

Citius Altius

We last spoke with Rick Burton more than seven years ago. At the time, we were publishing our interviews on *Reveries.com*, and Rick was director of the Warsaw Sports Marketing Center at the University of Oregon.

Rick was extremely concerned, back then, about the future of professional sports in America. "What's driving me is my passion for an American way of life," Rick said. "I'm worried that we may be losing parts of it."

After citing a litany of issues, from rising ticket prices to the popularity of videogames to the decline of youth sports leagues, he challenged the big leagues to find new and innovative ways to connect with sports fans or risk losing their relevance.

"I know I sound like some kind of John the Baptist out here in the wilds of Oregon," Rick said. "But these leagues have got to be looking at how to sustain their products."

Rick would soon have the opportunity to practice what he was preaching, first as commissioner of the National Basketball League of Australia, and, starting last fall, as chief marketing officer of the United States Olympic Committee.

In most ways, the issues Rick raised in January 2001 have not changed all that much. The difference is that those challenges — and more — now rest squarely in Rick's court, along with the awesome responsibility of representing Team U.S.A. on a global stage.

Rick Burton wouldn't trade that for anything: "To think that I'm a small part of a lineage that goes back to ancient Olympia is an incredible honor every day," he says. "It really is pretty cool to be part of the Olympics and Paralympics."

Rick Burton
promotes peace,
love and the
Olympic Games as
marketer-in-chief
of Team U.S.A.



Fortius



What do the Olympic Games mean to Americans?

For every country, the Olympics are a great source of pride and patriotism. There's this great, wonderful relationship between the crowd and the athletes that are participating for their countries. In most cases they're not participating for the money. They have worked their entire lives to be able to represent their countries and it's rare in that way.

Yes, they may have had scholarships to a university, and yes, in a couple of sports there may be a professional career to follow. But for a majority of them, the Olympics are the greatest achievement that they will ever attain. And they will forever be Olympians. Every day I meet Olympians and I'm just blown away by the way they carry themselves. I think they believe that they are part of a higher ideal.

How are you dealing with the controversies over China's human rights policies?

I'm comfortable that, as an organization, we are being supportive of the International Olympic Committee, and of the Beijing Organizing Committee, which has a great challenge on its hands staging what will become the largest sporting event ever.

The Olympics generate a lot of passion, and a lot of people see the Games as a platform from which to speak to the world. The Olympic movement is very much about peace, and one of the greatest forces of good in the world today. So, there are a lot of people who want to attach to the Games and make statements.

Are the controversies helpful in any way?

I don't know if "helpful" is the right word. I think the controversies create context. They create a sense of the magnitude of the Olympic Games. My feeling is that you have to accept that as part and parcel of putting on the Games.

You don't put the Olympic Games under a bushel basket, to use a Biblical reference. You put a light out there for everyone to see. That is what's happening. Is it good? I hesitate to use that word. But is it relevant? Without question it is relevant.

What's your game plan if sponsors get nervous?

We will deal with public issues as they unfold. That is not to say there isn't a lot of planning and strategizing, but I don't want to get into guessing about it.

Why did Ralph Lauren replace Roots as the official "look" of the U.S. Team?

We wanted the Beijing Games to have a more formal look. We thought that these Games, given their magnitude, needed to be buttoned up, and this relationship with Ralph Lauren is going to give us that opportunity (*see sidebar*).

Doesn't Ralph Lauren skew a bit older?

We have to be able to speak to different demographics through different vehicles. The Lauren relationship is very much a part of the opening ceremonies and the closing ceremonies, but the Nike outfits that our athletes will wear on the podium present a different image, maybe to a different target.



Is the more conservative look because of the Chinese culture?

It has more to do with our perception worldwide and not wanting to look like we are taking these Games for granted. Some of that does have to do with China. These are the first Games ever in China, and our chairman, Peter Ueberroth, has a great sense of gratitude to the Chinese.

When Peter ran the Los Angeles Games in 1984, there was a point where the Russians announced they were going to boycott those Games. There was a chance that the Chinese would boycott as well, but they didn't. So, Peter has long been grateful to China as a country and believes that these are going to be momentous Games that will change the world.

How will these Games change the world?

Until the Games were awarded to China in 2001, it was a country that a lot of people didn't understand. It's been the world's largest population and the world's strongest economy over the last few years. Just think about the number of companies that want to do business in China today, and the number of people

who will watch these Games through the internet and other digital applications. These will be Games unlike any we've ever seen before.

How do make sure the Games are relevant, especially to young people?

You've got to understand their interests and what the Games are capable of doing. You have to define commonality. The IOC's decision to add a snowboarding event in the Winter Games and BMX events in the Summer Games are examples of that.

Something as big as the Olympics has to accommodate all kinds of people from all over the world. If you were to go to India or Pakistan you would find that certain sports are far more popular there than they are here. So, you don't make decisions as the IOC solely with North America in mind. You make decisions that you hope are relevant worldwide.

Why would kids today want to grow up to be Olympic champions?

Some of that is just natural ambition. Some of it is a desire to be the best you can possibly be, and

Polo Gold

We have to put America on a world stage that looks refined and appropriate," says David Lauren, explaining why Polo Ralph Lauren fashions will be the new look of the U.S. Team at the Beijing Olympic Games.

That look is a decidedly more "preppie" style versus the past three Olympic Games, when "the Canadian apparel company Roots outfitted the U.S. team," most memorably in a red, beret-style hat that "caused a retail sensation in Salt Lake City in 2002, amid a groundswell of patriotism following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001."

Roots was slated to continue as the official outfitter this time, but the U.S. Olympic Committee didn't quite

take to its "yoga-inspired, technical, green product."

The USOC's Norman Bellingham told David Lauren that "his inspiration was *Chariots of Fire*, the 1981 movie about British athletes competing in the 1924 Summer Olympics in Paris."

This translates into "blazers and slacks... V-neck sweaters and ties, classic Polo mesh shirts... and cargo pants—all in a patriotic palette of red, white and blue."

The designs will be sold online, through U.S. department stores and potentially through shops in Beijing.

[Source: Rachel Dodes and Stephanie Kang, *The Wall Street Journal*, 4/7/08].

the Olympics offer opportunities in so many different sports. Unlike our two most popular sports in America, football and basketball, you don't have to be six-six or taller. The Olympics caters to all shapes and sizes. It always has.

The Olympics have done innumerable things that are spectacular. Countries marching together — North Korea and South Korea recently marched together at one of the Games, for example.

It has also given athletes chances to go to places in the world that they would never get to go to. If you are a skier, a gymnast, a swimmer or any of the 45 sports that are part of the Olympic movement and the Pan-American games, those 45 sports are going to take you all over the world.

Did you ever aspire to be an Olympic athlete yourself?

I didn't because I was pretty ordinary as an athlete from a very early age. I loved sports, I've always been involved in sports and I still play basketball. But I wasn't particularly tall, fast or strong. I was a skinny little kid and it was one of those things where I didn't fall into a sport where I ended up getting committed to it.

Not even curling?

No, not even curling!

How did your years in Australia change your view of American sports?

It's very easy to see Americans as loud or arrogant. What we might see in ourselves as being competitive or as a commitment is sometimes not seen the same way by the rest of the world. And so it was a great opportunity for me to see how another country conducts itself relative to sport.

If there's a country that's possibly even more committed to sports than America, it would be Australia. I think it was Phil Knight who said that if Nike were a country it would be Australia. They just love their sports beyond even how we perceive our love of sport here.

In Australia, they have what's known as the "tall poppy syndrome," which is the idea that those who try to stand up as the "tall poppy" and be recognized are cut back down to size. So there's great humility

there. I'm hoping to bring some of that outlook back to my work here as chief marketing officer.

If America were a brand of sport, what brand would it be?

The first brand that comes to mind is Wal-Mart, because they have so many different products. That is what America is. It is every product and there is a great availability of athletes, sports and products here. Everyone has a chance. That's one of the great calling cards of America — not only our free speech but also our freedom of choice, our freedom to travel and be engaged in the things that interest us.

What did you accomplish for Australian basketball?

I think we grew the game. We brought in corporate sponsors. We extended the playoffs in a way that made the championship more dynamic, and re-signed the TV deal with Fox Sports. We expanded into Singapore and I believe we became the first western professional sports league to place a team in Asia.

That was something that still may not work out. It's been difficult on that beachhead, making basketball relevant in Singapore. But it was one of the great adventures to be able to put a team in an Asian city while based primarily in Australia.

Why did you come back and take this job?

Peter Ueberroth and I were together in Beijing for a conference where we conducted the "interview of the day" in front of a large gathering. We continued talking afterwards and I was so impressed with him as an individual. I just couldn't turn down the chance to work with him and be part of the Olympic movement.

What kinds of innovations do you see ahead for the Games?

I think a lot will happen in the years ahead in terms of technology, how sports are delivered and how people are able actually to interact with sports. The consumption patterns are changing every day in terms of what you can watch a sport on and what you can see when you choose to watch. Certainly YouTube has changed the game for everybody.

How are you using those same technologies to market the Games?

We have a social-networking site right now that allows consumers to go online and connect with athletes that are likely to be competing in Beijing. You can send them messages, have the athletes post messages in response and then forward the conversation to your friends.

So, suddenly we've kind of got a social network built around the Games and in some cases around individual athletes who are going to compete in Beijing.

As a result, you'll start to see new forms of advertising and activation. Coca-Cola, Nike, McDonald's, AT&T and Anheuser-Busch are planning extensive activation campaigns around this summer's Olympics that will be bigger and bolder than anything we have seen before.

What do you look for in a sponsorship partner?

We look for companies where we can help them ring their cash registers and grow their businesses. But we're also looking for companies that are very much interested in committing to America's youth sport movement.

The money they give to us as a sponsorship partner doesn't go to a team owner—it goes back to the athletes to allow them to train and go to the Olympics.

How do you protect against too much commercialism?

That's a great question. I think the Games are sacred. When the Games are presented you see no logos down on the field. So, the field of play is clean and the issue of commercialism largely takes care of itself.

The opportunity for us is to make sure that when companies are activating in the runup to the Games that each of them is very clear in their defined space. We want to be sure that if Coca-Cola is doing great activation in the beverage category that we've helped them have a real clear space. Same thing with McDonald's, with their great foodservice.

Can the USOC have the same kind of brand identity as the NFL or the NBA?

The USOC is as big as the NFL and the NBA, but I don't think our brand is seen in the same light. What Pete Rozelle and Paul Tagliabue did in terms of their stewardship of the NFL brand or what David Stern has done with the NBA is create brands with enormous cachet that are immediately identifiable, as are the five Olympic rings.

I would love to see the United States Olympic Committee become more dynamic and more recognized as a brand. I would like our mark ultimately to expand in its capacity to inspire confidence and create great excitement for those who earn the right to wear it or to have the opportunity to associate with it.

What would it take for that to happen?

It will take time. In some ways it's already there. It's kind of like in the *Wizard of Oz*, where the wizard hands the diploma to the scarecrow and he starts spouting off $E=mc^2$. We already have what it takes, but just haven't presented it in an optimal way or built on it as much as we can.

What's your greatest hope for the Games this year?

My greatest hope is for a spectacular presentation of the athletes, and on the shoulders of that a peaceful, heroic Olympic Games. Heroism is a qualitative word in that heroism will take place every single day of those 17 days and it will lend itself to countries and to sponsors and to broadcasters and to national Olympic committees.

These Olympic Games will be notably peaceful and heroic. They will change China and they will change the world. It's exciting what the Olympics have the power to do. ■



RICK BURTON is CMO of the **United States Olympic Committee**. Previously, he was commissioner of the National Basketball League of Australia and director of Warsaw Sports Marketing Center at the University of Oregon. He began his career at Miller Brewing Co.