

Trash Talk Radio

By GWEN IFILL

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LET'S say a word about the girls. The young women with the musical names. Kia and Epiphanny and Matee and Essence. Katie and Dee Dee and Rashidat and Myia and Brittany and Heather.

The Scarlet Knights of Rutgers University had an improbable season, dropping four of their first seven games, yet ending up in the N.C.A.A. women's basketball championship game. None of them were seniors. Five were freshmen.

In the end, they were stopped only by Tennessee's Lady Vols, who clinched their seventh national championship by ending Rutgers' Cinderella run last week, 59-46. That's the kind of story we love, right? A bunch of teenagers from Newark, Cincinnati, Brooklyn and, yes, Ogden, Utah, defying expectations. It's what explodes so many March Madness office pools.

But not, apparently, for the girls. For all their grit, hard work and courage, the Rutgers girls got branded "nappy-headed ho's" -- a shockingly concise sexual and racial insult, tossed out in a volley of male camaraderie by a group of amused, middle-aged white men. The "joke" -- as delivered and later recanted -- by the radio and television personality Don Imus failed one big test: it was not funny.

The serial apologies of Mr. Imus, who was suspended yesterday by both NBC News and CBS Radio for his remarks, have failed another test. The sincerity seems forced and suspect because he's done some version of this several times before.

I know, because he apparently did it to me.

I was covering the White House for this newspaper in 1993, when Mr. Imus's producer began calling to invite me on his radio program. I didn't return his calls. I had my hands plenty full covering Bill Clinton.

Soon enough, the phone calls stopped. Then quizzical colleagues began asking me why Don Imus seemed to have a problem with me. I had no idea what they were talking about because I never listened to the program.

It was not until five years later, when Mr. Imus and I were both working under the NBC News umbrella -- his show was being simulcast on MSNBC; I was a Capitol Hill correspondent for the network -- that I discovered why people were asking those questions. It took Lars-Erik Nelson, a columnist for *The New York Daily News*, to finally explain what no one else had wanted to repeat.

"Isn't *The Times* wonderful," Mr. Nelson quoted Mr. Imus as saying on the radio. "It lets the cleaning lady cover the White House."

I was taken aback but not outraged. I'd certainly been called worse and indeed jumped at the chance to use the old insult to explain to my NBC bosses why I did not want to appear on the Imus show.

I haven't talked about this much. I'm a big girl. I have a platform. I have a voice. I've been working in journalism long enough that there is little danger that a radio D.J.'s juvenile slap will define or scar me. Yesterday, he began telling people he never actually called me a cleaning lady. Whatever. This is not about me.

It is about the Rutgers Scarlet Knights. That game had to be the biggest moment of their lives, and the outcome the biggest disappointment. They are not old enough, or established enough, to have built up the sort of carapace many women I know -- black women in particular -- develop to guard themselves against casual insult.

Why do my journalistic colleagues appear on Mr. Imus's program? That's for them to defend, and others to argue about. I certainly don't know any black journalists who will. To his credit, Mr. Imus told the Rev. Al Sharpton yesterday he realizes that, this time, he went way too far.

Yes, he did. Every time a young black girl shyly approaches me for an autograph or writes or calls or stops me on the street to ask how she can become a journalist, I feel an enormous responsibility. It's more than simply being a role model. I know I have to be a voice for them as well.

So here's what this voice has to say for people who cannot grasp the notion of picking on people their own size: This country will only flourish once we consistently learn to applaud and encourage the young people who have to work harder just to achieve balance on the unequal playing field.

Let's see if we can manage to build them up and reward them, rather than opting for the cheapest, easiest, most despicable shots.

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