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The Unpleasant Reality for Women in Sports

By [WILLIAM C. RHODEN](#)

I stood in front of the associate professor Barbara Osborne's Sports Law class at the [University of North Carolina](#) last Wednesday. The subject was the seldom talked-about disparity of power and privilege between black and white women in the sports industry.

The timing was fitting. This year is the 35th anniversary of Title IX, the Congressional legislation that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in any educational program that receives federal financial assistance.

A week earlier, hundreds attended a convention in Cleveland, the site of the women's basketball Final Four, to celebrate and discuss Title IX, the law that changed the landscape of sports in America. Title IX drastically increased the number of women involved in intercollegiate athletics as well as the amount of money spent to support them, including scholarships, facilities, coaches and publicity.

After her class, Osborne noted how few of her students, especially the women, had any idea about the struggle that was fought to elevate women's sports to their current level.

Many of them, she said, felt that things had always been the way they are now. So many of today's women have had life and opportunity handed to them on a platter. Osborne said: "They have it so good here. Then they go out in the real world and get slapped in the face by reality."

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It didn't take long for Osborne's students to receive a hard dose of reality. On the day I was speaking in Chapel Hill, [Don Imus](#), the national radio host, referred to the women on the Rutgers basketball team as "nappy-headed ho's." The remarks were part of off-handed comments about the [N.C.A.A.](#) championship game the night before between Rutgers and Tennessee.

For all the ugliness of the remarks, I'm encouraged by the controversy they've unleashed. So many of our young people, especially women, especially African-American women, have been raised in cocoons, led to believe that sexism and racism have significantly subsided. This naïveté is so entrenched that the threshold to insult has become higher.

There have been calls for Imus to be fired. (Full disclosure: After I wrote a column critical of Imus in 1999, I was told that he referred to me as a "quota hire." Since then, he has apparently praised my work, even if he has declined to review my books.) But there are larger issues, and chief among them is how to close the historic and deeply rooted gap of consciousness and compassion between black and white women.

Historically, white feminists, and black men, have drawn a counterproductive line in respect to African-American women — a line that has compromised the war on sexism and racism. The author Paula Giddings wrote, “We have been perceived as token women in black texts and token blacks in feminist texts.”

Imus’s comments highlighted age-old, deep-rooted stereotypes that seem to surface whenever African-American women excel in sport.

Beginning in the mid-1930s, when African-American women began to excel in track and field, their success was seen through a mainstream prism of success in a “mannish” sport and reinforced disparaging stereotypes.

In the late 1940s, an Olympic official, Norman Cox, sarcastically proposed that in the case of black women, “The [International Olympic Committee](#) should create a special category of competition for them — the unfairly advantaged ‘hermaphrodites’ who regularly defeated ‘normal women,’ those less skilled ‘child bearing’ types with ‘largish breasts, wide hips and knocked knees.’ ”

Linda Greene, a law professor at the [University of Wisconsin](#) and a founding member of the Black Women in Sports Foundation, said that Imus’s characterization of the Rutgers team resurrected “old stereotypes about African-American women that date from slavery, where stereotypes of promiscuity were generated to mask the systematic rape that was a concomitant of slavery.”

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“In addition,” she said, “they also are consistent with the historical rejection of black women as beneficiaries of the feminine ideal.” Althea Gibson, the first African-American to win a major tennis championship, introduced an aggressive, take-no-prisoners style of tennis. Time magazine reported in 1957 that Gibson was forced to take a test to see if she had an extra chromosome.

On the surface, Imus’s remarks were aimed at African-American women. But as Greene points out: “No woman who participates in sport, and no mother or father who encourages and supports that participation, can escape their animus. Beyond his bold and overt racism lie assumptions about the proper bounds of femininity, assumptions that Title IX and other civil rights legislation sought to shatter.”

According to N.C.A.A. statistics, 70 percent of the athletes benefiting from increased athletic opportunity are white. “A closer look sport by sport reveals more stunning disparities,” Greene said. Black women, she said, account for more than 35 percent of the basketball players and 20 percent of track and field competitors, yet are only 2.5 percent of all the intercollegiate soccer players and are virtually absent from other sports.

How will the current generation of young women with unprecedented access reconcile gender with race and class? Will it ever?

Whether a foul-mouth radio host stays or goes, the larger issue is that sexism and racism are very much alive.

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