

## GUEST COLUMN

# Mitch Henck: My night with the presidential press corps in Milwaukee

February 12, 2016

MILWAUKEE — It was like walking into your first Major League Baseball game. Actually, it's always a kick to breathe the same air as famous people.

At the Democratic debate on Thursday in Milwaukee I kept saying to myself: "There's Kasie Hunt of MSNBC."

Oh. She's a political reporter who covers the presidential race. Don't know her? Well, those of us who are political junkies do.

Then I saw him. John Heilemann of Bloomberg Politics was sitting right there, working on his laptop. John Heilemann and his partner Mark Halperin have taken the place of Theodore H. White, who wrote "The Making of a President, 1960." That book was really the first time we went inside the ropes of a presidential campaign from beginning to end.

In 2008, Heilemann and Halperin wrote "Game Change," with a fascinating section on Sarah Palin's bizarre run that turned into an HBO movie. Four years ago, Heilemann and Halperin wrote "Double Down: Game Change 2012."

I said, "John, do you have a minute for a quick interview?" He said, "Sure. Have a seat."

Feeling like I was talking to Theodore H. White himself, I said, "Do you think Wisconsin could still matter in the race?" He said, "Sure. In fact, I think this will be a long, protracted fight for every state and every delegate."

Heilemann rejects the notion that Hillary Clinton has a firewall in South Carolina.

"She has a big advantage with African-Americans and Latinos, but Bernie (Sanders) won a majority of women in New Hampshire. He won big with working-class voters as well. Remember in 2008, Hillary won that vote over Barack Obama."

He continued: "If Bernie can hold that vote along with independents and win big with young people (another Obama constituency) then he could offset Hillary's advantage with minority voters."

Then his eyes widened for emphasis: "If Bernie could cut into her lead significantly with African-American and Latinos, we could have a fight to the end."

I thanked him and walked away like I just scored Arnold Palmer's autograph. I shouldn't be this weird at 54, but it's too late to change. The attitude of the traveling press corps was that of a freshman reporter covering a city council meeting. Eyes glazed over when a group of Black Lives Matter protesters came to the media center entrance chanting for a \$15-an-hour minimum wage.

TV reporters at all levels showed no looks of empathy. They just made eye contact with their news photographers with the silent command, "Make sure you get this."

The biggest chuckle of the night among the press corps came after Hillary was calling out Bernie for being critical of President Obama in a number of ways. The laughs came after Bernie said, "Only one candidate up here ran against Barack Obama, and I was not that candidate."

After it ended, the campaign spokespeople came out to give sound bites or explanations on why their candidate won the debate. For me, none of that was as important as when Kasie Hunt of MSNBC tripped over my foot and said, "Excuse me."

Eye contact was made. For a political geek like me, it was the same as being 12 years old. No wonder I'm divorced.