game and themselves. This point will be elucidated in our later discussion about the branding of players.
Contradictions between team and individual success

Inherent in the emphasis on individuals with television is a contradiction for players between team and individual success. The structure places its emphasis on individual production which rarely coincides with team success (Wenner, 1989, p. 82). Opposing forces are therefore pulling at players. On the one hand there is a desire to excel to maximize both the individual player’s salary and marketability through a style of play which is entertaining to fans and makes its way onto the sports hi-light shows. On the other hand there is the aspect of winning. Teams want players who will contribute to a winning situation, while marketers need winners to sell their products. As was mentioned earlier in the discussion of heroes, it is through triumph in a contest or conflict that heroes earn their stripes (Izod, 2001, p. 125). Fans want to cheer for winners, while advertisers want their products associated with the best.

The difficult balance between team and individual success has been made increasingly difficult with the impact of television revenue. The millions of dollars now available in both salary and endorsements mean that the stakes are much higher than they used to be. Lebron James, who will be discussed further later, signed a $90 million/seven year endorsement deal with Nike prior to his graduation from high school. This amount dwarfs the $12.9 million/three year playing contract he signed.Advertisers also want to be absolutely sure that their choice for a pitch-man is correct meaning that there are fewer opportunities available. Once a successful player is found then other advertisers use that athlete as well.
No better example of the blending of individual and team success exists than Michael Jordan. He was able to capture five most valuable player awards, lead the NBA in scoring 10 times, and also claim six league championships. He certainly meet’s Izod’s criteria for being a hero. This is why he represents the pinnacle of what athletes strive to be in terms of sport and business success. A similar trend can be noted with Shaquille O’Neal who experienced a lull in his endorsements after bursting onto the scene in 1992. By the mid 1990’s he was no longer a popular marketing tool, having been dropped by Reebok. After his Los Angeles Lakers collected three consecutive NBA championships he returned to being featured prominently in ads for Burger King, Pepsi, Nestle and others.

Americans, for all their immodest individualism, saved their highest praise for the Mikans, Russells, Johnsons, and Birds who raised teammates to a championship level. Many could score, but only a few could transcend individualism (that too often in sports, as elsewhere, was only a disguise for selfishness) to win it all. When legendary coach John Wooden was asked in 1990 to rank the greatest players, he chose Larry Bird and Magic Johnson, but not Jordan: ‘He’s a show within himself, he’s not a team player’ (LeFever, 2002, p. 76).

It took Michael Jordan seven seasons before he won his first league title. It is evidently no easy task to balance individual and team goals. The list of athletes who have not been able to negotiate the delicate balance as well as Jordan or O’Neal is significant. There are many star players who have not been able to parlay their individual success into wins for the team. When Jordan was rising to stardom in the 1980’s, some believed that Dominique Wilkins was the more talented player. Their duels are legendary. But Wilkins, unable to lift his Atlanta Hawks past the second round of the playoffs at any point in his career never approached Jordan as a marketer.
A final consideration in the apparent discrepancy between marketable plays and successful players is that of market size. Though the NBA has implemented rules which allow teams to pay their players more when they become free agents, in terms of endorsement potential there is a clear difference between large and small markets. O’Neal was offered more money to stay with the Orlando Magic than to sign with the Los Angeles Lakers, but the outside influences were too good to pass up. When Steve Francis was drafted by the Vancouver Grizzlies with the second pick in the 1999 draft, he refused to sign with the Canadian club which he viewed as the NBA’s last outpost. He was eventually traded to the Houston Rockets where he has become a fixture for the western conference all-star team. It is debatable if he would have gained such status playing in a small market such as Vancouver where significantly fewer of his games would have been broadcast on national television.

All of these examples emphasize the extent to which television has placed an emphasis on the individual much like other entertainment industries. In a team sport like basketball the individual can not win games alone. Team play is required, but this is not the type of play which makes it into hi-light shows and translates into commercials. When a basketball player appears in a commercial it is unlikely to be because he is an accurate free-throw shooter or hustles on every play. Somewhat paradoxically however, the best pitch-men are the ones who have achieved team success. The negotiation of this awkward balance between team and individual success can determine the success or failure of an athlete’s career.

Michael Jordan Inc.: The Star as a “branded” product

“What Phil [Knight] and Nike have done is turn me into a dream.”

- Michael Jordan
Players are no longer just players or even for that matter endorsers of products. They are becoming brands onto themselves. At the forefront of this trend is Michael Jordan. There were major sports stars before him like Muhammad Ali or Babe Ruth, but no one has come close to matching Jordan’s level of celebrity both in North America and around the globe.

That stratum [of celebrity] was reserved for movie and pop stars, who had been transformed by the special effects, art direction and careful cinematography of films and music videos, Sport stars pre-Nike, no matter how talented or worshipped, were still stuck on the ground. Football, hockey and baseball may have been ubiquitous on television, but televised sports were just real-time play-by-plays, which were often tedious, sometimes exciting and high tech only in the slow-mo replay. As for athletes endorsing products, their advertisements and commercials couldn’t quite be described as cutting-edge star creation – whether it was Wilt Chamberlain goofily grinning from a box of Wheaties or Rocket Richard being sentenced to ‘two minutes for looking so good’ in Grecian formula commercials.

Nike’s 1985 TV spots for Michael Jordan brought sports into the entertainment world: the freeze frame, the close-up and the quick cuts that allowed Jordan to appear to be suspended in mid-jump, providing the stunning illusion that he could actually take flight. The idea of harnessing sport-shoe technology to create a superior being – of Michael Jordan flying through the air in suspended animation – was Nike mythmaking at work. These commercials were the first videos about sports and they created something entirely new (Klein, 2000, p. 52).

Jordan’s image has become so powerful and profitable that he not only has his own shoe, but his own brand. The JORDAN brand sells athletic shoes, dress shoes, athletic clothes and casual clothes. JORDAN has superstar athletes endorsing its products such as Derek Jeter of the New York Yankees, Roy Jones Jr., a heavyweight
boxing champion, and Randy Moss, a pro bowl wide receiver for the Minnesota Vikings. The brand also has retail stores in Chicago and New York and plans for expansion. So when Michael Jordan steps onto the floor, exactly who he is a spokes-person for? Is he promoting Nike, Hanes, Wilson, and MCI, and his other sponsors, or is he promoting his own brand?

Klein (2000, p. 30) uses the term “co-branding” in discussing the shift which has taken place. The term relates to the fluid partnership between celebrity people and celebrity brands. Stars from all entertainment industries such as Jordan, Puff Daddy, or Martha Stewart now mirror the corporate structure of the corporations whose products they endorse. They are just as enchanted by the possibility of developing and leveraging their own branding potential as are product-based manufacturers like the Gap or Nike.

Andrews and Jackson (2001, p. 4) present a similar argument in viewing a shift in the nature of celebrity. The celebrity industry has evolved to the point where people can be manufactured into, and marketed as, celebrities in any field. The power of the media, particularly television to distribute images and messages across time and space enables this crossover or co-branding as Klein calls it. Michael Jordan can sell hot dogs, phone services, and cologne because he is a celebrity.

It is an environment where everything promotes everything else. Though not as outwardly noticeable, there is a movement towards an MTV like structure. This station provides high-energy entertainment by playing music videos, and doing interviews of stars. The station is very good at employing a commercial logic – everything is dedicated to selling – but not making this obvious to their teenage viewers. What is lost with music television is the distinction between advertising and editorial content. Programming is
“all a commercial. Sometimes it’s an advertisement paid for by a company to sell a product. Sometimes a video for a music company to sell music...Sometimes a set filled with trendy clothes to sell a look that include products on that set” (McChesney, 2001, p. 1).

A similar blurring of the lines can be seen with professional sports, especially the NBA where endorsement deals exceed those attainable in the other major sports leagues. Branding seeks to eliminate the appearance of boundaries between the sponsor and the sponsored (Klein, 2000, p. 51). This way, when Michael Jordan steps onto the floor he isn’t just a fantastically talented basketball player, but also a representative of Nike, Hanes, and Wilson. At the same time, he must remain more than just a corporate figure. Much in the same way in which musicians and their videos must appear to be different than the other advertisements on MTV, Jordan must remain different than his commercials. He must also be a basketball player.

Jordan’s brand status has reached such heights that he is quickly becoming Nike’s biggest promoter, as well as competition. Jordan has been working on becoming what his agent David Falk terms a “superbrand” (Klein, 2000, p. 57). The attempts to build “Michael Jordan’s corporate partnership program” according to Falk is best exemplified by the movie *Space Jam*. Jordan was the movie’s star, but all of the companies which sponsor him were featured prominently in the film. Some notable dialogue includes “Michael, it’s show time. Get your Hanes on, lace up your Nikes, grab your Wheaties and Gatorade and we’ll pick up a Big Mac on the way” (Klein, 2000, p. 57)!

Nike did not promote the movie or tie it into any of its advertisements. They were not pleased with Jordan’s activities outside of Nike. They even criticised the movie for
being aimed primarily at selling product. In a fantastic ironic twist a shoe company/ad agency was complaining that a Hollywood movie would tamper with the purity of their commercials.

It has been touched on in terms of the power of being a hero and excelling at the highest level, but exactly why are athletes so conducive to being pitch-men? Klein (2000) argues that:

There is another reason behind Nike’s stunning success at disseminating its brand. The superstar athletes who form the building blocks of its image – those creatures invented by Nike and cloned by Adidas and Fila – have proved uniquely positioned to soar in the era of synergy: they are made to be cross-promoted. The Spice Girls can make movies, and film stars can walk the runways but neither can quite win an Olympic medal. It’s more practical for Dennis Rodman to write two books, star in two movies and have his own television show than it is for Martin Amis or Seinfeld to play defense for the Bulls, just as it is easier for Shaquille O’Neal to put out a rap album than it is for Sporty Spice to make the NBA draft. Only animated characters – another synergy favourite – are more versatile than sports stars in the synergy game (p. 57).

Klatell (1988, p. 197) outlines three benefits to having athletes endorse products. He points to Reebok’s commercials as examples of the role of athletes in advertisements. The first benefit is the level of authenticity that athletes bring to products and companies. Athletes excel on the floor, so they must use the best available products. Athletes can also be seen excelling. The purchasing public can watch them while they play and know how talented they are. This clearly differentiates athletes from other entertainers as pitch-men. A second benefit is the credibility that companies get when they have professional athletes endorse their products. Along the same lines as the first benefit, athletes are known to excel. If a company can be viewed in the same manner, as excelling in their
particular field, then the boost to their image can be invaluable. If the product, be it shoes, clothes, or deodorant, is good enough for an NBA all-star then it must be good enough for me. The third benefit to having athletes endorse products is somewhat specific to the type of product being sold. Athletes can provide invaluable insight into product development. With sporting goods and apparel they have an intimate knowledge of the products, but even with other products that are outside their sporting use, they often either represent or are close to the demographic which the products are being targeted to. Advertising executives and product designers may be quite skilled at their jobs, but they may not have the specific expertise of the athletes. The benefits to having athletes endorse products can be seen in the profits of companies aligned to Jordan. In 1991 Gatorade saw its revenues soar from $681 million the previous year to over $1 billion after signing Jordan and starting the “Be like Mike” campaign (Andrews & Jackson, 2001, p. 20).

Sport has a tremendous capacity to capture the collective imagination of a society. Sport figures commonly possess a heightened presence and affection within popular consciousness, making the transition to potent celebrityhood that much easier (Andrews & Jackson, 2001, p. 8). They also have an aspect of reality to their character which is unlike most other professional entertainers. Actors play roles in television shows or movies, while musicians routinely adopt fictive identities to sell their music. There is a perception that athletes are “real.” Though we have seen that the realm in which their celebrity develops bears striking resemblance to other entertainment industries, these similarities are less overt in sport than in the other industries. The explicit
"manufacturing" of movies and music is not as readily apparent with sport. These forces combine to make athletes, in many circumstances, the ideal endorser for many products.

There is more to the success of athletes as product endorsers than what has been outlined so far. They represent many of the values which are held in high regard in North American society. Much of the work on the subject has focused on Michael Jordan so that is where we will stay. Jordan's on court brilliance links perfectly with American ideologies of competitive individualism (Andrews & Jackson, 2001, p. 22). He is an example of the American dream. Through his own hard work and dedication Jordan has risen to the peak of his profession, showing that anything is possible if you only work hard.

Jordan has also been able to transcend race. In a society still controlled primarily by white middle-class men, Jordan, an African-American, has been able to succeed. His image has been shaped to be in accordance with the dominant structure. He exhibits values with which everyone can relate and support. An executive from a rival of Nike's explained that "The thing about Michael is that he doesn't alienate anybody" (LeFeber, 2002, p. 64). Because he comes from a stable middle-class family, Jordan presents an enticing vision of black success. His is the antithesis of the single-mother led homes in which black families are viewed as inherently pathological (Andrews & Jackson, 2001, p. 31). He is the ultimate breadwinner for his family, having been raised with appropriate values, and now providing his family with everything they could ever need or want. It has been argued that this vision of Jordan and his familial success is actively involved in cementing both his image as well as dominant societal values.
Athletes have the potential to be tremendously powerful and wealthy product endorsers. The example of Michael Jordan has shown how successful they can be, but at the same time, how structured their image must be. Athletes are capable of arousing emotions unlike perhaps anyone else in society. There is a reason Joe DiMaggio was starring in commercials decades after he had retired from baseball. But we must be aware of the limits that are placed on these athletes, and the impacts that these limits have on them as well as others in society.

**Sport and the Dream of Upward Mobility**

I know you won’t believe me when I say this, but I wish kids, especially black kids, didn’t dream so much about playing in the NBA… NBA. Those three letters spell hope, escape, and promise to thousands and thousands of kids across America…

The NBA is dynamic and exciting. But that glamorized view is also incomplete. What you don’t see is just as important as what you do. For every David Robinson, Shaquille O’Neal, Hakeem Olajuwon and Patrick Ewing, there are countless names who will never make it. It’s no so bad that these kids tried, there’s nothing wrong with chasing your dreams. But it’s sad when anyone allows themselves to be deluded by glitter and gold. There are so many guys I know who had the intelligence to do almost anything, but all they thought about was basketball. And then when basketball didn’t work out, they had nothing to turn to (Joravsky, 1996, p. 9).

- Charles Barkley

The push towards individualisation which is characteristic of American capitalism contributes greatly to the hegemony of professional sport. The potential for upward mobility offered to those from disadvantaged backgrounds is based on the premise that through hard work and dedication any one person is capable of getting out of the ghetto and making it to the peak of athletic success. There are many who have done it, and they
can be seen on television every weekend. Individualism also arises in the consideration of
the social issues involved with poverty and crime in North American society. If those
who are in such a situation would just put in the effort that Michael Jordan did, then they
too could be famous.

Dennis Rodman, the notorious rebounder and defender for the Michael Jordan led
Chicago Bulls teams discussing the situation faced by many black players:

A lot of times you’ll hear somebody ask an NBA player
what he’d be doing if he wasn’t getting paid to play
basketball. The answer they get pretty often is: Dead or in
jail. Most of us are from shitty backgrounds: projects,
ghettos, no money, no father, no hope...I didn’t have a
male role model in my life until I got to college and started
getting my shit together (Lafrance & Rail, 2001, p. 37).

Compared with all young men in the United States, young black men are twice as
likely to be unemployed, three times more likely to have been arrested, and six times
more likely to have spent time in prison. Almost half of all black youths live in families
below the poverty line, and one in five black youths aged 18 to 21 lack the basic
certificate of education needed for most entry-level jobs. Perhaps the most shocking and
troubling figure is that the leading cause of death for black teenagers and young adults is
homicide (Sandell, 1995, p. 71). While Race may be a social and ideological construct,
there are very real implications of this construct in terms of positioning and power within
society.

The positioning of black athletes as those who rose above the conditions to make
it provides an incomplete example to both other African-Americans as well as the white
majority. Sport contributes greatly to fitting the athlete into established mainstream
cultural and behavioural patterns of the society and in this way contribute to the stability,
maintenance, and perpetuation of the society (Landers, 1976, p. 184). Sport is seen as the way out for blacks. Eitzen (1986, p. 269) explains that sport may be perceived as one of the few means by which blacks can succeed in the highly competitive American society. At the same time, these few athletes who do make it to the professional ranks provide an unrealistic example to society that the American dream is within everyone’s grasp if they want it. In discussing Cathy Freeman, the Olympic champion runner from Australia who is of Aboriginal descent, Tatz (1995, p. 295) uses the term “sample of one.” This unrepresentative sample serves to blur the appearance of the very serious and still present social issues within society. Poverty, crime and racism can be seen as something other – something out there somewhere, but which doesn’t have a direct impact on those in power. If the problem was so bad then how are these athletes accomplishing so much?

In 1995, Anfernee “Penny” Hardaway was an emerging NBA star. He appeared on the cover of Sports Illustrated with the headline “Penny From Heaven?” He was featured in a series of Nike commercials; most notable for our analysis was the commercial entitled “Work.” In the ad he says:

Nah! I wasn’t born with a basketball in my cradle.
For some believe we come out dunking once we are conceived.
Superstar? I got it made, right?
I went from nothing to something overnight.
Well, don’t believe the hype.
I had to work to get where I’m at and that’s a fact.
Mom and Grandma raised me to be proud
and they instilled their philosophy in me
knowing that no one could take that from me.
Nah! I had to work to get here.
At the Boys and Girls club. At Memphis State.
I had to work to be great.
Just do it (King & Springwood, 2001, p. 33).
This commercial ran at the same time as another Nike commercial which featured playground basketball legend Peewee Kirkland. Kirkland tells his tale of regret. He had the chance to make it, but didn’t take advantage of it. He didn’t work hard enough. Hardaway is the realisation of the American dream while Kirkland’s failure is painted as the result of his poor choices. These commercials reinforce the focus on the individual. The system provides opportunities to individuals with talent, character, and discipline for upward mobility. Those who don’t have these attributes will inevitably fail. The situation appears simple. Goldman and Popson (1998) argue that, “Though these ads allude to questions of social structure, Nike prefers to highlight an individualism that privileges the role of proper values, personal choices, and the willpower not to give in to the lure of easy pleasures. Lose your discipline and you can lose everything. Such morality tales are redolent of traditional middle-class accounts of individual success in a capitalist society” (p. 118).

_Hoop Dreams_, the documentary film released in 1994 followed two Chicago kids from the eighth grade until high school graduation. These two young men were from poverty-stricken neighbourhoods, and basketball was their escape. Arthur Agee, and William Gates offer a glimpse into the conditions that young black males face as they pursue their dream of making it to the NBA.

Gates is the more accomplished of the two players when the film begins. Already close to full-grown at 6’1” in seventh grade, Gates is a prodigy. He is recruited to attend St. Joseph high school in the Chicago suburbs. Interestingly enough, this is not the only high school to recruit him. Before ever attending the school, at age fourteen, he says, “Right now, I want to play in the NBA. That’s something I …think about all the time.”
Gates lives in the Cabrini Green housing project with his mother and brother. His brother was a collegiate player, but did not make it any further because of a questionable attitude.

Agee also lives in a difficult neighbourhood. He lives with his mother and father, as well as numerous siblings. Like Gates he is recruited to attend St. Joseph high school. Expressing a similar desire to Gates, Agee explains his future plans at age fourteen.

"When I get to the NBA, first thing I’m gonna do, I’m gonna see my momma. I’m gonna buy her a house. Gonna get my Dad a Cadillac...so he can cruise to the games." Unlike Gates, he does not finish his schooling at St. Joseph. Unable to pay the tuition fees after his father returns to dealing drugs and leaves the family, Agee is forced to transfer to the local public school, Marshall.

A particularly telling incident occurs when the two boys attend a basketball camp at St. Joseph, a year before they both began attending the school. Isiah Thomas, the NBA all-star guard for the Detroit Pistons and graduate of St. Joseph is at the camp and takes time to address the campers. He then spends time with William and Arthur in particular choosing Arthur out of the crowd to play a game of one-on-one before speaking with William.

"I hear Coach Pingatore [the senior boys coach at St. Joseph who also coached Thomas years earlier] speaks highly of you," Isiah told William.

William swallowed hard. "Yes, sir."

Isiah smiled. "You don’t have to call me sir."

"Okay."

"I got to tell you, there are great kids in gyms all over the country. Kids like you, just starting out. If you want to make it to the next level, you’ll have to work hard and listen to your coach."

"I will."

"Everything you’re gonna do, I had to do too – don’t feel you’re alone," Isiah said. "I came from a poor family. For a long time we didn’t know if we would have
food to eat. I had to travel a long way to get to St. Joseph. But that never bothered me. If you feel travelling far out here is hard, you ain’t going to make it. If you know you can do it, it’s going to be a breeze.”

William didn’t know what to say, so he said nothing. He was in a dream sitting so close to Isiah. He didn’t dare say what Isiah probably knew – that more than anything else he wanted to be like Isiah. As did Arthur. As did all the kids in the gym. Isiah’s life was their dream. More than anything they wanted to play in the NBA (Joravsky, 1996, p. 27).

The idea of basketball being their escape is expressed later in the day when the boys are sitting together listening only partially to Pingatore.

They were lost in their dreams – of Isiah, and of greatness. They thought about their friends and classmates, brothers and sisters, filing into their old, run-down schools, so decrepit and dark, back home in the inner city. They felt enormously grateful. They were the lucky ones with the ticket in their hands, their dreams within reach (Joravsky, 1996, p. 27).

The careers of these two players take distinctly different paths. Gates, a far superior performer to Agee upon arriving at St. Joseph is a key member of the senior boys team in ninth grade, while Agee plays for the ninth grade team. When the families can no longer afford the tuition for the school, Agee is forced to leave the school while a sponsor is found for Gates. This sponsor will cover all of William’s tuition fees for the remainder of his time at St. Joseph. The one who performs is rewarded, even at the high school level. Neither is particularly interested in academics, though Agee struggles tremendously.

In a scene indicative of his ambivalence towards academics, Agee is preparing to write an essay on the life cycle of the butterfly. He has little interest in the subject or much to do with reading or writing for that matter. As he saw it, the only reason to stay in
school was to play basketball, and the only way to play basketball at the college level was to graduate high school. He reads his opening sentence for the camera: “As people bloom into another year, the butterfly also blooms.”...I’m gonna do what I gotta do to stay on the team, Arthur thought. Even though I don’t like writing, and I don’t like reading, and I don’t like school. He had been telling himself that for so long that he believed it” (Joravsky, 1996, p. 242).

Television serves a critical role in the construction of the desire that Gates and Agee, as well as so many other black youths, have. Television modifies and (re)presents social reality as something that is natural. TV serves to naturalize myths about sport.

The apparent innocence of sport provides a significant site for the construction of myth and ideology. With sport’s seemingly “neutral” emphasis on the body, and supposedly equal conditions for competition and possibilities for success based on merit, the rhetoric of sport contains a powerful tendency to represent particular objects and social relations in ways that mask their socially constructed character. This has the result of “naturalizing” particular meaning and social relations of sports practice. Socially constituted and culturally specific meanings and relations are thus presented as natural and universal (Cantelon & Harvey, 1988, p. 184).

The visibility of professional sport has been increased to an infinite degree by television. Coupled with that increase in visibility is the increase in salaries and endorsements which are collected by athletes. The potential rewards for “making it” are so great that the allure is too much to resist. The hundreds of thousands who never play in the NBA, or those who are able to make it to a developmental league are rarely, if ever, seen while the stars of the NBA are on TV almost every night. The message which is sent is one with a distorted message about the possibility of playing professional sport, with little mention of the staggering odds against it. Televised sport also means that the most
visible African-American successes are those who play sports. Black doctors, lawyers, teachers or any other profession are rarely featured on television. Professional athletes are in your living room every night.

In the movie *Hoop Dreams*, when we are first introduced to Gates, he and his brother are watching the 1988 NBA all-star game. Gates has a wide-eyed stare as he watches his NBA idols playing in his hometown. Gates’ brother Curtis is offering advice and pointing out to his brother the moves and plays that make these players so good. It is during this segment that Gates expresses his desire to play at that level that was quoted earlier. The next time we see Gates is after watching the game. He is out on the local court practicing his dunks.

During his senior season, Gates is struggling to capture the form he had shown as a ninth and tenth grader. He watches tapes of Isiah when he was a high schooler and sees a story that a local news station produced. “‘Isiah is joined by two other starters, Ray Clark and Tyrone Brewer, all three recruited from Resurrection Elementary on Chicago’s West Side,’ the reporter said. ‘The kids get a good education and the Chargers get one terrific basketball team.’ What a joke, William thought” (Joravsky, 1996, p. 244). William believed that St. Joseph had certainly gotten the better of the deal.

*Hoop Dreams* at its core is an exploration of the American Dream, but understandings can exist on numerous levels. The Columbus Dispatch newspaper describes the film as “A celebration of the passions and possibilities of doggedly pursuing a goal” (Joravsky, 1996, back cover). This viewpoint mirrors that of the reporter in the story on Isiah Thomas. In that news story, a larger issue is being ignored in favour of the superficial one. The education that those young men were receiving at St. Joseph
was likely very good. Probably much better than they otherwise would have received at their local public high school. Thus is the power of the media, and the superficial reading. The issue which is not addressed is why those boys could not attend the high school in their home neighbourhood. The answer is provided by Luther Bedford, Arthur’s basketball coach at Marshall High School. He explains that kids go to St Joseph to advance to university. Kids go to Marshall because they have to. If they do graduate from high school it is an accomplishment in and of itself. *Hoop Dreams* rather than being a celebration of the possibilities of the American dream must be seen as depicting a system in which the majority of certain sectors of the population are set up to fail. A few individuals may succeed, but they are the exception rather than the norm.

Both Agee and Gates went on to play basketball for an NCAA university: Gates at Marquette University in Milwaukee and Agee at Arkansas State after a stop at Mineral Area Junior College. Gates was able to graduate with a degree in communications while Agee did not receive a diploma. Gates gave up the dream of playing in the NBA, but Agee kept pursuing the ultimate goal after finishing his collegiate eligibility. He played in the CBA, USBL and IBL as what he hoped would be a springboard to the NBA. He has yet to crack an NBA roster.

The lesson that must be learned from the story of both Agee and Gates is just how powerful the allure of professional athletics is. Sheila Agee, Arthur’s mother, though not talking about basketball, addresses the pressures which keep impoverished black neighbourhoods from elevating themselves. After Arthur’s eighteenth birthday, the state cut Sheila’s welfare benefits. “‘It’s a trap,’ she told the others. ‘They don’t want you to have no control or power over yourself. They just give you just enough to keep you
hungry and keep you coming back. I got a lifetime of experience. I'm raising my children. The things we survived would kill other people. And I can't find a job? I don't have what it takes to find a job? They just want us to be little black girls, crying and begging” (Joravsky, 1996, p. 240).

In a similar fashion that Ms. Agee believes that the welfare system is structured to provide just enough to keep people coming back, professional sport offers sufficient opportunity to young black males that they will continue to play and pursue the dream of making it. Though the odds are 7600 to 1 that a high school basketball player will reach the NBA, the statistics are meaningless as long as the belief exists that the dream is possible.

*Generation next: The evolution of mediated sport and upward mobility*

In 1989 Wenner wrote that the socializing impacts of mediated sport were unknown (p. 23). Fourteen years later, these impacts are becoming clearer. Young athletes are increasingly aware and determined to make it to the professional ranks, and the system through which they develop is becoming increasingly geared towards professionalisation. Increasing numbers of players are jumping from high school to the NBA, the NCAA has become a farm system for professional leagues, high school games are featured on national television, and the systematic problems in North American society remain unchanged.

Historian Geoffrey Smith likens the current era of youth, particularly those in the United States to the corrupt, rampant exploitation of the so-called Gilded Age in the U.S. between the 1870’s and 1890’s. He believes that a new Gilded Age has developed with a high level of greed and rapacity. In this age the market in sport defines nearly everything.
The immense amount of money and celebrity associated with sports leads many, especially impressionable youth, to conclude that playing games is more important than education or politics (LeFeber, 2002, p. 19).

At the Nike All-American camp where the top 100 high school players from across the United States perform for coaches from virtually every NCAA division 1 university Spike Lee addressed the players. This talk was shown in Hoop Dreams where Gates was invited to the camp. Lee cautions the players about the motivations of the system into which they are being recruited:

You have to realize, that nobody cares about you. You're black! You’re a young male! All you’re supposed to do is deal drugs and mug young women. The only reason why you’re here [is] you can make their team win. If their team wins, these schools get a whole lot of money. This whole thing is revolving around money (King & Springwood, 2001, p. 110).

Systemic pressures to achieve on-court success, coaches are hired and fired at a similar rate at the collegiate level as the professional level, structure university athletics in such a manner as to encourage athletic over academic success. This refers to the NCAA where the majority of professional players emerge and not the Canadian circuit knows as the CIS.

College sports, while theoretically still a form of amateur sport, is becoming increasingly corporate. Sperber (1990, p. 147) uses the term College Sports Inc. in discussing the NCAA, which has become “a commercial entertainment conglomerate, with operating methods and objectives totally separate from, and often opposed to, the educational aims of the schools that house its franchises.”
In our discussion of professional sports, we outlined how players are entertainers. This is also applicable to collegiate athletes, particularly those in major sports such as football and basketball. Athletes are unlike the majority of the student population at their university. They are recruited for purposes outside of academics. They go through school on grants not based on academic aptitude, but rather on their talent and potential as performers.

The system does not make sense. If colleges searched for and awarded scholarships to upcoming rock stars so that they could entertain the university community and earn money for their schools through concerts and tours, educational authorities and the public would call this “a perversion of academic values” and would not stand for it. Yet every year American institutions of higher education hand out more than 100,000 full or partial athletic scholarships, worth at least $500 million, for reasons similar to those that would justify grants to rock performers (Sperber, 1990, p. 148).

Studies have shown that high school athletes choose colleges based more on athletic than academic considerations. It has also been shown that universities are considered as the pathway to most professional team sports (Sperber, 1990, p. 148). Universities are a crucial player in the process of realising dreams of making it to the professional ranks. The visibility of college sports functions to perpetuate the myth that sport is a way of amassing great wealth, securing social position, and achieving individual happiness (King & Springwood, 2001, p. 32).

When you go to college, you’re not a student-athlete but an athlete-student. Your main purpose is not to be an Einstein but a ballplayer, to generate some money, put people in the stands. Eight or 10 hours of your day are filled with basketball, football. The rest of your time, you’ve got to motivate yourself to make sure you get something back (Sperber, 1990, p. 147).

- Isiah Thomas
Following the theme of players as entertainers, NCAA scholarships are one-year scholarships renewable annually. Though it is rare, players could be in essence “fired” for not performing up to expectations. Such a situation occurred with Canadian Jordie McTavish who did not have his basketball scholarship renewed after the 1997-98 season, his second season at the University of Utah.

College may be a necessary step on the track to the pros, but that doesn’t mean that it is the preferred route for many athletes. Jim Walden, former head football coach at Iowa State University, said that in his sport, “not more than 20% of the football players go to college for an education. And that may be a high figure” (Sperber, 149). Much like what was seen with Agee’s ambivalence towards academics, the key is to stay eligible so that a player can continue to compete. Wayne Yates, a former NCAA basketball coach explained that “I believe academic counselors honestly want athletes to graduate, but I’ve heard an academic counselor say he could keep a cockroach eligible for two years. That’s true” (Sperber, 1990, p. 150).

The proof is in the numbers. In a recent study, 10 of the 16 schools in the quarterfinals of the 2003 NCAA Div. I men’s basketball tournament failed to graduate even half their players. Black players are also less likely to finish their careers with degrees than whites. The study is based on players who have graduated within six-years of entering the school. Some highlights of the report were that:

- Five of the 16 teams had graduation rates a third to a half lower than the school’s overall athletic graduation rates.
- Six schools had graduation rates for black basketball players a third to three-quarters lower than overall athletic rates.
- Only three schools graduated at least two-thirds of their black basketball players, while just those and two others graduated at least two-thirds of all basketball players.
• Only six schools graduated at least 50 per cent of all basketball players, and seven graduated at least half of their players.
• 57 per cent of players in men's basketball are black. 58 of the 328 Division 1 teams failed to graduate a single black player during those six years (Associated Press).

Though the NCAA's structure does not encourage academic success, it does result in a form of player exploitation. Though they are provided with special dormitories and dining facilities, academic advisors and tutors and a variety of other privileges unavailable to other students, much of the revenue their talents generate is distributed to the schools and athletic departments. Though athletes are not paid any sort of salary, the television rights to men's basketball games were sold in 2002 to CBS for a six-year $11 billion contract (Brown, 2002, p. 1). The crown jewel in the NCAA's package is the men's basketball tournament. This event is the major factor in motivating television networks to pay such an enormous amount to broadcast NCAA athletics. The revenue from the television deal is distributed to all member institutions of the NCAA. Included in the television deal is a change in the NCAA's corporate partners program. Host Communications secures these corporate partnerships, but under the new television deal, they will be able to include television to make partnerships more attractive and expensive. Former NCAA president Cedric W. Dempsey, the man largely responsible for negotiating the landmark television deal sees only positives. "We've been able to increase revenue without increasing commercialisation - we've even decreased commercialisation, in my view" (Brown, 2002, p. 6).

Washington State University President V. Lane Rawlins raises the systemic issues associated with the NCAA's television revenues. "You have to admit we've gone into a market, that our events are for sale. That isn't necessarily bad, but it can be. It can be totally bad if the only things you're focused on are those that have a price tag. But I think
we reached the best compromise we can come up with that’s acceptable to all parties.

We’re in a world that none of us individually control and that world is very commercial.

You can’t do quality intercollegiate athletics on an Association-wide scale without putting out the ‘for sale’ sign” (Brown, 2002, p. 5).

Dempsey argues that the NCAA needs its television deal and corporate partnerships because they are critical to the level of exposure that university athletics receives.

Host Communications CEO Bruce Kidd explained the relationship between the NCAA and corporations as being mutually beneficial: “When you work with blue-chip companies that have stellar relationships with their consumers, then the Association’s brand and mission are naturally enhanced. Having the combined power of a CBS and a Disney not only broadcasting NCAA championships but also committed to communicate to the public what the NCAA stands for could be very powerful. The reality is that corporations and athletics are intertwined. The right partners can help you advance your message and what you’re trying to accomplish” (NCAA news, 2002, p. 2).

American capitalism has its tentacles firmly attached to collegiate athletics through television revenues. The NCAA has an extremely valuable commodity in the men’s basketball tournament, and television networks will pay handsomely to get it. This influx of money and exposure raises the stakes for coaches, players, as well as administrations. Kidd’s reference to the intertwining of corporations and university athletics is troublesome. The notable questions lacking from these NCAA executives are why the NCAA needs such alliances, how this shifts the focus of the system away from academic success towards athletic success, and the impact this has on the perception of
the NCAA by high school students who hope to play at the collegiate level. With university athletics being propelled to such a powerful position, the inevitable result is one in which a large portion of athletes suffer the consequences. As was seen in the discussion of the NCAA system, there are quite strong forces pulling against academic in favour of athletic success.

The story of a black inner-city player having success has become commonplace in NCAA television broadcasts. At the 2003 final four of the men’s basketball tournament, Syracuse’s Carmelo Anthony was the focus of CBS’ attention. He was the best player on the floor, but also came from a neighbourhood in Baltimore which he calls “the pharmacy” for the amount of drug use.

The story of overcoming the harsh realities of the inner-city is extremely marketable. It situates the NCAA as a major source of aid to the socially disadvantaged. It provides them an opportunity to overcome their upbringing. In the feature on Anthony, his success is attributed to his decision to do what no one else in his family had ever done, leave the dangers of the inner-city and attend university. The location where Anthony was raised is described as being a place where no one had any chance to succeed. The interview concludes with Anthony explaining that he has won many championships in his life, but than “nothing compares to the final four” (CBS, April 5, 2003). The slant of the story is clear. The NCAA is there to help someone who has worked hard to achieve their goals. While a positive message, it is incomplete.

Lebron James arrives at Los Angeles International Airport with his teammates. They are picked up in a 30-foot-long Cadillac Escalade complete with satellite TV, two wet bars, frosted windows, an eight-speaker stereo and room for 16 passengers. James is
accompanied by his mother and body guard. He is in town for a game. His team wins, despite his relatively poor performance. After the game, Adidas decorates the lounge in the hotel for a party for James, his teammates, and numerous young women. Magazine covers and photos of James are hung on chain-link fences that surround leather couches, chairs and beanbags. James sports a custom made jersey with "KING JAMES" sewn on the back (Wahl, 2003, p. 73). James is not in the NBA, or even college, but rather in high school. Wahl concludes his article by saying, "Life is good for the king these days. Yet you wonder, gazing at the scene, what it says about the state of the kingdom" (Wahl, 2003, p. 73).

The emphasis on athletic performance is trickling down into high school sports. James recently completed his senior season at St. Mary’s – St. Vincent’s high school in Akron, Ohio. He was the first pick in the 2003 NBA draft by the Cleveland Cavaliers. His high school games drew such large crowds that his games were moved from the high school’s gym to the over 5,000 seat stadium at the University of Akron. ESPN also broadcast some of his games on national television. In fact, his game against legendary Oak Hill academy drew the highest ratings in the history of the ESPN2 network. Over the past two seasons he has earned nearly $500,000 in revenues for his high school. This figure does not include appearance fees for tournaments which can reach $10,000 (ESPN, 2003). He also signed a endorsement deal with Nike for $90 million over seven years before ever setting foot on an NBA floor. There is no reason for him to pursue any sort of academics. He can’t be faulted for this. The system however can be questioned.

While the majority of high school basketball players are not able to go to the NBA, there are many who believe they will. As was seen in the case of Agee and Gates,
school was merely a vehicle through which they could pursue their goals. Numerous high school all-star games are nationally televised and the recruiting process can be intense. Collegiate scouts have players on their radar-screen by the time they are in middle school.

Having been raised with televised sport, new generations of players understand how the system works. When he arrived in the NBA Shaquille O’Neal was the most coveted rookie in years, and he knew it. At a meeting between O’Neal’s manager, Leonard Armato, and Nike’s marketing team Armato explained to Nike’s representatives that Shaq understood how the system worked and had a plan of attack. Donald Katz described the meeting:

Shaq has observed the explosion of the sports-marketing scene (“He took sports-marketing courses,” Armato says) and the rise of Michael Jordan, and he’d decided that rather than becoming a part of several varied corporate marketing strategies, an array of companies might be assembled as part of a brand presence that was he. Consumer products companies would become part of Team Shaq, rather than the other way around. “We’re looking for consistency of image,” Armato would say as he began collecting the team on Shaq’s behalf. “Like Mickey Mouse” (Klein, 2000, p. 55).

Coaches as Commodity

Television has raised the importance of winning. This impacts both players and coaches. As we have seen, players must play for winning teams to maximize both their salaries as well as marketing potential. Coaches have seen the environment within which they coach change as they too become both coaches and entertainers.

Coaches are not given the same time to build teams as in past years. With the arrival of television, fans have grown less and less patient with losing teams. “Before
television, winning wasn’t everything or even the only thing, and the future employment of coaches and managers was not tied directly to whether they won the big one...Now endlessly sniped at and analysed, no coach or manager escapes public scrutiny, and fans grow restless looking at the same losing faces night after night, season after season” (Abelman, 1998, p. 253). This can be blamed partially on the escalated salaries that coaches now receive. In the same manner that television revenue has dramatically increased player’s salaries, coaches are now paid salaries in the millions of dollars. Some NBA coaches receive upwards of seven million per season. It is hard to justify such a salary for a coach that does not win games. Therefore losing coaches are fired without hesitation.

In a sense, coaches are similar to players. They must also be entertainers. Be it during the games or after, coaches must become celebrities. This is a blanket statement with exceptions, yet it is applicable to a majority of coaches. As Rader (1984, p. 202) states, “coaches, especially basketball coaches, sometimes behave like raging maniacs. Such behaviour on the streets would have quickly called forth the police, not to mention an ambulance crew from the local mental hospital.” Coaches yell and scream like maniacs on the sidelines, bombarding officials with obscenity laced tirades. They then conduct press conferences or appear in interviews to be calm well-mannered men.

Coaches now appear in movies and commercials endorsing products. They also appear on late night talk shows. A coach must make a name for himself, and the best way to do this is self-promotion. This is increasingly important with the short tenures of many coaches. If you make a name for yourself, perhaps other teams will consider hiring you as you are a celebrity.
The role of coaches in NCAA athletics is particularly interesting. The uneven distribution of revenue in the NCAA has made it highly desirable to have a winning program. Winning produces more revenue. With recruiting playing such an important role in success at the inter-collegiate level, coaches become critical. These coaches, with their strong market position, can earn salaries far greater than any other university employee. "It’s like being a movie star. You get paid because you’re Steve Spurrier, Bobby Bowden, or Rick Neuheisel...Our coaches have become the Michael Jordan of college athletics" (NCAA News, 2002, p. 1).

Conclusion

The significant development of the professional sports industry over the past half-century has been remarkable. The growth in the 1990’s alone is staggering. Prior to 1960, there were only a few independent sports leagues whose members could legitimately claim “major league” status. However, today the situation is dramatically different. As professional sports have grown in recent decades, they have gained recognition as a vital part of the burgeoning mass-entertainment industry (Worsnop, 1995, p. 125). The NBA, NHL, MLB, and NFL have television deals which combined reach into the tens of billions. Other than the NHL and to a much lesser extent MLB, rights fees show few signs of slowing down anytime soon.

TV and more specifically the money associated with television is a major impetus behind many fundamental changes in the world of professional sport. This revenue stream is a fundamental component to Rowe’s “Unruly Trinity” of commercial sport, the entertainment media, and late capitalist culture (Andrews & Jackson, 2001, p. 4). These
powerful forces can all be seen as shaping the context of professional sport in North America.

It is no longer enough for leagues, teams, and even players to be involved solely with the sport in which they participate. Teams must find revenue streams outside of simply gate revenues, leagues must promote themselves globally and sell merchandise while also searching for new revenue within a market which is approaching an inevitable level of saturation, and finally players are also product endorsers and in some cases, even their own brand. Sport now resembles other entertainment industries such as music, television, or film. The actual sport, while still crucial to the success of professional leagues and players, is in some respects secondary to other concerns such as image and promotion.

The changes have a trickle down effect which shapes the world in which professional sports athletes work and the system in which they develop. University athletics has become a stepping stone to the pros while high school sports is a breeding ground for university athletes. These systemic priorities help to normalise the myth of making it to the professional ranks for underprivileged groups within society with troubling effects.

Sport is both play and display. Televised sport occupies a critical role in the potential for upward mobility offered by professional sport. The few athletes who are able to make it to the professional ranks are positioned on a pedestal for others to see and attempt to follow. The likelihood of achieving a similar level of success is virtually ignored. Particularly troubled by this situation are African-Americans who see sport as their way out of difficult situations. Sport may be perceived as one of the few means by
which blacks can succeed in the highly competitive American society. In this context the market in sport defines nearly everything. The immense amount of money and celebrity associated with sports leads many, especially impressionable youth, to conclude that playing games is more important than education or politics (LeFeber, 2002, p. 19).

Roone Arledge’s quote was mentioned earlier, but provides a fitting close to our discussion. “We are going to add show business to sports,” he once said. This mission has been accomplished, but many social issues have arisen from this emphasis which call into question the value and positive impacts that professional televised sport is reported to possess.
Works Cited


CBS. (2003, April 5) 2003 NCAA men’s basketball final four.


