

Policy Point—Counterpoint:

Do African American Athletes Have an Obligation to Fight Against Racial Injustice?

On February 26, 2012, Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old unarmed African American youth, was shot and killed by George Zimmerman, a neighborhood-watch coordinator who suspected Martin of being a criminal. Martin's death struck a chord with black America, which was all too familiar with racial profiling and violence. The news about Martin quickly made its way into the locker room of the Miami Heat, one of the NBA's top teams, led by Chris Bosh, Dwyane Wade, and LeBron James. The three superstars wanted to make a statement and decided to pose for a photograph. Posted to Twitter and Facebook, the image featured the entire team wearing hoodies, the same garment that Martin was wearing when killed. The players stood with their hands in their pockets, their heads lowered. The hashtag James attached to the photograph read "#WeWantJustice."

This was not the first time, nor would it be the last time, that black athletes engaged in social-justice activism. Following the deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, and others, all black males killed by police, black athletes responded en masse. They warmed up in t-shirts reading "I Can't Breathe," and "Black Lives Matter," emerged from the tunnel with their hands up ("Hands Up, Don't Shoot"), wrote editorials, gave interviews, and knelt during the U.S. National Anthem. All the while the public screamed for them to "shut up and play," to be grateful, to keep politics out of sports. The President of the United States even called them "sons of bitches."

This policy point-counterpoint, authored by history Ph.D. candidates BJ Marach and J. Marcos Reynolds, frames black-athletic activism as a longstanding historical debate reaching back to the late 1800s. Both argue for the efficacy of such activism and ground their analysis in

the “Revolt of the Black Athlete” of the late 1960s. From here they diverge. Marach contends that black athletes are under no obligation to protest racial injustice, while Reynolds concludes that their platform and position within the black community requires that they act.

Point: African American Athletes are Not Obligated to Fight Against Racial Injustice

In recent years, sports has become a stage upon which African American athletes have protested police violence, including most recently San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick kneeling during the U.S. national anthem. Reactions have ranged from solidarity with Kaepernick and others to profanity-laced demands by U.S. President Donald Trump that any player who protests should be fired. These protests have raised questions about whether sports are the appropriate platform for calling attention to social injustices. Athletes should be permitted to protest racial injustice, but they are under no *obligation* to do so. Engaging in activism could, and often does, irrevocably damage their careers. Such protests are also many times ineffective in forcing real social change.

The most obvious example of how protesting racial injustice can negatively affect athletes’ careers, as well as the efficacy of such protests, occurred in 1968 before and during the Olympic Games in Mexico City. Although the Civil Rights Movement in the United States had achieved several of its goals by this time, such as the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, there was still rampant discrimination against African Americans in the United States and people of color around the world. A group of athletes, led by San Jose State sociology instructor Harry Edwards, formed an organization called the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR) to organize a boycott of the Olympics by black athletes. The group had four demands. First, that South Africa and Rhodesia (both under white minority rule) be expelled from the games. Second, that Muhammad Ali’s boxing titles, which had been stripped from him for

refusing to fight in the Vietnam War, be restored. Third, that Avery Brundage step down as the President of the International Olympic Committee. Finally, that the Olympic team hire more African-American assistant coaches.¹

Although several athletes agreed to the boycott, none of them, including Edwards, possessed the world-class skills required to actually participate in the Games. The only truly elite athlete not to participate in the Games was UCLA basketball player Lew Alcindor, who would go on to dominate the NBA under the name Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. Conversely, the elite athletes who would eventually win medals at the 1968 games such as Ralph Boston (long jumper), Charlie Greene (sprinter), and Jim Hines (sprinter) openly spoke out against the boycott and were unwilling to sacrifice the dream of representing their country for which they had strived their entire lives. Following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the spring of 1968, these athletes expressed sympathy for the movement but still refused to participate in the boycott. Ralph Boston, for instance, said prior to the Games, “I believe that it is good and right that we fight for our people...but there are different ways of fighting and one man’s way is not necessarily the right way...nor does it have to be my way.” Many of these athletes believed that winning their events in the Olympics would send a stronger message about the quality of black athletes than not showing up.²

Historian Douglas Hartmann has argued that there is tension between protest “as a mode of structural power to force change and as a way to focus cultural attention on social issues,” such as racial injustice. This is precisely why athletes have never been under any obligation to fight for social justice. Many African American critics of the boycott cited its ineffectiveness. Charles Maher, a black journalist for the *Los Angeles Times*, explained, “I still can’t see how Harry [Edwards’s] caper is going to do much for the man in the ghetto...It doesn’t apply enough

muscle to people who might be in a position to help the Black man.” Even Edwards begrudgingly conceded that his main goal was to highlight racial injustice in the United States. There are profound differences between acts such as marching across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, and boycotting the Olympics or kneeling during the National Anthem. The latter acts, by design, were focused on raising awareness about an issue, and it would be unreasonable to demand that any athlete jeopardize their career and their livelihood for something that isn’t likely to affect real change.³

Athletes who choose to protest against racism and social injustice frequently suffer severe repercussions. The OPHR’s boycott of the Olympics eventually fell apart, and two of the black athletes took it upon themselves to carry out their own form of protest. American sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos each raised a black glove-clad fist while on the victory podium to symbolize Black Power following their first and third place finishes in the 200-meter race. The International Olympic Committee, as well as the U.S. Olympic Committee, promptly banned both athletes from the Olympic Village and forced them to return to the United States. Smith, who was under contract with the Los Angeles Rams of the National Football League, came back to the United States to learn that the team had terminated his contract. He eventually secured a job as a collegiate athletic director, but his companion in protest, John Carlos, was less fortunate. Carlos bounced around various occupations from semi-pro football to inner-city outreach, but he found mainly dead ends. He heard from his agent that “no businessman in his right mind would hire me.”⁴ The protest had cost them their careers.

Smith and Carlos were neither the first nor the last athletes to experience negative consequences to their careers as a result of their decision to protest injustice. Boxer Muhammad Ali refused to fight in the Vietnam War and was banned from competing for three years in the

prime of his career. In 1967, the track team at the University of Texas El Paso declined to compete in a track meet at Brigham Young University because of racism at the university. UTEP kicked them off the team and revoked their scholarships. Colin Kaepernick, the former San Francisco 49ers' quarterback credited with igniting the recent trend of kneeling for the National Anthem, has also found his career in a crater. After achieving modest success in the NFL, he remains unemployed. Kaepernick has filed suit against the NFL for colluding against him to end his career. Regardless of whether we judge athletes' protests against injustice as heroic or villainous, it is wrong to deem them mandatory, especially in the absence of any certainty of the protests' ability to result in real social change.⁵

Counterpoint: African American Athletes Have an Obligation to Fight Against Racial Injustice

The reemergence of activism among black professional athletes is the latest flare up of the culture wars. The symbolic protests are not only an appropriate form of social expression for the sports arena, but political activism is part of an ongoing tradition in American sports. Throughout U.S. sports history, college and professional athletics have alternately rejected and reinforced racist ideologies.⁶ Black athletes have historically used their unique place in society to mount challenges to racial segregation and initiate social change. Contemporary athletes have an obligation to continue this practice, to draw attention to, and delimit persisting racial inequities. Furthermore, these acts of protest, in the context of rising racial tension, heighten racial pride and consciousness in the black community and represent an act of agency on the part of the athletes, who are rejecting police abuses against the black community and racial inequality.

Activism in athletics has been an enduring feature of sports in the United States, where black athletes have used sporting events to challenge racial discrimination. During the late 1960s, athletes, inspired in part by the Black Power Movement, became more involved in social justice activism and less accommodating of racial discrimination in sports, and in American society in general.⁷ Harry Edwards established the Olympic Project for Human Rights to initiate a boycott by black athletes of the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City and to draw attention to the problem of racism in sports and U.S. society.⁸ With the proposed boycott, the athletes denounced the idea that sports were innately egalitarian, and while it ultimately fell through, and the athletes failed to realize significant social change, they drew attention to the problem of racial discrimination, and challenged the racial status quo.⁹ During the awards ceremony at the Olympics, by raising their fists in a salute and bowing their heads, athletes John Carlos and Tommie Smith challenged notions about race, drew attention to race as an enduring factor in American life, and demonstrated their resolve to continue to fight for equality, just like the players today with their symbolic acts of protest.¹⁰

In the late 1960s, black college athletes also became increasingly involved in activism and protested the discrimination they experienced. At the time, discriminatory practices were still commonplace in sports.¹¹ In the American South, many colleges were only beginning to desegregate sporting events, and some teams flatly refused to play northern colleges and universities that included black athletes.¹² Black athletes reported that they experienced discrimination in student housing, employment, and from university personnel, including administrators and coaches.¹³ In 1968, dozens of sit-ins and boycotts took place at universities across the country, led by athletes who rejected discriminatory practices.¹⁴ The athletes' activism

caused African Americans to become more conscious of race and express racial pride, and it resulted in increased acts of racial solidarity by black athletes across the country.

A number of athletes have realized significant social change as a result of their activism. In 1969, St. Louis Cardinals centerfielder, Curt Flood challenged the so-called reserve clause, which restricted players from entering into new contracts with other teams, and allowed sports franchises to trade their players as they saw fit.¹⁵ By filing suit against Major League Baseball, Flood began the process of dismantling the restrictive labor policy. Arthur Ashe, a star tennis player, struck back against racial segregation on an international scale during his trip to South Africa in 1973, where he refused to play at the championship tournament, unless the stands were integrated.¹⁶ More recently, black athletes at the University of Missouri exercised their power by demanding the resignation of the president of the university, who had demonstrated an inability to improve race relations on the campus.¹⁷

The athletic arena is a proven site of political contestation. Black athletes have maintained a very privileged position in black communities due to the significance of sports, and some have been transformative figures who used their prowess in the sports arena to challenge notions about race relations and black stereotypes.¹⁸ Pugilist Jack Jackson, for example, heightened racial consciousness and pride among African Americans during the Jim Crow era, and due to the mass commodification of sports, star athletes like Johnson influenced the political and intellectual debates about race.¹⁹ His string of victories in defense of his heavyweight championship title galvanized black communities across the country, who were overcome with jubilation when he defeated Jim Jeffries, the so-called “Great White Hope.”²⁰ Historian Davarian L. Baldwin explained that Jack Johnson did more than win—he exemplified the New Negro archetype, who was self-reliant, creative, and race conscious.²¹ Sports provided the arena for the

emergence of a sports hero like Johnson, and his victories, in the ring and outside it, were transformative.

Political, intellectual, and social activism have always been an enduring feature of U.S. sports, and it should continue. Athletes play a major role in American culture today, and have a great deal of influence they can wield over contemporary political debates. African American players should continue this tradition because it is in the interest of black athletes to break down racial barriers. Acts of protest increase racial solidarity, can lead to reconsiderations of black identity, and elevate racial pride in African American communities. Since sports have become so central to American culture, perhaps few other social spaces are more important for influencing the terms of contemporary cultural debates, and the players themselves have an important role to play.

ENDNOTES

¹ Douglas Hartmann, *Race, Culture, and the Revolt of the Black Athlete: The 1968 Olympic Protest and Their Aftermath* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 62-3, 133.

² Ibid.; John Matthew Smith “ ‘It’s Not Really My Country’: Lew Alcindor and the Revolt of the Black Athlete,” *Journal of Sport History* 36, no. 9 (Summer 2009):.

³ Hartman. *Race, Culture, and the Revolt of the Black Athlete*, 124, 133-4, 149-50.

⁴ Amy Bass, *Not the Triumph but the Struggle: The 1968 Olympics and the Making of the Black Athlete* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 316-22.

⁵ Ibid.; *Washington Post*, 15 October 2017; David K. Wiggins, *Glory Bound: Black Athletes in a White America* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 111-2.

⁶ Charles H. Martin, *Benching Jim Crow: the Rise and Fall of the Color Line in Southern College Sports, 1890-1980* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), xix.

⁷ Richard Hoffer, *Something In the Air: American Passion and Defiance in the 1968 Olympics* (New York: Free Press, 2009), 55.

⁸ Kevin B. Witherspoon, *Before the Eyes of the World: Mexico and the 1968 Olympic Games* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008), 97.

⁹ Amy Bass, *Not the Triumph but the Struggle: the 1968 Olympics and the Making of the Black Athlete* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 98.

¹⁰ Russell T. Wiggington, *The Strange Career of the Black Athlete: African Americans and Sports* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2006) 70; David K. Wiggins, *Glory Bound*, 106.

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- ¹¹ Lane Demas, *Integrating the Gridiron: Black Civil Rights and American College Football* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 107.
- ¹² Pamela Grundy, *Learning to Win: Sports, Education, and Social Change in Twentieth-Century North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 269.
- ¹³ Demas, *Integrating the Gridiron*, 107.
- ¹⁴ Wiggins, *Glory Bound*, 110.
- ¹⁵ Richard O. Davies, *Sports in American Life: a History* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 295.
- ¹⁶ Eric Allen Hall, *Tennis and Justice in the Civil Rights Era* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 169.
- ¹⁷ Joe Nocera, "College Athletes' Potential Realized in Missouri Resignations," *The New York Times*, 9 November 2015.
- ¹⁸ Earl Smith, *Race, Sport and the American Dream*, 7.
- ¹⁹ Theresa Runstedtler, *Jack Johnson, Rebel Sojourner: Boxing in the Shadow of the Global Color Line* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 85.
- ²⁰ Davies, *Sports in American*, 197.
- ²¹ Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 15.