SAM LACY: Sportswriter

Don't Call Me The 'Dean!'

Although Sam Lacy has been writing sports for the AFRO-AMERICAN Newspaper chain since 1944, he refuses to be called the "dean' of black sportswriters. Says Sam: "That merely means the oldest."

By Ralph Mason

Occasionally, we get a chance to sit with a celebrity and query him at length, which is precisely what was done in the case of Sam Lacy, who has been writing sports for 40 years.

Dawn—You have been in sports for about 40 years, how long are you going to continue, and do you get bored with it all?

Sam—No, no way—I would get bored if I gave it up. I started working at the *Afro American Newspapers* in 1944, and before that I was with the Washington Tribune, then I went out to Chicago.

Dawn—Were you a part of the *Defender* chain?

Sam—No, I went to the *Defender* eventually. I went out there as the first black correspondent at the *Chicago Sun*, and did a field series for them.

Then, when the *Defender* wanted somebody, I went to see Lucious Harper. I told him I would like a bit more stability, that I was tired of running all over the place.

So, Lucious said yes, we'll be glad as hell to have you, so I went with them for about three years.

Dawn—So how did you get to the Afro-American newspaper chain?

Sam—My home is Washington, D.C., and one day I went to Washington to spend the Christmas holidays, and dropped into the Afro office. Carl Murphy (then publisher of the Afro) was there, and inquired why I was in town.

Laughingly, I said I was looking for a job. He said: "come in here and let's have a talk." We went into a little room, and he asked: "you're serious?"

I had to admit, "No, really I have a job, and I'm pretty satisfied except every time I want to see my parents, I have to take the whole week-end off and spend a lot of money to come down here.

Dawn—What were you making at that time?

Sam—$50.00.

Dawn—Month or week?

Sam—A week, this was in 1944, and Murphy said that we might be able to work this out, that we would settle on $55 a week. I said that sounds good to me, so I came back making $30 a week more than when I left.

Dawn—What are the circumstances surrounding your becoming the first black in the Baseball Writers' Association.

Sam—Ken Smith of the *New York Mirror*, and *Joe King* of the Herald American were the two who sponsored my membership in the BBWA.

D—How did you get to know them?

S—Well, I was travelling with the Brooklyn Dodgers, and Joe was the president of the National Baseball Writers' Association. After my name was proposed, there was a discussion over whether or not I qualified.

To be a member of the BBWA, you must work for a daily paper. I qualified by reason of that the *Afro-American* had equivalent to a daily paper because it had a paper printed daily for various cities.

D—Did you ever get to serve as an official scorer?

S—No, because I was not travelling with a major league team. At that time, the Orioles were not a major league team and I was working out of Baltimore.

The major league team in the area then was the Washington Senators.

D—As the first black member of the BBWA, did you run into problems? What about when they played in the South?

S—When I travelled to Cincinnati where Tom Swope was president of the local baseball writers chapter, he barred me from the press box, but gave me an entire field box to work from.

When I was travelling with the clubs in spring training, we got to such places as Beaumont, San Antonio and Houston, Tex., Mobile, Ala., Tampa Fla., and all of the southern towns, and the local jurisdictions would not allow me to go into the press box.

But the president of the Dodgers, Branch Rickey, obtained special dispensation for me to work from the dugout, which is probably the first and only time that has ever happened. Anything to keep me out of the press box.

Beginning in 1949, there were no problems at all, I was admitted into press boxes every place.

D—Now what about on the football side?

S—No problems there whatsoever, because I didn't get involved with football until Baltimore got a franchise in 1953.

D—Let me get some opinions. You covered most of Joe Louis' fights, and all the following boxing heavyweight champions including Muhammad Ali. Who, in your estimation, was the greatest champion?

S—Joe Louis.

D—Why?

S—Because he could do everything. He wasn't a fancy dan like Ali. Once I did a story for another magazine about a year ago, and I rated them: Joe Louis, Rocky Marciano and Muhammad Ali, in that order.

Jersey Joe Walcott I think I placed fourth. Joe Louis was first because he could do everything. He could stalk an opponent, he could punch, he could box, and he was fast. It was all business when he was in the ring.

He fought everybody who was available. There was no such thing as saying, well he's got to make a name for himself before I fight him. As a matter of fact, they accused Joe of fighting a bum a month at one time.

Marciano was picked above Ali mainly because of his punch, and because he got better with every fight. At first he was just a fighter, a brawler, and he progressed to become a boxer and a puncher.

Sam poses with two of the all-time sports greats in 1948. At (L), Joe Louis, heavyweight boxing champ, at (R), Jackie Robinson of the Brooklyn Dodgers.

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—Something Better

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you can't chart.

"And the way a person does that is what distinguishes him from another artist. This is why the Rev. James Cleveland is so well-known because there is something in his voice that just reaches out to you.

"He puts it like nobody else can put it, and you find yourself saying, 'that's right,' and you identify with the music and the singing."

A New Era

Gospel music has moved on into a new era, as you can hear with groups such as the Hawkins Singers, or Andrae Crouch. They are now taking advantage of superior recording techniques, with full instrumentation, and it is giving gospel a more modern, contemporary type of sound.

Rev. Nicks feels that there is a market for all types of gospel music.

There are those who still really enjoy the basic gospel sound, then there are those who want the more refined, contemporary sound — but whatever, there is a public for all of it.

—Young People

(Continued from Page 7)

She's right, agree Louise Williams and Mary Mason, two local popular radio personalities, who broadcast Sunday gospel music.

Although crowd attendance at gospel concerts aren't analyzed, gospel music scene watchers, such as Ms. Williams and Ms. Mason, contend that they too have noticed that gospel concert audiences are "getting younger."

"Gospel music has been reaching out and crossing over into the younger generation more so than in previous years," says Ms. Williams, who, besides playing rock and disco music weekdays at WDAS-AM, also for the past 17 years has been spinning gospel music Sunday mornings at the station.

Overall, she's been a fixture on the gospel scene for 21 years.

Said Ms. Mason: "More and more young people are coming into gospel music by joining interdenominational church choirs. Some may not belong to a church, but it provides all of them with a needed social life."

Most of the 33 Philadelphia high schools now boast gospel choirs, says Ms. Mason.

On the Philadelphia gospel

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