

## Sports Stories

Scholar and author Thabiti Lewis '90, '91W (MA) says the tales we spin about sports can illuminate, as well as transform, some common assumptions about black men.

Interview by Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

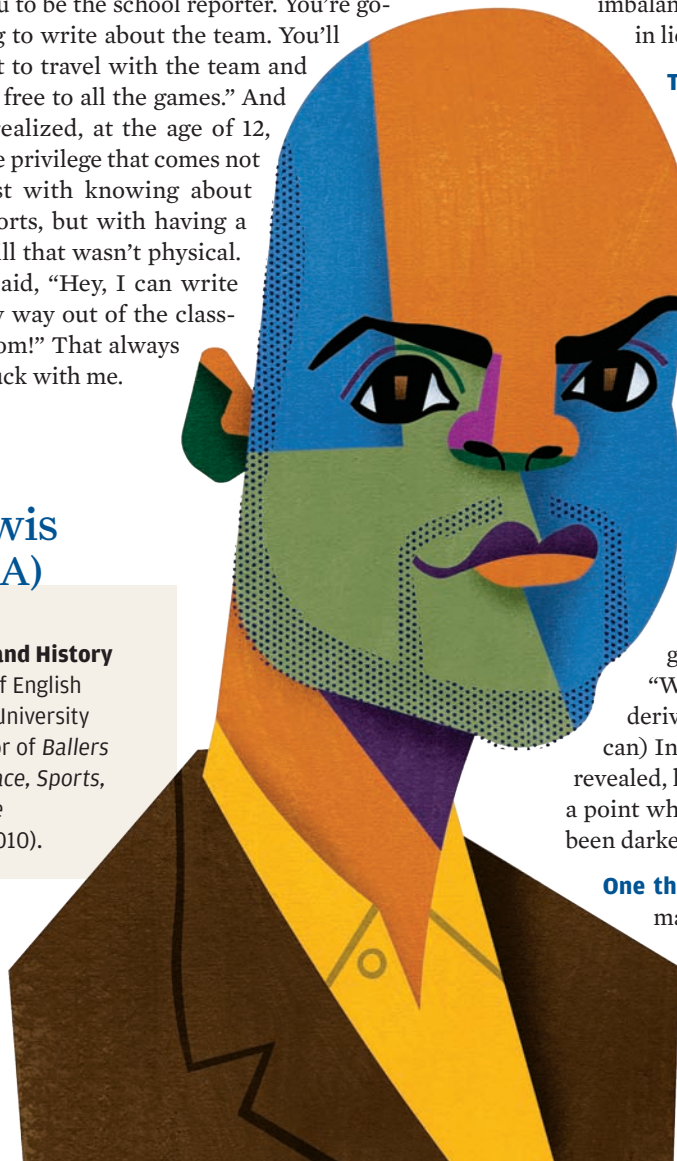
**When I was 12**, and in middle school in St. Louis, our school had a great basketball team. But you had to pay to go to the games, and I rarely had extra spending money. One day our class got to go to the game. But the deal was that our teacher wanted everyone to write about the game. After we turned our work in, the vice principal, who was also the team's coach, read my piece and summoned me to his office. He said: "I want you to be the school reporter. You're going to write about the team. You'll get to travel with the team and go free to all the games." And I realized, at the age of 12, the privilege that comes not just with knowing about sports, but with having a skill that wasn't physical. I said, "Hey, I can write my way out of the classroom!" That always stuck with me.

### Thabiti Lewis '90, '91W (MA)

St. Louis, Mo.

**Majored in English and History**

Associate professor of English at Washington State University Vancouver, and author of *Ballers of the New School: Race, Sports, and American Culture* (Third World Press, 2010).



**I was always a very good student** but also a very good athlete. Because of my athleticism, I was permitted to engage and reveal my intellectual ability without repercussions like bullying or people picking on me. Because they respected my athleticism, my intellectual endeavors were, to use a word I don't like, tolerated.

**One of the more privileged positions** in the sports world is that of the writers. One of the major problems regarding diversity is that if you look at the number of sports editors and sports writers, they're completely imbalanced in terms of both race and gender. Therein lies the question, Who's spinning these tales?

**There's a narrative** among sports writers and commentators, and it's not necessarily conscious. When you read or listen to the commentary, you notice there's often a divergence between the way white and black athletes are discussed or written about. For example, white quarterbacks are more likely to be described in terms of their mental game. And while there are more black quarterbacks these days, they're more likely to be described in terms of their physical abilities. But the more "athletic" athlete is not necessarily the athlete of color.

**The media success of Tiger Woods** is due in part to his construction of a nonracial persona. We haven't transcended race in the way that we sometimes say we have, given the fact that he even needed to say, "Well, look, I'm 'cablinasian' [a term Woods derived by combining Caucasian, Black, (American) Indian, and Asian] Since his infidelities were revealed, he's gone from a nonracial, neutral figure to a point where photographs of him in the media have been darkened.

**One the other hand**, someone like Dennis Rodman was able to exploit certain stereotypes of black men as aggressive. This is a guy who wasn't a big scorer, but he found a way to make himself really visible, and really marketable. It's a shame that it worked. This stereotype has legs, and it will continue to have legs when people profit from it. 