



ESPN.com: Schreiber

[\[Print without images\]](#)

Sunday, April 13, 2008

Updated: April 14, 12:01 PM ET

ESPN is right to engage, not avoid, racial matters in sports

By Le Anne Schreiber
ESPN Ombudsman

Something unprecedented happened in the ombudsman's mailbag last month. Almost by definition, an ombudsman is an avenue for complaint, but in March, the ESPN telecast that drew the most mail drew only praise.

The program was "Black Magic," ESPN's two-part, four-hour documentary on the early contributions to civil rights and to the game of basketball made by players and coaches at historically black colleges. Viewers called it "superb," "awesome," "the best sports television I can recall." Its ratings were the highest ever for an ESPN documentary.

"Black Magic" made clear where today's game has its roots, and it is *not* in early NCAA basketball, which featured a slow, patient, half-court minuet style of play. The founding fathers of modern basketball were coaches at black colleges who, while their teams were barred from NCAA participation, were training players in a high-intensity, baseline-to-baseline, fast-breaking game that revolutionized both NCAA and NBA basketball when integration in the 1950s brought the contrasting styles into face-to-face collision.

History lessons don't always make compelling TV, but the deft weaving of rare archival footage and intimate, in-depth interviews with black pioneers of the fast game seems to have struck a chord with viewers.

"I haven't learned so much watching TV in years!" wrote one male viewer.

"I just loved the whole thing," wrote a viewer who called herself "Old lady Laker fan."

Although I shared those viewers' estimate of "Black Magic," I was extremely surprised to receive this kind of mail. Spontaneous outpourings of praise are rare for any endeavor, but when it comes to ESPN's coverage of race and sports, I had grown used to a very different kind of feedback.

From my earliest days on this job, I noticed that whenever race was introduced into the discussion of sports -- whether on TV or ESPN.com, whether through polls, town hall specials, opinion shows or columns -- I would receive mail accusing ESPN of fueling or even creating racial divides in an attempt to drive ratings or page views.

The first time I noticed this reaction was in the weeks surrounding the 2007 Super Bowl, when I read mail from viewers who thought ESPN had made too much of two black coaches leading teams to the NFL championship game. That so many viewers thought ESPN was making a big deal of nothing surprised me greatly, because from the vantage point of my advanced age, this historic first was unquestionably a big deal.

I didn't know whether to feel encouraged that younger fans thought race was a nonfactor, or discouraged that history I still think of as recent and relevant seemed so ancient to them. At the time, I wished ESPN had presented more context for understanding the significance of this first.

'Fire her'

The most recent incidence of fan aversion to racial topics surfaced in my mailbox only days after it had been flooded with delighted responses to "Black Magic." Suffering a kind of ombudsman's whiplash, I read message after message from angry readers demanding that ESPN.com Page 2 columnist Jemele Hill be fired for her [March column](#) suggesting NBA superstar LeBron "King" James should be more careful with his image. Her offense: Seeing a resemblance to King Kong and Fay Wray in the March Vogue cover of James and supermodel Gisele Bundchen. Many readers who thought the resemblance far-fetched accused Hill of "inflaming racism" and "setting the country back."

"With alarming consistency, readers are calling for Ms. Hill to be fired," wrote one reader, alerting me to the hostility toward Hill being expressed by commenters on ESPN.com's conversation pages. "Her race-baiting, which had already been tiresome, has reached a new level of recklessness and unprofessionalism. Reader frustration with her is beyond palpable. Several commenters are asking how to 'organize' to complain to ESPN about Ms. Hill. I figured the best recourse was to write to you."

The problem is, if I were to second the calls for Hill's dismissal, I would have to call for my own dismissal as well, because I too saw the King Kong resemblance in that cover, as did half the random sample of friends I asked to look at the cover, as might anyone who watched "Black Magic." The film reminded us that when first confronted with the fast, airborne style of black college teams -- the style now spectacularly embodied by James -- many NCAA stalwarts dismissed and degraded their play as "jungle ball."

That was then, the readers angered by Hill's column might say, and James is now -- so "now" that he is the first African-American male ever to appear on Vogue's cover. True, but it is my experience that stereotypes die hard, and only after undergoing many permutations. I was so certain Vogue intended such a permutation that I expected quick confirmation when I called the magazine to ask if the evocation of King Kong was deliberate. Patrick O'Connell, the magazine's director of communications, said, "Absolutely not" and sounded insulted when I blurted, "You're kidding."

The Mad Brute

King Kong had his own precursors, such as 'the mad brute' in [this World War I recruiting poster](#) for the U.S. Army.

I had presumed photographer Annie Leibovitz and Vogue's creative team would be steeped in the history of iconic movie images, and perhaps intended to turn the stereotype on its head, using LeBron's immense mainstream popularity to transform a classic image of black sexual menace into a contemporary image of black chic.

Leibovitz declined to speak about the cover, preferring to let her photograph speak for itself. Clearly, it speaks in many tongues. The translation Hill offered made sense to me. But to another reader, her interpretation was "crass, racially indulgent, and just plain wrong."

Significantly, both Hill and the reader who called her "just plain wrong" thought they were echoing what the reader called Barack Obama's "brilliant speech on race in America." The reader wished that Hill, like Obama, would "rise to the level of discourse that might actually lead us forward." Hill had taken a different message from the same speech. "It's like Barack Obama said in his much-talked about speech on race," Hill wrote, "We know so little about one another. Even scarier, we know even less about the fallout of racist history."

I asked Hill to respond to readers' accusations of setting back race relations.

"I can guarantee you that when I write a column critical of black people -- when I talk about how the black community should not make a martyr of Michael Vick for going to jail -- readers do not see it as a racial setback," Hill said. "I get glowing feedback for my 'thoughtful criticism.' But when I flip the coin and ask the mainstream to take a look at themselves, then I'm setting racial progress back."

How does she understand the discrepancy between the positive response to "Black Magic" and the negative response to her column?

"People don't mind looking at the past," she said, "but when you force them to examine the here and now, that's when they get prickly, because we like to think we have made it through this."

"I don't understand why it isn't common sense to see that we might be past the first layer of overt racism, but that overt

racism becomes subconscious racism and it has seeped everywhere. I am just trying to get people to be more aware of how even a seemingly benign image like the Vogue cover can further all sorts of stereotypes that I am afraid we have become so accustomed to we don't even see them anymore. That was the root of that column."

Several of those who wrote me complained that Hill always writes about race, so I checked her archive. Her previous eight columns were not about racial topics, and they generated an average of about 50 user comments. Her Vogue/LeBron column drew more than 2,800 comments, the majority of them hostile. What does Hill make of that?

"It lets me know I hit a nerve," Hill said. "The way people react to racial topics should be the clue that they *do* want to talk about them at some level. We are ready to be past it, but before we can be past it, there is still a lot for us to talk about."

Matter of motives

Many readers interpret those comment numbers differently, charging that Hill and ESPN.com stir racial controversy in a calculated attempt to drive page views. I asked Patrick Stiegman, vice president and executive editor of ESPN.com, to respond.

"Traffic to a story is not necessarily proportionate to the number of comments on a story," he explained. "More controversial and provocative topics will engender more fan comments, but not necessarily more overall page views. Generally speaking, straight news stories make up the bulk of our most trafficked stories each day."

According to Stiegman's figures, in 2008, the Hill column that generated the most page views -- twice as many as the Vogue column -- was "Hottest Parties in the Desert," written from the Super Bowl. The number of comments on that story was 68 -- only 1/40th the comments of the Vogue column, despite drawing twice as many readers.

One lesson that has been reinforced for me in the course of doing this job is not to presume other people's motivations - - whether those people are ESPN executives or the fans who write me. Last fall, in the dormant period between Vick's guilty plea and his sentencing on federal dogfighting charges, ESPN held a Town Hall meeting in Atlanta to discuss the racially divergent reactions to the downfall of the Atlanta Falcons' first black quarterback. Because Vick had been out of the news for a month, and because the meeting produced more heckling than dialogue, I received many messages accusing ESPN of stirring the pot.

The timing had stirred my suspicions, too, and last fall I asked Rob King, ESPN.com's editor-in-chief, what purpose the low-rated Town Hall had served beyond driving traffic to ESPN.com's interactive features. Belatedly, I offer his answer, which I think sheds light on present and persistent suspicions.

"The Vick session was originally scheduled to take place closer to his plea date," King explained, "but logistics and the dramatic events made that impossible. I think the later date for this session opened us up to criticism that we held the meeting for less timely, more selfish reasons, but that criticism is misguided.

"Look, the bottom line is that we asked ourselves whether or not we should/could use our place in the world of sports discourse to address issues more complicated than fantasy starting lineups, and we chose the more admirable, more difficult course. I think criticism on this is inevitable, and I don't begrudge it. I certainly don't begrudge folks for criticizing our level of success at execution. I do wish we'd get more credit for daring to try."

The harsh reality is that unless ESPN's handling of race-related issues is near perfect, as it was with "Black Magic," it is not likely to get credit for trying. ESPN will keep encountering a phenomenon that has been dubbed "white fatigue" -- an impatience that wishfully equates issue-exhaustion with issue-resolution.

It should not take an elaborately researched two-part, four-hour, commercial-free primetime documentary to remove the rancor from the discussion of the intertwined history of sports and race in America. Columnists should not have to face "fire her" campaigns for trying to connect the dots between past and present. ESPN should not have its motives impugned every time it falls short of perfection on racial matters. The bar is set too high. The only alternatives are to clear it or take the lumps trying. Walking away from it is not an alternative.