

Hate and Redemption

By Richard E. Lapchick

Special for the Sports Business Journal

John Rocker please meet Hurricane Carter.

That may seem like a strange match but the chasm between Rocker's hate and Carter's heart may really show American sports some elusive answers about racism.

Anger management is a hot topic and professional psychological counseling seems to be the primary consequence for pro athletes who commit violent acts.

In cases of violence against others, counseling is certainly an approach worth pursuing as long as the athlete knows that serious consequences may also be part of the outcome.

Many writers interpreted Major League Baseball's decision to have Atlanta Braves' pitcher John Rocker undergo psychological testing as a sign that MLB thought Rocker's racist and homophobic remarks were an indication of mental problems.

I think this was a belated but first step by Commissioner Bud Selig primarily to address an underlying problem with Rocker. It seems clear from the Sports Illustrated article on Rocker that his problems went beyond hating "other" people. He seems to have so much anger buried deep inside that such testing may help Selig to decide what more serious actions he needs to take in the case of Rocker.

But it is Rocker's virulent hate that the sports community is focussing on. He went far beyond the offensive rhetoric of Al Campanis, Marge Schott and Reggie White. Like some other people, I have lobbied for more fair hiring practices in sports leadership positions so people of color and women can participate in guiding sports world. Maybe they will do better and maybe not, but they have to be represented in a fair society.

But Rocker shows that changing the numbers alone is not enough. Sport needs to change attitudes. All racial groups hold stereotypes about one another. According to many surveys on racial attitudes, the majority of whites think African Americans are less intelligent, more violent, more inclined to use drugs and are more likely to live on welfare. Fortunately, these attitudes don't necessarily convert into actions or overt expressions of hate. Many whites with such beliefs are able to change when confronted with a more realistic picture of African Americans as equals.

Diversity management training is one way of getting those real images on the table with the stereotypes so people in front offices and on teams can openly discuss them in a safe environment. One of the greatest problems with racism in our country is our unwillingness to frankly talk about it until or unless it is thrown in our faces. Rocker did that for us and now it is time to talk.

Racial confrontations take place in every nook and cranny of the United States. A few years ago, 75 percent of African American high school students told public opinion analyst Lou Harris that they had seen an overt act of racism with violent overtones often or somewhat often in their school in the previous 12 months.

Whites obviously control most of the power in our nation. While African Americans also misunderstand whites, they rarely put those whites in danger of serious physical or mental consequence. Some whites do it to African Americans, consciously or unconsciously, all too frequently.

Fear is generally the operative factor in converting hateful attitudes into perilous actions. This where the life of Hurricane Carter comes into the equation.

Here is a man who showed considerable anger as a young person. Imprisoned for nearly two decades for a crime he did not commit, Carter was another African American man who was discarded by the justice system. But because he was famous, people kept looking to help him until truth finally prevailed. Over the course of those decades, there was plenty of time for Carter's anger to grow. And it did not have to be general but could easily have been directed at white people.

South African Bishop Desmond Tutu, who led the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, speaks eloquently of the need for reconciliation and for the victim to forgive the oppressor. Carter is a perfect example.

He now speaks of America and whites with a sincerity that his own life experiences would seem to defy. He was amazed that he watched Hurricane, the new film about his ordeal, with President Clinton in the White House and that he addressed the United Nations General Assembly this week. People want to hear from Carter not only because he was denied justice for so long but also because he has embraced the notion of reconciliation.

Like Nelson Mandela in Bishop Tutu's homeland, Carter emerged from being the object of injustice and hatred with the intent to heal both himself and his society of the wounds caused by racism.

I hope Rucker can see that racist attitudes like his put people like Carter in prison. I hope he can also see that attitudes of people like Carter give racists the chance for redemption.

**Northeastern University's
CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF SPORT IN SOCIETY
360 Huntington Avenue, Suite 161 CP
Boston, MA 02115-5000
Phone: (617) 373-4025
Fax: (617) 373-4566 / 2092**

E-MAIL US at sportinsociety@neu.edu