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The Journey of the Black Sports Journalist: Past, Present and Future

Gary Washburn

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, gwashburn14@gmail.com

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By Gary Washburn

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ABSTRACT

It took nearly 60 years for the mainstream audience to learn and digest the impact of the Black sports journalist on the American sports landscape.

In the Disney-movie “42,” detailing Jackie Robinson’s breaking of baseball’s color barrier in 1947, Robinson bonded with a journalist named Wendell Smith, who served as a guide, mentor and liaison for the baseball player during his travel journey with the Brooklyn Dodgers.

Smith not only covered Robinson’s ground-breaking excursion into a sport that had proudly prohibited and disavowed Blacks from playing Major League Baseball, he became Robinson’s trusted colleague, gaining access to stories and insights that his white counterparts simply could not and in some cases, would not.

Smith’s presence was a subtle and overlooked aspect of the movie, but it was one of the first occasions where a Black sports journalist was acknowledged as impactful prior to the 1990s, when Black faces in press boxes became more commonplace.

In many facets, racism denigrated the impact of the Black sports journalist in their early years, as these pioneers were only allowed to work at African-American-based publications. Despite these barriers, writers such as Smith and Sam Lacy withstood racism

and discrimination and formed important bonds with the athletes they covered to tell their stories.

A handful of Black journalists traveled abroad with Robinson and other Black athletes to get access and material for stories, and they detailed how these athletes were treated with more respect and regard in other countries than in the United States in the 1940s and 1950s. Smith and Lacy led a crusade of the Black sports journalist to make an impact on the American sports landscape with unique stories and insights.

Although Lacy (1999) acknowledgedⁱ that he endured racism and discrimination from his white peers because they didn't respect the humanness of the Black athletes they were essentially obligated to cover and they resented his presence in the press box, he did not allow those obstacles to deter him from doing exactly what those white reporters were doing: covering the American sports landscape and informing his audience about the games, the players and meticulous and sometimes painful integration of these sports.

Smith and Lacy, to many current Black sports journalists sports journalists overall, are considered the Jackie Robinson's of their field because of the sacrifices they made to emerge as respected and elite storytellers and journalists. Recognition from the mostly white journalism organizations, newspapers and other media outlets came slow and sometimes not at all.

Despite his impact on the life of Robinson and his legendary and historical impact on American sport, Smith was not honored with the J. G. Taylor Spink Award (now the Baseball Writers Association of America Career Excellence Award) until 1993, 21 years after his death. Lacy, who wrote for the Baltimore Afro-American until he was 99ⁱⁱ, did not receive the Spink Award until he was 94, two years before his death. Spink Awards have generally been

ⁱ <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-1997-04-01-1997091097-story.html>

ⁱⁱ <https://baseballhall.org/discover-more/awards/884>

presented to living writers. Lacy was not inducted into the National Sports Media Hall of Fame until 2017, 14 years after his death.

While organizations such as the National Association of Black Journalists honored these pioneers, they were never given their due appreciation, especially while they were alive. They were eventually accepted. Lacy became a power sports voice in the Baltimore area and Smith's contributions were finally recognized in "42," these men were under appreciated and overlooked.

But what they did do is set the groundwork for the emergence of the Black sports journalist on the American sports scene and the sports media is filled with impactful, brilliant and talented Black writers and reporters who have become some of the great storytellers of this and past generations.

The story of the Black sports journalist is not one that has been chronicled often. The evolution of Black men and women into what was once a white-only field has been slow and meticulous. But one only needs to watch ESPN, the preeminent sports network, for a few hours to see the plethora of Black faces.

This project will tell the story of these journalists, past and present, and argue that while there has been great progress made, barriers broken and integration improved, there remains a great deal of work to be done by mainly white-run establishments before true equality and diversity is achieved. This project will prove that hiring of Black journalists for prominent positions is improving but still not equivalent with those whites who are hired.

And there has also been a new and rather disturbing trend in sports media where former Black athletes have been hired for positions usually reserved for trained Black journalists, making the competition for jobs as hosts and analysts even more difficult for Black candidates. Some television networks have created what they believe is a successful formula for a sports discussion program, pairing a white woman host, white male journalist

and Black male athlete. This has created even another more difficult barrier for the Black journalist, one that is prevalent and imposing even as we approach the year 2022.

This project will look at the stories of noted Black journalists, their journeys, what has kept them flourishing in the journalism business and what they believe is the future in sports media for the Black sports journalists. First, however, we will start from the beginning stages, when those such as Lacy and Smith were fighting simply for a seat in the press box.

THE BEGINNING

Lacy (1999) credits Smith, his friend and contemporary, with impacting the breaking of baseball's color barrier not only with his escorting of Robinson during his rookie season, but presenting to Major League clubs potential signees from the Negro Leagues before the Dodgers decided to sign Robinson. What's more, Lacy (1999) points out that Smith served as an agent of sorts for Negro League players who were talented enough but prevented from playing in the Major Leagues. In 1945, he brought three players to the Boston Red Sox but the Red Sox passed on all three, including Robinson. The Red Sox, by the way, were the last team to integrate in 1959ⁱⁱⁱ.

This was an example of the power and influence of the early Black sports journalist. Lacy and Smith informed teams about potential baseball prospects and they also wrote columns imploring the Major Leagues to integrate. Of course, these columns ran in Black newspapers, the *Baltimore Afro-American* for Lacy and Smith wrote for the *Pittsburgh Courier*.

“Both Wendell Smith of the *Courier* and I were credited with boosting the circulations of our publications as a result of our coverage during the early years after

ⁱⁱⁱ<https://www.si.com/mlb/2020/02/24/black-history-month-pumpsie-green>

Jackie Robinson broke the modern era ban on Blacks in Major League Baseball.”

(Lacy, 1999)

It was apparent that Smith and Lacy saw themselves as more than journalists but civil rights activists who could influence audiences with the power of the typewriter. Smith constantly reached out to teams about Black baseball prospects while Lacy worked to integrate the press box and gain the respect of his white counterparts with his worth ethic and writing skills. The possibility of either being hired by white newspapers was nil until Smith’s work on Robinson’s autobiography and serving as a ghost writer on his columns.

Because of that work and Smith’s access to Robinson, he became one of the first Black sports writers at a major newspaper in 1948 when hired by the *Chicago American* to cover baseball and boxing. Only then was he allowed into the Baseball Writers Association of America, its first Black member.

Membership into the BBWAA for Smith didn’t exactly have its privileges. He was subject to racism and discrimination by his white counterparts and had to continue the fight for fairness despite being a BBWAA and at a mainstream newspaper.

Lamb (2012) describes an incident at a BBWAA season kickoff dinner in February 1947 at New York’s Walford Astoria. According to Lamb, the mostly white affair filled with journalists, players, coaches and other local celebrities included a skit where a sportswriter in blackface played the role of a butler in a mansion wearing a Montreal uniform, obviously referring to Robinson. According to Lamb, Smith was incensed even though most of his contemporaries thought the skit was funny and harmless.

Smith responded by penning an article criticizing the skit and New York sportswriters, saying: “They are not for equality in sports and they gave vent to their feelings in a vicious manner. They weren’t courageous or brave enough to express their feelings in their respective newspapers (that might affect circulation), so they put

on this dastardly act behind closed doors. The parts were played by well-known members of the New York chapter, but their names were not made public for fear of being reprimanded. Therefore, the entire blame for that ‘Nazi Opera’ must be heaped on the entire body.”

Lamb (2012) noted that incidents such as these were commonplace amongst white sportswriters. Many of them privately held disdain toward Black athletes and especially the integration of baseball. Smith and Lacy’s responsibilities were not just to cover sports or chronicle athletes; they accepted the chore of fighting for equality and fairness, even if they were further ostracized by their peers.

Lamb (2012) wrote about Lacy not only having to try to flourish in a white-dominated market but defend himself against sportswriters who attacked his style or decisions.

According to Lamb (p. 260), S.W. Garlington of the *New York Amsterdam News* wrote that Black sportswriters need to make a stronger case for Black players breaking into the Major Leagues. Garlington said Black writers were, “sabotaging the possibility of desegregation with their silence.” Lacy, offended because he and Smith had written about these topics for the Black newspapers, said, “Invariably the guy who doesn’t know what he’s talking about is the one among us, somehow or other, gets himself quoted in the white press. Lacy also added he was not sure Garlington ever read a Black newspaper.

Lacy (1999, p. 100) wrote that he became an asset to his white brethren because of his relationships with Black athletes and perhaps that created bonds and a level of respect from these reporters.

“In the early years of baseball integration, the daily reporters were more likely to come to me for information than the other way around, because I was staying with black players and had better access to them.”

Campbell (2020) wrote about a particularly impactful experience for Lacy in the spring of 1947 when he traveled to Cuba for Brooklyn Dodgers spring training, the club's first with a Black player (Robinson). The team chose Cuba to avoid any issues with Jim Crow laws at their usual sprinting training facility in Florida. Lacy reported that in Cuba, Black players and white players fraternized off the field, drank from the same glass and were seen together at Havana bars. Lacy wrote in his columns that the United States could take a page in racial harmony from Cuba. According to Lacy (1999), that led to speculation from some white reporters that the Communist Party was behind the integration of baseball. Lacy called those claims ridiculous.

Lacy (1999) wrote that many of his white peers acknowledged they had advantages over him and would advance further because of their race. Lacy spent all of his life with the *Afro American* after arriving there in 1944. He also became a sports commentator for WBAL-TV in Baltimore and he continued to write his weekly column, "A to Z" until his death in 2003. Lacy had been bestowed with awards, especially in his later years, receiving the "Pioneer Award" from the National Association of Black Journalists at its Washington D.C., convention in 1998.^{iv}

At the ceremony, hundreds of Black sports journalists gave Lacy a standing ovation as he was given the award. Would have Lacy advanced further in his career if he were white? Were Lacy and Smith given enough credit by their white brethren and white establishment during their career? Likely not.

Being activists defending not only the emergence of the Black athletes but fighting for acceptance themselves was a daily responsibility for those such as Lacy and White. What became apparent during their lifetimes, especially Lacy, is that the press box became more integrated and more diverse in the decades after Robinson broke the color barrier.

^{iv} <https://nabjsportstaskforce.com/sam-lacy-pioneer-award>

One of the key events that led to this integration was the Watts Riots, the civil unrest in 1965 near the city of Los Angeles that was prompted by the police killing of a 21-year-old Black man^v. Because of the sensitivity of the subject and that it was racially motivated, newspapers sought Black reporters to cover these events because of their potential access to stories — similar to the access Lacy and Smith shared in dealing with Black athletes 20 years prior. Black journalists were hired and promoted to cover the riots, not because news services were seeking diversity but because they were seeking better stories and many white reporters found the Watts atmosphere too dangerous to work.

Veteran journalist Clarence Page (2015) wrote about his personal experience as an aspiring journalist during the Watts Riots. Page was an 18-year-old entering his freshman year at Ohio University during the riots.

“But as an aspiring black student journalist I mostly remember the Watts riots for their impact on the media that covered them. Despite all you may hear about the “liberal media,” American newsrooms in those days were no more racially or gender diverse than the early seasons of “Mad Men,” AMC’s series about a 1960s agency.

“The Watts riots caught the media with their diversity down,” he wrote. “Suddenly called upon to report and explain events in a part of town with which they were woefully unfamiliar, editors and news directors had a revelation: It might be a good idea for them to hire a few reporters or photographers who could be sent out to “the ghetto” without looking too conspicuous.”

Page (2015) recalled a *Los Angeles Times* advertising department messenger named Robert Richardson, who was Black, being sent into the riot areas to offer reports from a pay phone on what he was witnessing.

^v <https://www.britannica.com/event/Watts-Riots-of-1965>

In 1967, the National Advisory Commission in Civil Disorders^{vi} formed by President Lyndon Johnson following a series of riots in major cities, suggested several ways to improve communities and one of them was to hire more “Negro journalists.”

The committee, which did not include an African American, stated: “*Cooperate in the establishment of a privately organized and funded Institute of Urban Communications to train and educate journalists in urban affairs, recruit and train more Negro journalists, develop methods for improving police-press relations, review coverage of riots and racial issues, and support continuing research in the urban field.”

The Watts riots and the findings of the committee were two events that sparked the increasing numbers of Black journalists, and that includes sports writers. Several sportswriters were interviewed for this project, including three whose career began during this pivotal time.

What was discovered? during this study is that Black role models in the sportwriting industry were scarce in the late-1960s. There was no internet, obviously, and little ways of reading newspapers outside of your hometown. The recourse was to idolize those sportswriters who covered your local teams, penned columns about subjects that affected your areas.

Writing for a living was not a prominent profession for those subjects, according to the study. Sportswriting as a career was not something they considered, they just enjoyed the art of writing and allowed their skill to carry them to places they never envisioned.

Their stories are unique but the common denominator is that these aspiring Black writers found encouragement and motivation from either their family members or teachers

^{vi} <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/national-advisory-commission-civil-disorders-kerner->

who saw potential and sought to cultivate that. Smith and Lacy set the groundwork for these journalists, they were more than writers or reporters, they were activists who would not remain silenced about the injustice of Black athletes being banned from Major League Baseball or mistreated by a country that profited from their exploits. A new generation of writer was coming, however, one that would face a less treacherous road to sportswriting success but still had to deal with their share of racism and discrimination.

FROM COLLEGE FOOTBALL STANDOUT TO AWARD-WINNING JOURNALIST

William C. Rhoden was a teenager in the mid-1960s when he not only carried aspirations of perhaps being an NFL quarterback but also a journalist. Rhoden was the editor of “The Verdict,” the paper for Harlan High School on the Southside of Chicago. Born in 1950, Rhoden had a clear and extensive view of the Civil Rights Movement and he became a byproduct of the sacrifices of men such as Lacy and Smith, as he considered journalism a viable profession despite the lower numbers of Blacks working at major newspapers.

Rhoden said his journalism journey began as an 8-year-old when his parents gifted him a Childcraft Encyclopedia set, ^{vii} designed for younger people. The 15- volume set told various stories and young Rhoden decided to copy one of these stories and told his father he was writing a book. His father quickly told him that’s not how books are written, but the set helped Rhoden become a creative writer long before he ever considered writing as a profession.

Writing became a passion for Rhoden and he split his high school years playing varsity football and then covering the basketball team for the school newspaper. What

report-1967/

prompted the teenager to delve more into journalism as a livelihood was a summer internship with the *Chicago Defender*, one of the more powerful Black newspapers in the country and the first Black newspaper to have a circulation over 100,000^{viii}.

Rhoden did not write for the *Defender*, instead he worked melding steel for the linotype machines:

“With the idea that one of the guys, the boss was saying, ‘oh yeah maybe you could write a column, a story or something for the *Defender*.”

Rhoden said that never panned out but he attended Morgan State University, a historically Black college, with the idea of writing. And he recalled that he worked with the brother of Wendell Smith while in high school, cutting his lawn.

“I always used to remember watching Wendell Smith on TV because, while he made his mark as a writer, he became a TV personality and I remember always watching him, being, even at an early age, proud seeing a Black man on TV representing.” (W. Rhoden, personal communication, October 9, 2021)

It was at Morgan State that Rhoden was mentored by a professor named Francis Murphy^{ix}, a former staff writer for the *Baltimore Afro American*, the same newspaper as Lacy, and encouraged Rhoden to work there. In those days Black newspapers were more powerful entities.

Rhoden’s father wanted his son to be teacher, doubting whether his son could actually become a journalist. “Who are going to write for?” Rhoden said his father asked. “White people aren’t going to hire you.”

^{vii} <https://www.worldbook.com/products/childcraft-how-and-why-library>

^{viii} “Newspapers, the Chicago Defender,” https://www.pbs.org/blackpress/news_bios/defender.html

^{ix} <https://www.thehistorymakers.org/biography/frances-l-murphy-ii-39>

Rhoden, during this time, was also playing cornerback for the Morgan State football team, the highlight of his career playing in a game at old Yankee Stadium against Grambling State. Murphy told Rhoden that he if did not get drafted by an NFL team or pursue graduate school, that was to report immediately to the *Afro American* for a staff writer position. Rhoden gave up his professional football aspirations (despite being told by a coach he would attend New York Jets free agent camp), he did not apply to graduate school and in February 1972, he began working at the *Afro American*. Sam Lacy was the sports editor.

Rhoden said Lacy's mentorship was an essential reason why he continued in the journalism business. Lacy was familiar with him because of his football prowess and Rhoden said they became great friends, and Lacy encouraged him to remain with Black publications, and that message resonated with Rhoden, who eventually joined Ebony Magazine.

While unfortunately Ebony and Jet have been discontinued as magazines, both were powerful entities in the 1970s^x, the primary news source for Black Americans whose issues and concerns were not covered as extensively in mainstream newspapers. Ebony features large cover stories on racial issues, features on Black entertainers and athletes and also powerful business and private sector moguls. It was considered an essential part of many Black American households, and became an extension of the Black newspapers that employed Smith and Lacy.

“Going to different cities and picking up the magazine and seeing my name on the masthead was great. I really developed my craft as a writer. I remember at Morgan, when I was going to work at the *Afro*, I felt like an athlete where you learn you get paid for playing athletics. What I realized is, ‘they’re going to pay me for writing?’ Getting paid for writing was phenomenal.” (W. Rhoden, personal communication, October 9, 2021)

^x <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/11/opinion/ebony-jet-magazine.html>

Rhoden said as the 1970s progressed and opportunities were increasing for Blacks in journalism, he said he felt the inclination to join a mainstream publication. “I felt it was time to start knowing what white folks were doing.”

He joined the *Baltimore Morning Sun* as a jazz writer and actually toured with the Billy Harper Quartet^{xi} and on the tour in Poland that Rhoden penned a letter to *New York Times* executive editor Abe Rosenthal, a former bureau chief in Poland. Rhoden’s ploy worked. *The Times* sent him a letter requesting his resume and a few years later, he began his 34-year journey as the first Black sports columnist for *The Times*.

Rhoden said while there were not many sports journalism role models who were Black besides Lacy and Smith, he pointed out standout Black journalists during his time such as Ron Thomas (*Chicago Daily News*), Jack Slater^{xii} (*Los Angeles Times*), Phyllis Garland^{xiii} (*Ebony Magazine*).

“In the universe of Black journalism, there was a lot of inspiration just from Black journalists and also we had something called ‘The Black List.’ It wasn’t like Sam Lacy’s era where there was like nobody. There were a group of us; we were beginning to infiltrate newsrooms. There were some role models and also a group of us, a group of young Black journalists who were sniffing around.” (W. Rhoden, personal communication, October 9, 2021)

(The “Black List,” a compilation of Black sportswriters from around the country formed at the first National Association of Black Journalists convention in 1975, will be discussed later in this project.)

^{xi} <https://www.allmusic.com/artist/billy-harper-mn0000083525/biography>

^{xii} <https://about.kaiserpermanente.org/our-story/our-history/jack-slater-early-diversity-in-kaiser-permanente-communications>

^{xiii} <https://www.columbiaspectator.com/2006/11/21/phyllis-garland-journalism-prof-dies-71/>

Despite the mainstream media's openness to hire Black journalists, the obstacles those journalists faced to reach success were prevalent, the byproduct of what he said was an institutional racism and "good ol' boy" network that was like "white folks were there and got the dibs on all the good stuff. And you had to fight and claw to make yourself seen. The (institutional racist) atmosphere was like coronavirus, where it just drips from the ceiling."

Bryant Gumbel is considered a pioneer for Black sports journalism because he was the first on-air reporter for the NFL that was not a former professional athlete. Gumbel, at age 26, was hired by NBC to report on-site from NFL games. And while he broke barriers throughout his career, Gumbel said in a Yahoo!^{xiv} Article that the price to pay was what he called a "black tax."

"(It's) more than just the added stares, whispers and suspicions when you're out and about... it's about the many instances of disrespect and incivility your color seems to engender, and being expected to somehow always restrain yourself, lest you not be what white Americans are never asked to be, a credit your race."

The pressure of being the only Black in the department or perhaps perceived as a minority hire could have served as a detriment for Rhoden and his contemporaries in an era – the 1970s and 80s – where overt racism was being replaced by a subtle version of discrimination.

"That's what it was like for me, being pulled out of the environment of Ebony, Johnson Publishing and put in the environment of the *Baltimore Sun* was like taking me out of water and 'oh shit, I took this for granted.' It was a general atmosphere of trying to make yourself visible. You definitely weren't a priority. All the good stuff was for the white reporters. It's like the United States is a playground for white

^{xiv} <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/bryant-gumbel-gives-powerful-commentary-185614432.html>

people. That's how the shit was invented. We get all the best shit, the best land, the best houses. We'll pay you and all that but it's still our playground.” (W. Rhoden, personal communication, October 9, 2021)

One element that led to Black advancement for many veteran journalists was the support of a white superior who served as a sponsor or mentor who was genuinely interesting in their success. The Institute for Diversity and Ethics and Sport did not begin its Sports Media Racial and Gender Report Card until 2006. But what the Institute found 15 years ago was that 87.4 percent of reporters in sports newspaper departments were white.^{xv} Studies of this subject were not conducted extensively through sports departments in major newspapers and television networks, but Blacks and other people of color were just beginning to emerge in the 1970s and 1980s as departments were beginning to integrate.

Rhoden was writing features at the *Baltimore Sun* when he was approached for a sportwriting position at *The New York Times* in 1986. Rhoden said all the editors who hired him for mainstream publications were white men, and it was former *New York Times* sports editor Neil Amdur who promoted him to become the first Black sports columnist.

What has occurred with Rhoden and several Black journalists as their careers progress is they reach a crossroads where they have to decide whether to retire, pursue a job with another media corporation or pursue another industry. Rhoden spent 34 years at *The Times* before being encouraged to accept the company's buyout. He soon after accepted a writing position for ESPN's *The Undefeated*, a website that focused on sports culture and African American life.

While Woody Paige and Bob Ryan, former newspaper columnists who are well into their 70s, flourish on television at ESPN, and Tony Kornheiser, 73, remains co-host of

^{xv} <https://www.leagueoffans.org/2006/07/17/dismal-racial-and-gender-report-card-for-newspaper-sports-staffs-2>

“Pardon the Interruption,” Rhoden said veteran Black sports journalists rarely are given those options deeper into their careers. Rhoden, an award-winning journalist and member of the National Association of Black Journalists Hall of Fame said he was essentially pushed out of *The Times*.

Gumbel, 73, was the first Black NFL reporter for NBC Sports and later moved on to host the “Today Show” as well as CBS’ “This Morning” before moving to HBO. Gumbel has been opined on controversial sports issues as well as his own treatment by the mainstream media and his white counterparts. After one episode of “Real Sports,” Gumbel discussed the “black tax.”^{xvi}

“It’s the added burden of being Black in America. And it’s routinely paid, no matter how much education you have, how much money you make or how much success you’ve earned. It’s about the day in and day out fatigue of trying to explain the obvious to the clueless. It’s the black tax and it’s paid daily by me and every person of color in this country.”

According to Rhoden, discrimination and racism has evolved past name calling and blatant acts of bigotry and was replaced by favoritism, nepotism and exclusion for assignments and beat positions. What is ironic about this fact is despite the obstacles, sometimes over racism or discrimination and unfair treatment, many Black journalists decide to weather that barrage and remain in the business for the love of the industry and the work.

“I was just having so much fun. I was really having a ball and in fact it was the racism that gave me strength and focus because I was an issues-oriented columnist and there were tons of these types of issues every day. Being in the prestige of being the *Sports of the Times* columnist, being at *The New York Times*, being encouraged to write about these topics because nobody else was. I think people kind of did want to

^{xvi} Gumbel, B. (2020, June 23) “Black Tax.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VvKPBjVAPWE>

succeed or else I wouldn't have been there for 34 years. I would have not been allowed to do that and it would have been too tiring to fight.” (W. Rhoden, personal communication, October 9, 2021)

An example he said he experienced while at *The Times* was his quest to cover the Olympic Games. Before Rhoden pushed to cover one of the sports' most premier events, he said *The Times* would load their staffs with white male and female reporters, largely ignoring their writers of color. Once again, he reiterated, it was the case of large white-run newspapers and television stations wanting their best assignments to go to white reporters. It was similar to two decades before when white newspapers and stations only called on Black reporters because their white counterparts feared covering riots in urban ghettos.

“You still saw all the good stuff was still reserved for your white colleagues, all the plums. It seems important for (management) to always make sure the white men and white women were always heroes and heroines. I still think that's part of the racism that we find. There's still this entitlement, where white people expect to get all the good stuff. And if one Black person gets a plum, then that takes care of all the Black people.”

THE PRICE OF PERSEVERANCE

Ron Thomas is a journalism professor at Morehouse College, a historically all-male Black college in Atlanta, Georgia. He helped form one of the few departments that focuses on sports, culture and social justice after a 34-year career as a print and online journalist.

Thomas was born and raised in Buffalo, his father, then 61, taking his young son to American Football League games when they played at War Memorial Stadium or the two would catch doubleheaders of the Buffalo Bison minor league team on Sundays. Born in

1899, Ron's father, Laughton, moved to Washington D.C. from Brunswick, Georgia at AS a teen and sold peanuts at Griffith Stadium, home of baseball's Washington Senators.

Ron collected baseball cards, read baseball biographies at his local library. Without access to major Black publications such as *Pittsburgh Courier*, *Baltimore Afro-American* or *Chicago Defender*, Thomas said he read closely and idolized writers from the city's main newspaper, the *Buffalo Evening News*, including sports columnist Larry Felser^{xvii}, who was known for his tough but fair and humorous coverage on the Bills while Steve Weller^{xviii} offered the witty commentary.

When Joe Collier was fired as coach of the Bills two games into the 1968 season, a 19-year-old Thomas wrote a column (longhand) as to why he thought it was unfair and mailed it to Weller. Weller mailed back Thomas with some encouraging words. Thomas graduated from the University of Rochester having served time as a basketball manager and football statistician but never wrote for a newspaper.

The only piece Thomas wrote in college was about the life of professional hockey players for a sociology class. After earning his degree in political science, Thomas decided to mesh his love for sports and love for writing and pursue sportswriting.

Of course, like Rhoden, Thomas said journalism became an option despite having few Black sportswriting mentors. He said he was unsure whether it would result in a fruitful, fulfilling career, but he decided to apply to Northwestern's graduate journalism program, which offered a program for journalists with no prior experience.

Thomas' father, who worked as a peanut vendor, on the railroad and as an assembly line worker during the course of six decades, didn't quite understand his son's career decision. Working in the newspaper industry for his generation and even his son's generation

^{xvii} <https://www.buffalosportshallfame.com/member/larry-felser/>

^{xviii} https://buffalonews.com/news/steve-weller-news-columnist-for-decades-dies-at-62/article_457c0136-ca32-5a82-a2a3-b6b662aaa49e.html

was not a conceivable career option because of the lack of Black journalists working at mainstream newspapers during that time.

The Northwestern master's opened the door for Thomas' first journalism job, covering high schools in his college hometown of Rochester, N.Y. in 1973. Two years later, he called dad to let him know he was hired by the *Chicago Daily News*.

“I said, ‘hey dad, I’m moving to Chicago,’ He responded, ‘Are you sure you want to do that? Giving up a job to go to Chicago?’ He just didn’t get it. But my dad never discouraged me. I grew up during the civil rights protest, so we both understood what I was facing.” (R. Thomas, personal communication, October 26, 2021)

THE PAIN OF OVERT RACISM

Thomas was the first full-time Black sportswriter in the history of the *Chicago Daily News*, which began publication in 1875^{xix}. He was named their Big 10 writer while also covering regional schools Notre Dame, Marquette and DePaul. The inexperienced Thomas was beaten on an early story, and a Black secretary in the office began confiding in him what Thomas' coworkers were saying about their 24-year-old Black reporter in the office.

Thomas said the older white reporters were ridiculing him, rooting for him to fail. One of those who were critical, was his own assistant sports editor.

“I wasn’t sure if it was because I was Black or because I was the young, rookie reporter. They knew I didn’t know what the hell I was doing and rather than to come to me and say, ‘you need to do this or you need to do that,’ they just left me out to dry.” (R. Thomas, personal communication, October 26, 2021)

^{xix} <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/2598.html>

Thomas said that relationship with the secretary, who offered support and guidance, was critical to his success at the *Daily News*. While he had no Black contemporaries in his workplace, Thomas found solace in another Black person who understood his struggle and realized he was the subject of scrutiny.

Eventually, Thomas was inexplicably removed from his Big 10 beat and demoted to copy editor by his sports editor, Ray Sons^{xx}.

Thomas said he had just written as front-page feature on the University of Minnesota basketball team and was the lead college writer. Now he was working a 6 p.m. to 2 a.m. copy shift at age 28. He was never given a reason.

“Does that have anything to do with race? I don’t know,” (R. Thomas, personal communication, October 26, 2021)

Before one of his desk shifts, Thomas said he found out the *Daily News* had stopped advertising and was planned to shut down in weeks^{xxi}. After the announcement, Thomas said the *Daily News* editors began pitching members of their staff to other newspapers looking to fill openings. The owners of the *Daily News*, which also owned the *Chicago Sun-Times*, decided to move some of their staff to that paper. Thomas was not one of those chosen.

The *Daily News*, according to Thomas, then circulated a list of names of available journalists with comments next to each name. Thomas said he had heard there was one insult in one of the comments about the writers. He saw the list and found out that disparaging comment was about him.

“All it said next to me was: ‘Black, competent.’ The competent was not a compliment. I’ve been your front page Big 10 writer for two years and that’s the best you can say about me? That really hurt me.” (R. Thomas, personal communication, October 26, 2021)

^{xx} https://www.baseball-reference.com/bullpen/Ray_Sons

Forty-six years later, Thomas said he still has that list. He went on to cover the NBA for *USA Today*, *San Francisco Chronicle* and was a columnist at the *San Francisco Examiner* and now runs the Morehouse College journalism program.

At a goodbye party for those soon-to-be former *Chicago Daily News* employees Thomas said he was pulled aside by Sons, who had hired him.

“Forty-six years later, and I’m still emotional about it. (Sons) said, ‘look, I want you to know you are really a tough guy. You did a really good job and I want you to know they hired you because Jesse Jackson’s Operation Push had been putting a lot of local newspapers to hire Black staffers.” (R. Thomas, personal communication, October 26, 2021)

According to Thomas, Sons said the *Daily News* hired Thomas because he was inexperienced and if he failed, as expected, they could tell Operation Push^{xxii} they tried diversifying and it didn’t work. Sons died in 1991. Thomas said that while the “Black, competent” statement was painful, the fact Sons offered encouragement and verification for his work provided optimism that he could continue in this journalism business.

Hammond, Gillen and Yan (2010)^{xxiii} wrote that workplace discrimination has a bigger mental impact on African Americans, many of whom feel that race played a major part of their mistreatment from the outset. They wrote that 19.7% of African Americans studies said workplace discrimination was because of race compared with 3.1% of whites.

“When I got hired by the *San Francisco Chronicle*, I didn’t have any doubt about my ability to do the job. What happened really could have hurt my confidence looking for other jobs.” (R. Thomas, personal communication, October 26, 2021)

^{xxi} <https://www.nytimes.com/1978/02/04/archives/chicago-daily-news-is-likely-to-close-march-4-publisher-says-no.html>

^{xxii} <http://libproxy.unl.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/cbs-bends-jackson-on-hiring/docview/170853328/se-2?accountid=8116>

Several years later, with Sons debilitated because of a fall, Thomas said he visited his old sports editor to thank him for his kindness and support.

“He really didn’t have to tell me what happened with my hiring. And he didn’t have to give me that boost to let me know I had done a good job. I needed that affirmation.” (R. Thomas, personal communication, October 26, 2021)

THE STAKES BECOME HIGHER BUT THE GAME DOESN’T CHANGE

Jemele Hill was a major sports fan as a child and loved to write growing up in Detroit. She grew up idolizing the Fab Five University of Michigan basketball team of the early 1990s. She revered wide receiver Jerry Rice and became a San Francisco 49ers fan.

Black female sportswriters were hardly as present in the press box as their Black male counterparts. Claire Smith is considered a pioneer amongst Black journalists, being the first female baseball beat writer, covering the New York Yankees for the *Hartford Courant* from 1983 to 1987. And she was the first woman and fourth Black person to win the formerly J. G. Taylor Spink Award.^{xxiv}

By the 1990s, newspapers and television networks’ quest for diversity had increased. There were more programs that cultivated young journalists of color. There were organizations such as the National Association of Black Journalists^{xxv} and CCNMA^{xxvi} conducted job fairs and connected with newspapers and television stations to funnel young minority journalists into jobs out of college.

^{xxiii} <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2867471/>

^{xxiv} <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/29/insider/claire-smith-first-woman-baseball-reporter-hall-of-fame-spink-award.html>

^{xxv} <https://nabjonline.org/about/history/>

“I had a desire for two things: storytelling and truth. I was an avid reader as a child and I really enjoy breaking down how stories are told. I wanted the ability to be able to move people in that.” (J. Hill, personal communication, October 13, 2021)

Growing up in a majority Black, Hill, born in 1975, said she was able to read the *Detroit Free Press* and *Detroit News* with Black writers such as Rob Parker, Terry Foster, Drew Sharp and Brian Burwell. And she said those writers influenced her pursuit of journalism.

Also, Hill said she participated in the *Detroit Free Press* High School Apprenticeship Program that helped train and tutor young Black journalists^{xxvii}. And she joined the National Association of Black Journalists in 1992. NABJ^{xxviii}, formed in 1975, became a pivotal part of development, education and networking for Black journalists as the organization grew in the 1980s. Hill attended the national convention in Detroit in 1992.

“Imagine seeing the convention in Detroit, 1992, I’m in the 11th grade. Seeing all those Black journalists, hundreds and hundreds of Black journalists left a deep and dramatic and immediate impression on me. I was very lucky because early on I had examples of Black journalists, examples of women, so I never felt like this was something I shouldn’t be doing or that I was invading somebody’s space or that there was no room for me. It was reaffirmed to me constantly that it was, even if the industry didn’t matchup with what was in my mind.” (J. Hill, personal communication, October 13, 2021)

Hill said that unlike her Black journalism predecessors, she was able to envision a journalism career because there were actually mentors and veteran journalists who were doing what she wanted to do. Rhoden said he was encouraged by a Black professor while playing football at Morgan State University while Thomas said he idolized white reporters

^{xxvi} <https://www.ccnma.org/>

from the *Buffalo News* but didn't interact with other Black journalists until graduate school at Northwestern.

Twenty years later, the experience was different for Hill. She said she was able to develop relationships with not only Black Journalists but Black female journalists. Through the *Free Press* program, Hill said she was assigned two mentors – Johnette Howard^{xxix} and Rachel Jones^{xxx} -- both of whom were accomplished journalists.

Hill said her mentors gave her the confidence and tutoring she needed to make a successful entry into the journalism field. Howard also took Hill on an assignment with her when she was researching for a feature story on then Detroit Lions football coach Wayne Fontes.

“Observing her reporting the story and actually seeing what it became was mind blowing to me. They were very essential into me having this belief that this is something that I can actually pull off.” (J. Hill, personal communication, October 13, 2021)

Hill said she then applied for a clerk position in the *Free Press* sports department answering phones, and there she met Parker^{xxxi}, the paper's first Black sports columnist.

“Even though I knew the industry was white and I knew it was male dominated, I was not intimidated by that because I had a community that built me up before I had to face that.” (J. Hill, personal communication, October 13, 2021)

Working 55 to 65 hours per week as a freshman at Michigan State University and making \$65, Hill said she knew she was fully dedicated to a journalism career because she worked feverishly despite the low pay. Even at a non-sports internship in Lima, Ohio, Hill pushed to write sports. She also interned at the *Free Press*, *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the

^{xxvii} <https://www.freep.com/pages/interactives/detroit-free-press-apprenticeship-application/>

^{xxviii} <https://nabjonline.org/>

^{xxix} <http://www.johnettehoward.com/bio.htm>

^{xxx} <https://www.aspenideas.org/speakers/rachel-jones>

^{xxxi} <https://archive.ph/20130414163440/http://dsba1.org/staff/joe-pendergrass/>

Cleveland Plain Dealer, preparing Hill for her first post-graduate position, at the *Raleigh News and Observer*.

Hill said she arrived at the *News and Observer* at the “perfect time” because the paper was expanding its women’s sports coverage and allowed her to write expansive features, including on Mandy Garcia^{xxxii}, the first female athlete at The Citadel.

Gary Smith of *Sports Illustrated* became Hill’s idol and she said she wanted to flourish at writing long-form stories. She was headed for success and she said the staff at the *News and Observer* was diverse, allowing her a level of comfort. She bonded with the North Carolina State beat writer, A. Sherrod Blakely, who is now president of the NABJ Sports Task Force^{xxxiii}.

Hill said it wasn’t until her next job, when she was hired home to the *Free Press* to cover Michigan State football and basketball that she felt both racism and sexism. She took the job covering two of the college sports’ most iconic coaches in Tom Izzo (basketball) and Nick Saban (football). It was a big responsibility for a 23-year-old reporter, but Hill said she had no idea the condemnation she would face because of her age, race and gender.

“There’s just this feeling you get when you know people are scrutinizing you and looking at you and you know they’re thinking, ‘Oh, I know why she’s here.’ It wasn’t just paranoia.” (J. Hill, personal communication, October 13, 2021)

What’s more, Hill said a colleague from a competing paper told her directly that she had it “easier in the profession than I did because he was a white man.” According to Hill, the reporter said nobody was seeking to hire white men. Newspapers all wanted a person or color or a woman. Hill said she asked the white male reporter how come she was the only female and Black person on the Michigan State beat.

^{xxxii} <https://www.wral.com/news/local/story/138485/>

“And the fact was, I was always the only Black woman in the locker rooms, covering the team. I was the only one. But in his mind, feeling like my presence made him feel as if it was something was slipping away from him and that really taught me a lot about what I was facing in terms in perception in the industry. They don’t know I had been at this since I was 15 years old.” (J. Hill, personal communication, October 13, 2021)

Hill said she received her first death threat from one of her stories while in college. While covering Michigan State, the Spartans edged rival Michigan on a controversial final play^{xxxiv} and Hill said she received racist and sexist emails and phone messages after her game story was published. What Hill said she was reluctant to tell young female journalists they had to develop a tolerance for sexism and racism because it would exist in the business. But she said she realized after this aforementioned incident that she was going to face these detractors for the remainder of her career.

“Why shouldn’t I act like this bothers me? On the psychological level it definitely does. Covering Michigan State for six years it was a great time but it was also this other element where you’re learning in real time just what it means when you profile rises in this business and the readers attach you to these stories. It brings a level of creditability but it also brings a level of toxicity that you’re going to be stuck with the rest of your career.” (J. Hill, personal communication, October 13, 2021)

One jarring instance of racism and harassment Hill said she experienced was when a *Free Press* secretary connected a disturbed caller to her cell phone. He not only admonished her with racial and sexist remarks but threatened physical harm.

^{xxxiii} <https://nabjsportstaskforce.com/leadership>

^{xxxiv} <https://www.michigandaily.com/uncategorized/last-second-heroics-doom-wolverines/>

Despite these incidents, Hill said she never considered leaving journalism. Like Rhoden and Thomas, the love for the craft superseded the discrimination and racism. At age 28, Hill was named as columnist at the *Orlando Sentinel*, the lone Black female sports columnist in North America^{xxxv}. Out of 405 newspapers, only the *Sentinel* had a Black female columnist.

In the mid-2000s, Hill was able to establish a following by conducting video interviews with athletes while they were driving their cars. Hill said she felt pressure being a columnist as such a young age – sports columnists generally are named to their positions in their late-30s after years of beat writing – and wanted to separate herself with a unique project.

It was the interview series that turned Hill into a nationally known figure and drew the attention of ESPN, the premiere sports network and website. It was at this point that Hill said she realized the lucrative salaries that could be earned in journalism.

Black print journalists such as Stephen A. Smith, Michael Wilbon and Howard Bryant were making the transition to television where the financial rewards were considerably higher than an average print journalist. According to Payscale.com (2020), the average sports reporter salary in 2021 is \$49,417 per year.

Smith^{xxxvi}, who covered sports as a reporter and columnist for nearly 20 years before joining ESPN, makes an estimated \$12 million per year, according to the *New York Post*^{xxxvii}.

“I was thinking at ESPN that the TV people will always be of use and there is a glamour to what they do. They’re able to connect with viewers and that’s the easiest way to stay at ESPN for a long time. Seeing the money, I started to eye making a fulltime switch away from the writing, is what I had always known and loved.” (J. Hill, personal communication, October 13, 2021)

^{xxxv} https://archives.cjr.org/behind_the_news/jemele_hill_on_being_black_fem.php

By the mid to late oughts, print journalists were making the transition to television as reporters and insiders and even hosts. John Clayton, Adam Schefter, Jayson Stark and Peter Gammons had transformed from print reporters to ESPN on-air insiders and Black journalists such as Hill were also offered that option.

While the money and popularity was alluring, Hill said she was about to enter a new level of scrutiny and discrimination that would alter her career and change her life.

“There was a lot of things I had to get adjusted to because I’m coming from a newspaper background where you are told from Day One you are not the story, you are not the centerpiece of what’s happening and TV takes you in a totally different direction. ESPN takes you in a totally different direction because they perfected and introduced the idea of the celebrity journalist.” (J. Hill, personal communication, October 13, 2021)

What was different about Hill’s experience was she was the first Black female journalist hired by ESPN who was a trained journalist, with no background in television. Hill worked for the ESPN’s website as a writer before the network approached her about doing television.

There had been Black females on sports television prior such as Jayne Kennedy for CBS Sports^{xxxviii} or Robin Roberts^{xxxix} but both had come from television backgrounds before entering sports reporting. Hill was a print journalist.

Hill said ESPN struggled to find a place for her because of her sports expertise. In more traditional television days, women journalists would tee up stories for their male counterparts. Their opinions were generally not valued. Hill was a former columnist who carried strong sports opinions.

^{xxxvi} <https://espnpressroom.com/us/bios/stephen-a-smith/>

^{xxxvii} <https://nypost.com/2021/07/09/stephen-a-smiths-espn-contract-pays-him-12-million-per-year/>

^{xxxviii} <https://playersbio.com/jayne-kennedy/>

^{xxxix} <https://www.rocknrobin.tv/robin-roberts>

What opened the door for Hill and other women with some opinions was the Ray Rice incident. Rice, a running back for the Baltimore Ravens, was caught on video assaulting his girlfriend in an elevator in 2014^{x1}. Hill and other women journalists expressed their opinions on the video and the NFL's reaction to a landmark domestic violence case.

“Everybody want to create a show like (‘Pardon the Interruption’), Black guy-white guy or ‘First Take’, Black guy-white guy. Nobody ever thought about putting Black woman-Black man together because optically, that did not look appealing to the audience. There was clearly a type in television and a type at ESPN that was able to get opportunities and I wasn’t that type. I had braids. I was Black. I came from a newspaper background.” (J. Hill, personal communication, October 13, 2021)

THE PRICE OF SUCCESS

Hill was finally paired with another print journalist named Michael Smith^{xli} for an ESPN program named “His and Hers”^{xlii} before both were named hosts of the 6 p.m. edition of SportsCenter, one of the network's most high profile shows. Smith, 42, was plucked by ESPN from the *Boston Globe* to cover the NFL and he eventually turned into a television personality.

In 2017, ESPN rebranded its sports highlight and feature show and renamed it “SC6”^{xliii} in attempt to attract younger viewers with a more hip-hop themed and contemporary appeal. Hill and Smith, both Generation Xers, hosted entertainment and sports guests, debated issues, used modern and non-mainstream cultural references and stayed away from the traditional sports-highlight format.

^{x1} <https://www.lawinsport.com/topics/item/ray-rice-domestic-violence-and-the-nfl-s-personal-conduct-policy>

^{xli} https://web.archive.org/web/20180727085137/https://espnmediazone.com/us/bios/smith_michael/

^{xliii} <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3108852/>

While the show appeared to be wildly successful initially, Hill and Smith said they began to hear criticism from inside the company about the show being “too Black” or mainstream – i.e. white – audiences being unfamiliar with their references.

“This was the beauty of our friendship. Because Mike and I were similar, because we came from newspaper backgrounds, we had both developed a chip on our shoulder for different reasons. Mike was an NFL insider and while he was really started to develop a big name, (ESPN) hired Adam Schefter.” (J. Hill, personal communication, October 13, 2021)

Smith, a New Orleans native, attended Loyola (New Orleans) University and said he was motivated to enter journalism by watching Stuart Scott^{xliv}, the ESPN SportsCenter host who popularized hip-hop and other catch phrases and became iconic with younger audiences.

Smith became the first sports intern at the *New Orleans Time Picayune* in 1998 and then said attending his first NABJ convention in 2000, where he said he WAS able to meet fellow Black journalists served as inspiration to enter the business following college.

“I never had any doubt because it was what I saw from a very early and impressionable stage, so when you see a Ralph Wiley, Stuart Scott, when you see a Brian Burwell, you’re like, ‘OK, I could do that.’ There’s so many people that opened these doors that when it was my turn to walk through the door, I didn’t have to knock, I didn’t have to kick it open. It was already open for me.” (M. Smith, personal communication, October 21, 2021)

Smith also said that Scott taught him that he could be himself on the air. The perception, according to Smith, was that prior to Scott, Black television sports hosts had to “talk white” in order to be accepted and embraced.

^{xliii} <https://www.sportingnews.com/us/other-sports/news/jemele-hill-michael-smith-espn-sportscenter-the-six-debut-time-interview-fs1/1lb2s217ygjc105j0ixhjkjm4>

Waldron (2015) wrote about Scott's influence on sportscasting: "There were successful African-American sportscasters at the time," ESPN director of news Vince Doria told ABC. "But Stuart spoke a much different language... that appealed to a young demographic, particularly a young African-American demographic."

"Conventional wisdom at the time, was that if you were going to be a Black person on television, you had to 'talk white,' you had to conform, you had to code switch. But then seeing Stuart, you're saying, 'that's the same slang I use.' He's comfortable in his own Black skin." (M. Smith, personal communication, October 21, 2021)

Smith, who was hired by *The Globe* directly out of college in 2001 and was named the No. 2 Patriots writer, said he learned from his early newspaper experiences that a Black journalist needed to be twice as talented, polished and meticulous as their white counterparts. His rise to stardom was swift, with ESPN hiring him as an NFL reporter in September 2004 after making a series of TV appearances on the network show "Around the Horn."^{xliv}

Smith was part of the transformation for younger print journalists into television, hired for their sports expertise and on-air savvy. Smith spent five years as an NFL insider along with Chris Mortenson and John Clayton until 2009, when the network hired former *Denver Post* reporter Adam Schefter, essentially nudging Smith out of his insider position, a move he felt may have been racially motivated.

Smith said he was then relegated to find another avenue for his talents and he turned into various of the network's analysts shows.

"I think with white executives, you have to fit in a certain pre-conceived box of what they think a Black person should be. One, it helps if you played the (professional sports), which I didn't." (M. Smith, personal communication, October 21, 2021)

^{xliv} <https://www.theringer.com/2020/1/15/21066392/stuart-scott-ESPN-sportscenter-career-death-broadcaster>

According to Smith, there's three categories of on-air talent: the studio anchor, the ex-player and the commentator. He said it's difficult for Black journalists to fill that third role, a commentator without having actually played the game. Stephen A. Smith, one of ESPN's most popular personalities, was one of the first Blacks to fill that role who did not play professional sports.

The first Black studio analyst was former NFL defensive back Irv Cross^{xlvi}, who was hired by CBS in 1975 as a studio expert. Many Blacks followed Cross as an analyst or commentator and most of them were former players.

Smith and Hill decided to do a podcast together, "His and Hers Podcast," and that spilled into a television show: "His and Hers" and finally SportsCenter, Smith said he never felt secure because the template for a successful show had never been a Black man with a Black woman.

"That's the thing about Black people. We don't get opportunities, we get chances. We had a chance. We kept doing it and made it our own." (M. Smith, personal communication, October 21, 2021)

Smith said he was in a hotel room in 2016 when it was announced that he and Hill would host SportsCenter, and he was brought to tears by the news. What Smith said bothered him was the perception that he and Hill were given this position simply because of ESPN's quest to attract a younger audience and give the impression it sought to diversity, not for duo's journalistic talents.

"I'll take the Pepsi Challenge with anybody who walks through those doors in terms of ability. I don't give a (expletive) who you're talking about. I can anchor with the best of them. But it was the wrong place and the wrong time for us. The country wasn't ready for us." (M. Smith, personal communication, October 21, 2021)

^{xlv} <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0377139/>

Hill and Smith took over SportsCenter at a pivotal time in our country, a month after Donald Trump was elected President. Smith added that the 6 p.m. SportsCenter followed “Pardon The Interruption,” which Smith said had the oldest demographic of any ESPN show.^{xlvii}

“Corporate America wants to be able to capitalize and profit off Black culture but they don’t want the other side of that proverbial coin. They don’t want to hear about the struggle. They want to co-op Black culture as much as they can to the point of (not) making anybody uncomfortable. So see two Black people be unapologetic was not what that audience in particular at 6 o’clock wanted to see. It also wasn’t what a lot of executives at ESPN wanted to see SportsCenter become. They weren’t interested in us being the faces of SportsCenter.” (M. Smith, personal communication, October 21, 2021)

Guthrie (2018) wrote that key ESPN executives criticized the show internally, including executive vice president Norby Williamson saying in a meeting: “One down, one to go” after Hill was removed from SportsCenter. Guthrie (2018) quoted an unnamed ESPN executive as saying Hill and Smith faced scrutiny the moment they took over the show, saying “SC6” was too modern for mainly white executives who wanted a more traditional highlight show. Not only did ESPN remove Hill and Smith from SportsCenter, each were bought out of their contracts in the subsequent months after their dismissal. Smith, considered a rising star, had not yet reached his 40th birthday, considered young in the sports journalism business. Hill, 43, was one of the most significant Black female journalists in the country.

^{xlvi} <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/01/sports/football/irv-cross-dead.html>

^{xlvii} <https://espnpressroom.com/us/press-releases/2021/09/espn-to-celebrate-20-years-of-pardon-the-interruption-with-one-hour-documentary-special-and-four-part-espn-daily-podcast-series/>

Smith said he believes that the two were destined to fail because of over-promotion and such a drastic and immediate change from the original show. Guthrie (2018) wrote that one Black ESPN executive said the show was “too Black” while other employees would privately complain they didn’t understand the cultural references or were uncomfortable with the Black-themed content.

ESPN’s initial promotion of the show as essentially everything but a standard highlight show created resentment for Smith and Hill within the company, Smith said.

“Again, two Black people, had never been done before. Two Black people in the era of Trump. It was way too much at one time and it all set us up to fail.” (M. Smith, personal communication, October 21, 2021)

Lewsley (2020) wrote that workplace racism and stress can lead to mental and physical health issues. Lewsley wrote: “experiencing or witnessing racism can have long lasting effects, increasing the risk of chronic disease and mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression in both children and adults.”

Smith pointed out that there had never been a non-comedic show in the history of television with a Black man and Black woman as the lead hosts. He also said there was internal resentment from other ESPN hosts and personalities that believed Hill and Smith were given their position merely because of race.

“I’ve procrastinated on going to therapy. It was a low point. August of 2017 to September of 2019 was the lowest point of my career because I felt I got a raw deal. I didn’t understand how somebody can go to one of the faces of the network to basically being buried. Somebody had to pay as far as they were concerned.” (M. Smith, personal communication, October 21, 2021)

Smith said he is annoyed that ESPN tried having the same frank on-air discussions about race and diversity in their shows in the wake of the George Floyd murder in May 2020 as he and Hill tried having three years earlier.

“So Black lives matter now but they didn’t back then? Now you want to do these segments? not everybody’s free to be unapologetic? Now everybody is free to speak their mind now? But back then, it was like ‘we’re a sports network, stick to sports.’”

(M. Smith, personal communication, October 21, 2021)

For Hill, the departure from ESPN was considered more controversial because of a social media post. Hill (2017) wrote: “Donald Trump is a white supremacist who has largely surrounded himself w/ other white supremacists.” The tweet made national headlines with The White House demanding she be fired by ESPN, with Trump personally referencing her name.^{xlvi}

Hill agreed to a buyout of her contract in September 2018.^{xlix}

“Maybe we had to die on the cross so a lot of other people could live. It was an exhilarating experience but also traumatic too. We faced a level of vitriol that neither one of us had ever faced. A lot of it had to do with being two unapologetic people on TV and a lot of people didn’t like that. As much a people (direct message) or Tweet me or make comments on my Instagram how much they loved our partnership, it came with a price.” (J. Hill, personal communication, October 13, 2021)

THE RAW NUMBERS

Since 2006, Dr. Richard Lapchick¹, the director of the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport, has collaborated with the Associated Press Sports Editors to produce a

^{xlvi} <https://www.vox.com/identities/2017/9/15/16313800/trump-jemele-hill-espn-white-supremacist>

“Sports Media Racial and Gender Report Card.”^{li} APSE sought to assess its diversity practices and Lapchick just released the results of his group’s latest study after missing 2020’s report because of the pandemic.

The report gives APSE – an organization of editors from newspapers, websites and television networks – an overall “C” grade for overall DO YOU NEED BOTH OVERALLS? hiring of hiring people of color and women. The report gives APSE a “B+” for racial hiring and “F” for gender hiring. Overall the report revealed that gender hiring is considerably worse than racial hiring across the board in all positions in newsrooms.

The overall grade increased from a “D+” in 2018, a sign that the hiring of people of color in the journalism business is improving. Lapchick (2021) said the “B+” was the highest grade since the reports began in 2006. The report also quotes former APSE President and advisor to the study, Lisa Wilson, saying the lack of hiring for women of color is a “major problem.”

Overall, the report said there were several improvements in hiring numbers for people of color over 2018:

- Assistant sports editors of color increased from 23.6 percent to 27.7
- Sports editors of color increased from 15 percent to 20.8 percent.
- Sports columnists have increased from 17.9 percent to 22.9 percent
- Sports copy editors and designers increased from 22.3 percent to 23 percent.

Lapchick (2021) also pointed out the reason some of the numbers have increased is the presence of ESPN, one of the largest employers of sports journalists in the country. Lapchick says if ESPN were removed from the study, all of the aforementioned numbers would decrease.

^{xlix} <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2018/09/14/outspoken-trump-critic-jemele-hill-confirms-her-departure-espn/>

^l <https://www.tidesport.org/our-director>

Lapchick (2021) also suggested a way to increase minority hiring is to institute a rule that would mandate members of ASPE interview diverse pools of candidates for open positions. He suggested it would be called the “Ralph Wiley Rule” after the veteran Black journalist and author.^{lii}

Despite the increase in numbers, according to the report, 77.1 percent of sports columnists in the United States and Canada are white and 82.2 percent are male. In addition, 77.1 percent of APSE sports reporters are white and 77.1 percent of copy editors and designers. Although the numbers are steadily increasing, sports journalism remains an overwhelmingly white industry.

The APSE report also said only five members – Yahoo!, Sports Illustrated, *The Detroit Free Press*, The Athletic and ESPN – employed Black sports editors, who make personnel, story and hiring decisions.

The study also showed the percent of Black assistant sports editors decreased from 11.2 percent to 10.5 percent. The number of assistant sports editors who were black jumped from 23.6 percent in 2018 to 27.7 percent in 2021. The report also revealed that 36.1 percent of columnists from APSE members were women or of color.

The report also stated 11.8 percent of all reporter positions were Black and 1.1 percent were Black women. And 11 percent of upper management in APSE member companies were Black.

Here are the overall grades for each people of color category from the Lapchick study (2021):

- APSE total staff: B+
- APSE sports editors: B+
- APSE assistant sports editors: A-

^{lii} <https://www.tidesport.org/associated-press-sports-editors>

- APSE columnists: B+
- APSE reporters: B+
- APSE copy editors/designers: B+
- APSE upper management: B

As Lapchick (2021) mentioned, the grades and statistics researched were the best since the study began in 2006, an indication that hiring practices and opportunities for Black sports journalists are slowly improving.

THE BLACK LIST

In 1975, the National Association of Black Journalists WAS? formed in Washington, D.C. ^{liii} The organization sought to galvanize the growing number of Black journalists and *Boston Globe* sports reporter Larry Whiteside^{liv}, who covered the Milwaukee Braves and Boston Red Sox during his illustrious career, decided to approach every Black writer he saw in press boxes beginning in the early 1970s and formed what was called, “The Black List,” a typewritten list of all the Black reporters Whiteside could tabulate around the United States.

As years progressed, the list grew and our research was able to recover a copy of the “Black List” from the early 1980s. It was the first page of the list that contained 50 games NAMES?, including Thomas and Rhoden. The list included the reporter’s name, publication and beat responsibility. Whiteside continued to collect games into the 1990s, and the National Association of Black Journalists formed a Sports Task Force (a group of Black sports journalists) and they would meet annually at the organization’s convention. Whiteside, who

^{lii} <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A44630-2004Jun15.html>

^{liii} <https://nabjonline.org/about/history/>

^{liv} <https://twitter.com/CFBONFOX/status/1431316506789310466/photo/1>

passed away in 2007, was inducted into the NABJ Hall of Fame and a the Task Force presents an annual scholarship in his name to a worthy college student.

THE BLACK LIST

THE MINORITY SPORTS WRITERS

1. Larry Whiteside, Boston Globe, baseball and NBA.
2. Tom Greer, New York Daily News, NBA, features and columns.
3. Caesar Alsop, Wilmington (Del.) night sports editor.
4. Dave DuPree, Washington Post, NBA and features.
5. Derrick Jackson, Newsday, features.
6. Ralph Wiley, Oakland Tribune, columns, baseball and NBA.
7. Al Harvin, New York Times, NFL and general assignment.
8. Dave Sims, New York Daily News, NBA and general.
9. Fred Mitchell, Chicago Tribune, NBA.
10. Julius Thompson, Phil. Bulletin, high schools.
11. Donald Huff, Washington Post, high schools.
12. Terrence Moore, S. F. Examiner, baseball and features.
13. Mike Meyers, Indianapolis News, baseball and general.
14. Elton Alexander, Detroit News, desk and general.
15. Ron Thomas, S.F. Examiner, NBA and features.
16. Lacy Banks, Chicago Sun-Times boxing, soccer and WBA.
17. Charles Coulter, K.C. Star, desk and general.
18. Brian Burwell, Newsday, NBA and general.
19. Bill Rhoden, Balt. Morning Sun, features and general.
20. Steve Monroe, Rochester (N.Y.) Democrat Chronicle, NFL and general.
21. Fred Goodall, AP Miami.
22. Bob Greene, AP-New York, tennis editor and general.
23. Gary Binford, Newsday, H.S. and general assignment.
24. Roger Jackson, Sports Illustrated.
25. Tony Cotton, Sports Illustrated.
26. Roy S. Johnson, New York Times, features, NBA.
27. Wilmer Ames, Sports Illustrated, boating.
28. Ray Richardson, Chicago Defender, general.
29. DeWayne Cheeks, Cleveland Plain-Dealer, preps.
30. Greg Simms, Cleveland Plain Dealer, boxing, NBA.
31. Fred Guzman, San Jose Mercury, baseball.
32. Prentice Rogers, Atlanta Journal, NBA.
33. Ernest Reese, Atlanta Constitution, colleges, NFL.
34. Ronald Powell, San Diego, NBA.
35. Chris Baker, Los Angeles Times, general assignment.
36. Mike Eurd, Houston Post, NBA.
37. Bill Stickney, Houston Chronicle, NBA.
38. Mike Bruton, San Antonio Light.
39. Sam Fullwood, Charlotte Observer.
40. James Alexander, Charlotte Observer.
41. David Squires, St. Petersburg Times.
42. Tinley-Ann Jackson, Inside Sports.
43. Marvin Goodwin, Oakland (Mich.) Press, boxing and general.
44. Chuck Johnson, Flint (Mich.) Journal.
45. Chris Thorne, Newark-Star-Ledger. colleges.
46. Alan Whitt, Grand Rapids (Mich.) Press, copy desk.
47. Annette Jackson, Oakland (Cal.) Tribune, preps.
48. Mike Wilbon, Washington Post, colleges.
49. Larry Casey, Chicago Tribune, sports copy desk.
50. Clyde Travis, Chicago City News Bureau.

(MORE)

CURRENT ISSUES

While the Lapchick study (2021) showed that hiring has improved for Black sports journalists, issues remain that could perhaps curtail the quest for true diversity.

There is a growing perception that trained Black journalists are being pitted against ex-athletes in terms of reporting and analyst positions. For example, each Fox Sports and ESPN released their college football coverage teams with promotional tweets in August 2021. Of the 24 play-by-play announcers, analysts and commentators on the FOX team only five with Black and just two – Gus Johnson and Eric Collins – did not play college football. (Fox Sports College Football, 2021).

Of the ESPN team^{iv}, of the 71 analysts, play-by-play announcers, reporters and field analysts, 15 are Black and seven of those Blacks are non-former players. Of the three on-field analysts, a position that generally does not require former players, none were Black. And of the 20 play-by-play announcers for ESPN college football, three were Black. And of the 19 on-field reporters, five were Black. (ESPN Public Relations, 2021).

Also, at Fox Sports, two former NFL players – Marcellus Wiley and Emmanuel Acho – host a debate show called “Speak for Yourself,” while the network’s morning debate show, “Skip and Shannon: Undisputed” feature former print journalist Skip Bayless, who is white, and former NFL tight end and Hall of Famer Shannon Sharpe. The network also paired white personality Nick Wright with NFL Hall of Famer Cris Carter on “First Things First.”

What’s more, there are a handful of national radio shows that feature white journalists or personalities joined by Black former athletes. Alan Hahn, a New York journalist, partners with former NFL linebacker Bart Scott on ESPN radio. Keyshawn Johnson, a former NFL

wide receiver, and Jay Williams, a former NBA first-round pick, is ARE paired with white personality Max Kellerman. Of the six ESPN radio daily radio shows, ~~only~~ Freddie Coleman, a former New York radio personality, is the only Black host who did not play professional sports.

Such development promoted ESPN national sportswriter Howard Bryant to post on Twitter: Bryant remarked last week on Twitter, “So, Mr. Bryant, as a black male aspiring journalist, what skills do I most need to get a shot in this business?” “A good 40 (yard dash) time.” (Howard Bryant, 2021).

“How many Black talk radio hosts are there? How many Black columnists? When it comes to giving our opinion, if we did not dribble, I we didn’t tackle, if we didn’t hit the ball, people don’t find Black people credible from a straight up intellectual standpoint.” (M. Smith, personal communication, October 21, 2021)

THE MARIA TAYLOR-RACHEL NICHOLS CONTROVERSY

Draper (2021) wrote that while in the NBA Bubble in Orlando, where the season was being resumed following a pandemic-caused postponement, ESPN NBA host Rachel Nichols conducted a phone conversation with Adam Mendelson, an advisor for NBA star LeBron James. During that conversation, according to Draper, Nichols remarked about how she felt colleague Maria Taylor earned the position of host of the network’s premier NBA pre-game show because she is Black.

Draper (2021) wrote that because Nichols had been on the air prior to the phone call, the call was fed remotely back to the network’s Bristol, Conn. Studios, where an employee recorded the call and then distributed the recording to other ESPN employees. The fallout

^{lv} <https://espnpressroom.com/us/press-releases/2021/08/espn-kicks-off-industry-leading-college-football->

from *The New York Times* story prompted ESPN to reassign Nichols^{lvi} and Taylor to leave for NBC Sports^{lvii}.

Nichols' comments raised the issue as to whether other white journalists as well as other white employees in corporate America felt as if their Black counterparts were gaining promotions because of race. ESPN has established a new NBA show with Malika Andrews, a Black woman, as the host. Nichols has been off the air for months.

THE FUTURE

What this study has established is that Black sports journalists have made great strides since the days of Lacy and Smith but there is still considerable progress to make. The subjects of this study varied on their opinions on the future prospects for the Black sports journalist. The advent of social media and the Internet has offered a plethora of opportunities for journalists, there remains a considerable gap between the number of Black reporters and editors and white reporters and editors.

- “I would say some of the same challenges still exist. There’s still a significant lack of Black and Black women in particular people in positions of power across the landscape. Even if it’s better, it’s still not where it should be. There’s still some of the same ol’ battles being fought, even if it feel like it’s been a culture shift. I feel like it’s a better space for Black people but some things just never change.” (M. Smith, personal communication, October 21, 2021)

coverage-for-2021-22-with-marquee-matchups-and-dynamic-commentator-teams-in-week-1/

^{lvi} <https://www.cnn.com/2021/08/25/media/rachel-nichols-espn-the-jump/index.html>

^{lvii} <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/sports/maria-taylor-joins-nbc-sports-after-split-espn-n1274891>

- “Mostly what I tell young journalists is there’s a lot of opportunity. You see the growth potential but you see a dynamic that can be dangerous too. You don’t actually need a major platform to be a success anymore. You could still have an equally big impact and be a lot happier. I’m also inspired by the ingenuity of today’s generation. They’re so much more skilled in terms of how they understand technology and how they sync it all together. But there’s not a lot of commitment on behalf of digital media, even traditional to develop and cultivate Black journalists. I feel like that part has gotten way worse. We need Black journalists more than we ever have.” (J. Hill, personal communication, October 13, 2021)
- “It’s great to see people like Stephen A. Smith, in order (?) words, in terms of broadcast, you have more front-facing journalists. I still think there’s a great deficit when it comes to Black folks running the show as executive producers. It’s about power and control and plums and white people want to continue to have the plums. That’s probably the way it’s been and that’s probably going to be the way it is. A couple of us can get choice parts of the playground but most of us are kept out.” (W. Rhoden, personal communication, October 9, 2021).

Tashan Reed, 25, has been a full-time sports journalist since his graduation from the University of Missouri and is now the Las Vegas Raiders beat writer for The Athletic, a fast-growing website that employs hundreds of sportswriters and has served as the primary national competitor to ESPN.com.

Reed said a college internship and mentoring encouraged him to pursue the journalism business and he is considered a rising star in the business. But even his outlook on the future of the industry for those coming behind him is not rosy.

“I think particularly what’s been going on in the world, (diversity) conversations are had more often but just talking to my peers, looking at the company externally and looking at non-Black individuals talking about race more and the importance of diversity, but at this stage, it’s still mostly conversation. We really haven’t gotten to that action piece of that. Some companies make a few hires here and there but when it comes to consistent growth, and something that companies value on a broader scale and something that changes the landscape of the industry, I feel like we’re still in the early stages of it. There needs to be more sustainable ways of building diversity within this injury. I’m not overly pessimistic but I’m not jumping for joy either.” (T. Reed, personal communication, Nov. 2, 2021)

CONCLUSION

What this study has discovered is the journey of the Black sports journalist has been progressive and fascinating. From the day of Smith serving as a liaison for Jackie Robinson’s break into Major League Baseball and serving as a pseudo-scout for MLB teams in search of Negro League talent to Smith writing columns pleading for fairness for the Black athlete and the integration of baseball and then writing about sports and society deep into his 1990s. What the study discovered was that these men, although allowed into the Baseball Writers Association of America, were not given the respect or awards of their white counterparts, especially Smith, who did not receive the prestigious J.P. Taylor Spink Award until 1993, 21 years after his death. What’s more J.P. Taylor Spink^{lviii}, the creator and publisher of the *Sporting News*, had his name removed from the award in February 2021^{lix} because

^{lviii} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J._G._Taylor_Spink

^{lix} <https://www.forbes.com/sites/danschlossberg/2021/02/05/writers-remove-jg-taylor-spink-name-from-prestigious-award-after-research-reveals-racist-tendencies/?sh=5521c1551e17>

researchers found Spink made racist and disparaging remarks about the Indians signing of Negro League pitcher Satchel Paige and the integration of baseball.

The fact that an award bestowed upon the best baseball writers carried Spink's name for nearly 60 years is a testament to the acceptance of presence of racism and discrimination and describes the climate for which Smith and Lacy had to exist for more than two decades.

Those two and many other Black sports journalists of the 1950s and 60s set the groundwork for their next generation of Rhoden and Thomas, who might not have had direct Black mentors but navigated their way into the industry and established successful careers at newspapers. Thomas said he faced overt racism in being intentionally hired for a job because the *Chicago Daily News* felt he was unqualified and believed he would fail. Rhoden had to battle white counterparts at the *New York Times* for premium stories and assignments before establishing himself as one of the top columnists in the country.

Hill and Smith were the products of the previous generation that had established the National Association of Black Journalists and an industry that began establishing programs to foster young Black journalists. Each participated in high school programs and college internships to hone their skills. And each was hired by newspapers directly out of college. Hill said she faced sexism and racism because of her coverage of Michigan State at the *Detroit Free Press*, even having a white counterpart tell her directly that he felt she was hired only because of her race and gender. Smith had risen to become an NFL insider at ESPN before the network unseated him by hiring a white reporter and had to work various jobs and turn himself into a viable host without formal training.

When they were paired together, Hill and Smith were considered a successful on-air duo on one of ESPN's daytime commentary shows. But they were met with disdain, backbiting from co-workers and criticism for their Black cultural references and talk-show

approach to SportsCenter, one of ESPN's most beloved shows. Each claim race played a part in the criticism.

And despite being in the primes of their careers, Hill and Smith were each bought out of their contracts and departed ESPN. Each wondered if that would have occurred with white counterparts.

Reed said he entered the business after being encouraged by mentors at the University of Missouri and participating in nurturing programs for young journalists of color. He is considered a rising star in the business, covering the NFL at age 25, but he is not optimistic about the future of the Black sports journalist.

There are other issues that have surfaced over the past decade, such as the perception that Black journalists are getting their positions because of the recent racial reckoning because of the murder of George Floyd. Also, Black journalists in some instances are being forced to compete with former Black athletes for host and commentating positions that were originally designed for trained journalists.

The project found the road to success for the Black sports journalist have progressed immensely over the past eighty years since Smith and Lacy were covering the Negro Leagues. But as the APSE numbers show and Smith and Hill expressed, years of continued diversity progress from newspapers, stations and websites are essential before true fairness is achieved.

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