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From The Field Of

Are you doing your part to sell all that is good about sports?

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**BILL
SUTTON**

My emotional roller coaster began last month with a thrilling Super Bowl XLIII that saw my hometown Pittsburgh Steelers come back in the closing seconds to defeat a surprising and formidable Arizona Cardinals team. That game was probably the most emotionally fulfilling and draining sporting event I have ever attended.

Since that high, however, I have been exposed to Joe Torre's book on his Yankee years, Michael Phelps' bong photo, A-Rod's admission that he used steroids, plus countless other minor irritants, including the Roger Clemens/Brian McNamee defamation hearings and so forth.

These are all down stories taking place in a down economy — not great positioning for those of us selling sport. But let's try to keep everything in perspective.

Sport is cyclical in nature and a microcosm of society. In other words, good will be followed by bad and be followed again by good.

What happens in the sports world happens in society every day in much larger numbers. Yet our attention to sports and its problems sometimes seems to obsess us more than the greater issues of the real world.

■ Looking forward

Let's step away from the mess we have placed at our own doorstep and see what we can look forward to:

- Tiger Woods returning to the Masters
- An NBA playoff run that will include the traditional rivals the Lakers and the Celtics joined by the Cavaliers, Spurs, Magic and some other aspirants to the league crown
- Opening Day. Yes, I realize that the NFL is America's national pastime, but despite some poor judgments by the MLB commissioner's office and the MLB Players Association as well as debatable leadership decisions, I and many others look forward to this time of year. On Opening Day, my team (along with every other team) is undefeated and, well, somebody has to win, so why not the Pirates?
- The College World Series (baseball and softball). Two of the best sporting events in the best venues with the best hometown hospitality (Omaha, Neb., and Oklahoma City) that I have ever experienced.
- Just going outside in the spring and playing the games that we love most



GETTY IMAGES

**An event worth looking forward to:
the College World Series in Omaha, Neb.**

■ Refocusing effort

How do we begin or refocus our selling efforts? Back in my NBA days, Mark Cuban said something that continues to resonate: "We don't sell tickets; we sell good times."

That is exactly what a ticket is: a passport to a good time with your friends or family. Watching a sport and being entertained by the packaging of that experience.

We also have some good news about our games for consumers and why they should come out to watch and be a part of them.

- Most teams have frozen prices and some have even reduced them.
- General admission tickets for MLB and NBA teams are as low as \$5.
- Value is the key concept. Some NBA teams provide value through establishing a \$1 menu (hardly original, but it worked for McDonald's and Burger King) to stretch the consumer dollar. Several MLB teams are planning to do the same.
- The spread of all-you-can-eat seats from baseball into the other sports
- Variable pricing: paying less at certain times of the year or on certain days of the week
- Postgame concerts, frequent T-shirt giveaways and so forth
- One-price night for college students

■ Showing a good time

We have good events to look forward to and marketing and pricing incentives to make it easier and more attractive to have a good time. But what is missing?

Simple: an effective way to tell a story about these opportunities. If we keep running ads showing the action of the game, we miss the real story: people choosing to attend sporting events to have a good time and, most importantly, showing people having a good time.

In these tough economic times, in which we look for good news every day and have a tough time finding it, sports can provide that uplift for anyone who needs further convincing.

Remember that sports did not take time out during the Great Depression, during wartime or, unfortunately (as many people have pointed out), following the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

Sports were not only permitted but also encouraged because they gave people a sense of normalcy, distraction and hope as well as simply the opportunity to have a good time.

So, marketers, let's show people enjoying themselves on television and on the Web. Make the messaging about the game. Show fans having a good time and enjoying themselves.

And let people see that enjoyment on their television and on their computer screens and say, "That could be me and my family," or, perhaps, "That looks like fun. Let's get some people together and go to a game."

Sound corny or too simple? Look at it another way then: via big-screen HD television providing coverage and views of the game as no other time in history.

It would be a difficult argument to make that one needs to go to the ballpark or the arena to see the game at its best. That probably isn't true anymore.

■ The full experience

What is true is that attending a sporting event and being part of that experience — or better yet, helping to create that experience and to have a great time in doing so — is the story.

I would not trade my Super Bowl XLIII live experience for anything. But when I got home that night, I did watch the game that I had recorded to enjoy it in a different way.

Nothing can replace being at the event with my son: going to the pregame interactive NFL Experience that is set up outside the stadium, high-fiving Steelers fans after big plays in the Super Bowl and acknowledging to the Cardinals fans present nearby that their team belonged in the big game (even if I felt like Howie Long in a Chevy truck commercial while doing so).

It may be just a game, but being there is a lot more fun and provides a better story to be told and shared.

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Are you doing your part to sell all that...

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