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Kenny Mack

David Slutzky

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Gullah Project
Kenny Mack
David Slutzky, Portia Morgan
July 2013
St. Helena Island, South Carolina

DS: Good afternoon. I'm David Slutzky here with Portia Morgan, and we are interviewing Kenny Mack, a lifelong St. Helena resident, give or take a couple years. And a baseball coach, basketball coach and he's gonna tell us the sports culture on St. Helena Island. Mr. Mack, welcome!

KM: Thank you!

DS: Yeah, thanks for joining us here. As you know, we do these interviews to take back to students we teach in the Cleveland area as well as the D.C. area. You just met a D.C. teacher as well. We've covered all facets of Gullah culture and Gullah life on St. Helena Island so our students can understand their history better. One area we have not heard a lot about and gotten a lot of information on is baseball as a sport on the island. We've spoken to people that have played baseball years ago, different plantations would face each other and no big deal. So we wanted to talk to you about the history of it as well as your involvement with it.

KM: I got involved with baseball at an early age, was not organized. When I got to the middle school, that's when we saw a lot of the organization of baseball. But as you mentioned in the past, the history of baseball, every plantation had a individual baseball team and we would travel and play each plantation on different teams. We didn't have a lot of equipment. As you know now, baseball is more like a economical sport. More like the middle-class plays, the middle-class doesn't actually play because they can't afford equipment. Kids here can't get equipment. And to travel and play. But I started playing in the yard, backyard, and then when I got to middle-school, we played organized ball at St. Helena. Junior high back then now St. Helena and now it's St. Helena. So that's how we got involved. But a lot of plantation had their own teams. And the lack of equipment was funny. We shared bats, we shared gloves and we all friends. So that's like... I remember being from a kid where we started baseball.

DS: What was it about baseball when it was happening on the plantations. What was it about it that attracted boys and girls to that as opposed to soccer or different sports?

KM: It was more like a family thing. If your father played, you played. If your uncle played, you played. It was more like a competition. "I can do better than you." That's how it really actually got started.

DS: So it was already pretty established before you began playing?

KM: Yes.

DS: Your father, uncle, grandfather?

KM: Father, uncles, and grandfather. Yes.

DS: Terrific. Any favorite position you played?

KM: Uh, I played shortstop. Loved the outfield, but I played short and second. Didn't wanna play first cause my father and my older brother played first and we always competitive. So we always competing, what's best, what's base. And so I moved on to second.

DS: That's great. [Note: unclear].

KM: Yes sir.

DS: I understand that. I understand that you've coached as well. What's that experience been like?

KM: Yes, I coach T-ball and Dixie minor and major league. Minor is 9 and 10 year old boys, I finally recruited some girls. And major is 11 and 12. And we play a lot of area teams. The teams on St. Helena Island were so good, so athletically that they came to a mission that the county and the city took over the rec league and they kind of abolished the island districts cause our pool was so talented. We would beat up on the other communities so they do district and drew a line and said, okay. Now we put all our names in a hat and each coach get a pick and stuff. And that's why the minorities here on St. Helena island here get to play baseball. Cause you stay here at Penn Center. You have to travel into town and go to practice. And so the teams were so good. And I got blue like nine, ten years in a row. So they divided the teams up, which they actually kept the base for right here on St. Helena Island. So now you may find one or two kids on one team, as many as fifteen, ten. So it kinda, like you said, eliminated baseball from a lot of kids in a way. Even for the high schools, it's the same way.

PM (offscreen): So could you have like... I'm trying to think like. My daughter said like a community center so that the kids from the community center could...

KM: We had that! We had that, say like Scotts down the road and this is considered the wildest area. Where I live, Oaks, and then there's Rose Hill. There's Lady's Island. Then further down there's we call Frogmore, it's old St. Helena Island name. They change it St. Helena. We all had community teams and they organized it. And it came under, we call it PALS, Parks and Leisure, known as the recreation department. We all organized it and came under that name. And we had

teams from Beaufort and then the new development, Lady's Island. Well, teams from the island would beat up on each other, but the teams, the representative teams that we was sending to the play off was always better than the teams that we play against. And see the city had a league too. They were like from the city just of Beaufort. But we would beat them all the time. One commission year, they got tired of all the parents complaining. So they put all the teams in a pool and we just draft. Coach draft from that area, for that district. Then you play.

DS: You look fairly young, I'm curious. What years did that encompass?

KM: I wanna say in... I got back from the military say in... back in the mid-70's. From '77... 1977 to about 1983, '84.

DS: Wow!

KM: That's when that happen.

DS: So the schools were pretty well integrated by then?

KM: Yes.

DS: But they still kind of found a kind of quid pro quo kind of way to get around it.

KM: Now the baseball teams at the school were just all about talent. When they're doing that zone of the district, when they're in school. At St. Helena's, I played baseball at St. Helena Middle School. And we were pretty talented. We had a good team. We played against the teams from town and stuff and that type of thing.

DS: Right, right. What's your experience coaching the men who play baseball here?

KM: Football, basketball more popular. So baseball you kinda have to drill it in them, and tell them, "Man there's baseball and it's great." Kids wanna jump around, run and skip and hop. Baseball you gotta be focused and stand. And that was just... once we instilled that into the discipline, they pretty much liked it. But if you were kind of active, they kinda shy away from baseball. Like when you go to high school and play baseball, play football and basketball. But the hardest thing and I was coached by Mr. Felix. He's a famous baseball coach over here, Wesley Felix. He taught at St. Helena Middle School. And the fundamentals of baseball. We weren't being taught the right way with community teams, and the local teams. And when we got to the school, all the habits we had, we had to recorrect those. Right. Like cross-hand batters. Ain't no such a thing. We do that.

DS: Right.

KM: But at school, we had to play basic fundamentals.

DS: So that's something that maybe your father or uncle, whatever would've taught you because that's what they learned themselves.

KM: Exactly! So we had to recorrect our thinking and get that cross in. Coach Felix would make you switch it, go to the left side. If you did it from the left side, switch it to the right side.

DS: Okay.

KM: Which I thought was interesting.

DS: But you guys have enough talent to adjust? For that to happen?

KM: Exactly.

DS: Did the boys that you coached, did they know much about history of baseball on the island? Going back generations?

KM: Well we told them about it, but there's nothing documented. Like my father-in-law, they played. Then my father played. But there's nothing documented as far as records and that type of thing. And we have a lot of talented baseball players, a few that got called up. Like Dan Driessen from Hilton Head. He used to play over here. Gib Perry, Joe Perry, all those guys. And the Braves have Jason Heyward. I went to school with his father.

DS: Wow! Nice!

KM: Yeah. All his fathers were athletes and uncles. They were worried about serious athletes.

DS: I'm a Mets fan but even so, I'll take it! (Laughs). I was gonna ask you if there were any famous sons from here that have made it to the big league?

KM: Oh yes, oh yes!

PM (offscreen): We also spoke with Ms. Lula Holmes.

DS: In sixth now!

KM: Oh yeah, THE historian of St. Helena Island!

PM (offscreen): One thing she talked about is the girls play.

KM: Softball.

PM (offscreen): So how successful was it getting girls to play?

KM: That was easy. Like the men had they team, the boys had a team. More or less, I'll say the girls, they got into the adults, fifteen, sixteen. All the community had the teams. And they were really, really, really competitive. Really competitive. Unfortunately, they didn't play a lot of high school softball. They wouldn't... I guess it was a sport they added lately. I say from the early 90's, they may've added softball. But it transitioned from the slow-pitch to the fast-pitch and when it went to the fast-pitch, I have no idea. It kinda just faded away. Just like they do things... I guess they don't like. No one participated. The slow-pitch is real, real popular. On Tuesday, Thursday at the Felix Park I mentioned, they had a softball league. And the whole community would come out. They would travel.

PM (offscreen): Yeah, that's a gorgeous park. Is it used anymore?

KM: Well, now they built the park in Lady's Island and it kinda faded away. They used to use it for football every Saturday, they still do a little bit. All the baseball games were played there. I have three sons and all of them played baseball and they played there. But now it's kinda fading away. They're moving everything towards town and Lady's Island. New directors coming from different areas, and they say it's far too drive. But that's one of the main parks that have lighting at night and you can play...

PM (offscreen): Oh yes! Gorgeous park!

DS: When we drove by it the other day, we were wondering... It definitely looks more modern that it did a couple years ago when we went around there. So to see it's not used more than...

KM: Yes. I used to play football out there. Now Saturday I still play a little bit of football games. Like I said, the majority of athletes now that participate in town sports live in the Lady's Island area and they were tired of driving over here. So politics got involved and they built a field out there on Lady's Island. They're tryna move everything here to that area.

DS: Well I saw a sign on a backstop there: "Beaufort County Champs."

KM: Yes! My son name is on one of them. Jaylen. He played on the all-star well... Yeah, he played on the all-star team.

DS: Oh, great!

KM: Yeah, my youngest son, he played at Beaufort High. He went all the way up from... middle school and then he played at high school freshman year. And then the coaching... he didn't like the coaching so... That was sad. It was sad because he was one of the first minority that played in five years on a high school team. JV and varsity.

DS: Wow.

KM: It was good and then... It's a bad taste in the mouth, but it works out for the best. He's a good football player and basketball player. Playing two sports, three is kinda hard playing baseball. And in high school, you keep your grades up.

DS: We actually got a chance to meet him, I believe.

KM: You met Jaylen!

DS: Right.

KM: That's the middle one. I have a younger one that also played baseball, too. They both played baseball. I made 'em play baseball.

DS: Oh, good for you then. Gotta keep it going.

KM: They were pretty good. Yes.

DS: What's your Edward Initiative for funding to keep baseball affordable?

KM: Tough question. Yes and no. I spoke about it and I said 8 thousand. I spoke about it, but the interest fee kept raising, like you know. Like example, thirty-five dollars for one kid, if you have two kids in the family, it be maybe fifty. If I tried to do vouchers, they had vouchers to supplement that. But the fee kept raising. Then, budget crunch, they start taking back the uniform, they start taking back the bats, start taking back the gloves. So a kid to play baseball, now they have to pay eighty-five dollars. Have to purchase his own bat. Minimum bat's two hundred bucks. Have to get gloves, you got the shoes, a hundred bucks, a hundred twenty-five bucks. And every year, you need this equipment. And so if you're a catcher, you gotta get the mask, the protector, the chin guard, the knee guard, everything. And so it becomes what we call it now, and people on this island when I say we, say economic sport.

DS: Yeah, it's awful. Do you think if all things were equal, people playing field, there'd be an equal distribution of baseball...

KM: Oh yes, yes. This is considered a football state cause it's more advantageous to play football here. There are more opportunities. Baseball... see we have a history of baseball players, starting from Hilton Head on back. And they have a softball of men's baseball league. And this was the recreational, it was a farm system for that league. Well you don't have a farm system anymore, so that league is slowing down, too. So like in Hilton Head, like Perry, Driessen, all them players, we used to go over there and play. And a lot of kids, you know, when the parents come down to money and travel, they can't afford it. So something has to give. But it's kinda like, you thought about it and like everything the kids get with baseball and softball, they kinda find a way out. Pushed to the side, which is sad. And the fundraisers, businesses will do things for certain groups of people.

DS: Yeah, we see that in Cleveland also. It's always easier to get a group of kids into basketball and then boom! You can play basketball. And we wish we could have more, you know, more baseball leagues in the inner-city.

KM: Yes, and it died. Baseball died. And Mr. Felix made a gallant effort and got the community political powers to be and they brought the rec league back. And that was about see '84, '85. They brought it directly back and like I said, they came back. It was strong. And then they start winning. So that zone in that district... competition, competition, which they really like. And then they took all the coaches and the coaching jobs so.

DS: You'd think they would celebrate that. That's just me. Celebrate what you have and cultivate it more. The way you do with football or different sports.

KM: Now that baseball's coming exting, and I have a friend, Mr. Heyward, he owns a local store on Farley Road. [Note: unclear] and he was talking with a gentleman that came from Ohio. I think it was Ohio, somewhere New York. And he bought a tract of land property back there and he developed it into a baseball field. Cause he wants to see baseball come back.

DS: Was it common to see scouts come to this area back in the day?

KM: Yes for baseball.

DS: Right.

KM: For baseball, yes. And they'll start at Hilton Head and Bluffton and they had a lot of... they had a lot of talent! And you got some guys that throw a hunnid miles an hour that didn't even go to college. But they could hit. And they were real good. They were really good baseball players. And we had a lot of good players here. We had a couple that went to Baltimore Orioles. Couple that went to I think the Braves. And then they have American Legion at the high school. They

have American Legions with juniors, seniors and freshmans in colleges. And all those come down and I think the Yankees came down a few times. Saw some kids.

DS: Great.

KM: Like the team in Charleston, the [Note:unclear].

DS: Yeah, we've seen them. The Riverdogs.

KM: Riverdogs! That's right.

DS: Yeah, we almost saw the Savannah Sand Gnats the other night but we got rained out on that one. And as a Nets fan, I was hoping to see that. But what could we do? (Chuckles).

PM (offscreen): I know that there's some uh, Imma use the word resistance. There's a need not to overly develop St. Helena. You have a beautiful library. You have a gorgeous senior center. Is there any talk about doing a community center where you have just some basketball, maybe some baseball and a pool. Have something for the young people to do. And to be involved in as well as to have something to offer to older people, to seniors.

KM: As in baseball, good analogy, as in baseball, here we go again. As in baseball, each community has a community center which is called a senior citizens center. And the seniors will have something to do and they will go there in the daily. And just like located this one from Saxonville Rd. down to here, where the library's at. And last four-five years, budget cuts. And well not enough people going to the political parties, got not enough people going in there and participating which is not true. They needed to cut something so they cut the senior citizen center. And the swimming pools now, the county has to share with the high school in the summer and then there's a fee. Now Green St. has a rec swimming pool that's been there for a while and they still use that. It's a minimum fee to get into that. But anything that you don't see is gone be fight. A lot of minorities participated, it's cause of economical reasons.

PM (offscreen): Why can't they bring something more here on St. Helena rather than having to go to Lady's Island or any Beaufort. Something here on St. Helena that would give the young people, I mean I've been to several churches. I've seen so many young people here. There seem to be a lot of young people on St. Helena.

KM: Yeah. (Nods head). Yes, that's been a talk. But city county management, politicians don't wanna bring anything on the island. And then cause, and here's the catch twenty-two to that. If... and here's the politicians excuse. If you develop, start developing the island, then it becomes another Hilton Head. Become commercialized. So where you draw the line, if I let one entity come on, how can I stop the other entity from coming? So you start bringing the civic centers,

then the convention centers and the commercialized swimming pool. How you gonna stop the developers? And that's where they had to find out in Beaufort County. I said we too... we hadn't found out how to balance that and we have a lot of pro-anti development on St. Helena Island. Because they see what happened to Hilton Head and so they...

PM (offscreen): Oh yeah, I understand. I would hate to see it turn into Hilton Head. I mean again, you have this kind of complex arriver, senior citizen. To me that maybe the next step would be to add a community center just for St. Helena. That there residents could use as a walking track, basketball and tennis courts and a pool. So it would be located here because it is difficult to get from here to town all the time, and especially if you're elderly or young. The two ends are the ones who are missing out from the service.

KM: Now we do have four or five outdoor basketball courts on the island. Scott Community has one, Seaside has one and then there's one at Wesley Felix Park. And we utilize, we used to utilize St. Helena gym a lot for community involvement. And like I said, PALS got involved again. We had to volunteer to open the gym, kids come in, you know, a little minor trouble but PALS got involved again. They had a partnership with the schools and that's Parks and Leisure. Partnership with the school and all a sudden now they close it. Manpower. Don't wanna have it. Cause I have an AAU team and I'm tryna bring a tournament. I'm tryna organize a tournament to come to Beaufort, cause we go to Atlanta. We go to Atlanta next week. We be in Charlotte. We be all over the place, tryna, takin the kids out. Showin 'em different exposure, let 'em see in front of some scouts and see how other kids 'round the world act. So they know how to interact. And overcharge you 550 dollars for a stay at 400 dollar semester. But that's a school facility and I pay my share of school taxes and property taxes. And the community goes, "Oh we charge everybody that. It's a done deal." They makes the decisions so, you know, it's kinda tough. So we have to go out there and get sponsors from the church and from individuals. And do what we can from the parents who actually have that. But the swimming pool, it'll come up the cost and it'll come up and then who's gonna pay. And so we have to raise property taxes or we have to cut somethin. It's political.

DS: [Note: unclear] a way to shut it out?

KM: Yeah. Unless we get some major funding. We have a Y in Beaufort, but like you said (points to PM), there's no Y over here. And more or less, we don't have a voice on the island. We do have some voices and... (shrugs shoulders). You know, outta sight, outta mind.

DS: How about city council here in St. Helena?

KM: Oh, we have county council.

DS: Oh, county council?

KM: All our council is Mr. McBride. He's been there twenty-nine years. Twenty-seven years.

PM (offscreen): So you said that football is the number one sports...

KM: In South Carolina, and football here in Beaufort County and I say that because majority of the kids get football scholarships. They get looked at for football. And you know, I do basketball. Basketball is pretty popular too but it's easier to get a football scholarship. Football, recruiting by football and basketball, it's some... it's part of the kids faults. Cause they don't take care of what they need to. Take care of they grades, GPA, SAT. And I blame some of the coaches too and some of the parents. The parents have to take charge. Cause, oh my boys play basketball. I got a sophomore in highschool and they know at the end of sophomore, junior year, he takin the SAT. Three SAT. He knows his requirement in gettin in Division 1, Division 2 schools. And he knows his SAT score has to be a certain level to play D1 ball. You know, he gotta make an 850 for science and math. We know that. He know he have to maintain a certain GPA. And in certain places you have to take... Some of us, is what is implementing this. Some of the coaches are coming on board. But you know, when you have coaches that live in this area, this district, they look out for certain kids. And it's around the world. It's not just here.

DS: Well since we're educators and we're showing these to students, some of whom are student athletes as well, what are some messages or words you can give to them about what they need to do to be successful?

KM: Be obedient. Stay focused in the classroom. You know right from wrong. Get you by association; be careful who you hang out with. Take your education seriously, because you wait til your senior year, you try to get in colleges, you know, that's too late. Most coaches and recruiters recruit you by your junior year. Normally, if you don't have a scholarship by your junior year, you're playing catch up and like I said, education open the doors. It opened the door for me. I'm from St. Helena Island, not have a problem gettin a job, I went to a local community college with the military. The main thing is, take care of your education. Be where you're supposed to be. Do what you're told. And everything else will work out for itself.

DS: What branch did you serve in?

KM: I serve in the Army and then I crossed over to the Air Force now in the Air Force Reserve right there in Charleston.

DS: I wanna thank you personally just for your service.

KM: You're welcome.

DS: [Note: unclear] be with us. You know that being said, that's not said enough. You know, young men and women go off and join the services.

PM (offscreen): Thank you for helping us understand about sports on the island.

KM: You're welcome, anytime. Glad to be of assistance.

DS: Yeah. Tomorrow's the mid-summer classic, the all-star game. Do you have any favorite team growing up?

KM: Always loved the Braves. They're so close to here. Love Chipper Woody.

DS: Who's that?

KM: Chipper Jones!

DS: Oh yeah!

KM: Great man. I used to know the guys. Hank Aaron. Hank Aaron fan.

DS: I'd be grudgingly like uh... remember seeing his 715th homerun. I remember being offered tickets to go see a basketball game that night. That's when it was still the ABA. And it was the Long Island Nets before the Nets NBA team. And I'm like, "No. I wanna see the Atlanta game to see if Hank Aaron beats the record" and sure enough. So that's a good child memory for me. Yeah, I'm a baseball fan myself. So... well anyways, I guess if the national league wins tomorrow night.

KM: Yes, yes!

DS: Well on that note, we're united.

KM: Yes. Yes. (Chuckles). World Series.

DS: Well thank you, Kenny.

KM: Alright, you're welcome. 'Preciate it.