

# Closing

## *Solutions Start at Home*

While America was consumed by gluttony, Reaganomics, and a pair of cable TV start-ups called ESPN and MTV that would soon change the culture, another phenomenon was developing in the 1980s. Three men who had never met were about to make their mark on society just by doing what fathers do.

One of the men was purely fictional, although Heathcliff Huxtable appeared almost lifelike to a record number of devoted watchers of *The Cosby Show*, the highest-rated sitcom of the decade. The others were Earl Woods and Richard Williams, a pair of Southern California dads who would meet with Huxtable-like comparison soon enough. These three men had their own distinct personalities, occupations, and outlooks, and even their family situations were diverse: The Huxtables were New York upper-middle-class, the Woodses were typical Orange County suburbanites, and the Williams family lived on the rough edges of Los Angeles.

Most important, though, is what the men did share. They were black fathers living with their young kids and were devoted to raising them properly.

In each instance, the impact was considerable. Bill Cosby's TV character awakened America to the realization that, surprise, there are black families headed by highly educated parents with professional jobs. Earl Woods stuck a toy golf club in the crib of his infant son Eldrick and laid the foundation that created a golf legend. Richard Williams hustled home from work every day and hit tennis balls with his two youngest daughters until Venus and Serena grew up and changed the sport. Certainly in the case of the real-life dads, the sports world would now be a lot poorer had Woods and Williams fallen victim to a destructive trend in black America and become

disinterested or absentee fathers. Those who really benefited, though, were Tiger Woods and the Williams sisters, who are a lot richer today for having dads in their lives—and not just richer financially.

Any examination of the state of blacks in sports, or blacks in general, starts with the father. Many of the problems currently faced by black athletes, along with solutions for those problems, can be attached to him. When he is involved in the lives of his children, the result will be mostly positive. When he is a ghost who fades in and out of the lives of his children, the result is mostly negative. We can list all the evils of black society and rail against drugs, unemployment, and racism until our vocal chords snap. But the most critical issue by far is the health of the black family, which depends heavily on the father and whether he handles his business.

Too often, he doesn't handle his business in poor black America, from where we get most of our black athletes, where too many fathers are jackasses who flee once they become fathers with the swiftness of LaDainian Tomlinson in the open field. And then, when their sons are ready to hit the sports jackpot, they magically reappear with ready-made excuses for their failures as fathers. Usually, the deadbeat will blame it on society, or the white man, or the inability to keep a job, all legit excuses to a degree. But the real reason is he was simply unwilling to spend his time with one woman or work out any problems they may have had. He was unprepared to be a father in the first place, and when he became one, he turned coward and looked for the easy way out instead of owning up and manning up to his responsibilities.

The number of black athletes raised primarily by their mothers (or grandmothers, in some extreme cases) is staggering and sickening. It's beyond the crisis stage, beyond tragedy. It's officially a plague that society has grown to accept, ever so ignorantly. Roughly 55 percent of black kids in this country grow up fatherless. There aren't any hard statistics to tell us how this situation cripples

black athletes specifically. But in a sense, numbers aren't necessary. We see the problem clearly reflected in a variety of ways among some, though not all, athletes. We see it in behavior. We see it in the athletes who think they're men but have no idea how to be a man. We see it in how they treat women. We see it in the males who become fathers before they turn 20, and when that happens, we see them becoming part-time dads themselves. We see it in a vicious cycle that keeps spinning and chewing up one generation after another, spitting out more potential misguided souls who do nothing to improve the image of black society.

We see it in the black athletes who lean on their coaches, especially on the high school and college levels, to be "father figures" because their own father is a rumor who lives strictly in their imagination. While a number of men have done incredible jobs as fill-in replacements, Uncle Bob is just that, an uncle. Coach John Doe is nothing more than a paid teacher who's with a kid a few hours a day at practice after school. Although their intentions are good, these men aren't waking up in the same house or helping with homework or expressing love to the mother, all things kids need to see, feel, and experience from real fathers. Kids aren't stupid. They know the difference. They see the bond enjoyed by their more fortunate friends who do have involved fathers, and they know they're missing out because that bond can be made possible only by one man.

Let's make one thing clear. There's no question that a black kid is better off without a natural father if that natural father is a worthless bum. Shaquille O'Neal perfectly captured his situation in a raw and angry ode titled "Biological Didn't Bother," a rap song written from the (broken) heart, and it became an appropriate anthem for those like him in modern-day sports who could relate. Biological doesn't play catch with his young boy, and the result is that blacks are no longer falling in love with baseball. Biological isn't taking his son back and forth to

practice. Biological isn't teaching his boy how to act after scoring a touchdown or dunking on someone's head. Biological isn't around when the flesh-peddling agents come knocking at the front door to buy naïve boys in what has become a shady slave trade. Biological isn't keeping his kid from playing ball when the grades suffer. Biological isn't helping the kid decide which college to attend and what to look for. Biological often does show up eventually, however . . . when the first paycheck arrives. Lucky for him and us, Phil Harrison stepped in, as many stepfathers often do, and provided Shaq the necessary guidance for success. Shaq also became a doting father himself and did not repeat the sins of his biological father.

This is a good opportunity to salute the real heroes in these situations: black women. For much too long, she's had to deal with discrimination, abandonment, and mistreatment from men of all races. In the cases of single-parent households, she somehow manages to keep her sanity and her family together, as best as possible, given the challenging circumstances. She must wear so many hats in order to give her children the best chance for survival and prosperity. We all know the story of Mary Thomas and how she was the toughest human being in the Chicago neighborhood where her son, Isiah, grew up to become a Hall of Fame point guard. She shooed all of the negative influences away from her son so he could realize his dream. Fact is, there are many mothers like Mary Thomas in the black community, only they don't get the publicity and honor they deserve, except from their children, who remain eternally grateful. Still, in a perfect world, single mothers would have help, in the form of the fathers of their children.

Yes, in that ideal world, the number of responsible black fathers would soar. He would love his woman, demonstrate a work ethic, provide for the family, and teach his boy what it takes to be a man. Decades ago, this was the case more often than not. Decades ago, you saw legions of men take fatherhood very seriously. He was

very much a part of the family, even in poor communities, and his touch and guidance helped a good number of black athletes lead productive and professional lives both during and after their playing careers. Those athletes carried themselves with dignity during a racist era, paving the way for black athletes of today, who enjoy a much higher standard of living and fame.

But society changed. Morals changed. Lifestyles changed. Mindsets changed. Some black mothers stopped forcing the fathers of their children to meet their responsibilities. They began to accept the father's absence and take it on themselves to raise their children alone, without seeing this as a problem. And because they were no longer being held to a high standard, black fathers accepted their part-time status, too. This only increased the chances of their children developing behavior problems, flunking out of school, having children out of wedlock, and flooding into mainstream America without the social or educational skills needed to flourish.

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