## ALUMNI

## Ralph Wiley: Prime timing for Sports Illustrated

In the world of journalism, blacks aren't very plentiful. When it comes to blacks in sports journalism, the numbers are further reduced, especially on publications at the major league level - Sports Illustrated, Inside Sports, Sports, and The Sporting

Meet Ralph Wiley, a Knoxville College alumnus, who is a senior staff writer for Sports Illustrated. After nearly six -and-ahalf years, he is still the only black staff writer on the magazine. The proverbial fly in a bowl of milk. "It's almost just a bowl of milk," Wiley quips. "The job is everything I thought it would be. I was very comfortable with being a columnist for the Oakland Tribune, so when I came to SI, it was a question of me accepting the challenge and I did."

In college, Wiley majored in business management, was a football wide receiver, and doubled as a sports columnist for The Knoxville Spectrum, a weekly paper that eventually bit the dust. He chuckles a bit in reliving those days, well aware that his writing skills weren't as well honed then as they are now. "It was a very bad column," he con-

Wiley landed with Sports Illustrated in 1982 after six years in Oakland, Calif. with the Tribune. The last two years were spent as a sports columnist which gave him ample opportunities to cover most of the nation's premier sporting events, including Super Bowls and world championship fights.

He developed a penchant for picking NFL winners as early as 1980, correctly predicting during the pre-season that the Raiders would win the Super Bowl that year. The following August he chose the 49ers and the team followed the script as if he had written it himself. To make his gazes into the crystal ball complete, he accurately forecasted the margins of victory in both games.

Wiley's Oakland days molded him into the insightful, probing writer he has now become. It was Bob Maynard, the Tribune's publisher, that gave Wiley "the chance to fail" as a sports columnist. But in Wiley's mind, fail is an obsolete term, foreign to his way of thinking. "I was never satisfied to just be talented," he says. "I'm always looking to keep improving."

During his tenure at SI, Wiley has penned over 150 by-lined articles, several of them, cover stories. But when he first arrived at the magazine, it became clear that his counterparts had already determined that his capabilcoming from Oakland, a sizeable city sure enough, but certainly not as prestigious as its across- the-bay neighbor, San Francisco, or the media haven of the West Coast, Los Angeles. Evidently, they didn't feel he could handle the pressures of the Big Apple, the fooled them. nation's media mecca, and home of the mag-



photo courtesy of HIP Inc.

months) to open the eyes of editors and other

writers. It was November 1982. Ray "Boom

ities were limited. After all, here was a guy Wiley gets a photographer's attention as he chats with Cincinnati's Eric Davis during last year's major league All-Star baseball game.

> Those notions never bothered Wiley. "If you can play, you can play," he says, using a sports analogy to describe that situation. "They may have hired me as a token, but I

"The black college experience helped me

a great deal when I first joined the magazine. I knew who I was. I had no false illusions. knew that even if I had earned a degree from Harvard, it wouldn't make me an equal in the eyes of my cohorts."

Boom" Mancini successfully defended his WBA lightweight boxing title against Duk-Koo Kim, an anvil-tough Korean. The two It didn't take Wiley very long (about six combatants pummeled each other for 14

rable, but for all the wrong reasons. Mancini counterparts. The rap that sports writers have opportunities that may arise. This is espewon on a TKO, but days later, Kim died of

formed itself into a major story that broke as soon as the Korean was rushed to the hospital right after the fight ended. Wiley, strangely enough, was the only SI writer covering that fight. There was a lot to do and not a lot of time to do it. But 12 hours later, the magazine had a moving, accurate, detailed account of what took place at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas that weekend. In a day, Wiley had quieted the silent non-

> "After that fight," he remembers, "people perceived me differently. I could see it in their eyes. That

story didn't win a Pulitzer Prize, but

It's quite likely that Wiley's skillful use of words started even before he was born. His mother was an English professor at Owens Junior College in Memphis, Tenn. "So even as a fetus, I was exposed to lectures and words," Wiley jokes. But on a serious note, he acknowledges that he had a solid, well rounded, educational background. He was always exposed to a wide variety of literary works. "During my childhood, in any bed I slept in, I could literally reach out into a bookcase for a book. From Homer to Thurber, I had them all at my beckon call."

In journalistic circles, sports writers aren't viewed as serious either watch or participate because Sugar Ray Robinson. it's entertaining. Wiley, however,

sees things differently. The gifted sports jealous." writer, he points out, has a lot of creativity those in the sports departments. Sports lends itself more to descriptive writing, Wiley continues, and to be good at it, one must be able good. So it's very important to keep your to paint pictures with words. Sports writers have more flexibility for expression than

their news, business, and medical reporting gotten as being lesser journalists, he adds, cially true for those who feel it's worth their "usually come from other journalists who are time to wait for the moment that will get

some stick-to-it-tiveness to be prepared for those who aspire to break through the barri-

ers. The process isn't necessarily an easy one, and for most, results aren't produced at the blink of an eyelash. For those aspirants

Wiley offers these

Make a firm which media you want to work in. If you desire writing, then write. If you choose to go into television as an oncamera person, then develop the kind of persona you'll need. There is one warntake some time,

you think you want to do presently. Don't limit yourself to one area. That's a horrible mistake. | Have some career options within your career choice."

Wiley isn't one to

put all of his marbles in one sack. Magazine writing isn't his sole vocation. He regularly appears as a panelist and commentator on the Budweiser Sports Report, a weekly show which is aired on Black Entertainment Television. Additionally, he has several other projects in the works, including a soon to be published book -Serenity: A Boxing Memoir: There's also a documentary, The Other Side Of Victory,: and a collection of essays (32 in all, and only five of those center around athletics). He's eager to start work on scripting a three or four act play in the near future.

Being an on-camera personality isn't really his calling, Wiley quickly admits. He's more interested in the behind the scenes work in telefilm offer a broader market and you can reach more people through those mediums. And besides, I know that I'm not on the corporate

fast track in New York anyway. I didn't think I would be at SI for as long as I have. I've seen guys with 20 years argue with an editor and get fired. I've also seen new people come in, stay a few years, then walk away from it. As far as this job goes, I take things two weeks at a time."

photos by The Magnificent Eye practitioners. The sentiment is that In his six years with SI, Wiley has covered a wide range of the world's premier athletic anyone can write sports. Perhaps a contests. Above are two cover stories he authored. At top left is the tragic bout between lot of this perception has to do with Ray 'Boom Boom' Mancini and Duk Koo Kim; top right is baseball superstar Davis . At the fact that sports is fun and people bottom is a moving, revealing article about the degenerating health of former boxing great them where they want to go, career-wise. "You've got to keep showing up,"Wiley Reaching the top level of sports journaland imagination. And usually, he asserts, the ism is a matter of skill, but there's more to it repeats. "When things are going bad, such as

best writers on newspaper staffs tend to be than that, Wiley contends. "You have to be problems with editors or not being promoted confident at that level," he stresses. "People when you think its due, hang in there and will form a line to tell you that you're not that keep improving. To win, you've got to be

> While the number of black sports journalconfidence level high." Aside from that, he adds, you must have ists isn't what it should be, there are still

-- Craig T. Greenlee

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