

SUNDAY FORUM

GUEST COLUMNIST

BASEBALL'S NEXT STEP: MARKETING

By **BRANDON STEINER**

WHAT'S UP with baseball? Well, it's certainly not attendance, which so far is down considerably in the aftermath of the ugliest labor battle in sports history.

Strike one, two, three. Could baseball finally be out as our national pastime? I don't think so, but it'll take some time for baseball to return to its previous glory. To do so, it has to take a new marketing approach.

There is no doubt that over the last five years it has become increasingly apparent that baseball has missed a few steps in trying to keep up in the professional marketplace. In spite of its loss of a commissioner and other key leaders, baseball has maintained a business-as-usual attitude through its executive committee. But that's not enough.

To go forward, baseball needs qualified senior management headed by a commissioner. And it needs a public relations component specifically designed to represent baseball as a solid sports entity that supports its corporate partners, its teams, players and fans.

The marketing campaign should begin with the bid for a new TV contract. No matter how you slice it, the concept of the Baseball Network (ABC, NBC) most likely won't be renewed. In its next TV deal, baseball should accept a smaller rights fee in exchange for full-season programming, public-service announcements, pregame and magazine-type shows. These concepts have proved suc-



the All-Star break. In return baseball can recoup its loss in the long run.

More importantly, this would prove a critical element in providing added value to advertisers and sponsors. This added value has an amazing trickle-down effect. By allowing sponsors the right to use their marketing themes in adjunct promotions, the sponsors can develop grassroots programs to help sell their product. This is why they must buy into the sport. Baseball needs to get in front of sponsor contracts and communicate and incorporate more effectively their client's goals to team management and its players.

If utilizing a player or his likeness is a hot button for the league or a sponsor, management and players should view it as a mutual opportunity, and, if necessary, build it into the player contract. It is of the utmost importance that management, league, network and players work together. The result will be astounding.

It's obvious the strike has hurt retailers and licens-

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