

FORUM

CIAA Tournament fever



Nigel Alston

Motivational Moments

"It takes more than good memory to have good memories."

- Chinese fortune cookie message

It's about people, good times and lasting memories. It's about the fans who attended and graduated from CIAA schools, whose parents started a tradition and those who attended white schools and, now converted, participate in the fellowship and events, renewing old friendships and establishing new relationships.

It's about people who just heard about the good times and want to be part of the action. Once they attend, they are hooked. It's some experience. It's the CIAA Tournament.

It's about the scoreboard, which my wife likes, with the big screen that displays pictures of people with bright smiles having good times and the "kiss cam" that zeroes in on one couple after another - to the applause and laughter of the audience - as they recognize their faces high above the action on the floor and kiss each other

for all to see.

I wonder if the late John McLendon knew what he was starting back in 1946, when he pooled a personal loan from Mechanics and Farmers Bank with three other coaches and rented a boxing arena in Washington, D.C., to put on the first CIAA Tournament.

Did he have any idea that the CIAA Tournament would become one of the nation's largest of conferences? Founded in 1912 as the Colored Intercollegiate Athletic Association, the CIAA is the oldest black athletic conference in the nation and this year celebrated 90 years of education, empowerment and excitement.

While the tournament is a week-long opportunity to watch some outstanding young men and women execute a game plan in an attempt to bring home a championship title, it is also about the tradition of networking - seeing old friends and meeting new people. Basketball provides everyone another chance to gather, reminisce and watch Mr. CIAA change one outfit after another. He had 22 combinations this year, ranging from lipstick red to mustard yellow - each complete with matching umbrella, shoes and hat.

"It's the fun, friendship, camaraderie, and all the people just having a good time and eating good food,"

one person recalled. In addition to a fish fry he orchestrated - with his brother, sister and another friend - he cooked a big breakfast one morning that consisted of fried potatoes, grits cooked in chicken broth, bacon, link sausage, pork chops, beef sausage patties and something healthy, fruit. He's a veteran of the tournament, having attended since 1970.

His brother found it difficult to explain what he liked most about attending the tournament. "You know that's hard to explain, to be honest with you," he said, lost in thought for a moment. "Just mingling with the people and having a good time. I enjoy cooking and fixing food for people," he continued. "I really do."

Another fan, who attended her first tournament nine years ago, had the opportunity to meet a few more new people this year and was thrilled to go to the games and see another team win, a team that was not expected to win. "That was really neat," she said with excitement in her voice.

"Nobody is a stranger," she said. "Everybody truly wishes everybody good will." She comes back from the games renewed each year and is looking forward to celebrating her 10th next year.

"I enjoy talking to people and meeting people," said the friend who

exposed her to the tournament. The fellowship, food and seeing everyone getting along and coming together having a good time that impress her. Having played basketball (back in the day), she and her husband (her son and daughter-in-law attended this year too) arrive early in the week to see the women kick off the games.

"Oh no," was the immediate response of another veteran of 12 tournaments, as she answered the phone and my question about what she enjoyed most about her CIAA experience. It's the variety of things to do - like playing games, shopping and being sociable.

Her advice for those who have not attended a CIAA Tournament before: "Please make plans to go. Once you do, you get that fever and you gotta go again. You just can't help yourself."

She had a marvelous time, as we all did. "I just enjoy getting away, relaxing, relating, releasing, meeting friends, fraternizing and just talking about old times," she said.

That just about says it all, for an event that started in a rented boxing arena.

Nigel Alston is a radio talk show host, columnist and motivational speaker. Visit his Web site at www.motivationalmoments.com.

Round two for Louima?



Earl Ofari Hutchinson

Guest Columnist

The instant the three-judge panel of the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals tossed the conviction of three New York City cops accused of beating Haitian immigrant Abner Louima, his attorney and black activists demanded that the Justice Department retry the officers. The court didn't rule out the possibility of another trial for at least one of the officers. But if past Justice Department actions in thorny police abuse cases are any indication, the case may be dead in the water.

Despite the wave of highly questionable police shootings of mostly young blacks and Latinos the past few years, the Justice Department has done almost nothing to nail shoot-first cops. According to a 1998 report on police misconduct by Human Rights Watch, an international public watchdog group, federal prosecutors bring excessive force charges against police officers in less than 1 percent of the cases investigated by the FBI involving allegations of police abuse. The group also found that there was almost no increase in the skimpy number of police misconduct cases prosecuted by the Justice Department during the Clinton years.

There was a glimmer of hope this might change when President Bush and Attorney General John Ashcroft publicly pledged to take a hard and long look at racial profiling and police misconduct. After three days of rioting in Cincinnati last April triggered by the slaying of 19-year-old unarmed Timothy Thomas by white Cincinnati police officer Stephen Roach during a traffic pursuit, Ashcroft announced a full Justice Department probe into police violence in that city.

Months later there has been no word what, if any, action the Justice Department will take. When a Cincinnati judge summarily acquitted Roach of criminal charges in the Thomas slaying last September, the Justice Depart-



Hundreds march across the Brooklyn Bridge in 1997 to protest Abner Louima's beating.

ment gave no sign that it would even consider filing civil rights charges in the case. And since his initial vow to do something about police misconduct, Bush has been mute about the need for more aggressive federal prosecutions to crack down on police violence.

To better aid law enforcement agencies and federal prosecutors track patterns of abuse, the Violent Crime and Control Act of 1994 authorized the Justice Department to collect data on the frequency and types of police abuse complaints. The Justice Department still has not issued a comprehensive report on the level of police misconduct in America.

The Justice Department has long had on the books a strong arsenal of civil rights statutes to prosecute abusive police officers. Yet more often than not it has taken major media attention, large-scale protests, and even a major riot, such as the L.A. riots in 1992 after the Rodney King verdict, before the Justice Department used its legal weapons. It was only because of the intense media focus on the police killings of Tyisha Miller in Riverside, Calif., in 1998 and Amadou Diallo in New York City in 1999, and the threat of mass street demonstrations against police abuse, that then-President Clinton spoke out

against police violence in the waning days of his administration. But federal prosecutors say they can't nail more cops involved in dubious shootings because they are hamstrung by the lack of funds and staff, victims who are perceived as criminals, the lack of credible witnesses, and the public's inclination to always believe police testimony. Federal prosecutors also claim they are pinned in by the almost impossible requirement that they prove an officer had the specific intent to kill or injure a victim in order to get a conviction.

These are tough obstacles to overcome, and, because the Justice Department is in the business of winning cases, many prosecutors are more than happy to take a hands-off attitude toward police misconduct cases.

Still, this is no excuse for federal prosecutors not to at least make the effort to prosecute more officers when there is substantial evidence that they used excessive force. This is the legally and morally right thing to do.

And it sends a powerful message to law enforcement agencies that the federal government will go after lawbreakers no matter whether they wear masks or badges.

The prosecution in the

Louima case was a near textbook example of the effect even a failed, or compromised, prosecution can have on police conduct. The conviction, and the 30-year sentence of officer John-Volpe, the main perpetrator of the violence against Louima, still stands. This sent a strong message that unrestrained acts by violence-prone cops won't be tolerated.

This puts police and city officials on notice that they must take stronger actions to halt the use of excessive force in their departments.

The reluctance of federal prosecutors to go after cops who overuse deadly force and commit abusive acts perpetuates the dangerous cycle of racial confrontation and deepens the distrust and cynicism of blacks and Latinos toward the criminal justice system. The feds did the right thing in prosecuting the officers who assaulted Louima; now that a court undid their effort, let's see if they'll go for a round two in the case.

Earl Ofari Hutchinson is an author and columnist. Visit his news and opinion Web site: www.thehutchinsonreport.com. He is the author of "The Crisis in Black and Black" (Middle Passage Press).

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