

Opinionated sportswriter Ralph Wiley passes at 52

Special to Sentinel-Voice

WASHINGTON (NNPA)—Ralph Wiley, an outspoken former staff writer for Sports Illustrated and ESPN — the television network, Web site and magazine — died of a heart ailment Sunday night. He was 52 years old.

Wiley, a 1975 graduate of Knoxville College in Tennessee, died three weeks after the death of a fellow alumnus and colleague, Vernon Jarrett. A former president of the National Association of Black Journalists, Jarrett died on May 23 in Chicago at the age of 86.

"Knoxville College is noted for producing nationally-recognized African-American journalists," says Barbara R. Hatton, president of Knoxville College in Tennessee. "And to have two giants in the field of journalism die within three weeks of each other is a blow to the profession and brings deep sorrow to our Knoxville College family."

Jonathan Rodgers, now president and CEO of TV One network, was the first Black to work as a reporter at Sports Illustrated in the late 1960s. He was followed at SI by George E. Curry (Knoxville College '70), now editor-in-chief of the NNPA News Service, in the early 1970s. Wiley began writing for Sports Illustrated in 1982 and remained there for 10 years, producing 28 cover stories. He had been a regular on ESPN's "Sports Reporters," had provided commentary for ESPN's "SportsCenter" and had worked as an NFL analyst for NBC.

At Knoxville College, the Memphis native played wide receiver on the football team and obtained his first professional journalism job, writing sports for the Knoxville Keyana-



Fingers of Fury: Writer Ralph Wiley never hesitated to challenge or cajole his readers.

Spectrum, a weekly. After his student days at Knoxville College, Wiley began as a copy clerk for the Oakland Tribune but quickly got a staff job and was writing a regular column when Sports Illustrated hired him in 1982.

Reflecting on his lonely stint at Sports Illustrated, Wiley said it was not easy.

"I often thought of myself as the Larry Bird of Sports Illustrated during the 10 years I wrote articles there," he said in a column. "...Not counting public sentiment, I know the comparison to be apt. I lived it. I know very well what it was like to be good in an occupation where nearly all of the good guys were of the other so-called 'race,' and assumed by divine right deep down that this was the way it was. That made you not a colleague but a threat."

Wiley continued, "I always could tell when I was writing well, because I would come in

and nobody would speak to me."

Throughout his career, Wiley never bit his tongue. He was unmerciful on Whites as well as Blacks that he thought had gone astray.

"Oddly, and we do mean oddly, Michael Jackson recorded what should be Michael Gerald Tyson's theme song," he wrote in one column for ESPN.com. "'Man in the Mirror.' As in, how can either one of them bear to look in one?"

Warming to his subject, Wiley wrote, "Like it or not, apparently, the world is a more interesting place with Michael Jackson and Mike Tyson in it. Jackson is much too scary to contemplate, even for a boxing writer accustomed to facial disfiguration of all kinds."

Wiley had a deep respect for the craft of writing and an even deeper respect for veteran writers such as Sam Lacy, the legendary sports writer for the Baltimore Afro.

Upon Lacy's death, Wiley wrote, "There's a vicious rumor going around that Sam Lacy, columnist for the Baltimore Afro-American weekly newspaper, is dead. They said he died last week, 99 years young, and missed Palmeiro hitting his 500th home run on Sunday. Mother's Day. Impossible. I know Sam Lacy. He's can't die. He's one of the immortals."

Long before the Detroit Pistons began dominating the Los Angeles Lakers in the NBA finals, Wiley was solidly for Detroit.

"If either the Minnesota Timberwolves or the Detroit Pistons were at their full strength rosters, and of sound mind as well as body, each of them, it can be argued, could win the NBA title; and one of them should win the NBA title this year...One of them should,

and one of them just might — that one being the Pistons."

In another column, Wiley wrote: "The Finals is a referendum on who is the best coach in NBA history. For me (I can only speak for myself), it's Larry Brown."

After frequent appearances on sports shows, in recent years, Wiley increasingly turned his attention to writing books: "Serenity: A Boxing Memoir," "Why Black People Tend to Shout," "What Black People Should Do Now: Dispatches from Near the Vanguard," "Dark Witness: When Black People Should Be Sacrificed (Again), and "Trial of the Century."

He also co-wrote several books, including "Best Seat in the House: A Basketball Memoir" (with Spike Lee), "By Any Means Necessary: The Trials and Tribulations of the Making of Malcolm X" (also with Spike Lee), "Born to Play: The Eric Davis Story" and Dexter Scott King's autobiography, "Growing Up King: An Intimate Memoir."

In a column on Kentucky's first Black basketball coach, Wiley wrote: "...It couldn't have been simple for Tubby Smith to figure out how to play the game at Kentucky. There were going to be people who hated him no matter what his record was. There are people who hate him still.

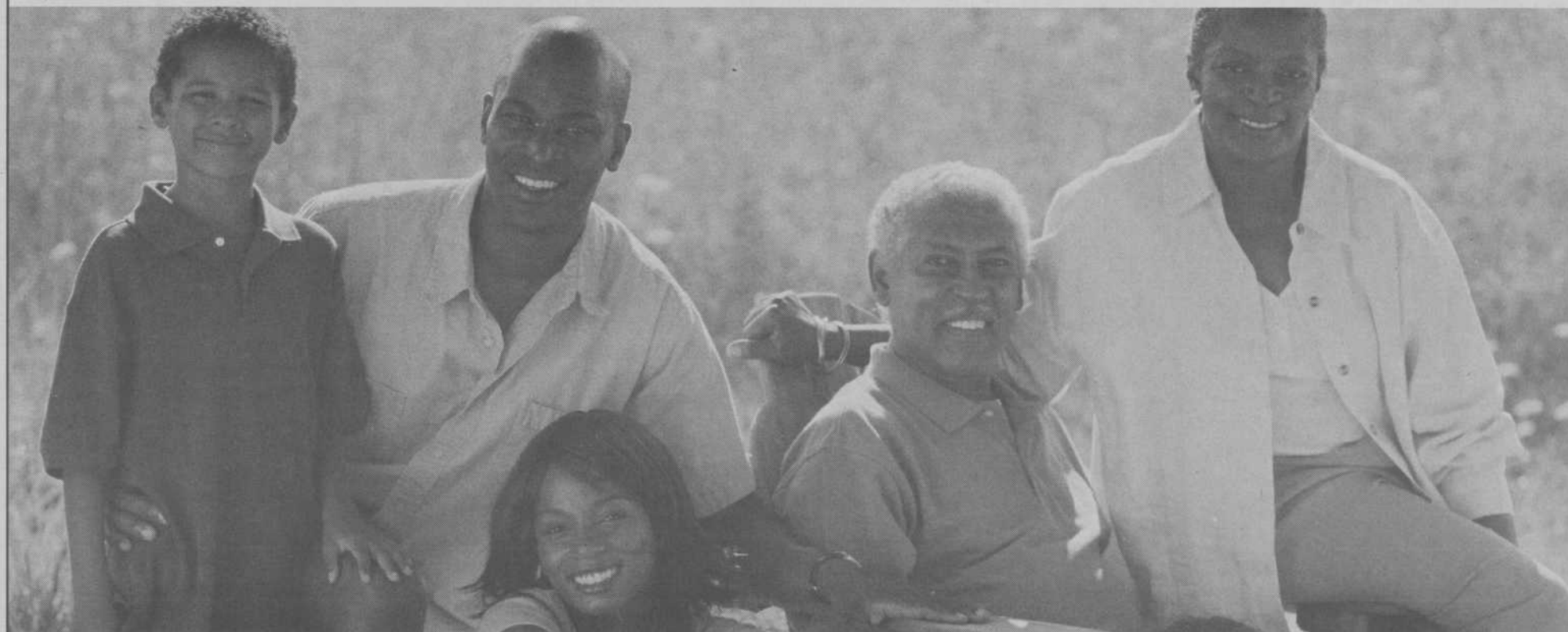
"I still recall a columnist named Tom Callahan being moved to write in 1978 that Kentucky fans were happy to have won the national title under Joe B. Hall — the only drawback was the hand that had dropped 41 points that night, Jack Givins', happened to be Black."

Ralph Wiley happened to be Black. And he was proud of it.

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