



(Source: © Elizabeth Pike)

## SPORTS AND THE ECONOMY

### What Are the Characteristics of Commercial Sports?

Professional sports have become vast global industries, billion-dollar enterprises and powerful cultural forces. Where does this leave their fans?

—Jason Kelly, editor, *University of Chicago Magazine* (2014)

When sport is regarded solely within economic parameters. . . there is the risk of reducing athletes to mere merchandise through whom profit may be obtained. The athletes themselves enter into a mechanism that overwhelms them, causing them to lose sight of the true meaning of their activity. . . Sport is harmony, but if the unrestrained pursuit of profit and success prevails, this harmony is lost.

—Pope Francis (2013)

Having proved [the] effectiveness [of sporting events] in connecting successfully with consumers in existing markets, companies are keen to use sponsorship in order to drive awareness in new, sizeable emerging markets.

—Karen Earl, *European Sponsorship Association* (in Blitz, 2010)

I see myself as an actor . . . They tell us who's going to win or be disqualified and we take it from there. . . Consumers are smarter now, so we admit what we do is entertainment. And we've changed programming. But the bones are the same. Pro wrestling, like action films, is still about good vs evil.

—John Cena, *WWE wrestler* (2009)

## *Chapter Outline*

### **Emergence and Growth of Commercial Sports**

#### **Commercialization and Changes in Sports**

#### **The Organization of Professional Sports in North America**

#### **The Organization of Amateur Sports in North America**

#### **Legal Status and Incomes of Athletes in Commercial Sports**

#### **Summary: What Are the Characteristics of Commercial Sports?**

## *Learning Objectives*

- Identify the conditions under which commercial sports emerge and grow in a society.
- Identify economic and ideological reasons why sports have become so popular in society today.
- Explain how the corporate branding of sports is related to the establishment of ideological outposts around the world today.
- Discuss how commercialization affects the rules, culture, and organization of sports.
- Distinguish differences between aesthetic orientations and heroic orientations, and explain how they are influenced by the commercialization of sports.
- Explain how the owners of the major professional sports have benefited from being allowed to establish cartels, monopolies, and monopsonies.
- Identify the major forms of public assistance received by professional sport franchises and leagues in the United States.
- Identify differences in the legal status of professional and amateur athletes in both individual and team sports.
- Describe the patterns of income received by professional and amateur athletes, and explain why the range of incomes received by athletes is so great today.

Sports have been used as public entertainment through history. However, they've never been so thoroughly commercialized as they are today. Never before have economic factors so totally dominated decisions about sports, and never before have economic organizations and corporate interests had so much power and control over the meaning, purpose, and organization of sports.

The economic stakes for athletes and sponsors have never been higher than they are today. The bottom line has replaced the goal line. Sports are now evaluated by gate receipts, concessions and merchandise sales, licensing fees, media rights contracts, and website hits. Games and events are evaluated using media criteria such as market share, ratings points, and the cost of commercial time. Athletes are evaluated by their entertainment value as well as physical skills. Stadiums, teams, and events are named after corporations and linked to corporate logos instead of people and places that have local historical meaning.

Corporate interests influence team colors, uniform designs, event schedules, media coverage, and the comments of announcers during games and matches. Media companies and other corporations sponsor and plan events, and they own a growing number of sport teams. Many sports are corporate enterprises, tied to marketing concerns and processes of global capitalist expansion. The mergers of major corporate conglomerates that began in the 1990s and now continue in the twenty-first century have connected sport teams and events with media and entertainment companies. The names of transnational corporations are now synonymous with the athletes, events, and sports that bring pleasure to the lives of millions of people.

Because economic factors are so important in sports, this chapter focuses on the following questions:

1. Under what conditions do commercial sports emerge and prosper in a society?
2. What changes occur in the meaning, purpose, and organization of sports when they become commercial activities?
3. Who owns, sponsors, and promotes sports, and what are their interests?
4. What is the legal and financial status of athletes in commercial sports?

### EMERGENCE AND GROWTH OF COMMERCIAL SPORTS

Commercial sports are organized and played for profit. Their success depends on gate receipts, concessions, sponsorships, the sale of media broadcasting rights, and other revenue streams associated with sport images and personalities. Therefore, commercial sports grow and prosper best under five social and economic conditions.

*First*, they are most prevalent in market economies where material rewards are highly valued by athletes, team owners, event sponsors, and spectators.

*Second*, they usually exist in societies that have large, densely populated cities with high concentrations of potential spectators. Although some forms of commercial sports can be maintained in rural, agricultural societies, their revenues would not support full-time professional athletes or sport promoters.

*Third*, commercial sports are a luxury, and they prosper only when the standard of living is high enough that people have time and resources to play and watch events that have no tangible products required for survival. Transportation and communications technologies must exist for sponsors to make money. Therefore, commercial sports are common in wealthy, urban, and industrial or post-industrial societies; they seldom exist in labor-intensive, poor societies where people must use all their resources to survive.

*Fourth*, commercial sports require large amounts of capital (money or credit) to build and maintain stadiums and arenas in which events can be played and watched. Capital can be accumulated in the public or private sector, but in either case, the willingness to invest in sports depends on anticipated payoffs in the form of publicity, profits, or power.



Sports are played in nearly all cultures, but professional sports seldom exist in labor-intensive, poor nations. The Afghan horsemen here are playing buzkashi, a popular sport in their country, but Afghanistan lacks the general conditions needed to sustain buzkashi as a professional sport with fulltime paid athletes and paying fans.

(Source: © IGOR KOVALENKO/epa/Corbis)

*Private* investment in sports occurs when investors expect financial profits; *public* investment occurs when political leaders believe that commercial sports serve their interests, the interests of “the public,” or a combination of both.

*Fifth*, commercial sports flourish in cultures where lifestyles emphasize consumption and material status symbols. This enables everything associated with sports to be marketed and sold: athletes (including their names, autographs, and images), merchandise, team names, and logos. When people express their identities through clothing, other possessions, and their associations with status symbols

and celebrities, they will spend money on sports that have meaning in their social world. The success of commercial sports depends on selling symbols and emotional experiences to audiences, and then selling audiences to sponsors and the media.

### **Class Relations and Commercial Sports**

Sports most likely to be commercialized are those watched, played, or used for profit by people who control economic resources in society. For example, golf is a major commercial sport in the United States, even though it does not lend itself

to commercial presentation. It's inconvenient to stage a golf event for a live audience or to televise it. Camera placement and media commentary are difficult to arrange, and live spectators see only a small portion of the action. Golf does not involve vigorous action or head-to-head competition, except in rare cases of match play. Usually, if you don't play golf, you have little or no reason to watch it.

But golf is popular among wealthy and powerful men, who are important to sponsors and advertisers because they make consumption decisions for themselves, their families, their businesses, and thousands of employees who work under their supervision. They buy luxury cars and other high-end products for themselves, but more important to advertisers is that they buy thousands of company cars and computers for employees and make large investment decisions related to pensions and company capital.

This collection of golf supporters has economic clout that goes far beyond personal and family lives. This makes golf an attractive sport for corporations that have images and products that appeal to consumers with money and influence. This is why auto companies with high-priced cars sponsor and advertise on the PGA, LPGA, and Champions (Senior) PGA tours. This also is why major television networks cover golf tournaments: They can sell commercial time at a high rate per minute because those watching golf have money to spend—their money *and* the money of the companies they control. The converse of this is also true: Sports attracting low- and middle-income audiences often are ignored by television or covered only under special circumstances. If wealthy executives bowled, we would see more bowling on commercial television and more bowling facilities on prime real estate in cities; but wealthy people seldom bowl, and bowling receives little coverage.

Market economies always privilege the interests of those who have the power and resources to select sports for promotion and coverage. Unless those people want to play, sponsor, or watch a sport, it won't be commercialized on a large scale,

nor will it be given cultural significance in society. A sport won't become a "national pastime" or be associated with "character," community spirit, civic unity, and political loyalty unless it's favored by people with resources.

This is why football is now known as "America's game"—it celebrates and privileges the values and experiences of the men who control and benefit from corporate wealth and power in North America. This is why men pay thousands of dollars to buy expensive season tickets to college and professional football games, why male executives use corporation money to buy expensive blocks of "company tickets" to football games, and why corporation presidents write hundred-thousand-dollar checks to pay for luxury boxes and club seats for themselves, friends, and clients. They enjoy football, but most important, it reproduces an ideology that fosters their interests.

Women who want to be a part of the power structure in the United States often find that they must learn to "talk football" so they can communicate with the men who have created organizational cultures and control women's careers. If female executives don't go to the next big football game and take clients with them, they risk being excluded from the "masculinity loop" that is central to corporate culture and communication (Gregory, 2009). When they go to work every Monday during the fall, they know that their ability to "talk football" can keep them in touch with male co-workers.

### **The Creation of Spectator Interest**

Sport spectators are likely to be plentiful in societies where there's a general quest for excitement, an ideological emphasis on material success, childhood experiences with sports, and easy access to sports through the media.

*The Quest for Excitement* When social life is highly controlled and organized, everyday routines often cause people to feel emotionally constrained. This fosters a search for activities that offer tension-excitement and emotional arousal.

According to sociologists Eric Dunning and Norbert Elias, historical evidence suggests that this is common in modern societies. Sports, they contend, provide activities in which rules and norms can be shaped to foster emotional arousal and exciting actions, thereby eliminating boredom without disrupting social order in society (Dunning, 1999; Elias and Dunning, 1986).

Sports generally involve a tension between order and disruption. To manage this tension, norms and rules in sports must be loose enough to allow exciting action, but not so loose that they permit uncontrolled violence or other forms of destructive actions. When norms and rules are too constraining, sports are boring and people lose interest; when they are too loose, sports become sites for reckless and dangerous actions that jeopardize health and social order. The challenge is to find and maintain a balance.

This explanation of spectator interest raises the question, “Why do so many people give priority to sports over other activities in their quest for excitement?” Cultural theorists suggest that answers can be found by looking at the connection between ideology and cultural practices. This leads us to consider the following factors.

***Class Ideology and Spectator Interest*** Spectator interest in sports is highest among those who believe in a meritocratic ideal: the idea that success is always based on skill and hard work, and skill and hard work always lead to success. This belief supports a widely held class ideology in societies with capitalist economies. Those who hold it often use sports as a model for how the social world should operate. When sports promote the idea that success is achieved through hard work and skill, their ideology is reaffirmed, and they become more secure in their beliefs. This is why sport media commentators emphasize that athletes and teams succeed when they work hard and have talent. This also is why corporations use the bodies of elite athletes to represent their public relations and marketing images—the finely tuned bodies of athletes are concrete examples of skill, power, and

success as well as the use of science and technology (Hoberman, 1994). When high-profile athletes can deliver this message for corporations, lucrative endorsements come their way.

#### ***Youth Sport Programs and Spectator Interest***

Spectator interest often is initiated during childhood sport experiences. When organized youth sport programs emphasize skills, competition, and success, participants are likely to grow up wanting to watch elite athletes. For young people who continue to play sports, watching elite athletes provides them with models for playing and improving skills; for those who discontinue active participation, watching elite athletes provides continuous connections with the images and experiences of success that they learned while playing organized youth sports.

NFL executives understand the importance of this connection between youth sports and spectator interest. For example, as parents learn more about the dangers of brain injuries in football, the NFL has joined with USA Football to conduct a major public relations campaign to convince parents that football is being made safer and that they should encourage their sons to play the game. If youth football programs decline, so does the number of future players, season ticket purchasers, and media consumers of football.

***Media Coverage and Spectator Interest*** Media promote the commercialization of sports by publicizing and covering events in ways that sustain spectator interest (Cooky et al., 2013). Television increases spectator access to events and athletes worldwide and provides unique representations of sports. Camera coverage enables viewers to focus on the action and view replays in slow motion as they listen to the “insider” comments of announcers—all of which further immerses spectators into vicarious and potentially exciting sport experiences.

On-air commentators serve the media audience as fellow spectators who embellish the action and heighten identification with athletes and teams.



Football is the most widely watched sport in the United States. It offers excitement in the form of rule-governed violence, and it reaffirms the notion that success is achieved through competition and dominating opponents. Youth football teams are very popular, and more young men play high school football than any other high school sport. Football lends itself to media coverage during which replays, slow motion, and expert commentary are used to dissect plays and game plans. (Source: © Jay Coakley)

Commentators provide inside stories, analyze strategies, describe athletes as personalities, and magnify the importance of events.

Television recruits new spectators by teaching newcomers the rules and strategies of a sport at home with family and friends without purchasing expensive tickets. This is a painless way to be socialized into a spectator role, and it increases the number of people who will eventually buy tickets, watch televised games, pay for cable and satellite sports programming, and even become pay-per-view customers in the future.

### **Economic Factors and the Globalization of Commercial Sports**

Commercial sports are now global in scope. Globalization has occurred because (1) those who control, sponsor, and promote sports seek new ways to expand markets and maximize profits, and (2) transnational corporations use sports as vehicles for introducing their products and services around the world. This makes sports a form of global cultural trade that is exported and imported in a manner similar to other products.

***Sport Organizations Look for Global Markets***

Commercial sport organizations are businesses, and their goal is to expand into as many markets as possible. In fact, future profits for major professional sports depend on selling media rights and consumer merchandise. Most leagues now market themselves outside their home countries and use various strategies to develop identification with their sport, teams, and players. In this way, sport organizations become exporters of culture as well as products to be consumed.

The desire for global expansion was the main reason why the NBA allowed its players to compose the so-called Dream Team that played in the 1992 Olympics. The global media attention received by Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson, and other players provided the NBA with publicity worth many millions of dollars. This exposure helped market NBA broadcasting rights and official NBA products worldwide. Today, the NBA finals and the NBA All-Star games are televised annually in over 200 countries and there are 76 international players from 31 countries now playing in the league. Outside the United States, China constitutes the largest NBA market and player development focus. More than 50,000 stores in China sell NBA merchandise, and about 30 percent of all visitors to NBA.com enter through the Mandarin language portal at the site.

The desire for global expansion has led NFL, NBA, NHL, and MLB teams to play exhibition and regular season games in Mexico, China, Japan, England, France, Germany, and Australia and to subsidize leagues and outreach programs for marketing purposes. This spirit of globalization is neither new nor limited to North American sport organizations. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has incorporated national Olympic committees from every nation worldwide and has turned the Olympic Games into the most successful and financially lucrative media sport events in history. Furthermore, the IOC, like some other sport organizations, has turned itself and the Olympics into a global brand.

The sport with the longest history of global expansion is soccer, which is governed by

FIFA—the Fédération Internationale de Football Association. The top soccer clubs in Europe have used multiple strategies to expand their global marketing reach. The best current example is Real Madrid Football Club (FC) in the Liga Nacional de Fútbol Profesional, or La Liga, the premier twenty-team league in Spain. It is valued at \$3.3 billion and is owned by about 60,000 club members. It has 50 million social media followers and is rated as one of the twenty most recognizable brands in the world.

Two other sport teams with similar global recognition and value are Manchester United FC in England's Premier League and Barcelona FC in La Liga with Real Madrid. Barcelona, long known as a football club of the working class, has 101 million social media followers worldwide and may be the most recognizable sport brand in the world because of its working-class identification.

As a point of comparison, the New York Yankees and the Dallas Cowboys are valued at \$3.2 billion each, but they have fewer than 20 million social media followers between them. Barcelona FC has ten times more followers than the Dallas Cowboys, and about the same number of followers as all thirty-two NFL teams combined. The only U.S. team with a strong global profile is the Los Angeles Lakers, with 26 million social media followers and high brand recognition. These data have attracted the attention of the leaders of U.S. sport leagues because they indicate that there is much room for global expansion.

***Corporations Use Sports as Vehicles for Global Expansion***

Because certain sports capture the attention, emotions, and allegiance of so many people worldwide, corporations are eager to sponsor them. Corporations need symbols of success and productivity that they can use as "marketing hooks" for products and as representations of their images. For example, people around the world still associate Michael Jordan with the "Air Jordan" trademark copyrighted by Nike; and many people now assume a connection between the Olympics and both McDonald's and Coca-Cola.

In the United States, the “gold medal” achievement for a corporation is to convert the company into a brand that can be associated with various forms of status and identity. Sports serve as effective sites for doing this as sport images and products can be used to represent people’s identities at the same time that they can represent other things that give them status in particular social worlds. This dynamic drives consumption and corporate profits. As a result, most people inadvertently boost brand power by wearing clothes that prominently display logos. But corporations have convinced them that this is part of personal identity construction rather than free advertising for a company that cares nothing about them personally.

Companies whose profits depend on selling alcohol, tobacco, fossil fuels, fast food, soft drinks, and candy are especially eager to have their products associated with sports. This enables them to defuse negative publicity about unhealthy and negative aspects of their products and production processes. They want people to think that “if the sports we love are brought to us by beer, cigarettes, liquor, soft drinks, beef burgers, deep-fried foods, candy bars, and fossil fuels, these things must have some redeeming qualities.”

We now live in an era of transnational corporations (TNCs) that influence economic activity worldwide, affecting who has jobs, the kinds of work people do, salaries and working conditions, the products that people can buy, where they can buy them, and what they cost. When these corporations sponsor sports, they negotiate deals that promote their interests, increase their power, and create positive images of themselves as “global citizens and leaders.” This is worth an investment of billions of dollars each year. For example, eleven global corporations, including Coca-Cola, McDonald’s, and Dow (Chemical), each paid \$100 million just for the rights to advertise in connection with the 2010 and 2012 Olympic Games in Vancouver and London; and Anheuser-Busch

**By unrolling the red carpet to the advertising and marketing of junk-food giants, the IOC is setting a toxic trap to hundreds of millions of parents and kids.** —Monika

Kosinska, European Public Health alliance (in Jack, 2012)

(Budweiser) spent over \$370 million for commercial time during Super Bowls between 2003 and 2016. Like other multinational corporations, these companies buy commercial time during sport events to promote the belief that pleasure and excitement in people’s everyday lives depend on them. They use this belief as an ideological outpost in the minds

of people worldwide, and as information is filtered through these outposts, corporate executives hope to defuse opposition to the products and operational practices of their companies. When successful, this strategy boosts their legitimacy and contributes to corporate hegemony worldwide.

The success of this strategy led a Coca-Cola executive to tell IOC officials that they owed loyalty to Coke. He explained that

Just as sponsors have the responsibility to preserve the integrity of the sport, enhance its image, help grow its prestige and its attendance, so too, do you [in sports] have responsibility and accountability to the sponsor (cited in Reid, 1996, p. 4BB).

IOC officials know that drinking cola does not meet the nutritional needs of elite athletes or the health goals of the Olympic movement, but they respond supportively to this executive’s message. Coca-Cola has worked for nearly a century to colonize their minds and establish the outposts through which this message has been transmitted. This is why the official program brochure for the Olympics contains these words:

Without sponsors, there would be no Olympic Games. Without the Olympic Games, there would be no dreams. Without dreams, there would be nothing (cited in Horne, 2007).

Of course, the sponsors themselves could not have written a statement better suited to their purposes. They want people to focus on dreams rather than the realities related to consumption and global corporate expansion; the Olympic Games continue

to be awash in Coca-Cola imagery as outposts continue to be established in the minds of billions of potential consumers of soft drinks.

**Outposts in Action: Branding Sports** When ranchers want to show ownership of animals, they burn their logos into the animals' hides. The brand is their mark of ownership. And in the realm of sports, nearly all major stadiums and arenas in North America now display the brands of airlines, banks, brewers, and a gang of companies selling cars, oil, auto parts, energy, soft drinks, and communications services and products. For the venues in which NFL, NBA, and MLB teams play, these branding or naming rights sell for \$3 million to \$20 million per year. Deals usually are for ten to thirty years and often include signage in and around the venue, the use of luxury boxes and club seats, promotional rights for events, and exclusive concession rights (for example, the four Pepsi Centers in the United States sell only Pepsi products to fans). This benefits corporations, especially in major cities where four large billboards can cost up to \$100,000 a month (\$1.2 million per year). Having multiple billboard-like surfaces inside and outside a stadium is viewed as a good investment by corporate executives, especially when the name of their company is used in everyday conversations and they receive "sport perks" for themselves, customers, and friends.

The branding of sports also is apparent inside stadiums, where nearly every available surface is sold for corporate displays. Surfaces without corporate messages are now defined as wasted space, even in publicly owned facilities. This occurs at all levels of sports. For instance, many corporations desperately want to establish outposts in the minds of high school students who are in the process of forming lifelong preferences for products such as soft drinks. David Carter from the Sports Marketing Company in California knows that high school sports need revenues, so he predicts that "commercialism is coming to a school near you: the high school cheerleaders will be brought to you by Gatorade, and the football team will be

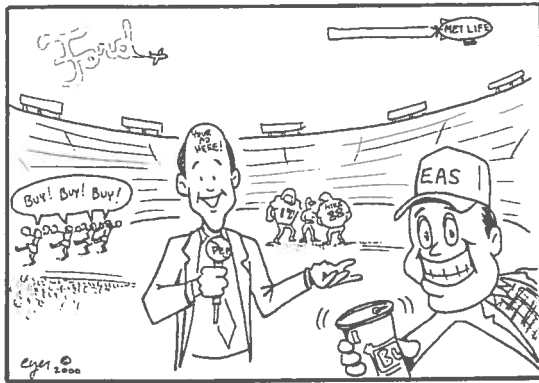
presented by Outback [Steakhouse]" (in Pennington, 2004, p. 1).

As corporations brand public spaces, community identities often come to be linked with brands, thereby converting the physical embodiments of local traditions and histories into highly visible signs that promote consumption and identify corporations as providers of pleasure and excitement. In the process, the public good is replaced by the corporate good, even in spaces paid for and owned by citizen-taxpayers.

Sport events also are branded. College football fans in the United States watch everything from the Capital One Orange Bowl to the Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl during December and early January. College football is clearly branded, as are the athletes who wear corporate logos on their shirts, shoes, helmets, and warm-up clothing.

NASCAR auto and truck racing has always been heavily branded. Although they have changed their branding strategies recently, they still have branded races such as Coca Cola 600, Coke Zero 400, Cheez-It 355, Hollywood Casino 400, and Goody's Headache Relief Shot 500. Additionally, racecars are billboards with surface spaces purchased by companies selling products that often cannot be advertised on network television, such as hard liquor and tobacco. This is why it was so important for NASCAR to be nationally televised—the liquor and tobacco companies wanted their brand names in front of a national audience for 250 to 600 laps during races.

Professional events in golf, tennis, beach volleyball, skiing, ice skating, and most other sports are now named after global corporations that want their names and products to be recognized worldwide. Corporations also brand teams in cycling, soccer, rugby, and many other sports. Professional baseball teams in Japan are named after corporations, not cities. Players and even referees in most sports wear the corporate logos of sponsors on their uniforms. Because European soccer was televised for many years by public TV stations that had no commercials, corporations put their logos on the players themselves and around the walls of the



(Source: © Frederic A. Eyer)

"This is Pepsi McDonald at Mad Max Fury Road Park where the Microsoft Raiders will battle the Wal-Mart Titans. Team captains, Nike Jones and Budweiser Williams, prepare for the Franklin Mint Coin Toss, right after this message from our sponsor, Ford trucks—giving you power on demand!"

**Televised versions of commercial sports have become inseparable from the logos and products of corporate sponsors.**

playing fields so that spectators would see them constantly. This tradition continues even though commercial media now own the rights to televise most sport events worldwide.

Corporate branders now give priority to sports that appeal to young males, a demographic category defined as "hard to reach." So there are the X Games, Dew Tour, numerous events sponsored by Red Bull Energy Drink, Van's Triple Crown (surfing, skateboarding, snowboarding), McDonald's All-American High School Basketball Games, the Sprite Slam Dunk Contest, and the Nike Hoop Summit.

Sports agents today tell athletes that they can be brands and their goal should be to merge with other commercial entities rather than simply endorse a company's products. Michael Jordan was the first to do this. He initially endorsed Nike products but gradually became a brand in his own right. Today he has his own line of products in addition to "Air Jordan." Tony Hawk has done this with his own line

of skateboards and other products. However, this strategy is possible only for athletes whose celebrity is great enough to be converted into a brand.

In all other cases, it is corporations who choose who and what they wish to brand. For example, some athletes as young as twelve years old may be known as Nike, Adidas, or Under Armour athletes. Corporate executives now try to brand athletes as early as possible so that they can socialize the athletes to develop marketable personas that can be used to effectively promote corporate interests.

The Super Bowl, far too expensive for any single corporation to brand on its own, is known as much for its ads as for the game itself. Corporate sponsors of the 2016 Super Bowl paid about \$5 million for thirty-second commercial spots during the telecast of the game—that's \$166,000 per second! Corporate sponsors pay this rate because their ads are seen by live viewers who can't "fast forward" through commercials and they receive exposure beyond the game itself—in terms of previews, summaries, highlights, evaluations, and rankings in other media coverage—and they will be available for years on the Internet where people can see every ad starting with the 1969 Super Bowl. Corporations have branded the Super Bowl to such an extent that it has been described as a program where the commercials are the entertainment, and the game may or may not be entertaining.

Future forms of corporate branding are difficult to predict because it's hard to say where people will draw the line and prevent corporations from colonizing their lives. Ads during television coverage are now inserted digitally on the field, court, and other surfaces of arenas and stadiums so that viewers cannot escape them even when they record events and delete commercials. Corporations spend more of their advertising money today to purchase brand-placement rights, so their names, logos, and products appear directly in the content of sports. This maximizes the branding of playing fields/spaces, uniforms, and athletes' bodies.

***The Limits of Corporate Branding*** Can corporations go too far in their branding of sports? People



The goal of branding is to establish outposts in people's heads by connecting personal pleasure and excitement with corporations and their products. This is why "sport spaces" are filled with corporate logos and messages. (Source: © Jay Coakley)

in New Jersey didn't resist when a local elementary school sold naming rights for its gym to Shop-Rite, a supermarket chain. Most high school and college sport programs have not resisted. Football fans don't object when McDonald's is touted as the NFL's Official Fast-Food Sponsor, and Olympic officials, who claim to be dedicated to health and fitness, have long accepted McDonald's as the Official Restaurant of the Olympic Games. Despite a handful of cases where people objected to ads located on the actual field of play, sports are for sale, and corporations are willing buyers when deals boost their power and profits and promote consumption as a lifestyle.

In less than a generation, sports have been so thoroughly branded that many people, especially those younger than thirty years old, see this situation as "normal"—as the way it is and should be. Does this mean that corporations have established ideological outposts in their heads to the point that they accept corporate power as inevitable and even desirable? If so, corporate hegemony is deeply entrenched, even if some people resist and argue that the control of sports should not rest in the hands of corporate entities accountable only to market forces. If so, commercial sports are a site where people with political and financial resources can package their values and

ideas and present them in a form that most people see as normal, acceptable, and even entertaining.

## COMMERCIALIZATION AND CHANGES IN SPORTS

What happens to sports as they shift from being activities organized for players to activities organized for paying spectators and sponsors? Do they change? If so, in what ways?

When a sport is converted into commercial entertainment, its success depends solely on spectator appeal. Although spectators watch sports for many reasons, their interest is tied to a combination of four factors:

- Attachment to those involved ("Do I know, like, or strongly identify with players and/or teams?")
- The uncertainty of an event's outcome ("Will it be a close contest?" and "Who might win?")
- The stakes associated with an event ("How much money, status, or danger is involved in the contest?")
- The anticipated display of excellence, heroics, or dramatic expression by the athletes ("Are the players and/or teams skilled and entertaining?" and "Might they set a record?" or "be the best team ever?")

When spectators say they saw "a good game," they usually mean that it was one in which (1) they were attached personally or emotionally to an athlete or a team; (2) the outcome was in doubt until the last minutes or seconds; (3) the stakes were so high that players were totally committed to and engrossed in the action; or (4) there were skilled and dramatic performances. Events containing all four of these factors are remembered and discussed for many years.

Because attachment, uncertainty, high stakes, and performance attract spectators, successful commercial sports are organized to maximize the probability that all four factors will exist in an event. To understand how this affects sports, we

will consider the impact of commercialization on the following three aspects of sports:

1. The internal structure and goals of sports
2. The orientations of athletes, coaches, and sponsors
3. The people and organizations that control sports

### Internal Structure and Goals of Sports

Commercialization influences the internal structure and goals of newly developed sports, but it has less influence on long-established sports. New sports developed explicitly for commercial purposes are organized to maximize whatever a target audience will find entertaining. This is not the only factor that influences the internal structure and goals of new sports, but it is the *primary* one. It is apparent in indoor soccer, indoor lacrosse, arena football, beach volleyball, roller hockey, and commercial action sports. Therefore, rules in the X Games are designed to maximize "big air," dangerous and spectacular moves, and the technical aspects of equipment, often manufactured by event sponsors. And when mixed martial arts was commercialized in the form of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), holding the fights in a cage was clearly an entertainment strategy—and it has worked!

Commercialization also forces more established sports to make action more exciting and understandable for spectators, but the changes seldom alter the basic internal organization and goals of the sports. For example, rules in the NFL have been changed to protect quarterbacks, increase passing as an offensive strategy, discourage field goals, protect players from career-ending injuries, establish "television/commercial time-outs," and set game schedules to fit the interests of commercial sponsors. But the basic organization and goals of the game have remained the same.

Changes in commercialized spectator sports usually do a combination of these six things: (1) speed up the action; (2) increase scoring; (3) balance competition; (4) maximize drama; (5) heighten attachment to players and teams; and (6)

provide "commercial time-outs." A review of rule changes in many sports shows the importance of these factors. For example, the designated hitter position in baseball's American League was added to increase scoring opportunities and heighten dramatic action. Soccer rules were changed to prevent matches from ending in ties. Tennis scoring was changed to meet the time requirements of television networks. Golf tournaments now involve total stroke counts rather than match play, so that big-name players aren't eliminated in an early round of a televised event. Free throws were minimized in basketball to speed up action. A 3-on-3 players sudden-death overtime period followed by a player versus goalie shootout (if needed) is now used by the National Hockey League to eliminate tie games and provide spectators with exciting action.

Although these changes are grounded in commercialization, they haven't altered the internal structure and goals of long-established sports. Teams remain the same size with similar positions, and outscoring opponents remains the primary goal. But games and matches are presented as *total entertainment experiences*. There's loud music, rapidly changing video displays, light displays, cheerleaders and mascots that present entertaining performances, and announcers that heighten drama with excited and colorful descriptions of the action. This entertainment package represents a change, but it affects the context surrounding a game or match rather than the structure and goals of the sport itself.

### Orientations of Athletes, Coaches, and Sponsors

Commercial sports occur within a promotional culture created to sell athletic performances to audiences and sell audiences to sponsors. These sports are promoted through marketing hype based on stories, myths, and images created around players, teams, and even stadiums or arenas. Athletes become entertainers, and the orientations of nearly everyone in sports shift toward an emphasis on heroic action and away from aesthetic action. As



to the personal joy of participation. Aesthetic orientations don't disappear in commercial sports, but they are combined with heroic orientations to produce changes in what constitutes a memorable sport event.

Because there are dangers associated with heroic orientations, some athletes try to limit an emphasis on heroic actions in their sports. This has occurred in figure skating as some athletes favor restrictions on the number of triple jumps required in skating programs. They worry that the quest for commercial success jeopardizes their bodies. Other skaters, however, adopt heroic orientations to please audiences and conform to shifts in the orientations of judges, coaches, and other skaters. As a result, they train to successfully land a succession of triple jumps along with quad jumps without breaking bones or destroying the continuity of their skating programs. Aesthetic orientations still exist, but heroic orientations have been woven into popular definitions of "quality" in skating performances.

As heroic orientations become more important, so do concerns about athletes becoming entertainers and sports turning into circus spectacles. For example, as accidents in NASCAR races have been linked to issues of revenge between drivers and strategies to prevent certain drivers from winning series championships, some people wonder if the sport is turning into a weekly circus act (Gluck, 2015). The challenge facing NASCAR executives is to decide whether the races are a form of honest competition or spectacles that pit drivers against each other in demolition derbies.

This issue is not limited to NASCAR. Those who control commercial sports must eventually deal with similar questions. For example, what happens to a sport when heroic orientations are pushed to extremes? Are spectators willing to have aesthetic orientations abandoned in favor of the heroic? What would events be like if this happened? One way to answer this question is to study professional wrestling—a sport turned into heroic spectacle in a quest to be entertaining. This topic is discussed in the Reflect on Sports box "Extreme Heroic Action."

### **The People and Organizations That Control Sports**

When sports depend on the revenues they generate, control in sport organizations shifts away from the athletes and toward those with the resources to produce and promote sports. Athletes in heavily commercialized sports generally lose effective control over the conditions of their own sport participation. These conditions are controlled by a combination of general managers, team owners, corporate sponsors, advertisers, media personnel, marketing and publicity staff, professional management staff, accountants, and agents.

The organizations that control commercial sports are designed to maximize profits. Decision making promotes economic interests and deals with athletes as commodities to be managed. Therefore, athletes in commercial sports usually are cut out of decision-making processes, even when the decisions affect their health and the rewards they receive for playing. This leads them to develop strategies to represent their interests relative to the interests of team owners, agents, advertising executives, media people, and corporate sponsors. For example, athletes in ESPN's X Games constantly struggle to maintain the spirit and norms of their sport cultures as they participate under conditions controlled by ESPN and corporate sponsors.

Like many athletes before them, the athletes in action sports find it difficult to oppose the power of the media and corporate sponsors. If they want the rewards offered in commercial sports, they answer first to the sponsors. This isn't new; sponsors traditionally define the conditions of sport participation. But some people view the power shifts that come with commercialization in critical terms, assessing carefully the pros and cons of a commercial model in which corporations set the terms and conditions of playing sports. Commercialization may not significantly change the structure and goals of some sports, but it does come with major changes in power relations and the organizational contexts in which sports are played.