

SPORTS AND THE STREET

By Mark Naison

Howie Evans is one of the best known figures in New York's community sports scene. A sports columnist for the AMSTERDAM NEWS, New York's largest black newspaper, Evans has sponsored sports leagues and tournaments for city youth, and has counseled high school athletes. Evans has been a forceful critic of discrimination against blacks in sports and the media.

How did you get started in New York as a writer, a counselor and a coach?

I had been a gang member and through my local community center I got involved in sports and eventually got a scholarship to college. The summer after my first year in college, I came back to work in the center and I enjoyed it so much that I came home from college on weekends to work with the neighborhood kids.

After I graduated I wanted to play professional basketball, but there weren't great opportunities for me. I played a couple of years in the Eastern League, but took a job with the Board of Education and became director of the Wagner Youth and Adult Center in East Harlem.

I had worked as a stringer for a Baltimore newspaper when I was in college, reporting on campus affairs, but I hadn't done anything since. Then around 1965, I became upset about the way the national press was attacking Wilt Chamberlain. I had competed against Wilt in intercity tournaments and in college and knew him pretty well, so I wrote a story about him. The *Amsterdam News*, New York's black newspaper, was the only paper that would print it. The story got a tremendous response.

Kids who saw my picture in the paper, and heard me interviewed on the radio or saw me on the tube during games began to come into the center to talk to me about careers in the media. And I was able to channel several of them into careers in journalism and broadcasting.

When you began writing sports, did you have any models?

Not really. There were almost no black sportswriters in the New York area. I was the first writer for the paper who would cover events on a local and national level from a black point of view, to get to know the top athletes, and the first one to become visible in the national press. I be-

came secretary-treasurer of the Football Writers of America and a member of the Basketball Writers Association.

In sports like basketball and football, the players are predominantly black and announcers are overwhelmingly white.

Announcers are the most insignificant part of a sporting event. Fans would do just as well if there was no sound and they just watched the games.

I don't think a fan cares what color an announcer is, unless he's bad, or exceptionally good. The networks feel that because a greater buying market exists among whites, they need a white face.

When a black sportscaster joins a network, he has to be on the money immediately. When Oscar Robertson began doing NBA broadcasts, he had to be good from the very beginning—there was no opportunity for him to grow. Frank Gifford, when he first came on television, was horrible—which he will admit today. But they gave him the opportunity to learn because he projected the image that television wanted—blue eyes, wavy hair, all-America, all-pro. It's the same with Rich Barry.

There is no recycling of black coaches in professional basketball. Willis Reed fails one time and he's out. Elgin Baylor fails once and he's gone. But you look around the league and you'll see they're talking about bringing Ed Badger back, and he's never won anything, in college or in the pros. Cotton Fitzsimmons is another example. He's been recycled around the league.

Why have blacks excelled in basketball?

In most of the communities where black people live, basketball is the only free recreational activity. You don't need anything but a basketball and a hoop. You see kids playing in shoes, sneakers, anything. In the South I've seen kids playing in their bare feet.

New York City high schools have produced some of the best basketball players in the country for the last 40 years. How has the high school scene changed since you were growing up?

Twenty-five years ago, coaches in high school like Jamie Moskowitz and Bill Spiegel didn't have a lot of black kids. They had mostly Jewish kids who had to be taught how to dribble because they didn't start playing basketball seriously until they got to junior high school, un-



Howie Evans

Journalist Howie Evans talks to ITT about the role of sports in the black community.

til they were 13 or 14. These coaches were teachers; they taught kids how to dribble, they even taught some kids how to run. So in the eyes of people who grew up under these people, the level of coaching has deteriorated.

Kids today start playing from the time they are eight years old, and they are in leagues from eight years on up, so that by the time a kid is 14 and comes to high school, he knows how to do all the fundamental things that a coach had to teach 25 years ago.

Are recruiting practices more unscrupulous than they were 20 years ago?

Without a doubt. Off-hand, I could think of five kids who could ruin hundreds of lives just by talking about what was offered and accepted as part of their recruiting. A guy like Kareem Abdul Jabbar started to talk about how he was recruited, what he got out of UCLA, he could pull the rug out from under a lot of people. But we never have been able to get a youngster to do this.

Sociologist Harry Edwards has estimated that 70 to 80 percent of black athletes never earn their degrees. I think Edwards' figures are way out of line. If he's talking about people in professional basketball and football, then that is what he should say.

But what about scholarship athletes at the black colleges, where athletes go and graduate? Or black athletes at schools like Fordham and Middlebury? Or black athletes in the Ivy League? It's quite possible that 70 or 80 percent of black athletes at professional sports schools like Nebraska and Michigan don't get their degrees. I don't know. But not 70 or 80 percent of

black athletes as a whole. I can show you statistics for the kids from the community program that I work in, where the kids all graduate. They are not all great athletes and they don't go to UCLA and Notre Dame, but they get athletic scholarships and degrees. For every Fly Williams, I can find you ten guys who are from his neighborhood who went to college and graduated, and are now back on the street working with kids.

Does the NCAA do enough to protect athletes at the "professional sports factories"?

The NCAA is a profit-making organization. They have money in stocks. They invest in real estate. They're not going to come down on those schools that the networks decide must go on national television. Notre Dame, UCLA and Michigan are on TV three or four times a year and make millions of dollars for the NCAA.

Some critics have suggested that college athletes in revenue-producing sports should be paid salaries.

Before the advent of the American Football League and the American Basketball Association, some college players actually took cuts in salary when they went into professional sports. Big-time college athletes are professionals in everything but name. You turn on those television spotlights, you spend ten dollars to see a football game, \$2.00 to park, and a hot dog costs \$1.50. If that's not professional sports, I don't know what is.

Athletes should be paid, but how to do it is another question. Out at Oklahoma State, there was a big scandal where they raised something like \$3 million to pay the football players every month, and one of the boosters blew the whistle because some players made more money than others. I think it's time to take the money from under the table and put it on top.

People like Harry Edwards and Arthur Ashe have argued that sports are over-emphasized in the black community. Do you think this criticism is valid?

How did Dr. Edwards get to school? He went there on an athletic scholarship. And he's not alone. Rone Evans, a special assistant to the Manhattan borough president, got to college on a basketball scholarship. Franklin Thomas, who was just named president of the Ford Foundation, was a great scholarship athlete at Columbia University.

These people had no aspirations to become professional athletes; they used sports as vehicles to get themselves through school. And there are many other black guys I grew up with who followed the same route. If they hadn't won athletic scholarships, they would never have gone to college.

It's a harsh fact that most of the people who work on a day-to-day, week-to-week basis with inner city kids are people who have been involved in sports. Many of these programs use sports as an attraction to get the kids in and then rechannel them. People who say this is a bad method don't know very much about kids, about black ghettos and about poverty.

When people make this argument—and I hear it all the time from black lawyers, doctors and engineers and so forth—my one question to them is, "What are you doing? Where are you?" I know that during July and August, if I need a speaker to talk to a group of kids, the only person I can get to come is a black athlete and, in most cases, a black basketball player. I don't see any black doctors holding workouts like the athletes do, telling kids, "This is how you can become a doctor..." I don't see black lawyers holding seminars for kids explaining, "This is how we as a race of people can move forward through politics and the law..."

On weekends in the summertime, you'll find guys like Bob McCullough [a former Cincinnati Royal], Bobby Hunter, Ernie Lorch and me out on the street with these kids. But you'll find the black elite on Martha's Vineyard, Fire Island, the Hamptons and Pegleg Bay. Yet come Monday, they tell us that we're overemphasizing sports in the black community. And I say to them, "You come and make your contribution. This is my profession. I'm making a contribution in my profession."



Evans coached this team of ten and eleven year olds; now seven are in college.