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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Don Imus, Isiah Thomas, and the NBA
NOVEMBER 7, 2007

My, how time flies. It was seven months ago that Don Imus made his remarks about the Rutgers women's basketball team and found himself on the receiving end of a considerable amount of heat from a wide range of critics. In less than a month Don Imus will return to the airwaves, not nationally, but in New York City, and his show will not be simulcast on Cable television. So after being away for eight months, being the subject of considerable criticism, and collecting \$20M for his troubles, the I-Man will return. I am already feeling the Christmas spirit.

As someone who believes in freedom of speech, I can't object to Imus' return to radio. No one has to listen to him, radios have a tuner and an off-switch, and of course around the country it is not an issue because the show will not be available except perhaps on the Internet.

I do have one suggestion for the I-Man as he returns. Make your first guest interview, Isiah Thomas. Imus and Thomas could engage in an interesting discussion of "bitch" and "hoe" and the race appropriate use of such words. And Imus might want to invite Madison Square Garden Chairman James P. Dolan to come along. It would be interesting to hear Don Imus apply his skilled interviewing techniques to the likes of Thomas and Dolan.

Thomas and his employer, Madison Square Garden, recently lost a major lawsuit for sexual harassment. The suit was brought by Anucha Browne Sanders, a former executive at MSG. In winning the lawsuit she was awarded \$11.6M to be paid to her by MSG. Thomas, Stephon Marbury, and Dolan were all named in the suit. In the course of the trial Isiah Thomas admitted that he called Ms. Browne Sanders a bitch, and said that it was more acceptable for a black man to call a black woman a bitch than it would be for a white man to do so. For his part Marbury testified that he had sex with a team intern in a truck following a group outing to a strip club. It is, of course, a well-known principle of management that there is nothing else quite like a visit to a strip club to build organizational unity.

One of the oddities of this case is how little public attention it has received. There was considerable outrage from black women across the country over Thomas' remarks, and Al Sharpton has

been publicly critical of Thomas. What seems most remarkable is the fact that Isiah Thomas is still occupying the position of New York Knicks General Manager, and that David Stern, NBA Commissioner, has taken no action in the matter.

You may recall that Stern has been most concerned over the past two years about such weighty matters as off court dress codes and on-court demeanor of players. The NBA under Stern's leadership has been extremely conscious of the league's "image." But in this matter of sexual harassment the Commissioner seems detached and aloof.

Stern commented on the Knicks operations, saying they are not a "model of intelligent management," but Stern gave no indication that any disciplinary action would follow for Thomas or Dolan. According to the Commissioner the league does not take action as a result of civil suits. "I'm not considering any range of disciplinary action," Stern said. But he did say "my powers are very broad if I choose to exercise them."

So far he has chosen not to exercise those powers. On the other hand he has always been quick to fine Mark Cuban, Dallas Maverick owner, whenever Cuban makes any negative comments concerning referees or the commissioner. Cuban has racked up about \$2M in fines by the league. Stern is quick to punish players for public misconduct, but often slow to act against ownership, except those owners who criticize him. Laker owner, Jerry Buss, was recently put on five years probation for a DUI violation. No action followed by Stern on this matter. Let a player rack up that kind of violation and Stern would be there to discipline him in a heartbeat.

In 2005 Stern instituted a dress code requiring players to wear "business casual" while traveling, when coming and going to the arena, or anytime they are on team or league business. The code detailed proper attire and included a detailed list of prohibited clothing. It is surprising that the Commissioner could be so fastidious in setting and enforcing this code for players, but can find nothing to do about sexual harassment inside the New York Knicks organization. I wouldn't think that in his silence Commissioner Stern is indicating that he agrees with Thomas, or that he condones what Thomas said. It is difficult, however, to think of other ways in which Stern's silence might be interpreted.

The entire affair is ugly, disgusting, baffling, outrageous, and nearly beyond belief. One would think that David Stern should be

fired for his total lack of sensitivity in this matter, but then he is not likely to fire himself.

Perhaps after further review Don Imus ought to make his first interview one with Commissioner Stern. Imus could thank the Commissioner for showing understanding and compassion for those who make idiotic, sexist, and racist statements.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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