Black Athlete Forum hit plenty of powerful notes

By Gene Wojciechowski
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ATLANTA -- You know how sometimes you see a movie like, say, "Syriana," and you walk out of the 40-plex two hours later not knowing what the hell you just watched? I mean, no clue. So you try to fake it with your wife and mumble something about "geopolitical fissures," whatever that is, and hope she buys it.

But here's the thing: Sometimes, even if you don't get it ... you get it. Sometimes clicks.

Anyway, that's exactly how I felt about the Black Athlete Forum held earlier this week at Morehouse College. The forum, moderated by Morehouse Man Spike Lee (Class of '79), was supposed to focus on, among other things, the glaring disparity between the number of African-American athletes (a lot) and the number of African-American sportswriters (not so much). And it did -- for a little while.

But then Rutgers women's basketball coach C. Vivian Stringer performed invasive verbal surgery (without anesthesia, I might add) on Kansas City newspaper/AOL columnist Jason Whitlock. And social activist and NFL Hall of Famer Jim Brown went all profound and poignant on the SRO crowd. And Atlanta Journal-Constitution columnist Curtis Bunn referred to ESPN's Stephen A. as "the Reverend Smith." And Washington Wizards center, poet, antiwar protester and ACLU advocate Etan Thomas chided the media for its negativity. And Atlanta Falcons tight end Alge Crumpler, whose quarterback can't go two weeks without being part of something dumb, said athletes have to become more accountable for their actions. And New York Times columnist William Rhoden suggested the possibility of the NBA being almost African-American free by 2025. And Lee held up a USA Today story with mug shots of 39 African-American NFL players with law enforcement problems, and then asked good guy Alonzo Mourning of the Miami Heat, "Do you think that the black athlete is being victimized, being demonized, or are some of these brothers just buggin'?"

Yes, I can honestly say I've never been to an academic forum like this one. Every topic was so passionately stated and argued. There was no waffling. And the student audience and VIPs (no general public allowed) reacted at times as if they were at a Baptist church, which makes sense, since the Rev. Martin Luther King was also a Morehouse Man. You couldn't go five minutes without hearing an "amen," "uh-huh" and "that's right."
Stringer, seated at the opposite end of the dais from Whitlock (not by accident, I'm guessing), didn't speak until the forum was nearly an hour old. But when she did, you could almost feel the sweat forming at Whitlock's armpits.

Whitlock, in an April column, criticized Stringer's handling of the Don Imus situation and wrote that she conducted a public and grandstanding "pity party/recruiting rally" after the since-canned shock jock called Rutgers' players -- well, you know what he called them. Now it was payback time.

"I'm amazed," she said, staring down the length of the table at Whitlock. "I just want to understand your mind-set. I just want to understand people like you."

This column isn't about Whitlock, who retracted nothing, or Stringer, whose intensity, anger and emotion won over the panelists and the room. But there is no denying that the most charged moments of the evening came when Stringer leaned toward the microphone and defended herself to Whitlock.

"It wasn't the Rutgers women's basketball team that brought Mr. Imus down," she said, still glaring at Whitlock. "It was America. Women spoke. Black people spoke. It was America!"

"I made a statement that it wasn't black or white. The truth of the matter is that we have been fooled for such a long time. We have such promise and we all are important. We need to step on each other's heads to get the little piece of the American dream. It became green. It was power. You [Whitlock] understand that. That's the reason why you chose these few minutes to get your one moment of [fame]. Because other than that, who knows Jason Whitlock?"

Thomas, Bunn and Claire Smith were no less critical of Whitlock. It was a raw, honest exchange between athletes, journalists, a coach and even the audience itself. Whitlock got the worst of it, but that isn't the point. The point is that it was real, healthy and instructive, especially for those Morehouse students who had enrolled in the school's new sports journalism program, which was co-founded by Lee and the late author/sportswriter Ralph Wiley.

Saying there aren't enough African-American sportswriters is like saying there aren't enough 50-mile-per-gallon cars. The same goes for African-American sports owners, management, managers, head coaches and, in the case of baseball, players. Duh.

But the answer isn't more African-American sportswriters. More African-American sportswriters who care about the craft, who can tell a story, who can advance the profession, who offer distinctive, thought-provoking, responsible voices to the discussion -- now that's the answer. And that's what Morehouse's program is trying to
Alonzo Mourning makes a point during the discussion in Atlanta.

As you can tell by my column mug shot, I'm not going to be receiving a BET Award anytime soon. I can't pretend to fully understand the black experience because, well, I'm white, and because I'm a product of a different set of experiences than, say, a Jerome Bettis. I grew up on Air Force bases in rural Kansas, North Carolina and Florida. Bettis grew up in inner-city Detroit. Our intersecting point is sports, but it takes us a while to get there.

I'm not saying an African-American sportswriter would have a journalistic advantage with Bettis, but in some cases, he or she might have a shared experience with him. I'd have the same head start if I interviewed the son of a lieutenant colonel who was in Vietnam during the Tet Offensive.

In the end, it comes down to the quality and integrity of the sportswriter. The journalists on Lee's hand-selected forum panel -- the theatrical, charismatic and thoughtful Stephen A., the eloquent Rhoden, the understated but forceful Claire Smith and the fearless Whitlock -- have both. But who will succeed them?

Listening to the panelists go at it Monday night was goose-bump stuff. But glancing back at the faces of those students, many of whom were spilling into the aisles, was even cooler.

We all agree we need more African-American sportswriters, but are the students I saw sprint to the microphones for the post-forum Q&A ready to cowboy up? It isn't easy out there. The entry-level pay stinks. The hours are insane. The travel is gruesome. The deadlines age you. The demands ruin marriages. The athletes can be anywhere from engaging to insufferable. More leagues and teams are trying to control the message. There are ethical land mines. And did I mention life-threatening press box food?

Yet, it's still the best job on the planet. Not because of how much you make, but because of what you see.

I saw a Spike Lee Joint production Monday night. And I mean this as a total compliment, but it was the best thing he's done in years.

And I'm not buggin'.

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