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# Pro Teams Should Reward Good Off-Field Behavior

BY PORCHER L. TAYLOR III AND DAVID R. MARAGHY

Using economic incentives to produce positive social results is an idea whose time has come.

In 2007, New York City began an experiment with paying low-income students in poor, inner-city neighborhoods small amounts for improving their attendance, grades, or test scores. Fourth-graders in 70 city schools receive \$25 each if they make a perfect score on state exams, or less for lower but good scores. The cash reward doubles for seventh-graders.

Professional sports—particularly the NFL and NBA, whose players clearly are behavioral models for kids and even young adults—should join the cash-for-performance movement by rewarding players for their exemplary good citizenship off the field. Why not reward integrity-passionate athletes like Matt Hasselbeck of the Seattle Seahawks or Willie McGinest of the Cleveland Browns with annual bonuses of \$100,000 each—or donate that amount to their favorite charities? Such a bonus program would require more than being scandal- or police-blotter-free for a year. To qualify, players would have to travel at the highest moral altitude of sports ambassadorship and citizenship. Character counts and should pay in pro sports.

By adopting an off-the-field reward culture, the NFL and NBA would follow a shrewd strategy right out of corporate America's motivational playbook. Some progressive companies are experimenting with corporate "wellness" programs, offering employees cash for quitting smoking, exercising regularly, or losing weight in order to reduce the high costs of unhealthy behavior. Those corporations know that financial incentives modify behavior and they believe that wellness bonuses will reduce absenteeism, lost productivity, and escalating health insurance costs. Although wellness bonuses are controversial in the business world, some companies see no equally effective alternative that would promote such positive behavior modification among employees.

Similarly, NFL and NBA teams should try the idea of paying players bonuses for significant community service in the off-season. They should consider financial incentives for young players—especially rookies—who complete required personal enrichment courses in personal integrity, media interaction, and basic life skills. Minimum salary retention could even be tied to successful completion of tests in such courses.

The business success of professional teams extends far beyond what occurs with stadiums. Off-the-field behavior is a core subset of a team's brand equity. The NFL has been overrun with the arrests of some 50 players since

2006—most recently and notoriously, Michael Vick's. While fans are not yet permanently heading for the exits, continuing player arrests threaten teams' fan and sponsorship bases. The Atlanta Falcons and NFL executives know so intuitively, judging from their swift actions regarding Vick. The NBA, albeit belatedly, recognized the negative effect on business caused by the public uproar over Latrell Sprewell's choking his coach. Won't the almost weekly arrests of pro players collectively erode fan support, too?

If professional sports leagues and teams want to ensure long-term profits while paying more than lip service to improving society, then teaching players how to be exemplary citizens—and paying them for it—is far more than a "Hail Mary" play.

To the first sports lawyer or agent who convinces the NFL or NBA to experiment with contract bonuses for high-integrity conduct off the field, he or she will bring a major competitive advantage in the sports industry that may be enjoyed by all. All of this would inure to the benefit of integrity-passionate athletes and faithful fans.

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