

# James Brown:

## the Sporting Life

◆ Kevin Lambert

In 1973, James Brown was on a fast track to dreamland. He had just earned a degree in American government from Harvard and had been drafted by the Atlanta Hawks. Everyone told him how well he was doing and he was developing the mindset of a professional athlete. Then he was cut. As in, you're fired, finished.

"That cut me hard," he says. "I cried like a baby. I thought I had enough talent to play at the professional level, and when I was cut it hurt me to my heart. I vowed never to let an opportunity pass me because I was not prepared."

James Brown, or JB, never played with the Hawks, but he went from that crash to become one of the most successful sportscasters in the country. He hosts three regular sports shows, and a bewildering number of specials. He works so many different jobs that Howie Long teases him about having Jamaican blood.

"The one nickname I do take seriously is the hardest working man in sports. But all of that," he says, "is an outgrowth of being cut by the Atlanta Hawks."

### A Different Kind of Sportscaster

The popular image of sports announcers is a brash, abrasive guy, using a nasal voice to carry his message above the grunts of players and yelling fans. James Brown, by contrast, is insightful and mellow. He has a warm, judicious voice, a vocabulary full of multi-syllabic words and he's never at a loss to find the right one. He is so well-spoken and smooth that this almost prevented him from getting into broadcasting.

"Before I really started, I asked around if there was a way to make this as broad-based a pursuit as possible. To do some TV that was thoughtful. I asked people I respected. I was told it would be extremely difficult. And when enough

When enough of them said it couldn't be done, I felt it could, if I were good at it. The best advice was from Mike Trainer (Sugar Ray Leonard's attorney). He said, 'The only security that you have is the degree to which you bring value to whatever you do. If you're good enough, people will want you.'"

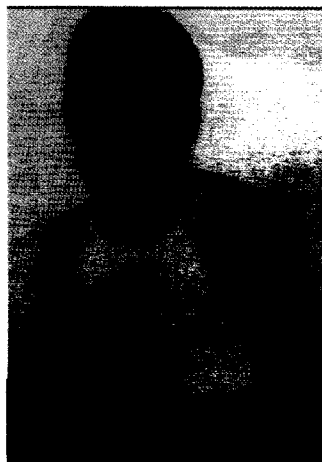
JB developed his own style, which has earned him the trademark of a thoughtful, articulate man. He has a loyal, proven audience. On or off the air, James Brown is simply a nice guy. He can't help it.

One of his shows he's proudest of has almost nothing to do with sports. *America's Black Forum* is a news and opinion "institution" that claims to reach 88 percent of African-American TV households. It has aired since 1977. JB, who co-hosts the show with Juan Williams from the *Washington Post*, likes to call the program a "Black Meet the Press" and says it is the only show where his degree in American government comes in handy.

### Washington Native

James Brown was born in Washington, DC in 1951. His late father once worked as a prison guard at Lorton. He also worked enough extra jobs to qualify for Jamaican blood himself.

"I have no idea how they raised five kids so well. They just did what they had to do and made it work." He is very close to his mother. He consults her before big decisions, and prays with her before big games or shows. "The biggest compliment you can pay me," he says, "is to call me a Mama's boy."



He attended DeMatha Catholic High School, run by the Trinitarian order. Founded by Saint John DeMatha (1160–1213), the order's original mission was to free fellow Christians from North African slave markets, either by ransom or by offering themselves as hostages. The Trinitarians are the beat cops of the monastic orders, doing the rough parish and prison work, usually in the poorer neighborhoods.

Morgan Wootten, his coach and world history teacher, credits DeMatha as being a diverse and extremely effective institution, both academically and athletically. DeMatha has had a starter on the Harvard basketball team for the last 17 years.

"JB was a young man everyone liked," says Wootten. "He created a feel good zone wherever he went - a straight 'A' student and a gifted athlete. From day one you knew this was a unique person." Wootten would also play an influential role in an important decision.

In his senior year, JB was heavily recruited by the University of North Carolina and UCLA. But there was also another, more difficult path that was almost unthinkable for a boy from the black working class. There was the possibility to go to Harvard. Even though the Ivy League school

didn't grant athletic scholarships it offered academic ones for talented but needy low-income students, which seemed to fit JB's status. He went for it, and he scored. He found the Ivy League to be quite another world, with some formidable people. He came to admire the future Senator Bill Bradley.

"Bill Bradley was quite the student and a gifted basketball player. I thought, why couldn't I do the same? What message would it send, if there were a number of African Americans playing at Ivy League universities and doing well in the classroom? What a positive image it would send to other young African Americans."

At Harvard, JB took All-Ivy League honors in his first three years and captained the team during his senior year. Following the Atlanta Hawks disappointment, he became an award-winning sales executive at Xerox and Eastman Kodak.

## Media Bug

In 1978, Abe Pollin gave JB his start in broadcasting as a television announcer for the Washington Bullets. He got \$250 a game, which wasn't that much even then. He kept at it and came to the attention of Bob Johnson, co-founder of BET, and started doing black college basketball games. He hosted a mid-day program on WTEM and co-hosted two weekly Washington-area sports programs. He was the sports anchor for the early newscasts at WUSA-TV, and hosted *James Brown's Pro Football Preview* for SportsFan Radio. He got the slot on *America's Black Forum*.

He has, like Sean Connery and Bill Cosby, what is called marketable likeability, becoming popular with fans, players and management. Now he's also pursuing other passions. He works as a motivational speaker. He endorses products. He's the Youth Minister at his church.

## On the Job

Announcing a Super Bowl can be compared to a vaudeville juggler's routine, wherein he balances plates and top hats between his hands and the air while keeping up a smooth line of amusing patter. The difference is a few extra million viewers. There is also the need to analyze plays, trot out players' histories, and to speculate on strategies. Television demands an unbroken flow of words and they have to be the right ones. Those who rely on "ums" and "ers" are quickly sent off to become method actors.

"A lot of that smooth talk is born of experience, but it goes back to the point of being prepared. I recognize that my preparation is important to me, so I'm well armed. We pre-interview each team aiming to be satisfied using a term SportsCaster John Madden calls, 'filling our buckets'. We'll talk with the Redskins on Friday, and when the visiting team comes in on Saturday we'll talk with them. That's when we ask all the questions; what the pertinent story lines and the subplots are. So what appears to be extemporaneous and reacting instinctively is really born of that preparation that enables me to have something to draw on."



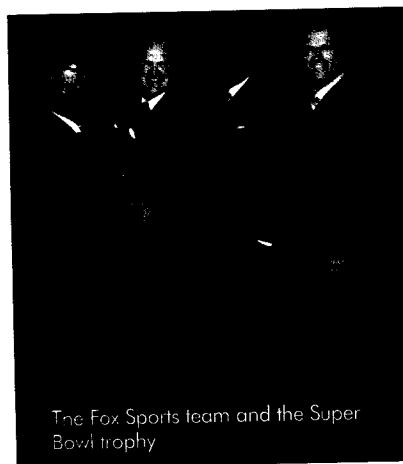
Green Bay Packer Brett Favre, Terry Bradshaw, and JB



Glenn Brenner, Angelo Dundee and JB

"In no way am I surprised that he got where he got. He got there by being just James Brown."

—Morgan Wootten, JB's high school coach



The Fox Sports team and the Super Bowl trophy



Coach Joe Gibbs with JB and his summer interns

The other shows are less hectic but equally hard on the brain. "My radio show is more 'interview oriented,' and one of the things I try to do is talk about the multi-faceted skills and talents that so many of these athletes have, so that you're not just seeing them one dimensionally. Just talking about stats and how many home runs is not my focus. I try to get to know the people. So many athletes have a hunger to learn, like the late Reggie White. Reggie White was an NFL Pro Bowler who studied Hebrew in an effort to become a better minister.

"I'm looking for the offbeat information, because with the proliferation of sports show outlets you've got everybody saying the same thing. I'm looking for something a little bit different. Does it always have to be so fast paced? Are attention spans that short? Is there a place on TV to examine things in the long form? Well, it's good to know that we can."

He likes to bring surprises, and he loves getting them. "Deion Sanders is one of those pleasant surprises. His persona is perceived by some as superficial and flamboyant, but the guy is actually very thoughtful, well read, and can

speaking on a multitude of subjects. Charles Barkley is another one. I actually had those guys as guests on *America's Black*

*Forum*. Barkley, while he can be outrageous at times, has made a lot of thought provoking comments."

For *Black Forum* he uses "pretty much the approach we take on *Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel*." (Gumbel once said, "Real Sports is about sports the way "Rocky" was about boxing.")

"I try to find a compelling story and read as much information as I can. While I have to cover the sports angle, I look for the human interest. Are they doing something offbeat, are they looking to strengthen their communities? That's what I want."

Sometimes shared points of interest can turn up some unexpected common ground. His hobby is classic cars, and he is a member of a Christian-oriented car group called Unity Thunder. It's a great icebreaker to get to know a new guest.

JB says a prayer before he undertakes anything significant. He calls his mom and his wife and they'll pray over the phone. "I pray that whatever I do, it would be done with excellence." Even at this point in his career, he regards a lot of things as significant. Before the interview, JB had just come from a talk with inner city kids in Anacostia. He had prepared for that one as well.

## Beyond Sports Talk

It is impossible to separate sports from the emotions attached to them. The English novelist J.B. Priestly, writing about soccer in the 1920's, said, "To say that these men paid their shillings to watch 22 hirelings kick a ball is merely to say that a violin is wood and catgut, and that Hamlet is so much paper and ink."

JB says, "There's almost a high that is not like anything else, to know that you have mastered whatever you are doing, you've had a great experience – and you've conquered the opposition. It's almost addictive."

The idea of athletes as irretrievably dumb jocks is a hard one to kill, even though people like Paul Robeson have crossed over practically from the start of the game (Robeson, who played football at Harvard, went on to a law degree and a long career as a singer, actor and star). Supreme Court Justice Byron White was a brilliant college football player. Bill Bradley and Jim Bunning went into politics. Athletes have achieved parity in the more cerebral spheres as well as any other group. "It happens more than people think," JB says.

"The shelf life of an athlete is only about four years. A lot of the guys are entrepreneurially oriented. The former Milwaukee Buck, Junior Bridgeman, is an owner of a fast food franchise, and doing exceedingly well. Deron Cherry, a former NFL player, owns a number of beer distributorships and is a part owner in a team. Kareem Abdul Jabbar and Arthur Ashe wrote books. Alan Page, from the Vikings, is a distinguished judge in Minnesota.

"If utilized properly, sports are a wonderful springboard. They get people into a collegiate atmosphere and open their minds to another world. The blinders get wider, their viewpoint is not so myopic, and they see that there is a wealth of opportunities out there. There are a lot of athletes who are actually very bright, but that part of what they are involved in is not given that much visibility.

"Terry Bradshaw, by the way, who is perceived to be a rube, is actually a very bright, very funny guy. He is quite the talent. He is sharp, and he probably has the quickest wit of any one I have ever worked with. When that red light goes on, he is second to none."

Big money and sports seem to many to be getting out of hand. Are people getting fed up? If everybody on the field is known to be filthy rich, will fans become cynical about the outcome of the game? Will this affect the way fans evaluate the players?

"It can be to the degree that athletes become detached and self-absorbed, losing the common touch. The Portland Trailblazers of a few years ago were the bad boys, and they didn't seem to care. It was partly due to big money. But then, teams like the New England Patriots and the Detroit Pistons were the opposite of that. They had a blue collar work ethic."

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## Public Service

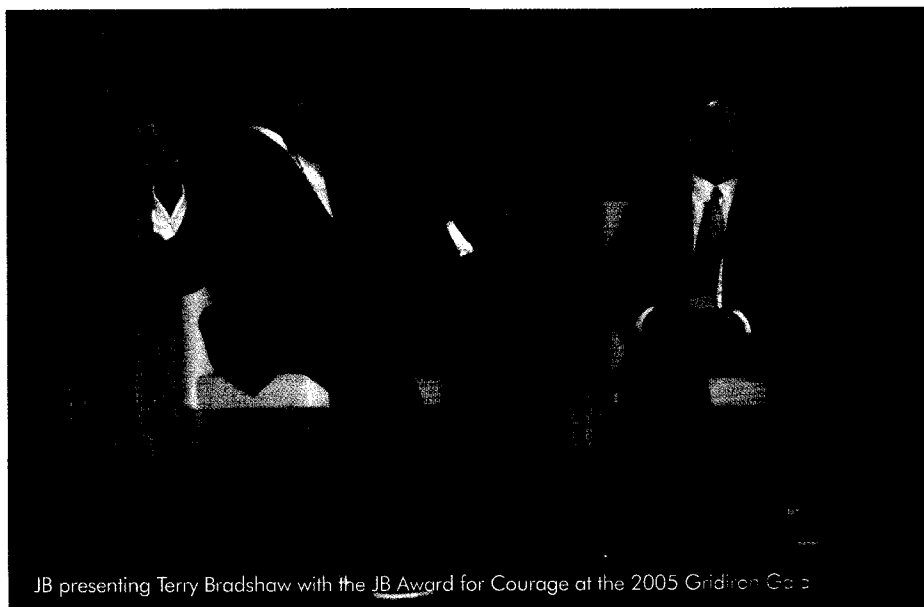
James Brown seems to have grabbed every brass ring that life has to offer. He has more television gigs than most people could keep track of, and more respect and admiration – a commodity as valuable as money – than most of us will achieve in a lifetime. But he's far better known for giving back than throwing it around. In fact, if he compiled a public service resume, it would be longer than his professional one.

He gives great support to Darrell Green's Youth Life Foundation. He's on the Board of

Directors for the Marrow Foundation, and Ronnie Lott's All Stars Helping Kids. He's the National Spokesman for the Neimann Pick Disease Foundation, which is a personal passion with him.

"There's a face with the disease that has really personalized it for me. A young lady I know, Hunter Ozmer, has just turned 20." This is about the time that the disease, which causes the body to attack itself, usually kills its victims. "They are so close to a cure, that's why we're working so hard to raise awareness."

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JB presenting Terry Bradshaw with the JB Award for Courage at the 2005 Gridiron Gala



The Fox Sports network is proud to present the 2005 Gridiron Gala featuring George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton



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He is also a National Celebrity Volunteer for the March of Dimes. He wears a purple wristband for 8-year old Sydney Schlobohm, a neighbor of his, who recently passed away from a brain tumor. He is a spokesperson for the American Podiatric Medical Association (APMA).

JB was awarded the National Marrow Donor Program's 2002 Grant Hartley Diversity Award, which is given for outstanding leadership in building diversity awareness. He is helping raise money – after the DC government slashed the budget – for Special Olympics DC.

In 2004, JB partnered with the NFL Players Association (NFLPA) and PLAYERS, Inc to recognize NFL players for their individual contributions to their communities. Formerly known as the Unsung Hero Awards, these JB Awards are presented annually. The 2005 Gridiron Gala presented Terry Bradshaw with the JB Award for Courage for coming forth and acknowledging publicly that he was clinically depressed.

"The way men are wired in this society," says JB, "one doesn't want to say this. He has been traveling the country, talking about this, on what he calls his 'Depression Tour.'"

Asked why he dives so deeply into community involvement, he really didn't have an answer. It may be his natural hard-wiring, mixed in with

the unhesitating selflessness of those medieval Trinitarians, going all the way back to the Tunisian slave markets.

Or perhaps, as he explains: "It was part and parcel of the community I grew up in. If someone down the street was in need, we pitched in. We saw our parents supporting one another. In our case, some friends bought us dress shirts. I have a heart for people."

Asked how he has been handling celebrity status, a condition that has ruined not a few working class kids, he says, "I'm humbled by it and pray that I'll never get to the point where I think I'm so much better than anyone else. Terry and I talk about this a lot. There is a lesson from Psalm 75: 5-6: 'Promotion comes neither from the East, North and West but from God. God is the Judge. He putteth down one and setteth up another.'

"I live life according to what I believe. We're all going to be answering how we used what He gave us."

The last word goes to Morgan Wooten, JB's high school coach and mentor: "In no way am I surprised that he got where he got. He got there by being just James Brown. Nobody works harder. nobody is nicer. He is living proof that nice guys finish first."

**THE HARDEST WORKING MAN IN SPORTS**

James Brown's resume is one of the most impressive in the sports world. He has co-hosted **FOX NFL Sunday** since 1994. He hosts **The James Brown Show** five days a week, on **Sporting News Radio**. He is a correspondent for HBO's **Real Sports with Bryant Sturgeon** and host for PPV.

He has hosted **Winter Olympics in Europe**, **NBA Finals**, ten years of **NCAA tournaments**, and a **game show**. He worked at **CBS**, **ABC**, and **ESPN**. He has hosted **day**, a **weekend anthology series**.

His awards include **Esquire's Sportsman of the Year**, **terback Club of Washington's Sportsman of the Year**, **the International Black Book of Sports**, and the **Excellence Award**. He was the **most successful American Sportsman** in 1998. He was **inducted into Harvard's Sports Hall of Fame**.