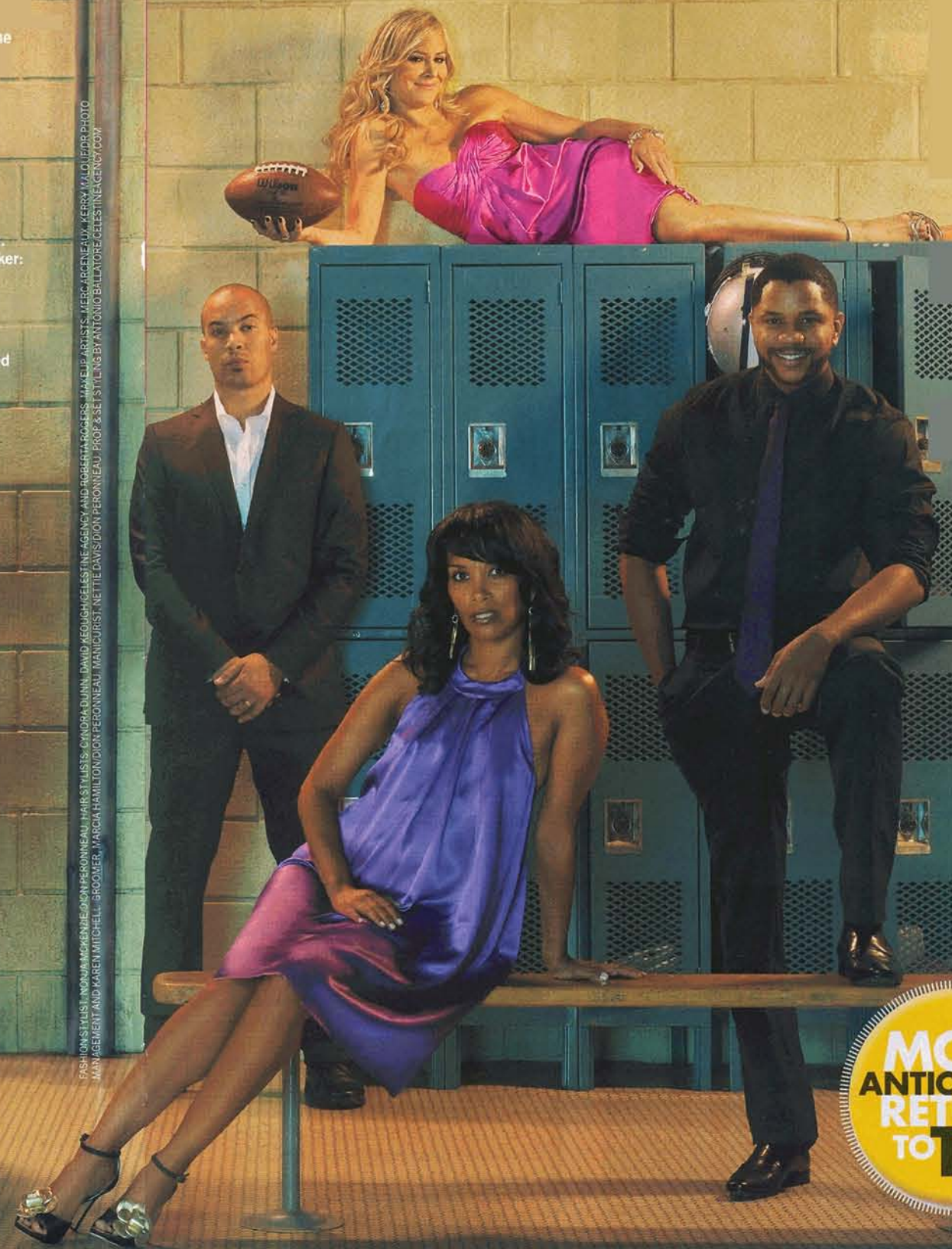


They've Got Game (from left): Wendy Raquel Robinson, Pooch Hall, Tia Mowry, Coby Bell, creator and executive producer Mara Brock Akil, and Hosea Chanchez. On top of the locker: Brittany Daniel.

The Game team was photographed exclusively for ESSENCE by Roger Erickson, June 4, 2008, in Los Angeles.

FASHION STYLIST: MONJAMCKENZIE; HAIR STYLIST: CHANDRA DUNN; MAKEUP ARTISTS: MERCA ARGENTEAU, KERRY WALDU; PROP PHOTO MANAGEMENT AND KAREN MITCHELL; SHOOTER: MARCIA HAMILTON/DION PERONNEAU; MANICURIST: NETTIE DAVIS/DION PERONNEAU; PROP & SET STYLING BY ANTONIO BRILLIANTO/CELESTINEAGENCY.COM



MOST ANTICIPATED RETURN TO TV: THE GAME (CW, October 3) When it comes to the San Diego Sabers, on CW's *The Game*, scoring touchdowns is half the story. The other part unfolds on the sidelines. Here's the play-by-play: Melanie and Derwin are about to reconcile when Derwin's ex announces her pregnancy. Jason, now steroid-free, might have finally pushed his doting wife, Kelly, to the brink. Meanwhile, Tasha has been laid up with her coworker. Oh, and Malik, who's fired Tasha as his momager, has jumped the broom with none other than actress Robin Givens! Although most of the actors play fictional characters, their problems mirror everyday life. Exploring those parallels is what executive producer Mara Brock Akil imagined when she created *The Game* three years ago. Now, she's got us staying tuned for more. According to the Nielsen Co., *The Game* dominates the half-hour comedy spot in Black households, which was left vacant last spring by *Girlfriends*, also Akil's brainchild. So who'll be winning off-field this season? For the record, most folks are rooting for a Team Merwin reconciliation, but the often-strained interracial union between Kelly and Jason might not fare so well. We're handing it to Akil for tackling the true-to-life image of the Black athlete who marries the White woman. "[On the show], we're very vocal about when a brother marries outside the race," says Akil. "That's what Tasha's character represents toward Kelly. But they've formed a friendship out of being bold, brash and confronting the race issue." In case you've been agonizing over who's in for the long haul and who's throwing in the towel, do know that producer Akil feels your pain. "I hear the audience—and please put this in there—I know they want a happy, good couple," says Akil. "I want that, too, but I'm just showing the journey of how you get there." —R.R.R. ▸

MOST ANTICIPATED RETURN TO TV

“I know audiences want a happy, good couple, but I'm just showing the journey of how you get there.”