

# Major League Sports and Big League Advertising

By Bruce A. Love

*A*pparently, Major League Baseball (MLB) stepped over a line last week, and into foul territory. When the Commissioner of Baseball disclosed plans to place Spiderman movie logos on the bases of major league ball fields, a brief, but spirited, protest erupted as baseball fans declared their mission to preserve the “purity of the sport.” MLB responded by withdrawing their ill-conceived plan – for the time being.

*F*rom a marketing standpoint, the plan seemed brilliant. In exchange for efforts to help promote the new movie, Baseball would receive \$3.6 million. Everyone wins – or so Commissioner Selig reasoned. There was no reason to suspect that the public might react unfavorably. After all, fans have remained virtually silent, during the evolving commercialization of professional sports.

*W*ithout a doubt, racecar driving wins the most commercialized sport award. Nearly every square inch of every racecar displays corporate logos of every variety, and crash boards around tracks feature sponsor ads. NASCAR participants wear tapestries of corporate sponsors as proudly as veterans, and brave young men and women in the military, display their medals of valor. Unlike other sports, however, this hyper-commercialized look is expected, and even admired, by its fans. It is testament to the success of the driver to be able to become a walking billboard!

*A*nother example of the evolving commercialization of sports is the recent trend to name sports stadiums after corporate sponsors. Veterans Stadium, the former home of two Philadelphia teams (Phillies and Eagles), was recently reduced to rubble to make way for two new monuments to capitalism – Lincoln Financial Field and Citizens Bank Park. These stadiums join a third financial pillar of the community – The Wachovia Center (home of the Flyers and 76ers). Once inside these sporting complexes, visitors experience as much advertising as they would at home watching TV.

*U*pon entering a hockey arena you will notice the decorations on the boards around the perimeter of the rink. Flat surfaces that TV cameras sweep are prime real estate for advertisers. As a result these walls have become sport's answer to billboards. There's more! Look at the ice. Embedded deep below its frozen surface lay the logos of still more sponsors. If you try to turn away from the action and look up, guess what you see rotating around the upper levels – full-motion Technicolor advertisements of enormous proportions!

*B*asketball is not quite as commercial as hockey. The NBA prohibits ads on the floor surface, but the rotating Technicolor ads are still present, and there has even been talk of some players offering space on their bodies for commercial tattoos! Football also prohibits advertising on its playing fields. But follow the gaze of the camera as it pans to the sidelines, and you will see Gatorade displayed in ways that only their \$46 million/year agreement can buy!

*W*e have always had billboards in the outfields of baseball stadiums. Even minor leagues and little leagues have learned long ago to use this opportunity to generate revenue. One new twist for MLB, however, are the virtual ads that appear distractingly behind batters as TV viewers await for some action to take place between signals, spits, and scratches at home plate. Fortunately, these ads are a product of television technology and not visible to anyone in the stadium.

*Y*es, there was a line crossed by major league baseball, but it was crossed years ago. It is the nature of professional sports to find ways to make money. With the growing financial appetites of professional players and their owners, expect this trend to continue, and look forward to the time when baseball uniforms resemble those of NASCAR drivers and plate advertising becomes commonplace.

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