

April 11, 2007

SPORTS OF THE TIMES

A First-Class Response to a Second-Class Put-Down

By [SELENA ROBERTS](#)

Of grace and dignity, without a single boob joke for ratings or a raunchy sidekick for on-air laughs, the women wearing Rutgers scarlet managed to capsize society's power differential yesterday.

The meek held the microphone — or the lifeline of the potent [Don Imus](#) — as the Rutgers players used their poised voices to hold a radio cowboy accountable for losing his 10-gallon mind during an unconscionable riff last week.

That was when Imus departed from his usual ridicule of influential equals, whether politicians or pro athletes or celebrities, to mock the vulnerable by degrading a mostly African-American basketball team of 18-, 19- and 20-year-old women.

The Rutgers team had done nothing but excel as history students and music majors, as big sisters and determined players on an improbable joyride to the national championship game.

"Nappy-headed hos," Imus called them.

Racism, shouted prominent black male politicians and journalists. And on the crawls across the screens of cable networks, when news of the Imus rant fomented, the word "racial" bumped into "racially charged." Right account, if only partly.

By its lonesome, "ho" has barely registered a ripple for anyone outside [Gloria Steinem's](#) buddy list or the Rutgers team.

"It's more than about the Rutgers women's basketball team," the team's captain, Essence Carson, said during a news conference in Piscataway, N.J., adding, "As a society, we're trying to grow and get to the point where we don't classify women as hos and we don't classify African-American women as nappy-headed hos."

Ho is the new bitch. And bitch is the old sissy. But whatever the label, women are always first to be part of the gag when sexism and misogyny are publicly sanctioned and celebrated — particularly in sports.

Shaquille O'Neal, in his [Lakers](#) days, referred to the [Sacramento Kings](#) as "Queens."

And in this sanitized version, a top Division I football coach was once overheard telling his team after a particularly big win: tonight, you guys deserve to take whatever woman you want.

In Johnny Damon's long-haired Boston days, a punch line used to circulate: He looks like Jesus, throws like Mary.

Last fall, a television ad for DiGiorno frozen pizza was broadcast throughout the college football season with South Carolina Coach [Steve Spurrier](#) and Washington Coach Tyrone Willingham in starring roles. They were shown participating in a news conference at which pizza was served. “If this isn’t delivery, we’ll play the entire game in dresses,” Spurrier tells Willingham.

Cut to the beefy players in sundresses and heels.

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No one wants a nanny planet, but funny has to be a fair fight — even in pillow fights.

It’s not just Imus in the cross hairs for mocking the defenseless. The [Toronto Blue Jays](#) have been under scrutiny for producing a commercial promoting this baseball season.

At 6 feet 5 inches and 275 pounds, Frank Thomas is filmed whacking a small boy so hard with a pillow that the child flies off the bed and hits the floor with a thud. Thomas then breaks into a home run trot.

The Television Bureau of Canada refused to approve the spot. The Blue Jays can’t understand why. But possessing the power differential means bullying someone your own size.

With the ear of a national audience, Imus denigrated women who have revealed the courage to play a sport in its pure, fundamental form even though it is often branded inferior to the dunk style of men. The gals absorb enough put-downs as it is.

The racial twist of Imus’s derision prompted the public outrage and scared network executives out of their focus groups. Talk of race ultimately gave the Rutgers women a platform, but a dialogue on vanquishing sexism and misogyny ribboned their message as they spoke from a dais yesterday.

“It is all women athletes,” Rutgers Coach C. Vivian Stringer said. “It is all women. Have we lost the sense of our own moral fiber? Has society decayed to the point that we forgive and forget because, you know what, it was just a slip of the tongue?”

With everyone’s attention, would Rutgers scream for justice? Instead the players eloquently described their tales of personal pain and their disillusionment with the networks. As the sophomore forward Heather Zurich said, “Our moment was taken away, our moment to celebrate our success, our moment to realize how far we’d come on and off the court as young women; we were stripped of this moment by a degrading comment made by Mr. Imus.”

With the stage, would they demand Imus be fired? They would not play shock jock, but calmly asked for time to meet with him, time to reflect.

“Right now, I can’t really say if we have come to a conclusion on whether we will accept the apology,” the junior guard Matee Ajavon said.

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Ajavon and her teammates could have cracked Imus over his cowboy hat with the microphone in their hands. They had the outlet to mock him if they had chosen to attack him just as personally as he had them.

Rutgers wasn't out for revenge, though. Carson said the team did not want to be looked at "as if we're attacking a major broadcasting figure.

"We're attacking an issue we know isn't right," she said.

Somewhere, Imus was listening. He, like everyone, had to hear the women out. This wasn't his studio or his sidekicks. The Rutgers women ran the show without abusing the privilege. Very ladylike of them.

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