

Canadian Media Missing The "Hoop"

By Kurt Wildman
Guest Columnist

If the selection of a team name and logo, in combination with a gigantic international marketing campaign, is the criteria for readiness in professional basketball, then Toronto and its new franchise, the Raptors, should have no problem "handling the rock" with the best in the game.

Unfortunately for all the bandwagoners, corporate opportunists, and event promoters, basketball preparedness and prowess are not the only positive function of an investment in T-shirts and caps. Success is also dependent on, among other things, the communication and information infrastructure.

Without an informed, open-minded sports media (one knowledgeable of not only the technical aspects of the game but also prepared to deal with the personalities and persons of a sport dominated by African Americans), Canadian coverage and some of the fan support for the Raptors, the World Championships, and the game of basketball will be superficial and soulless.

Despite the hype associated with the Toronto NBA bid, the local sports media labours in its minimal attempt to cover basketball. It's been this way for a long time and Toronto sports' scribes remain behind the curve.

It was not long ago that sports newspaper reporter Frank Orr found it dubious that former Chicago Bull's guard Michael Jordan reigned supreme in popularity with young sports fans.

Even the sober knowledgeable TSN's Dave Hodge missed a journalistic "open jumper" when he highlighted 7'5" Shawn Bradley (Philadelphia 76ers) as a (the?) top prospect in the '94 amateur draft and ignored superior performers like Jamal Mashburn (Dallas Mavericks) and Anfernee Hardaway (Orlando Magic).

In addition, radio and television media (and the print media to a lesser extent) continue to offer a paucity of basketball coverage, particularly if you exclude daily reports on how many more stores are carrying a full line of Raptors' T-shirts south of James Bay. Although the NBA playoffs produced more than footnotes or filler for most broadcasts.

CFRB (whose sports director is convinced that Isaiah Thomas was one of the NBA's great small forwards ??) and CTV's decision to carry U.S. broadcasts of the final series between the New York Knicks and the Houston Rockets may signify a beefed up effort to cover pro hoops. Still, one cannot help but wonder if the games would have found a home on Canadian radio and television if the World Championship of Basketball and the fast cash from its promotion were not coming here later this summer.

Even though the quality and quantity of basic basketball coverage remains a question, an even bigger issue might be the orientation of the local media and mostly White, middle-class, ticket-buying fans' attitude toward the players who eventually don the Raptors' colours.

Undoubtedly, many well paid young, urban Black men

will be wearing Toronto Raptor jerseys in the years to come. Whether they will be regarded as special athletes with skill, intelligence, and grit or as costly chattel slaves or indentured servants (Remember Raghib Ismail?) indirectly owned by season ticket holders, reporters, etc. will become apparent soon enough. It also may depend on how such athletes are portrayed in the interval preceding the Raptors appearance on a basketball court.

Already there may be some harbingers of an adversarial relationship between African American (and eventually African Canadian) basketball players and their critics.

New NBA megastars, like Orlando Magic's Shaquille O'Neal are increasingly being perceived as ball bouncing high jumping beastmanoids, rather than gifted human beings. It might not be that shocking if, by

the Championships this summer, Shaq reaches 1990s caricature status: a Big Black Slambro for the next millennium.

And while the news that future Hall of Famer and former Detroit Piston Isaiah Thomas had been brought on as the Raptors' vice-president of basketball operations (and as a minority owner) was viewed as a positive and significant development, murmurs can be heard in the mainstream media questioning Isaiah's business acumen and managerial ability.

Clearly, some legitimate reservations can be held about any athlete stepping directly from the court to the upper echelons of management. But Isaiah is a Black athlete making that step, which means an inextricable racist subtext to some suggestions that he is incapable.

It was just a few years ago that Al Campanis, former executive with the Los Angeles Dodgers, and Jimmy the Greek, once a CBS prognosticator, resurrected, before the public, latent attitudes in the sports power structure. In the sports' world, the boardroom is regarded as exclusive Caucasian territory because Blacks lack the intellectual "necessities". Arguably, the same attitude is responsible for the consistent, oftentimes mean-spirited criticism of the Blue Jays' Clarence "Cito" Gaston who, unlike Isaiah, is already a proven winner off the playing field.

But even if the Raptors, as expected, do a great deal of losing on the court as b-ball neonates, professional basketball in a broader context can still be a winner in Toronto.

Increased coverage of this great game (including more Canadian high school, college and university reporting) that avoids the dehumanizing, Phillippe "Rushton-esque" ideology of evaluating both the front office performance of those like Thomas and the on-court abilities of the Raptors' players, will make instant champions out of the organization, the Toronto sports media, and the fans.

An accompanying recognition of the individual idiosyncrasies and the sociological milieu from which many African American and Canadian basketball players evolve from will increase the chances of victory in the game of fairness and mutual respect. Particularly when athletes confront reporters, ticket holders, and lounge chair point guards as adversaries.

Without this kind of environment, the Raptors will begin as losers before their first tip-off. Ten million dollars and counting...T-shirts and caps notwithstanding.

