

# Dialogue

## Rush To Judgment On Limbaugh?

By Kurt Wildman  
Pride Columnist

If you know a little bit about talk radio, then you probably know about Rush Limbaugh.

To say he's conservative is like saying North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms isn't big on Cuba or that Mike Harris didn't see eye-to-eye with unions.

When ESPN/ABC/Disney signed him to do football commentary and analysis, it knew about him too.

Bold and confident in espousing his neo-conservative rhetoric across American radio, Limbaugh maintained a position of prominence and ratings dominance throughout the 1990's.

Although he tried TV before and failed, attempting years ago to translate his radio

aman like Limbaugh to generate ratings (which he did).

Among the critics, some said Limbaugh's comments were comparable to those of former L.A. Dodgers executive Al Campanis who claimed, among other things, that blacks lacked "the necessities" to be managers and executives in sports.

I watched Limbaugh's commentary the first time it aired.

Yes, it was controversial. Yes, it was distasteful as it conjured memories of black quarterbacks being exiled to Canada or converted into cornerbacks.

And yes, together with Limbaugh's declared views on political and social issues touching the lives of black people and the way he has delivered those views over the years, his McNabb commentary could reasonably suggest to some that he himself might hold racist beliefs.

But were the comments inherently racist? I don't think so. Should he have been let go?

No. Does this specific case set a bad precedent? Probably.

Like him or not, Limbaugh is a staunchly right-wing political commentator. He is probably less intellectual and sophisticated than other pundits such as conservative columnist George Will, who still collects a paycheck from ABC/Disney for his work on "This Week", the network's Sunday morning politics show.

Still, his comments on McNabb were political speech in a sports context, firmly grounded on his views against affirmative action and what conservatives like to call "social engineering". And while I'm 180 degrees and light-years away from Limbaugh on the political spectrum, I support more social and political commentary in sports. More to the point, I support Limbaugh's privilege to express his views on television, particularly since his modus operandi was a matter of public record before he was hired.

It might be a different situation if Limbaugh claimed McNabb and other blacks were incapable of playing quarterback or that NFL managers should turn back the clock and

play blacks at positions for which they are "better suited". But he never made those kinds of comments.

Tom Jackson, the former Denver Broncos linebacker and the senior ESPN Sunday NFL Countdown analyst, who along with Michael Irvin was one of two blacks on the set with Limbaugh, responded forcefully and factually to Limbaugh's assertions about McNabb. Jackson's retort and the many others that followed have shown how wrong Limbaugh was about McNabb and that he may know little about NFL football.

But Limbaugh has a right to be wrong. Of course, since ESPN is not an arm of the government (not yet anyway), it and its parent companies can wholly ignore Rush Limbaugh's right to free speech.

Still, there's a problem. What if the next sports commentary is equally controversial and analytically flawed, but from a completely different political space. More polarized than a battery, the U.S.

political scene is home to, among others, libertarians, critical race theorists, survivalists, radical feminists, gay activists, Islamic fundamentalists, and black nationalists.

One day, an analyst sympathetic to ideas arising from any one or a combination of these viewpoints might want to put his or her spin on MLB, the NFL, NBA, or the NHL. In the face of Limbaugh's departure from ESPN, however, you can rest assured that if corporate sports television cannot deal with Limbaugh's opinions, then it is clearly unprepared to entertain many others which fuel the marketplace of ideas.

Maybe comfortable Sunday morning football television programs are not the forum for edgy political speech, contentious social commentary, or Rush Limbaugh. Sometimes you want just football.

Thankfully, for all of us, Sunday morning football is not the only platform for our expression. **PRIDE**

## VIEWPOINT

gig for the "idiot box", ESPN Sunday NFL Countdown decided to put him on, presumably to spice up a political, middle-of-the-road analysis with right-wing flavour.

Limbaugh's last commentary on Philadelphia Eagles Pro-Bowl quarterback Donovan McNabb, however, left a bad taste in ESPN's mouth.

Claiming that McNabb, who is black, was given more credit than he deserved for his team's accomplishments and was benefiting from the NFL's "social concern" for promoting black quarterbacks and their success, Limbaugh drew the ire of many fans, commentators and his bosses.

Whatever permutation you choose, be it "forced to resign", "quit", "mutual agreement to part company", or "fired", Limbaugh's comments precipitated his divorce with ABC Sports.

Some critics characterized Limbaugh's comments as racist. The NAACP went beyond that and condemned ESPN for using

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