



## Exploitation of sports stars. Stronger and younger

By Kerry Schmidt 02-11-2007

It seems to me that the Super Bowl is sort of like Christmas. In the weeks leading up to this epic of mega proportions, there are millions of words written and spoken on this game, along with thousands of pictures and dumb questions. You cannot go anywhere and not be bombarded by the hype.

Just like Christmas.

And right after the game day after, all the zillions of writers and TV media spend the entire day telling us what we just saw for ourselves.

But by Tuesday, except for blurbs about the parade in the winner's city, it is virtually forgotten. Old news.

Just like Christmas. All the build up and hype (I know the religious importance of the occasion, but I'm simply referring to the commercial), and the day after, it is forgotten. I have often, in this spot, ridiculed hockey as a sport no one watches.

New York and the northeast were hit with a major snow storm in the last week of January, so most people were stuck at home.

Figuring such, an NHL game between the Devils and the Panthers was broadcast to about 7.4 million households in the metropolitan area.

A whopping 736 watched the game.

Final quote from the SB, by wunderkind Rex Grossman (T-Rex as in Terrible). Talking to the media, he said, "I'm realizing how ignorant you guys are. But I don't mean that in a bad way."

I would have responded, "I 'm realizing how crappy a QB you are. But I don't mean that in a bad way."

Like it or not, the 2007 NASCAR season kicked off yesterday with their pre-season Daytona 500 qualifying run, setting up the gigantic Daytona 500 on February 18.

There are two interesting subplots going on this year which probably will be major news throughout the entire season.

First, and foremost, you have the storm building up surrounding Dale Earnhardt Jr. and his racing team, DEI (Dale Earnhardt Inc.)

The brewing battle revolves around the majority ownership of DEI.

When DE Sr. was killed in a 2001 crash, his wife, and Dale Jr's. Stepmother, Theresa, took control over this mini-mega empire.

When Dale was asked if he wanted to own more than 50% of DEI, he replied, "Absolutely."

He also stated last month that the relationship with his stepmother "ain't a bed of roses." Earnhardt's contract with DEI runs out after this season.

Theresa was not available for comment, but was said to be in discussions with new DEI president Max Siegal. Dale stated that this (whatever they come up with) "will not effect my decision, but he's (Siegal) going to speed things up."



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For the past four consecutive years, DE has been voted the most popular driver. Dale said he didn't really gauge his value to DEI until he read words of support from fellow drivers.

NASCAR is, if not already there, close to a billion dollar business. Dale is the down-home good ole boy and his stepmother is more of a fashion plate.

The battle could get really interesting, but I have to believe Dale holds the cards. I mean, what would DEI be sans Dale Earnhardt? Step mommy may have the legal end, but could have no product to sell if Dale forms his own team. Stay tuned.

The other major story that you will hear a lot about this season is the "invasion" of this good-ole-boy, Southern redneck sport by the Japanese Toyota team.

Needless to say, there is a lot of animosity, some already bordering on ugly.

Jack Rouse, long-time team owner said it succinctly, "We're going to war with them."

Now here's my favorite little bit. Fan Bill Bagwell has started a website called "Fans Against Racing Toyotas," or FART for short. You gotta love these country boys.

As one driver said, "I can't see them getting the loyalty of fans who have a confederate flag as a bumper sticker."

Dale Jarrett and Michael Waltrip are two of the seven drivers for Toyota.

Dale Davis, director of Ford's racing technology, says, "Just because they build a lot of their cars here, all the money goes to Japan and the Japanese hotshots with the company. Other drivers are less than happy.

FART shows large photos of Jarrett and Waltrip beneath a "Sellout Drivers" label.

Bagwell says "I have a real problem with Waltrip taking their money. When you sell out your country for the sake of your pocket book, that needs to be known."

Roush says doing business with the Japanese is "contentious in many ways," and promises to "hand Toyota their head in the short term." Both of these stories should make interesting sidelights as the season goes on.

Is the media and related big company business trying to exploit young sports stars? Hey, does a wild bear poop in the woods.

If there is money to be made, and there is, millions of dollars, America's business world will go to hell and back to shake that money tree for all it's worth.

I'm mainly talking about high school basketball, specifically the top teams in the country. USA/TODAY ran a major story on it last week, and if you go to the web, you can find any number of aspects of this.

It all started, of course, four years ago when LeBron James, as a junior in high school was on the cover of "Sports Illustrated" and his team, St Vincents-St Mary were seen on ESPN playing against Oak Hill Academy of Virginia, a factory of high school basketball if there ever was one..

The chosen schools jump at the chance to be on national TV, partly for the exposure ("man, all my bros get to see me play on national TV) said one player), but the biggest reason is, surprise, MONEY.

These top teams are paid well. For example, the Huntington (West Virginia)- Hyatsville, Maryland match-up netted each school \$25,000.

Yes, long gone are the Hoosiers' stories of cold bus rides to play their games.



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The kids at these chosen schools are flown across country and put up in first class hotels, complete with room service and great food. Many of these kids come from poor backgrounds or broken homes, so a chance like this is “really cool, man, sweet,” as one player said.

But there can be a dark side.

Lakewood, California’s Artesia High School, flew cross-country to play five games in six nights at Duke’s Cameron Indoor Stadium. Artesia’s opponent Huntington, had to get a special court order to allow their top player (also rated the No. 1 player in the country by USA/TODAY) to play. He had been suspended due to two technical fouls in this last game, but surprise again, a local judge lifted the suspension, “until a further hearing can be held.

See Chicago Bears’ Tank Johnson at the SB.

Five games in six nights after a red-eye flight across country. And this took place during final exams week. The players missed two days of school.

According to USA/Today and its web site, Artesia point guard Malik Story sat down after his return to take his algebra final and “was about half-there mentally....I think I did bad. I tried to remember stuff, but I was so tired, I just wanted to go home and sleep.”

Karen Woi, his algebra teacher, had no sympathy. “The coach should have realized what would happen. It was bad planning.”

But the top HS teams in the country are partaking in every and all chances they have to gain exposure, higher rankings and, of course, big dollars.

Len Elmore, a former college and NBA player, attorney and an ESPN TV analyst is a member of the Knight Commission, a watchdog panel seeking reform in college basketball. He says “High school basket ball is getting way out of proportion.

“It’s not just ESPN, USA/Today and all the other involved entities. All the related aspects are contributing to this cult of celebrity, a culture that has now trickled down to high school kids. It needs to be controlled.”

Artesia’s five games in six days is extreme by any standards. In fact, not even the NBA would not have allowed such a schedule. No more than two games in a row and not back-to-back games over more than two time zones.

But where there are big bucks to be made, why have rules ruin a profit.

ESPN will do about 10 games this year, and they will be watched by a much larger audience than NHL games. But then, anything would.

And this leads some schools to, basically, become basketball factories.

Oak Hill Academy of Mouth of Wilson, Virginia, is perhaps Exhibit 1 of this situation.

A small Baptist school in southwestern Virginia, currently ranked No. 2 in the country by USA/TODAY, is built around basketball.

Many of their players are brought in from around the country (as a private religious school, the rules are quite liberal). They are also set up like a corporation, with levels of production.

They have not one, but two varsity teams. The “Gold” team is made up of “the chosen few,” transfers who usually attend the school for one or two years before going on to a top college program. The “other” varsity team, the red team, plays a different schedule and rarely move up to be with the big boys. That must really help their self esteem.



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So, is it exploitation or simply good business. The promoters argue that the kids get experiences of a lifetime, national exposure and chances to go to a good college. Especially after you bomb out on your algebra final because you are too tired from playing basketball.

I believe that this can work and truly benefit both sides. But right now, it's unchecked. It's all about the money, and the kids are simply taken along for the ride, while being told how good this is for them.

Since this is a pretty recent phenomenon, I certainly hope that common sense comes along and some sort of overseeing group is formed to control what at many times may be way out of control.

Show me the money, baby!