

# CITO AND THE MEDIA: The saga continues

By KURT WILDMAN

It is clear that many sports pundits and armchair analysts do not understand the psychological tightrope that many non-whites, blacks for example, must walk daily. Once confronted with the fact that, in North American society, race does matter, blacks often fight a constant struggle between being hypersensitive to the commonplace slings and arrows that all Canadians must face, and allowing racist, slightly biased, or racially indifferent people to mischaracterize, ignore, discriminate against, or walk all over them.

Unfortunately, in the last few weeks some commentators seem oblivious to this reality as they suggest that Clarence "Cito" Gaston, the hyper-scrutinized manager of the Toronto Blue Jays Baseball Club, has recently made a habit of playing the so-called "race card" by openly musing about the travails of racism in his

career and in baseball in general. This facile criticism ignores, however, both the indelible taint of baseball's racist history and Gaston's history of relative restraint in raising questions of race.

Rather than seeing Cito's recent comments as gratuitous and self-indulgent, his disclosures seem less than immoderate when you consider the source: a black baseball personality who, since his days of being interim manager, has felt clammy media hands holding his neck in the pre-employment guillotine.

On the contrary, Gaston's comments seem painfully reasonable when viewed within the context of baseball itself. This is a game that fervently opposed on-field racial integration until the historic advent of Jackie Robinson, 50 years ago, and that seems to restrict it off the field today. This integration issue is covered by contemporary media who are far less

integrated than baseball is, and whose racist fans helped make Hank Aaron the world record holder for hate mail (seriously, check the *Guinness Book*) after he broke George "Babe" Ruth's all-time home run mark.

Cito is not going to fool anyone into thinking that he is baseball's version of Reverend Al Sharpton or Dudley Laws. He is clearly one of the people who has tried to keep the racial emphasis muted in any analysis of his career. But lately he has turned up the volume on this aspect of his experience.

For that he has been roundly criticized, not unlike Isaiah Thomas was criticized years back when he made his comments on the differential treatment he perceived in the N.B.A. between black stars and white ones like the icon Larry Bird. Thomas spoke his mind and was emotive. To some, he may have fallen off the tightrope onto the net of hypersensitivity. Arguably, Cito has not done so.

For the most part opinion moulders and, to a lesser extent, fans are too sophisticated to be open about their views on race, intelligence, leadership ability and the like. For commentators, like CBC's Bruce Dowbiggin, to say that they haven't heard any racial

tones in the criticism from "Cito-bashers" is irrelevant in light of that sophistication and the restraints most pundits (and their employers) face under broadcasting and publishing codes and regulations. Essentially, they are not always in a

Continued on page 8

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## THE SAGA CONTINUES

# CITO GASTON AND THE MEDIA

Continued from page 4  
position to say what they really think and feel.

In effect, someone like Cito has no choice but to read between the lines to assess the motives of his critics and the impact that racism seems to have had in his career.

Further, aside from covering one's metaphorical ass, one wonders what agenda is served when sports commentators readily admit to the existence of racism, something they do with parrot-like mimicry, on the one hand, then deny its existence virtually every time a specific instance is raised.

Believe it or not, even in "Toronto the Good" Cito could receive more criticism than he

deserves. While comparisons can and ought to be made to assess the existence or degree of differential treatment the Blue Jays manager receives, at best it is difficult for a sports commentator, who is immersed in the occupation that does the criticizing, to objectively examine the practice of those with whom he is inextricably linked, or to accurately assess the practices of colleagues in other media centres. At worst, pundits suggesting that the sports media in Toronto is in relative terms a "soft touch" is simply self-serving and probably wrong.

No one can deny that individuals like Lasorda, LaRussa, and Leyland have had success. But they too have often been

blessed with "can't lose" rosters. LaRussa's Oakland teams, for example, were stacked with big bats and dominating pitching. Some have lost with similar lineups.

The point is, unless the Blue Jays championship teams were the greatest baseball teams ever assembled and possessed a self-existing chemistry that required no managerial intervention, it is misguided to suggest, as some have, that one would have to be an "idiot" to lose with those great rosters.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, Cito has shown us something. Division titles and World Series championships have come from a man who was supposed to be a stop-gap

measure. If the team wins this year, he will be showing the fans and the critics a little bit more. Still, no matter what kind of year the Blue Jays have, hopefully the day will come when

Toronto's media shows him something for doing what good managers do: win games with good players.

Perhaps some respect would be in order.

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