

SPORTS/EVENTS

The Locker Room



by Ulysses Tucker Jr.

In having a sense of social responsibility as a Black male/professional role model, I feel obligated to give something back to the community in which I gained so much wisdom, insight, and direction. The Black community.

Not long ago, I was asked to speak at the Portland Opportunities Industrialization Center, a non-profit operation helping young students who failed, for one reason or another, to do the "right thing" in the Public School System. Before a small group, I lectured about my corporate experiences, life in the streets of Washington, D.C., the joy of being a college athlete, and a host of other topics.

In particular, one young man was very rude and disruptive. Several times, I asked him to shut up or leave the room. I demanded my respect and right to speak with those who wanted to listen and learn. Even-

of the positive elements in life. To put it frankly, I introduced him to the gang I "hang" out with at a Trailblazer games as a writer and as a producer for KATU-TV 2.

Talk about role models? I introduced him to "Air" Michael Jordan. "Air" encouraged this young to join an educational gang and do something positive with his life. He met Clyde Drexler, Terry Porter, Byron Irvin, Wayne Cooper, Rick Adelman, and Cliff Robinson left him courtside tickets. He met Blazer VP/Special Events Wally Scales, Oregonian writers Dwight Jaynes and Kerry Eggers. He also met Blazer President Harry Glickman, his son Marshall, PR men John Lashway and John Christensen. All offer constructive advice and their help in the future. What more can a youngster ask for? All the elements dreams are made of were presented to him!



tually, he sat and listened. He had attempted and failed to gain control of the classroom or situation like he had done so many times.

As the class progressed, I learned that the great majority of the students were kicked out of school because of gang related activity; among them, the little sister of "Ray" Winston, and my little disruptive friend, the ring leader. For a moment, I ceased and stepped into their world.

In taking the time to listen, I learned that the gang has replaced the traditional family structure. It offers bonding, nurturing, love, support, comradery, acknowledgement, and protection. All of the every same elements that family use to offer.

When you consider that 43% of the prison population are Black males and that, 63% of Black females head households and how 98% of all Blacks killed last year were by other Blacks, one can understand but not accept the reasons for joining a gang. No one is in the home to direct the children before "mom" is working and "dad," is potentially absent.

At one point, I felt this young man reaching out to me for help and resisting what I said only moments later. Behavior science specialist suggest that these "type" of young youngsters need role models, positive reinforcement, and more importantly, they need to see bright and new environments.

With this in mind, I took it upon myself to make this young "gang leader" my special project and perhaps provide some

His reaction: "Where are these folks going to be when I'm getting jumped on the corner or shot at in the streets..." I then suggested that you eliminate those types of possibilities by eliminating the lifestyle.

His reaction: "I don't want to punk out on my homeboys by going square. I taught them how to bang. How would it look me leaving them..." At that point, I realized that it was not about changing him, it was about showing him that he had other choices besides the streets and gang activities--Did pride hide his joy, excitement, did the positive messages from my "gang" get through, or did he really care? These questions roamed around over and over in my head.

When I dropped him off at his house after the game, I told him a favorite story from my childhood that my grandmother (Carrie B. Tucker) once told me. She would say, "Junior, I can't put nothing in your hand if it is close. It will just keep falling on the floor..."

Perhaps, the young man did pick up more than he indicated. I can only hope that he did. It is with this hope that I can find simple pleasure in life and keep reaching out to help someone. Each one should teach one...

Hey shorty, yo! I'm reaching out again. Don't let it fall to the floor, open your hand...

Ulysses Tucker Jr. did not receive credit for writing the "Air" Michael Jordan story last week. It was omitted in error.



Role Model Responsibility

When a young athlete signs a contract with a professional sports team, the big question is always, "how much will he or she be getting?" While everyone wonders what salary the athlete will make, the other thing that comes with that contract often is ignored. That's the responsibility of being a role model.

Countless professional athletes say, "I don't think of myself as a role model," or "I don't want that responsibility."

I'm sorry, but it's not that easy. Kids have many role models in life, most importantly their parents; but professional sports is such big business today that it seems every kid looks up to the professional athlete. All anyone has to do is take a ride down to a park to see kids wearing the jersey and number of a favorite football, baseball or basketball player. They are wearing that jersey because of their admiration for the person who really wears it and their desire to be like that athlete.

Players have to realize that if they get caught doing something wrong, kids who look up to them will be crushed, or worse, think they should do the same things. Whether they like it or not, society places them on a pedestal. Rather than deny their position, athletes should realize their chance to be good examples and positive forces.

This is not to say that athletes should be treated any differently than the regular public. They are still human, and those who cannot act decently should be knocked off the pedestal. That's why I am at odds with the current NFL drug policy. A football player who gets caught by the league with drugs is given a 30-day suspension for his first offense. That's not dealing with reality. If he were John Q. Public, he'd be thrown in jail for the same offense!

We also have seen the great things professional athletes can do for the community through programs like the NFL's United Way program. But there is still a lot of room for involvement.

What can be done to get more athletes to take their positions as role models more seriously? First, I wish each one would take that ride down to the park and look at the kids who look up to them. Professional sports organizations also might take more time to teach rookies about their role in the community. Teams should lay down ground rules for player conduct. Athletes must realize that making a bundle of money does not give them the right to do anything they feel like doing.

Professional sports teams and their supporters give these players the opportunity to get a great start on life. They in turn should be responsible to their community. The professional athlete who doesn't believe that he or she is a role model might as well not eat or breathe, because it is inherent in what the athlete is doing. **tl**

Gale Sayers is considered one of the greatest running backs of all time. The former Chicago Bear is a member of the National Football League's Hall of Fame.

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