

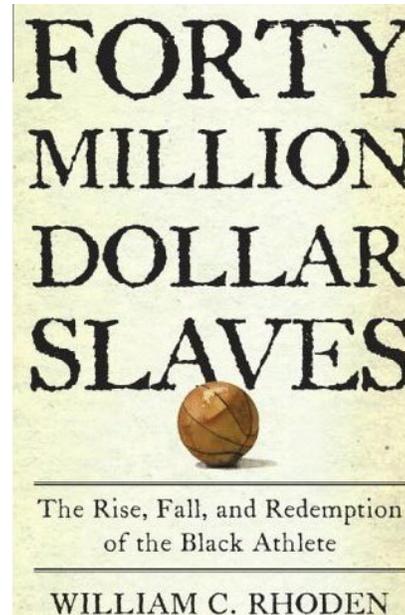
William Rhoden

Born and raised on Chicago's South Side, William Rhoden journeyed to Baltimore to play college football at Morgan State. After stints as an editor at *Ebony* and as a columnist and jazz critic with the *Baltimore Sun*, Rhoden joined the *New York Times* in 1981. He began to write about sports for *The Times* in 1983, and he has been a sports columnist there for more than a decade.

For HBO, Rhoden won a Peabody Award for Broadcasting as the writer of the documentary "Journey of the African-American Athlete." For ESPN, he serves as a consultant for the "SportsCentury" series and appears occasionally as a guest on "The Sports Reporters."

In April of 1997, Rhoden started working on a book he tentatively called "Lost Tribe Wandering." Nine years later, the book has been published with a new title: "Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete" (Crown). In the book, Rhoden critiques the multi-billion dollar sports industry and argues that, despite the unprecedented celebrity status and the mega-salaries and endorsement deals that contemporary African-American athletes receive, "Today, perhaps more than at any other juncture of their long, rich journey, black athletes are lost."

In his book review in the *Washington Post*, David Leonard, an assistant professor of comparative ethnic studies at Washington State University, wrote that Rhoden "rightly challenges the conventional American notion



of sports as a model of integration and meritocracy, where talent and athleticism trump bigotry. . . . Through each historic step, forward and back, Rhoden argues that black athletes, like blacks in general, have always been ‘largely feared and despised, relegated to the ‘periphery of true power’ despite their talents and contributions to sporting life in America.”

Part memoir, part historical narrative and part polemic, “Forty Million Dollar Slaves” is controversial and provocative. Just what Rhoden intended.

— David Davis

SportsLetter spoke with Rhoden via phone from his apartment in Harlem.

SportsLetter: You write that today’s black athletes are “lost.” How did contemporary black athletes lose their way?

William Rhoden: I just think it was circumstance. Going back in time, in the ‘50s, the ‘40s, the ‘30s, the ‘20s — the situation with African-Americans in this country was quantifiably drastic. There was no Voting Rights Act. There was open brutality. The racism was so open and so raw that everybody — whether you were an athlete or an entertainer or a teacher — was in the same boat. It didn’t matter how much money you made or your educational level. White society generally treated all black people the same. So, I think there was a great mission among African-Americans — including athletes, teachers, journalists — because everybody was locked out. And that defined our mission.

Beginning with integration, our community began to splinter. A certain few got opportunities, which led to greater educational opportunities and more money, and you began to see a division. And that’s where I think the mission was lost because you had a significant number of people who, in their minds, had reached the promised land, with great salaries, great jobs. For athletes, it meant going from Jackie Robinson being the only one to, all of a sudden, the NBA now being 80 percent black and colleges in the South that used to not recruit you and have quotas now being overwhelmingly black.

I think what that did is obscure the focus of the mission — there was no national mission. And, I think athletes are the metaphor for that because I think a couple of generations later, they have separated from the history. They say, “What struggle? How can I be struggling with \$40 million contracts?”

For the majority, the sense of mission has been obscured, and no leader has emerged — like a [Muhammad] Ali or a Jim Brown — to say, “Listen, this is 2006. This is what we need to do today.”

SL: Black jockeys dominated horse racing in the late 19th Century, but then after the white establishment changed the rules these jockeys disappeared. Do you foresee what you describe as “the jockey syndrome” happening in today’s NBA or the NFL?

WR: Yeah, well, that’s why I wrote it. In the NBA, it’s what I call the process of globalization, where you begin to dilute the black presence by bringing in more and more foreign athletes and gradually replacing all but the very, very best black athletes. The way it used to be in the ‘50s — you’d have maybe four blacks on a college team, but they’d all be starting. The entire bench would be white because blacks weren’t going to be role players. It might be a goal for some in the NBA to actually have a league that’s 50-50 — fifty percent black and 50 percent other.

I think that’s why people were so suspicious of all of the propositions — like Prop. 48 and Prop. 42 — all those things that made it difficult for a lot of black athletes to qualify [for school]. You raise the standards and raise the standards and make it more difficult to meet the criteria. That flows into educational opportunities: all school systems are not created equally.

I think that where there’s a will there’s a way. If you want to make it so that the starting team at Georgia, on offense and defense, is not 90 percent black, you can gradually do that by attacking the high-school system and having the recruitment pool change. It’s just a longer process than basketball and baseball.

SL: What lessons do you take from the demise of the Negro Leagues and the integration of Major League Baseball?

WR: First, it's important for any group of people to define their own path, their own mission. You can't have things defined for you. We were so eager to be "integrated" that we didn't think about what integration might mean for black businesses and institutions. The lesson is that you need strong institutions to provide jobs for your people and to provide opportunity.

You know, there's been a historic relationship in our country between the people we call whites and those we call blacks. It's been a relationship that's been very difficult — there's been progress — but it's still one group dominating and another group being dominated. So, you need your own institutions. You can't rely on someone who's been dominating you to provide you with the education — the tools, the weapons — that you need to shake free of that domination.

I never realized how deeply entrenched racism was in the fabric of our nation. I just didn't realize it. What that means is, your group has to begin to define its own path.

SL: You write that Rube Foster is, in some ways, "an even more significant figure than [Jackie] Robinson," and yet most baseball fans have never heard of Foster. Why was he so significant?

WR: Rube was a visionary. He created a league, and it wasn't just a league for black ballplayers. There were black executives, owners, journalists, umpires, advertisers in newspapers — it was a whole eco-structure. His vision was to be self-sufficient, self-sustaining, with the idea that, one day, when integration came, we would be able to integrate not just one player but maybe a team or a franchise. And, if that happened, then maybe today there would be much more of an integration at all levels of baseball, in the executive and ownership and management levels.

Rube was important because he was important to black culture in an economic and business way. Jackie Robinson was important in a symbolic way, in an integrative way, but also in a way that would greatly empower the white infrastructure of Major League Baseball.

SL: Branch Rickey is perceived as the chief integrator of baseball, but

you describe him as “a barracuda.” What could African-American owners and players have done at that point to retain some power when the Major Leagues integrated?

WR: In an ideal world, Jackie Robinson could have said, “I appreciate it, Mr. Rickey, but that’s going to kill our league.” There’s a quote from [journalist] Wendell Smith that I use as an epigram at the beginning of one of the chapters, where he wrote, “Organized Negro baseball is a million-dollar business. To kill it would be criminal, and that’s just what the entry of their players into the American and National Leagues would do.”

So, maybe the owners could have gotten together and used the court of law to fight the Majors. But they were split: some of the owners wanted to sell some players, others didn’t. In retrospect, they probably had no choice because Major League Baseball was going to crush them. But maybe they could have had more unity, been more resolute in sticking together.

SL: There’s been a lot written about how black baseball players now make up only about nine percent of Major League Baseball. Do you think that trend can be reversed?

WR: It could be if Major League Baseball really wanted to pour money to fund great little leagues in economically challenged neighborhoods. They’ve tried to do something like that in Compton, with the Baseball Academy. And if they get, like, 80 baseball institutes, all over the country, a lot of players probably would go to them because in baseball you see the money quicker, right out of high school.

SL: You write about your experience playing football at Morgan State College. How has integration affected the sports programs at predominantly black colleges?

WR: That led to a simple weakening of the talent pool, and that weakened their ability to attract all the great players. The people who would go to Grambling now go to LSU or Southern Louisiana. And, that weakened the number of people you see going to the NFL. And, I think the same thing has probably happened with students — a number of students are going to other places — but the schools aren’t as keen on the students

as they are on the athletes.

SL: You write that, under the guise of integration, the white owners and coaches who control sports' power structure "exploit black muscle and talent." Why hasn't integration delivered true equality? What must change for that to happen?

WR: I don't know if integration ever was designed to do that. I think it was designed to take the best and enrich the power structure. I think the attitude was, "Don't worry — they're not going to ever have power. We're just going to use the muscle. They're not going to become coaches at Alabama or athletic directors or head coaches. They're going to be doing the same things they've been doing on the plantation. They were tilling the land and bailing the hay, and they never participated in the economic fruits of their work and they're not going to do that here either." So, I don't know if sharing was ever part of the equation.

Athletes — and all African-Americans in the sports industry — must use their presence for leverage. You can't ask. You have to demand it. You've got some leverage. You're the people that journalists want to do stories about and interviews and documentaries and that advertising firms want to use. So, we need to have some black people doing this. I think this has to be very cohesive and unified and aggressive and militant.

SL: The generation of black athletes from the 1960s — people like Jim Brown, Muhammad Ali, Bill Russell, Curt Flood — were not afraid to speak out about sports and other social issues. Why are today's athletes so apolitical?

WR: I was just on a panel with [Washington Wizards center] Etan Thomas, and he's not apolitical at all. I think a lot of guys are not. It's just that the guys you hear about are. And, I actually don't think that they're apolitical. I don't really think [Michael] Jordan is apolitical. I think that, during his career, he chose a stance of neutrality because I think he felt that was a way to increase his market share.

Also, with Jim Brown and those guys in the 1960s, I don't know how big a part agents and lawyers played in their lives. Today, you've got a lot

of people around the players telling them, “Well, that’s not good for your image. That’s not a good thing to do. Just don’t rock the boat.” I think you have much more of that than you ever did.

SL: Jordan is generally perceived as the prime example of the icon who deliberately eschewed controversy. How does that affect his legacy?

WR: I live in Harlem, and there’s a guy named Jonathan who stopped me to talk a few weeks ago. And, he was upset because he’s a Jordan lover. He said, “Mr. Rhoden, why isn’t anybody talking about Michael Jordan anymore? You know, they’re talking about LeBron and this player and that player. Why aren’t they talking about Jordan?”

I thought about the question. You look at a guy like Jackie Robinson. He died in 1972 and played his last baseball game in ‘56, right before Brooklyn moved. But we’re still talking about him. Muhammad Ali fought his last [championship] fight against Larry Holmes in ‘80. Yet we’re still talking about him. So, why is that we’re talking about some people and some people we don’t really talk about them anymore?

I think that speaks to legacy because what [Robinson and Ali] did was so far out of sports. It was for principle, it was for standing up and making a stand. The ironic thing is, had Jordan taken stands and taken heat, he would’ve gained respect. People respect that, particularly in this country, which was formed on revolution. People respect the rebel, they respect the person who is little bit of a renegade. So, I think his legacy will be [seen as] great ballplayer, one in a series.

SL: Most of the book concentrates on male athletes, but you also cover women’s sports through the story of Delta State basketball star Lusia Harris. What unique challenges do black women athletes face?

WR: To me, they’ve got a steeper mountain to climb than anybody. And what’s disappointing to me, in terms of the feminist movement, is how the movement has adapted some of the same racial and racist patterns as their male counterparts. If you look at Title IX, black women have been largely left behind. Title IX has basically benefited white women. If you look at the hierarchy in women’s athletics, in college and the WNBA, it’s

the same power structure as the men's: it's white people. And, I thought that was a disappointment. I thought women would be in a position to create a new model, a new paradigm. Black women just have a double dose because black men ignore them and white women marginalize them.

I think Lucy Harris is a good example of this. The WNBA should make sure that this woman is taken care of, that everybody knows who she is. A statue should be built for this woman. You know, she's got medical problems and she's struggling, and she shouldn't have to.

SL: Does Robert Johnson and his ownership of the Charlotte Bobcats symbolize progress for blacks in sports?

WR: At the very least it symbolizes progress. We hope there's more than that. What shapes that takes we don't know yet.

If somebody told you in 1910 that, by 2006, there was going to be a black NBA ownership, you'd be saying, "Wow, that's progress." But we would have said the same thing about BET [Black Entertainment Television, the network that Johnson formed and later sold]: "Wow, there's going to be this great black TV network." But then you find out that the TV network stopped doing the right things for the community and started feeding into the worst, most vile stereotypes, with the booty-shaking and all that.

So, you hope that he doesn't turn the Bobcats into something like that. My hope is that it means something for him to own this team, whatever unique things can be done.

SL: What steps do you suggest black athletes take to free themselves from the system?

WR: I think they should form their own association. Right now, pro athletes belong to unions and players' associations. But unions aren't really set up to do a wide breadth of things. I think they need to form an organized association outside the union so they can meet together and have conventions, with panels and workshops. So, I think that's one of the first steps — to organize this power that they've got.

What they should do is work together, pool resources, pool foundation money. There's a community out there in desperate need. They can get together and build a bank, build schools. If they know a player who does have a school, rally around that and take it to the next level. They need to use their clout.

In the 1960s, we had to be in the street yelling, "Black Power, Black Power!" We had to say it because we didn't have any money. Well, these guys don't have to be in the street yelling, "Black Power." They can just do it, very silently and very powerfully. But they can only do it in numbers.