

Jon Richardson

## The Vital Role of Sports as a Platform Against Injustice

*“I am America. I am the part you won’t recognize. But get used to me—black, confident, cocky; my name, not yours; my religion, not yours; my goals, my own. Get used to me.”*

- Muhammed Ali

The Olympic games are historically a platform to showcase nationalistic pride, using sports as an allegory for global supremacy. Tales of hard work, perseverance, overcoming the odds, and rising to the top, clichéd as they may be in the arena of athletic competition, organically arise each time the games grace the international stage. In Mexico City, on the precipice of the summer of love, the 1968 Summer Olympic Games were anything but. As the United States prepared to accept both the gold and bronze medals in the 200 meters, glowing tributes of athletic achievement often heard throughout the ceremony not only fell on deaf ears, but retreated to the shadows. Instead, as the national anthem rolled through the stadium, two fists adorned with black gloves permeated the moment of routine reverence. American sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos, on both a figurative and literal raised platform, asserted their allegiance to the Black Freedom Movement in abrasive and unabashed fashion. While their actions reverberated both positively and negatively throughout an American social structure in flux, they also encapsulated an important function of sports in society, particularly in the framework of racial inequality. While a large faction of detractors label protesting athletes as anti-American, when viewed through a historical lens, it becomes clear that athletes utilizing their elevated platform to evoke social change has been, and still is, a necessary means to combat racial and ethnic injustice.

No athlete has provided a stronger sacrificial and socially active precedent than Muhammad Ali. In the wake of popularity that ascended the plight of an African American entrenched in the volcanic civil rights tension that defined the 1960's, Ali cashed in the spoils of sports hero for the scars of fallen martyr. As the Vietnam War raged on, and waves of America's youth watched helplessly as their draft card sent them to a strange and deadly wilderness, it was the boxer who stood up to Uncle Sam. Ali did the unthinkable, not just in speaking his mind, acting as an individual in an arena that shunned individuality, or accepting the spotlight with a boisterous confidence that black figures were expected to shy from - Ali resisted. With unapologetic assertiveness, Ali laid out his mission statement:

“My conscience won't let me go shoot my brother, or some darker people, or some poor hungry people in the mud for big powerful America. And shoot them for what? They never called me nigger, they never lynched me, they didn't put no dogs on me, they didn't rob me of my nationality, rape and kill my mother and father. ... Shoot them for what? How can I shoot them poor people? Just take me to jail” (qtd. in Calamur).

The cutting words sharpen proportionate to the rise in each rung of social stature, and as the prominent figure in the height of success in one of the most important sports in America, Ali's blade was razor-edged.

Now with proper historical context, devoid of shockwaves and blistering civil rights heat, the impact can be measured more accurately. As Jack Newfield of *The Nation* states in “Like a Butterfly,” his review of the Ali profile *Muhammed Ali: His Life and Times*, “With the perspective of more than twenty years, it may be that the true Zeitgeist of the rebellious, liberationist 1960s was embodied not by J.F.K., Bob Dylan, Mick Jagger, Tom Hayden or Stokely Carmichael but rather by a prizefighter who came to us as Cassius Clay and is now

known to the world as Muhammad Ali” (Newfield 818). Ali blazed the path, creating a precedent for sports figures to make political statements with their elevated public forum. The current war on the political presence in the landscape of athletics posits that sports are an escape from such discussions of social injustices, however Ali established a model of using sports to combat a culture of racial prejudice. As Ellen W. Gorsevski and Michael L. Butterworth, leaders of the Department of Communication in the School of Media and Communication at Bowling Green State University, highlight in “Muhammad Ali’s Fighting Words: The Paradox of Violence in Nonviolent Rhetoric,” “Ali translated the agonism of boxing’s physicality into activism’s rhetoricity. By doing so, he ‘characterized a strategy of cultural resistance effective in a modern media age. ... This evolution greatly influenced other modes of political intervention that could take place in the cultural arena.’ Given this, Ali’s rhetoric represents a productive site for engaging politics by going beyond resistance, creating proactive interventions against institutional and cultural forms of violence” (Gorsevski and Butterworth 53). Ali not only laid the groundwork for the activism we see today, his actions showcase the positive impact that very activism can have.

As the Civil Rights era dissolved into a false lull, racial inequality reared an ugly and vicious head in the early nineties. The Rodney King beating gave way to the L.A. riots, and the O.J. Simpson trial that immediately followed devoured the American consciousness. From that, though, the topic of racial inequality largely went dark, at least on a national stage and through the prism of an athlete. Buried within those 20 plus years, whether consciously or not, is a systematic erasure of the idea that athletes should have a voice against racial oppression, or that racial oppression even exists at all. In his book *Mediasport*, Lawrence A. Wenner, a Professor of Communication Studies at Loyola Marymount University, posits that sports coverage is not

suddenly devoid of racism, rather the way in which it is expressed: “Although overt racism has largely disappeared, covert racism, while perhaps less malignant than in earlier periods, can still be seen. New forms of racism may be evolving with the times” (Wenner 165). The shift in the coverage of sports and its previously “overt racism” lends some validity to the idea that the type of racial inequality of the past has been eradicated from America. It is in this thought that current detractors of politics in sports draw their sustenance. Within this mentality of smiles, blue skies, and the death of racial inequality, though, the true danger lies. Wenner goes on to state, “As old forms of racial prejudice become increasingly unacceptable new forms of subtle prejudice, such as ‘symbolic racism,’ emerge. Here, people of color are not seen as inherently inferior to European-Americans, yet it is believed that racism is no longer a serious problem, people of color compete on equal footing, the culture of people of color is the source of many social problems, and people of color want unfair advantages” (Wenner 168). This landscape, outlined in 1998, is the world in which the present-day athlete lives and fights, while detractors choose to ignore the presence of covert racism. When that very sense of covert racism clashes with what a large portion of the black community sees as blatant racism, those empowered with a voice due to sports prominence can speak for the voiceless. As Jamie C. Harris, columnist for the New York Amsterdam News asserts, “As Black men being shot and killed by law enforcement across the United States has disturbingly become commonplace, recorded and shared on social media for the global community to dissect, the aforementioned owners are confronted with what is seemingly a growing movement of athletes exercising their birth and constitutional right to speak out and demonstrate against societal injustices and inequities” (Harris 48). It is in this environment that an injection of politics in sports, as demonstrated by Ali, Smith, and Carlos alike, is both an acceptable and necessary means to incite change.

Today's torchbearer is not expressive with a raised fist, a rejection of war, or even a demonstrative act of defiance, rather a knee that symbolized peaceful dissidence toward that which the American flag stands for. In the preseason of the 2016 NFL season, former quarterback Colin Kaepernick first expressed to America his resentment for the way in which the black population is represented and treated in today's society. It started with a seat during the national anthem, and then moved to a knee at the advice of former green beret Nate Boyer. Kaepernick did not mince words explaining his actions: "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color. To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder" (qtd. in Borden B9). The avenue Kaepernick utilized has made perhaps the strongest impression. Sam Borden, a columnist for *The New York Times* who often highlights the intersection of social topics and sports of all varieties notes, "Others think the stage could not be better suited. The anthem's lyrics—an ode to America's promise, along with questions about whether it's living up to it—can be read both as a tribute to the nation's ideals and an invitation to challenge them. And doing the latter before an audience of millions watching on TV is a particularly bold act, says John Carlos [...] 'Where else is he going to make a statement where he's going to reach the far ends of the earth?' Carlos says" (Borden B9). While many have agreed with Kaepernick's sentiment, many do not, and a large portion of the population presented a heavy pushback. The idea of politics in sports was drawn to the forefront, with some arguing the two have no purposeful intersection. That backlash, both in ignoring the past and disregarding the idea of covert racism, demonstrates the underlying consciousness Kaepernick set out to combat.

Current detractors of the athlete as social justice spokesman often cite an inherent privilege athletes enjoy in both financial and social prominence. The thought that sports figures should simply enjoy their stature and be thankful American society has afforded them such blessings has become the de facto rallying cry behind a presence of anthem kneeling dissenters. Ears closed and blinders in place, this line of thinking is designed to disregard the actual message of the protestors, with the ultimate goal of negating the original premise all together. According to Harris, "The media and general public barely blink when an owner is linked to politics or influences policy. Yet, in what is the epitome of hypocrisy, athletes are by and large held to a completely different and biased standard. A plurality of sports fans and media, consciously as much as subconsciously, continue to take the position that that it is an athlete's place, particularly Black athletes, to simply perform on the field, on the court and in the boxing ring, and just be thankful for the so-called privilege of being a highly paid professional athlete" (Harris 48). Just as there is historical precedence for socially conscious athletes rallying against a racially oppressive society, there too is historical precedence for this type of societal blowback. Douglass Hartmann, a professor of Sociology at the University of Minnesota, outlines this concept in his piece on the protests of the 1968 Olympics, "The Politics of Race and Sport: Resistance and Domination in the 1968 African American Olympic Protest Movement," "A reconstruction of this movement demonstrates, first of all, how a cultural arena like sport can make it possible for otherwise powerless racial and ethnic minorities to draw attention to their cause. Of course, as with most insurgent movements, such initiatives ultimately (and often very quickly) come up against structural impediments that work to reject or absorb their challenge and reinforce the hegemony of the established regime" (Hartmann 548). This idea is not lost on Kaepernick or his fellow protestors. He states, "As I was reading different articles, I came across

one that was talking about the scientific discourse of pathology and how white critique of black protests has always been used to delegitimize what the protest is really about [...] Calling it stupid, dumb, moronic, idiotic -- all of those things are a way to sidestep the real issue so you no longer have to address it" (qtd. in Borden B9). The impact of this societal response from protest detractors is twofold. Not only does it legitimize the idea that the protests have truly touched the nerve of an underlying issue, it lends further credence to the importance of athletes utilizing their unique platform to combat racial injustice.

More than anything, the negative response of the anthem protests is fueled by the same underlying racism the protests are themselves speaking out against. The concept of this prejudicial dichotomy between protestors and detractors reached a fever pitch when Donald Trump injected himself and his office into the conversation, lambasting not just the way in which the players were protesting, but the players, their messages, and even their mothers: "Wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, 'Get that son of a bitch off the field right now. Out. He's fired! He's fired!'" (qtd. in Jenkins). The statement was met with a strong outcry, largely positive for Trump supporters, and negative for those in opposition of his regime. As with much of the president's policies and ideals, the sentiment radiated with an underlying implication of race. Ta-Nehisi Coates, author and journalist specializing in cultural, social, and political issues, outlined this idea in his piece "The First White President" for *The Atlantic*:

"The triumph of Trump's campaign of bigotry presented the problematic spectacle of an American president succeeding at best in spite of his racism and possibly because of it. Trump moved racism from the euphemistic and plausibly deniable to the overt and freely claimed. This presented the country's thinking class with a dilemma. Hillary Clinton

simply could not be correct when she asserted that a large group of Americans was endorsing a candidate because of bigotry. The implications—that systemic bigotry is still central to our politics; that the country is susceptible to such bigotry; that the salt-of-the-earth Americans whom we lionize in our culture and politics are not so different from those same Americans who grin back at us in lynching photos” (Coates).

This new age climate of racial and ethnic injustice, driven by a large population of individuals striving to “make America great again,” hearkening back to the days of Ali, Smith, and Carlos, is continually moving from underlying, covert racism to a full-blown environment of tactile racism. This faction longs for athletes keeping quiet, falling in line, and to be happy that a large group of black players are lucky to even have what they have. Shut up, move on, stick to sports. This idea is furthered by Harris, who cannot envision meaningful change in the face of this bigoted backlash: “What should not be expected is the NFL as a collective body publically acknowledging the troubling racial and cultural divide permeating this nation and illuminated by the current presidential contest between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. One should not expect any NFL public service announcements decrying the killings of 12-year-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland or Terence Crutcher in Oklahoma or Nathan Manning in San Diego, who held a master’s degree in classical guitar and suffered from mental illness” (Harris 48). As the divide is brought further to the forefront, though, the pushback gets stronger. But within that pushback lies the importance of the protests and the role athletes play in creating conversation and change. As the dialogue crescendos, the opposition’s true intentions will surface, and then true change can take hold. The covert must become overt.

Clichés often become clichés due to their frequency of occurrence. As the adage goes, history repeats itself. In many ways the sentiment is positive, in others negative. A cyclical



wave of racial oppression certainly falls within the latter; however, the former is represented by the power the athlete possesses through their elevated platform. Sports have always, and will always be a necessary cog in the machinery of social interaction. That includes entertainment, escapism, heroism, nationalism. It also includes social activism, especially in the face of racial injustice, where professional sports are dominated by those very racial and ethnic groups that are being oppressed. Within detractors of protests, those who wish the voiceless would remain so, the very racial oppression being combated can be found. As more athletes are empowered to lend a voice to that injustice, the less power can be found in the hands of the oppressors. Sports and political stances against oppression are not exclusive, nor should they be. They are a symbiotic means to a more inclusive society.

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