

Leon Carter and the Sports Journalism Institute
By Arabella Diedrich

The morning of the Super Bowl on Jan. 31, 1993, Freedom Forum, a free speech organization, announced it would be funding \$75,000 toward three years of a new program for college students called The Sports Journalism Institute.

Six months prior, Leon Carter and Sandy Rosenbush, the then Associated Press Sports Editors president, co-founded the concept at the National Association of Black Journalists Convention in Detroit. Carter said they designed SJI to get more women and people of color into the journalism industry. In a broader sense, he said he wanted a space for younger writers to develop into great writers.

While working as a journalist-in-residence at Norfolk State University, not far from the farm where he grew up, Carter and several of his colleagues began fine-tuning the program, designing what would become the infamously grueling sports checks. That summer, 15 journalists spent nine weeks at NSU in Virginia, marking SJI's first class.

Of the 30 classes that have graduated from SJI, Carter said a handful of alumni such as Marcus Thompson II and Baxter Holmes continue to live up to his reporting standards.

"My biggest encouragement is coming from people that I've helped with the Sports Journalism Institute," he said. "People that I've helped get that first internship. People who have gone from their first internship to a full-time job."

Following an initial rejection from SJI, Thompson reapplied the summer before his senior year at Clark Atlanta University and was accepted in 1998. At CAU, he said he felt like a big fish in a small pond due to the underdeveloped journalism program there. Coming to SJI, a program full of big fish, was a wake up call.

"Believe it or not I clashed with Leon. I wasn't a big fan of Leon at first," he said.

He resented Carter for the focus he placed on enhancing professionalism. Thompson wanted to be himself. He questioned the usefulness of the sports checks, SJI's intense daily quizzes, especially after he was asked what year Secretariat won the American Triple Crown. The answer was 1973. "I wasn't even born then," he said.

Despite the early turmoil, SJI gave Thompson, who now works as a senior columnist alongside Carter at The Athletic, the opportunity to intern at Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

"From my career perspective the internship is the main thing (I gained)," he said. "That was big. I got to experience what it was like to be at a big time real publication so that was invaluable."

That's the thing that I thought was the game changer.”

Nine years after Thompson graduated, Holmes, then a sophomore at the University of Oklahoma, was accepted into SJI. Along with a dozen students from all over the country, he traveled to Poynter Institute in St. Petersburg, Florida, for boot camp.

After weeks of sports checks, feelings of hopelessness and once even airing his frustration to Carter, Holmes was tasked with writing a final sports feature story. Toward the end of the program, Carter pulled him aside and praised his hard work on the story.

“It doesn't feel easy to win approval or praise from him. It became clear that that was not something he was going to give out easily unless you truly had earned it,” Holmes said. “When I received that it was very meaningful.”

Seventeen years later, Holmes, a senior writer at ESPN, said Carter is still involved in his life. From complimenting Holmes' stories to casual conversations about the industry, the pair talk regularly.

“He and I that summer together really forged I would say a friendship in some ways,” he said. “Leon I consider very much one of the key mentors in my life not only with respect to journalism but just as a human being.”

Now the editor-at-large at The Athletic, accumulating more than 40 years in the journalism industry, Carter said co-founding SJI is still one of the best moments in his career.

“I cannot turn on the TV without seeing somebody that I haven't helped. That inspires me to look up and see that I actually had something to do with their career,” he said. “There's about 350 of them out there.”

“That's what keeps me going.”