

Ad man talks Super Bowl, Olympics

(and why the 'real football' is such a hard sell)



Rob Prazmark, one of the world's leading sports marketers, is writing a book about his experiences dealing with some of the toughest, biggest personalities in the sports world, and finding success in it. —Maggie Caldwell photo

By Maggie Caldwell
Editor

As football fans gear up this Super Bowl Sunday for America's biggest sporting night, one Greenwich resident will be enroute to London to focus on a whole different ball game: The 2012 Olympics.

Rob Prazmark, a 30-year town resident and founder and CEO of 21 Marketing, is regarded as one of the top sports and entertainment marketers in the world. He is largely credited with making the Olympic Games the brand that it is today, with perhaps his biggest claim to fame coming in the 1980s when he dubbed Visa *the* card of the games, branding the slogan "The Olympics don't take American Express."

That tagline also inspired the name of the book he is writing, "The Olympics didn't

take American Express," memoirs of his experience representing properties such as the FIFA World Cup, Major League Soccer and the IAAF. He said the book will include anecdotes and inspiration for people who enter the sports marketing business, or any business, for that matter, that involves sales.

"This book is more of a fun look at the business with a little bit of tongue-in-cheek humor," Mr. Prazmark said. "It offers lessons about dealing with some high energy people and high priced opportunities that can translate into any profession."

Mr. Prazmark recently sat down with the *Post* to talk about the book, the Olympics, and why soccer, "the real football," is such a hard sell in America.

Working with Jerry Jones

The first chapter of the

See Prazmark Page 6A

Prazmark: Ad man talks about selling sports

Continued from page one

book, "How 'bout them Cowboys," details Mr. Prazmark's star-crossed love of the Buffalo Bills and gives his personal account of the 1994 Super Bowl where the team faced off in a rematch against the Dallas Cowboys who had handily defeated them 52-17 the year prior. The Bills took an early lead that January night in the Georgia Dome, but subsequently imploded, allowing 24 unanswered second half points and ultimately losing 30-13 to Jerry Jones and his abominable Cowboys. Mr. Prazmark wrote that he took the loss personally, giving up a pact he'd made with God, and immediately making up for lost time with his "good friend, Jack Daniel."

"Hungover wakeups are never fun," he wrote. "Hungover wakeups on the Monday morning after the team that you told everyone was unstoppable, infallible, unbeatable, loses the Super Bowl in the second half, are unbearable. Throw in a two-hour airplane ride, add a group of first class traveling [deleted] Cowboys fans, have those fans start harassing my prideful, Bills jacket wearing wife, narrate the scene with bellows of 'winners always sit in first class,' and my close encounter with being escorted off of a plane becomes completely reasonable. I hated the Cowboys.

I hated Jerry Jones."

A few days later, still smarting from the loss, he received a series of phone calls from someone claiming to be Jerry Jones. Figuring some marketing friends of his were playing a sick joke, he ignored the calls and carried on with his work, at the time with the Smithsonian Museum launching its first traveling exhibit. When the phone calls persisted, he finally called back reaching someone with a 214-Dallas, Texas area code number. A person with a "once vomit-inducing, Texas/Oklahoma voice" claiming to be Jerry Jones was on the other line, asking him to meet to talk about building up the Dallas Cowboys as its own brand, "America's Team." Intrigued, but still suspicious the whole thing was an elaborate prank, Mr. Prazmark and his number two man headed out early one blustery February morning to Teterboro Airport in New Jersey to board a private plane to Amelia Island, Fla. for the NFL owners' meeting. It wasn't until he was inside the small aircraft, decked out in Cowboys blue and gray and piloted by what looked like retired linebackers, that Mr. Prazmark realized this was no hoax. He would be flying to the Sunshine State to sign a deal with his own personal devil.

Memorable moments

"I've been a part of a lot of these game changing events," Mr. Prazmark said. "These evolutionary and revolutionary changes in the way the sports world works."

He has been to every Olympic Games since 1984. Three moments in particular stand out. The Calgary '88 Games were particularly memorable for two major sports stories. One was that of Eddie "the Eagle" Edwards, a renegade older ski jumper who was basically legally blind.

"He had these big goggles and lots of fanfare. And he came in dead last," said Mr. Prazmark, an inveterate supporter of the underdog. The other big story of those games was of the infamous Jamaican bob sledding team.

The most memorable summer games moment came only three years ago in Beijing with the Olympic opening ceremonies.

"I'd never seen anything like that," Mr. Prazmark said. "The Communist Party, say what you will about them. They reshaped a lot of their thinking and views to actually be able to hold an Olympic Games. They had to change their mindset to open their doors to the world is amazing to me."

While London is up next to host the Summer games, Mr. Prazmark said in the sports marketing world, all eyes right

now are on Rio.

Brazil's second largest city is set to serve as the epicenter of arguably the two largest sporting events in the world: The 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympic Games.

"People will wake up," Mr. Prazmark said. "Though the two events mean two totally different things to the people of Brazil."

Football is a passion the world over, but especially for Brazilians who perennially have one of the world's top ranked soccer teams, he explained.

"The Olympics is more of a philosophy of life, through competition," he said. "The World Cup is awarded to a country, with events taking place all over, in San Paolo, Rio, etc. The Olympics is awarded to a city. Marketers get involved for two totally different reasons with two different strategies. You have the high end professionalism in football versus the Olympics which conjure up more of an amateur spirit, though they aren't really amateurs anymore."

Soccer in America

Mr. Prazmark was one of the leading sports marketers in 1994 when the United States hosted the World Cup.

"In 1994, I just bled soccer," he said. "I talked to everyone about how this was going to change the destination of soccer."

Now Mr. Prazmark, older and wiser, sees soccer in America in a different light.

"I can argue both sides of the issue, whether soccer will ever be a success in this country," Mr. Prazmark said. "On the one hand you can argue that soccer in this country will always be a second tier sport because it's all about the money... It's all about where our most talented athletes aspire. That is currently baseball, American football, basketball, sometimes hockey... Because there is no pot of gold at the end, the better athletes will go toward bigger paying sports."

He added that those with talent that do come up through the ranks eventually leave to play overseas, again, where they will get paid.

The counter-argument? More American kids play soccer at a low level than any other sport. The problem, Mr. Prazmark said, is with the drop off in high school and college. Though many signs point to interest in soccer growing in this country, Mr. Prazmark said that is directly related to the swelling of the population base.

For the sport to gain footing, he said it needs to shed its wholesome image in this country.

"Soccer is associated with moms and mini-vans. It has yet to be considered a serious sport. It needs to shed its fam-

ily image in order to be taken seriously," he said.

To really make the sport a success, he believes one single thing needs to happen: The United States must win a World Cup.

"That could change the destiny of the image," he said. "People love the soap opera dramas of the players, the thrill of the World Cup. The soccer moms need to disappear. That phenomenon doesn't exist outside this country."

Though the Americans took an early exit from the '94 World Cup, the event did launch Major League Soccer, the nation's top professional league. It took more than a decade, but the league finally turned a profit and is expanding its franchises and building stadiums across the country. Still, coverage of its games are mostly relegated to ESPN 2 and other little viewed cable stations.

"Even David Beckham with all that publicity could not change the way people here view the game," Mr. Prazmark said, conceding that it didn't help the English football icon didn't play much when he came to play in LA.

"Soccer's got a long way to go," he said.

To read the first chapter of Mr. Prazmark's book, visit his Web site 21mktg.com.