

Reliever is off his Rocker

What a jackass! That is, more or less, what you thought when you first read or heard about the now-infamous John Rocker comments in the Dec. 27 issue of Sports Illustrated, right?

Those disparaging comments with which, if you haven't yet heard, Rocker loudly denounced minorities, immigrants, people with AIDS, women, homosexuals and New Yorkers.

Your initial reaction: Idiot! Jerk! What was he thinking?

But now you're sick of it.

Enough, right?

The reaction to the Atlanta reliever's ignorant, mean-spirited, racist — and they were racist — comments has been overwhelming. Extraordinary. Phenomenal.

Newspapers from Atlanta to Seattle, from Los Angeles to Toronto are still tossing the subject around nearly a month after his words first appeared.

You're probably aware that Bud Selig, major league baseball's commissioner, has ordered Rocker to undergo psychological treatment — and, not surprisingly, that's been a hot topic of debate as well.

An NAACP official called for Atlanta to release Rocker: "Not only are we outraged at the statements attributed to Rocker, but insult is added to injury by the fact that the [Atlanta] organization has allowed this situation to fester for so long without taking swift and decisive action."



Mirjam Swanson

All sorts of legalities have been brought into question. Can the Atlanta organization fire someone solely on the basis of his public statements? And wouldn't that infringe on his First Amendment rights?

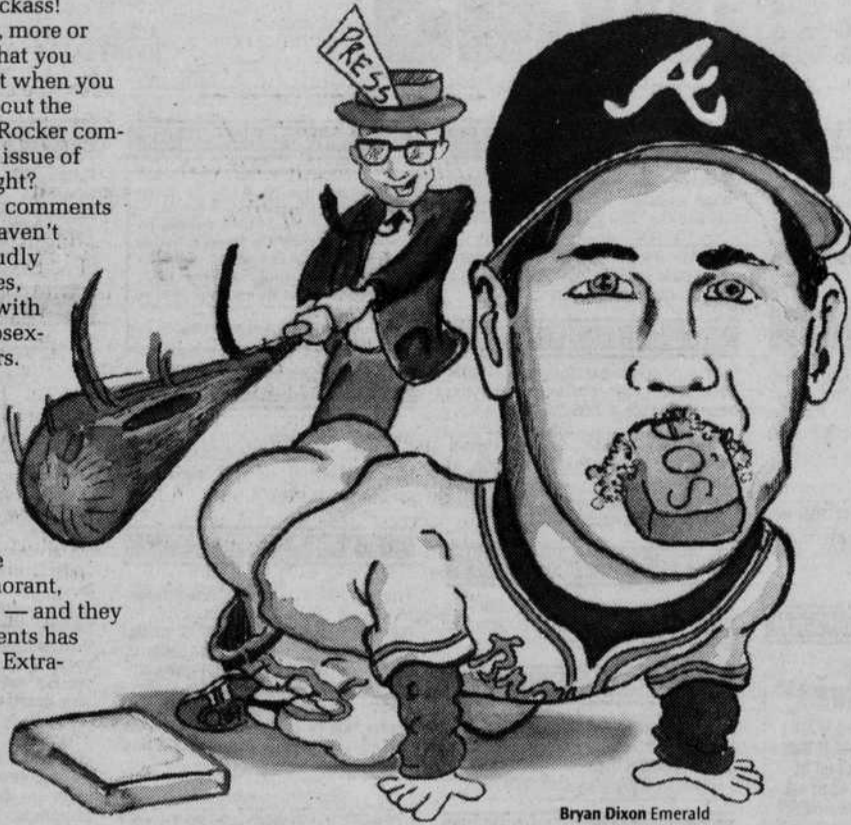
On Tuesday, about 75 people, carrying signs reading "Fire John Rocker" and "Shame on Baseball," gathered in front of CNN's headquarters in protest of the lack of action by the Atlanta organization against Rocker.

Presidential candidates Vice President Al Gore and Sen. Bill Bradley have both called for Atlanta to take action.

His teammates and peers are disgusted. Third baseman Chipper Jones was quoted as saying that he wouldn't want to be in the same county as Rocker: "... in all honesty ... I really fear for his safety at certain points."

Even the band Twisted Sister has asked Atlanta to stop using its song "I Wanna Rock" when Rocker enters the game. Guitarist Jay French: "We've got Hispanics in this band, Italians in this band; people are Polish and Russian. We're all immigrants ... this is our way of saying his comments were not acceptable."

It's been headline material for



Bryan Dixon Emerald

weeks.

But the original backlash has unleashed a new backlash.

People across the nation have had enough of this Rocker hysteria. Stop it already, they're saying. And they're voicing it in print, with letters to editors. Like these:

"Please. Does pro sports now consider anyone who harbors, say, anti-black or anti-gay views, to have a problem?"

"People have been saying hurtful things since time began. Where does the NAACP get off demanding that Rocker be released?"

"Political correctness be damned! I was under the impression that I lived in the United States of America, not the Soviet Union ... I was not aware that 'reeducation and banishment' was the law for speaking one's mind."

"If a person wants to express his or her opinion, no matter how vile, it is their right to do so without fear of punishment. As far as press coverage, this story was overkill of a nonevent."

"At least the man said what most of us think but lack the courage to say. Good for you John."

Frighteningly, this obviously is not just a stop-because-we're-tired-of-hearing-about-it type of thing.

This is a stop-because-it's-not-such-a-big-deal, we're-all-bigots-anyway type of sentiment.

Uhhh, no.

We're not.

Rocker's comments were wrong. Calling a black teammate a "fat monkey" is wrong. Condemning others — homosexuals, young mothers, people from other countries — because they're different than he is wrong. Prejudice, discrimination and racism are wrong.

The decision about whether such ideas — which he certainly has every right to have — justify psychological treatment or the termination of his contract belongs to baseball, and to the Atlanta organization.

But props to the media for blowing this thing out of proportion.

Thank you for making such a spectacle out of this guy's idiocy — something that certainly

wouldn't have happened 25 years ago.

Sure, he has the right to express his beliefs. Just like the media has the right to lay into him for doing it.

The message has been sent, loud and clear, that anyone who comes out blaring prejudice today is gonna get slammed. Big time.

And good.

That's right.

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