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## Time to hit the reset, not panic, button for women's sports

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**N**BA Commissioner Adam Silver unwittingly offered advocates for and promoters of women's sports a golden opportunity for "radical candor" (as management coach Kim Scott would have it) when in September he said the following about the WNBA: "I thought we'd be further along at this point. I thought ratings would be higher, attendance would be higher by now. I thought we would have broken through. I don't know how else to say it."

While it's easy to interpret Silver's comments as a betrayal or even a failure to recognize significant successes by women in sport, I welcome the opening Silver provided for a reset of what women's sports is about — as sport and as commercial product. In that spirit, I offer a few talking points that might be developed further in future columns.

### Title IX was never meant to be a business plan.

It is hard to fathom sports for girls and women gaining a foothold in the public imagination without the boost of Title IX's legal and rhetorical power. As one woman who rode Title IX to an athletic championship, a college scholarship and new career opportunities, I appreciate its impact as much as anybody. I am also aware that Title IX-driven advances have left in their wake some elements of complacency. "The men have it; so should we" remains an unproductive refrain. This Title IX argument is valid only where programs are funded with public money. It cannot and does not apply in a commercial space. Our focus needs to be on the commercial question; not "What do we deserve?" but "What can we earn?"

Women in sport have earned quite a lot if "earn" is equated with accomplishment. In 2015, the mainstream media unquestionably acknowledged the dominance and superlative performances of Serena Williams and the U.S. Women's World Cup team. To transform our various sports into going concerns, we can't forget Abby Wambach and her accomplishments as she instructs us to do in her recent Gatorade commercial. We have to trade on her fame — and that of so many others — to create self-sustaining and commercially viable enterprises.

Title IX is and was a helping hand, not an indefinite handout. There will always be moments when invoking Title IX is necessary and useful, but it's not applicable for post-collegiate women's sports. What are we doing today to continue to refine and implement our business plan on all levels?

### Taking a business perspective means knowing the numbers.

Sheila Johnson, part owner of the Washington Wizards, Mystics and Capitals, served as keynote speaker at SportsBusiness Journal's 2014 Game Changers conference. She noted that the NBA was founded in 1946, and that by 1952, attendance was just over 3,500 people during the regular season. In this its 19th year, the WNBA's average attendance was 7,318 per game, more than what the NBA averaged in its 19th season. The comparison provides analytic perspective and confirms that now is not the time to hit the panic button but rather the reset button.

The WNBA was more successful than the NBA in its early years. How can the league be positioned to recapture that success? Are we identifying and utilizing all the resources available to us? How do we leverage the power of women in decision-making roles in corporate America who directly benefited from Title IX during their athletic careers and help them understand the importance of "leaving the ladder down" to assist current and future generations of female athletes? Can we better coordinate the efforts of the multitude of organizations whose specific charter is to help grow women's sports?

### **There are still hurdles, as recent commentaries in this space have documented.**

A reset will not be "easy street." Consider:

- Carolyn Savini noted that women are less likely than men to negotiate for raises and promotions, further slowing their progress up the ladder ([SportsBusiness Journal, Dec. 7-13, 2015, issue](#)).
- Janet Fink stated that recent studies show that only 2 percent to 3 percent of network and cable TV coverage of sports is devoted to women's sports ([SportsBusiness Journal, Nov. 2-8, 2015, issue](#)).
- Val Ackerman highlighted the dichotomy between the number of women who play and watch sports at all levels and the number who serve as decision-makers in leagues, networks, sports marketing companies, intercollegiate athletic departments and Olympic sports organizations ([SportsBusiness Journal, Sept. 14-20, 2015, issue](#)).

These highlight constraints on action; they shape the decisions that can be made. But the challenge is to be sure that the context doesn't create constraints on our thinking or our belief in the viability of our product — that is, that promoters of women's sports aren't handcuffing themselves by failing to acknowledge their own role in limiting success or by failing to read the numbers.

### **What are we selling and how are we selling it?**

"How" we are selling is as important as "what" we are selling. I support Fink's and Ackerman's assertions that a more aggressive sales stance is needed. No apologies, no handouts. Provide value in your product and ask for support commensurate to the value. But first we need to make sure we have crafted a product that the market finds appealing. And at the least, that means asking your existing and potential fans what they want and what they like. When you ask people what they want, they are more apt to invest in the end product because they know they



Positioning the WNBA and women's sports for success is the responsibility of athletes, coaches and administrators.

Photo by: NBAE / GETTY IMAGES

helped to shape it.

## Advocates for women's sport are both motivated and blinded by their own devotion to the sport.

To pursue sport as a business, we have to interrogate both the motivation and the blindness, acknowledging that interest in sport is never a purely intellectual affair. Our personal experiences of sport may not represent the only motivational hooks. As marketers of a product, we have to mine the past histories of association that women and men have with sport and tend to those associations. What (or who) has the power to prompt thoughts and feelings of fandom, to develop the habit of tuning in or turning up at the box office.

The reset I have in mind involves researching and thinking critically about the full range of connection with sport. This is where we'll find an effective marketing plan, and the responsibility rests on all, from the athletes through the coaches to the administrators. It should be as important a part of their routine as practice time.

In a world cluttered with entertainment options, advocates for women's sport need to identify the multiple dimensions available for personal connection and the investment of time and money that goes with that. We need an ever-evolving business plan, an analytic stance, a commitment to persistence based on concrete progress, and a marketer's attitude. This is a reset moment; let's embrace radical candor.

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