

Iverson as Rap's Rocker

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*"Come to me with faggot tendencies
You be sleeping where the maggots be ... "*

These lines leap off of Allen Iverson's new rap song, 40 Bars.

It is only part of the music that promises to fan the flames of controversy that have always surrounded the over the edge Iverson since his days as a high school star. His attitude toward women becomes apparent with ...

*"Everybody stay fly
Get money; kill and f___ bitches
I'm hitting anything
And planning on using my riches ...
Down for zero digits I'm a giant you're a midget ..."*

Just as the hate spewed by Atlanta Braves pitcher John Rocker unleashed a national dialogue on racism, I hope Iverson's venom might open a slammed door in sport to discuss sexual preference and homophobia. Rocker joined white sports figures like Al Campanis, Marge Schott and Jimmy "the Greek" Snyder as outcasts in the media.

Will Iverson end up in their category or in that of football's Reggie White who publicly offended more racial and ethnic groups than anyone in memory except Rocker but kept his otherwise solid reputation intact? I believe Reggie survived for two reasons. First, he did have a solid reputation as a leader before his outburst and second, and more important, he made gays and lesbians a primary target. That hit a nerve in mainstream America where gays and lesbians reside in a special place of hostility. It must be noted that White had no connection to the violence in Iverson's lyrics that will be cited later. The direct connection is their shared homophobia.

Sexual preference remains a topic that we do not want to touch in sport as in society. Northeastern University's Center for the Study of Sport in Society, which I direct, has been doing diversity management training for more than a decade. We have done it for more than 60 college athletic departments and for the NBA's league office and all of Major League Soccer. Issues of race and gender are openly discussed in those sessions because participants expect it. However, due to the extraordinary volatility of the issue of sexual preference, our trainers wait and hope that a participant will bring it up during the eight hour session. Five years ago our staff had to put it on the table. Now it almost always comes up, either directly or through an anonymous written exercise. Once brought up, it usually becomes a dynamic but often uncomfortable discussion.

We almost never hear a participant say that they don't want to work alongside of a person from a different ethnic or racial group; or a man say he doesn't want to work with a woman or vice-versa. However, it is not at all uncommon for one or more people to say they do not want to work with gays or lesbians. Like Iverson, many are afraid of what they do not understand, of a behavior that parents taught them was morally repugnant, or that religious leaders have told them is against God's will.

While violence based on racism has been on the rise for too long, the most frequent victims of hate crimes and bias incidents are gays and lesbians.

Both the Los Angeles Dodgers and the Sacramento Monarchs had incidents with fans this year. Police working for the Dodgers escorted a demonstrative lesbian couple out of the park. The Dodgers later apologized and offered to bring the couple back as the team's guest. A group called the Davis Dykes bought a package of tickets to a Monarchs' game during the recent WNBA season. The team offers to put the name of any community group that buys a block of 20 or more tickets on an electronic board at the Arco Arena. A sales person told a representative of the group from Davis, California that it would not be possible to put the name of the Davis Dykes in lights. Offended but willing to work out a compromise, the women from Davis offered up the Davis Lesbians and the Davis Rainbow Women.

The story caught up with Joe Maloof, the owner of the Monarchs and the Sacramento Kings. He and team president John Thomas took the issue on directly. Maloof personally welcomed the Davis Dykes to the game and their name went up. Months before the incident, Thomas had scheduled our team to come to Sacramento to train the entire organization. We have now done that and have scheduled what we believe is the first session ever held by sports franchise on homophobia. What happened in Sacramento had a bad beginning and what may very well be a positive ending.

The same is true of a story at the Sydney Olympics where a married couple played against each other for the first time in the history of the Games. Denmark's Camilla Andersen had married Norway's Mia Hundvin this summer and announced that they wanted to have a child together through artificial insemination. Even in countries where sexuality is more open, that was a lot to digest for the national fans of each star. Lot's of titillating stories appeared for months in Danish and Norwegian tabloids. But in the end, Olympic coverage apparently focussed more on how would the competition be affected by a married couple playing on opposing teams. It became a sports issue and not one of sexual preference. Sports Illustrated, which exposed Rocker's venom last year, had Gary Smith write one of the most sensitive and intelligent articles I have ever read on lesbians competing in sport.

Allen Iverson has now publicly -if lamely - apologized for his lyrics about women and gays and lesbians. "If individuals of the gay community and women of the world are offended by any of the material in my upcoming album, let the record show that I wish to extend a profound apology. If a kid thinks that I promote violence by the lyrics of my songs, I beg them not to buy it or listen to it. I want kids to dream."

I guess that is why he wrote the following as part of 40 Bars. This ends with the sound of a gun being cocked and fired.

*"Man enough to pull a gun
Be man enough to squeeze it
I know niggas that kill for a fee
That would kill your ass for free
Believe me
How you wanna die, fast or slowly?
Now I'm reaching for heat
Leave you leakin' in the street
Nigga screamin' he was a good boy
Ever since he was born
But f___ it, he gone
Life must go on
Niggas don't live that long ...
This type of murder don't need no hook
Just 40 f_____ bars from the mouth of a crook ... yo"*

Twelve children die each day at the hands of another child using a gun. I have to wonder how their parents or those of the children killed in Littleton or Pearl or Jonesboro will feel about the lyrics. I especially wonder what the little boys who idolize Iverson will think about gays and lesbians, about girls and women, and about using a gun to solve one of their problems.

I hope that parents flood the 76ers offices with waves of concern. I recognize that other rap performers use the same language and images but that does not make it OK for Iverson. I hope that Allen Iverson either comes to understand what an influence he has on this hip-hop generation and that his apology/explanation falls short of taking his hate off the airwaves but instead might just act to promote more malevolence for those with hate in their hearts. He can use that influence for great good.

40 Bars uses it with pernicious results.

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