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- 1 In the years leading up to the 50th anniversary of the most famous protest in modern sport history—the clenched fist salutes of Tommie Smith and John Carlos on the victory podium at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics—a remarkable thing happened: a new generation of activist African American athletes and other allies burst onto the stage. The movement has been headlined by the former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick’s extraordinary decision to kneel during the playing of the American national anthem during NFL pre-game ceremonies in 2016, his being black-balled out of the league, and his subsequent (and ongoing) condemnation of police brutality against African American men and other form of racial injustice in the U.S. Kaepernick’s acts of defiance have warranted a huge outpouring of support in some quarters—including reenactments at colleges and high schools and across different sporting events and other venues all across the country—and equally intense backlash in others.
- 2 But the roots of Black athletic activism go back several years before Kaepernick, at least to the emergence of Black Lives Matter movement itself, and the scale and scope of contemporary Black athletic activism extends well beyond Kaepernick’s “take a knee” campaign as well. In the summer of 2016 alone, actions included: NBA star and American Olympian Carmelo Anthony urging athletes to quit worrying about their endorsement deals and speak out on police killings; tennis player Serena Williams offering support and then a clenched fist salute on the hallowed grounds of Wimbledon, after years of protests with her sister Venus against racist treatment of crowds at an event in California; the testimonials of Anthony and fellow NBA stars Chris Paul, LeBron James, and Dwyane Wade at the ESPYs awards on ESPN; WNBA players and teams, led by the Minnesota Lynx, dressing in support of Black Lives Matter and against police shootings; the NBA moving next year’s annual All-Star game out of North Carolina because of that state’s LGBTQ politics.¹

- 3 What is remarkable about all this is that in the last decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first, African American athletes—even those known to be thoughtful and politically aware—had been conspicuous by their silence on social issues, shying away from public commentary on any issues perceived to be controversial or political in any way. Perhaps the poster-child of this apolitical attitude was the basketball star Michael Jordan. When pushed to speak out on racial issues in the 1990s and express support for Democratic candidates in his home state of North Carolina, Jordan reportedly demurred: “Republicans buy sneakers too.”²
- 4 So why is all this happening now? How unique is this current wave of African American athletic activism? And what larger lessons or implications can we draw from it?
- 5 These are very important questions, and the overarching goal of this paper is to provide some historical perspective on them. I will do this by setting this current wave of activism, advocacy, and mobilization in the context of the Black Olympic activism of the late 1960s—that is, the “Revolt of the Black Athlete” that gave rise to Smith and Carlos’s iconic victory stand demonstration.³ Using the activism of 1968 as both a historical touchstone and a comparison point will, I believe, help us better theorize the African American athletic activism that is happening today. At least four primary and overarching arguments will result: first, that athletic mobilization is closely related to and grows out of larger racial movements of the period (the Civil Rights/Black Power movement in the case of 1968, and Black Lives Matter today); second, that the athletic activism we are witnessing in the contemporary moment is bigger, broader, and more sustained than any prior in American history; third, that sports-based protest remains polarizing and that critics are increasingly emboldened to use sports for their own political purposes; and fourth, while the contemporary movement may reveal the substantial dependence of the athletic establishment on African American athletes, its real societal power still lies in the ability of athletic activists to attract attention and impact broader cultural narratives about race and social justice.
- 6 These arguments, which are meant to be suggestive not definitive, will be developed in three main parts. I will begin by providing a basic historical overview of the organizing effort behind Smith and Carlos’s iconic victory stand gesture—specifically, the year-long effort to mobilize an athlete boycott of the 1968 Mexico City Games, what organizers called the “Olympic Project for Human Rights” (OPHR). In the second portion of the paper, I will then compare and contrast the athletic activism of the late 1960s with the protests and advocacy which we are currently witnessing; it is in this section that I will develop the analytic points outlined above. The paper will conclude by suggesting the lessons these movements and the reactions they have provoked hold for our understandings of race, protest, and politics in sports as a way to highlight the unique challenges of social change in and through athletic activism.
- 7 In terms of data and methods, the first part of the paper will be based upon the historical research and sociological analysis that I and others have produced on the Black athletic revolt of 1968 over the years.⁴ The second part of the paper is informed by new and emerging scholarly treatments of this new, contemporary wave of athletic activism as well as my own reading of media coverage and online archival sources.⁵ I have also conducted interviews with a handful of athletes, administrators, and reporters involved with African American athletes and their protests over the past few years. The final section on the unique cultural status of sport as a site for protest and social change is informed by my own research and writing on the racial space of modern Western sport as

“serious play,” and norms separating sport and politics. Again, the overarching goal is to provide historical perspective and a conceptual overview to begin to make sense of the new, 21st century era of Black athletic activism.

1. The Original Revolt: The Basics of 1960s Athletic Activism and Olympic Protest

- 8 The African American athletic revolt of 1968 was not the single, spontaneous act of two isolated, malcontents as is sometimes implied or assumed. Quite the contrary, it was the result of a year-long attempt by Tommie Smith along with other athletes and activists—including his San Jose State teammate and friend Lee Evans and their sociology instructor Harry Edwards—to organize a black boycott of the 1968 Olympic Games. It was an organizing campaign they called “the Olympic Project for Human Rights” (OPHR). Until recently, it was the largest, most-well known, and most impactful athletic protest movement in U.S. history.⁶
- 9 The boycott effort and larger movement it gave rise to started innocently and almost unexpectedly in the fall of 1967 when Smith told a reporter that he was open to the possibility of an Olympic boycott following a race in Tokyo, Japan. Smith’s comments provoked an incredible level of national and international attention (and outrage) and over the months to come, Smith, Evans, Edwards, and others at San Jose State—the home of one of the greatest collection of sprinters in U.S. history—reached out to other elite, Olympic caliber athletes in hopes of building support for a boycott. Their early efforts included a highly publicized workshop on athletic activism in Los Angeles, the creation of organizing pamphlets, telephone calls and mailings all over the country, and a major national press conference in New York City in December of 1967. In New York, activists from all across the civil rights spectrum such as Martin Luther King, Jr., H. Rap Brown, and Louie Lomax spoke in support of a list of demands for racial justice within the athletic establishment.
- 10 Although a boycott never materialized, the athlete activists were extraordinarily active and nationally visible in the months leading up to the Games. The OPHR organized a highly successful boycott of the fabled New York Athletic Club (NYAC) indoor track meet, attracted endorsements and assistance from prominent black athletes such as Lew Alcindor (the UCLA basketball star who became one of the greatest players in the sport’s history as Kareem Abdul Jabbar), All-Star football running back and aspiring actor Jim Brown, Bill Russell from the Boston Celtics, and the man who integrated Major League Baseball, Jackie Robinson. As spokesperson and lead organizer of the movement, Harry Edwards himself was profiled in national publications such as the *New York Times*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *Newsweek*. Also, dozens of smaller scale protests resulting from black athlete’s complaints about “everything from unfair dress codes to inadequate treatment of injuries by prejudiced athletic trainers” began to emerge on predominantly white college and university campuses across the country.⁷
- 11 Perhaps not surprisingly, the activism and organizing efforts generated fairly significant backlash and opposition along the way. White sportswriters and reporters across the country condemned the boycott initiative and all athletically-based protest from the beginning and almost universally, as did leaders and elites within the athletic establishment such as the International Olympic Committee President, the American

Avery Brundage, and U.S. Olympic legend Jessie Owens. At one point, then-California Governor Ronald Reagan called for Edwards to be dismissed from his Cal State instructorship. (Edwards, in turn, called Reagan "a petrified pig, unfit to govern.") The Vice President of the United States, Hubert Humphrey, in the middle of his own unsuccessful campaign for the White House, even stepped in to try to convince the athletes to call off their boycott threat.⁸

12 There are several points about the 1968 Olympic protest movement that bear particular significance for contemporary, 21st century race-based athletic activists and initiatives. One has to do with the basic vision, targets, and specific objectives of athletic advocacy and mobilization. The Olympic activism of 1968 is often understood or remembered for its condemnation of prejudice and discrimination in the athletic arena. Such interpretations are understandable. After all, the athletic realm was the target of its most specific and memorable demands for action (for example, reinstatement of Muhammad Ali to his heavyweight boxing title or the removal of American Avery Brundage from his leadership of US and international Olympic organizations), and some of its most tangible accomplishments were reforms in the world of sport itself (more on this shortly). However, such a sport-centric emphasis is a kind of revisionist history. The primary motivations and goals of the OPHR from its initial launch onward were **not** about protesting against racism in sport, but rather involved using the prominence of African American athletes to call attention to societal racism more generally in service of the larger movement for racial justice.

13 In one of his earliest interviews, for example, Tommie Smith asked the questions: "What the hell is going on in the U.S.? I'm a human. What kind of rights do I have? What kinds of rights don't I have? Why can't I get those rights?" The answers, Smith came to conclude, were because of "racial ostracism."⁹ The advocacy of Smith and his teammates was just part of the larger movement against that racism, their attempt to contribute to the ongoing struggle.

There have been a lot of marches, protests, and sit-ins on the situation of Negro ostracism in the US. I don't think this boycott of the Olympic will stop the problem, but I think people will see that we will not sit on our haunches and take this sort of stuff. Our goal would not be just to improve conditions for ourselves and our teammates but to improve things for the entire Negro community.¹⁰

14 Basketball star Lew Alcindor put it succinctly in this widely-publicized quote from the organizing workshop in the fall of 1967:

[L]ast summer I was almost killed by a racist cop shooting at a black cat in Harlem.... Somewhere each of us have got to make a stand against this kind of thing. This is how I take my stand—using what I have.¹¹

15 This emphasis on societal rather than athletic racism signals the emergence of a sophisticated and newly emerging understanding of sport and its relationship to race, racism, and social change, one that persists today. After the breakthrough successes of early 20th century superstar athletes like Jackie Robinson, Joe Louis, and Jessie Owens, black athletes (and many others in both the sporting establishment and African American leadership circles) viewed sport as an inherently, almost automatically progressive social space and prided themselves on being leaders in the struggle for racial equity by their athletic accomplishments alone. In the earlier, Jim Crow-segregationist part of the century, athletes could fulfill a progressive role simply by being athletes. Their athletic prowess spoke for itself as a direct rebuke to racist beliefs about segregation and black inferiority. In the 1960s, however, as more and more black athletes were coming to the

fore and as the civil rights movement was breaking down barriers for African Americans in society at large, this was no longer the case. In this new historical context, in fact, athletic success was beginning to have the opposite function or effect. Increasingly in the 1960s, mainstream white America was coming to view black athletes, both domestically and internationally, as symbols of the openness of American race relations, using their success as an argument against the need for further social change.¹² In other words, black athletic stars were being used to legitimate the racial status quo. As high jumper Gene Johnson explained:

The United States exalts its Olympic star athletes as representatives of a democratic and free society, when millions of Negro and other minority citizens are excluded from decent housing and meaningful employment.¹³

16 Socially conscious, politically committed African American athletes were becoming acutely aware of the way they were being used and, more importantly, unwilling to tolerate it. This recognition was a major motivator for the African American athletes who participated in protests in the year leading up to the 1968 Olympic Games. They would, as Harry Edwards put it, "no longer allow" mainstream America to "use [themselves] to rationalize its treatment of the black masses."¹⁴

17 OPHR activists tried to frame this new understanding of sport as a vehicle for social change as consistent with sport's long celebrated history as a leader in the quest for racial justice and civil rights, often going to great lengths to explain that it was not sports that they were protesting. Again, Tommie Smith:

I recognize that Negroes have had greater opportunities in sports in general and the Olympics in particular than they have had in other fields. I'm an athlete, I have stature only in the field of athletics and any action I take can only be effective there.¹⁵

18 This framing was a tough sell, however. More often than not, Smith and his compatriots were seen as radicals and militants, ungrateful black Americans and traitors to sport's ideals of itself and its place in society.

19 The reasons for this treatment were complicated and remain that way still today. They stem, at least in my analysis, from the ways in which sport idealism, liberal democratic idealism (especially regarding individualism, competition, and merit), and the mainstream culture of civil rights and social change all combine to create an ideological structure that allows only certain, individualistic and formalist kinds of racial advocacy, equity, and justice.¹⁶ Sport participation, in this popular idealization, almost automatically exemplifies and thus contributes to racial advancement and understanding; protesting in or through sport, simply is not compatible with these idealized conceptions.

20 This framing calls our attention to another key factor animating this new conception of sports and the need for a more instrumental approach to using its power to contribute to social change: the broader social context of the Civil Rights Movement and the complexities of the struggle for racial justice by the late 1960s. Just as all the events of 1968 radicalized many young people in the United States, so too for African American athletes. It is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine activism among Black athletes emerging in the absence of the evolving struggle for civil rights and racial justice. Indeed, the threat of an Olympic boycott along with all of the various mobilizations and protests that followed were less the result of mistreatment in sport than it was a growing frustration with the limitations of the Civil Rights movement itself. As Edwards put it in

one of their earliest organizing pamphlets: "The roots of the protest spring from the same seed that produced the sit-ins, the freedom rides and the rebellions in Watts, Detroit and Newark."¹⁷ According to Lee Evans,

A lot of militancy was rising in the black community. We stopped referring to ourselves as colored or Negro. You were black or you were not black. An Afro haircut was a statement of black nationalism. Nineteen sixty-seven was the first year I was proud of my skin being black.¹⁸

- 21 The tensions between the emphasis on civil rights in the earlier 1960s and the emergence of the black power phase of the movement (and its more structuralist or systemic orientation) in the later years of the decade created obvious tensions for activist-minded athletes who were ideologically more comfortable with the former but pressured toward the latter. They help explain why support for the OPHR was limited, even among the most politically conscious athletes. Legendary long jumper Ralph Boston, for example, may have sympathized with some of the activist's goals, but did not believe they were sufficient to justify an all-out Olympic boycott. (It is not accidental that Smith refused to call the victory stand demonstration a "black power" salute, though the more radical Carlos did and it quickly came to be understood that way and remains so today). Still, the more basic point here is that athletic protest would have been inconceivable were it not for these broader movements, and the radicalization of the struggle.
- 22 Smith, Evans, and Carlos, and their like-minded teammates, experienced much of this on the predominately white college campuses on which they lived, studied, and trained.¹⁹ Other activists—such as students in the Black Union at SJS—pressured their African American athlete classmates to be more involved and, more specifically, to take a stand in service of the movement's demands for more structural, institutional changes in society. Black student-athletes also took courses on black history and culture that served to help them understand what was happening in the country and to re-imagine their role and responsibilities therein. (Again, Edwards, a sociology instructor, had many of sprinters in his popular courses on black leadership and social change in American society). At San Jose State, a successful protest at a fall football game really opened their eyes to the possibility of using race-based activism on the fields of athletic competition to bring racial inequities to larger public attention.
- 23 So what did all the athletic organizing, advocacy, and activism of the Olympic Project for Human Rights accomplish? The subtitle of Amy Bass's 2004 study of the movement, "Not the Triumph but the Struggle," captures one way, perhaps the dominant way, to answer this question. There were surely some successes—the calling out of old-school bigotry and racism in the athletic establishment and the boycott of the NYAC track meet early in 1968, for example. But an Olympic boycott itself never materialized, Smith and Carlos and their various allies were treated harshly, and none of this seemed to change many American minds about American race problems or the need for further social change.
- 24 However, we should not be too dismissive. For one thing, the race-based Olympic activism of 1968 gave rise to other protests and forms of athletic radicalization in the late 1960s and early 1970s. There is no doubt that the radicalism of the Black athletes who pushed for an Olympic boycott in 1968 paved the way for Arthur Ashe's protests against South African apartheid, Curt Flood's stand for free agency in professional baseball, or race-based athletic protests at colleges and universities ranging from Wyoming, BYU, and the University of Texas at El Paso.²⁰ Moreover, the athletes' rights movement of the early 1970s²¹ owed much—vision and tactics and basic inspiration—to the Olympic Project for

Human Rights as did the organizing and mobilization that led to the unionization of professional athletes in the United States across the period. Even the rise of women's sports and the Title IX movement was part of this wave of activism and athletic reform.

- 25 At a broader level, the Olympic activism of 1968 also paved the way to new understandings of sport's role in society and athletes' understanding of themselves as social actors. One key accomplishment of the athletic activists of 1968 was to keep issues of racial inequality and racism in the public eye, in front of the American public and even on a global stage. This was no easy task or simple accomplishment. At a moment when much of mainstream, white America would have rather gotten past Civil Rights and racial justice and moved on to other things, the ability to use the threat of an Olympic boycott constituted an enduring general lesson about the cultural power and primary social change function of sport. In my view, the biggest accomplishments of the activism of 1968 were symbolic and cultural, involving the media attention and the powerful platform that athletes and their voices were afforded due to their status and standing as exceptional athletes.
- 26 Much of the symbolic power of sport revealed by the activism of 1968 was illustrated and embodied in the organizing of Harry Edwards himself. Scholars have often focused on his organizing acumen and his role in educating Smith, Evans, and Carlos and their brethren.²² Given the limited number of Olympic caliber athletes who endorsed an actual boycott, however, it was Edwards' media savvy, personal charisma, and public relations genius that really made the movement and the threat of a boycott even relevant.
- 27 Edwards' public relations skills were on display in December of 1967 when he, along with Martin Luther King, Jr., appeared at a press conference in support of the boycott proposal and a list of six protest demands. These demands were part of a strategy intended to convince otherwise reluctant athletes to consider supporting the boycott. There was no reason to expect that any of the demands they offered would really be enacted. After all, no institution or individual had the power or authority to enact them. But this was not the point. Edwards and his collaborators were using the demands to force their agenda for racial change in the public eye. Edwards and the OPHR were at their most brilliant in the summer and late fall of 1968. Even after it became clear to insiders that the possibility of an all-out, full-fledged black boycott of the US Olympic team was gone, Edwards kept the essential collapse of the boycott out of the media, and when questions mounted he mysteriously announced a change in strategy explaining the OPHR would not announce its intentions until after the team reached Mexico City. "There is only one thing more confusing than a rumor," he told reporters, "and that's a million rumors."²³ Again, the point was to use the threat of a boycott—predicated on the prominence of black athletes and America's desire for their international success—to focus attention to the cause of racial injustice in the United States. This was a lesson that has endured.
- 28 And when it comes to illustrating the cultural power of sport protest for generating public attention, there is no better example than the victory stand demonstration itself. This paper is not the place for a full review of the symbolic brilliance of this protest gesture and the lessons it holds with respect to Olympic ceremony and sport ideology, especially as they pertain to liberal democratic ideologies of race, sport, and social justice.²⁴ But one thing that is striking about this demonstration is that it did not do or say much more than simply assert that race and racism—the race of Smith and Carlos, their identity as African Americans and the injustices experienced—was a topic of epic, global import. The enduring power of the victory stand gesture crystallizes sport's expressive potential

and unique ability to focus cultural attention to issues of race and racial injustice (rather than force any particular material or institutional change). It shows us the remarkable ritual, cultural power of sport to capture attention and send messages—regardless of what other concrete, tangible results may or may not accrue. All of this is the legacy and achievements of the Olympic activism of 1968.

2. Contextualization, Comparison, Contrast: Contemporary Black Athletic Activism

- 29 The history of the OPHR's 1968 boycott project and the protests of athletes of the period more broadly reminds us, first and foremost, that the African American athletic activism of the contemporary era is far from unprecedented. To the contrary, it is part of a long historical legacy of socially-minded and activist oriented black athletes—"Protest 2.0" as David Leonard (2017) describes it, the "heritage" as Howard Bryant calls it, or the "fourth wave" of an even longer trajectory of racial change through sport according to Harry Edwards in his plenary keynote to the North American Society for the Study of Sport in the fall of 2016.²⁵ And this legacy is not just abstract or imagined. Media coverage of the most recent generation of activism regularly harkens back to the 1960s, especially Smith and Carlos's iconic victory stand demonstration, and athlete-activists often invoke memories themselves as inspirational.
- 30 None of this is surprising. Much of what we know—or think we know—about black athletic activism (not to mention sport-based activism more generally) has been informed by scholarly reading and understanding of the lessons of 1968.²⁶ Here it is also worth noting that athlete activists from the 1960s such as Kareem Abdul Jabbar and John Carlos himself have also both come out in support of Kaepernick and other forms of activism in and around the sporting arena. In fact, Harry Edwards has served Kaepernick as something of a confidant, collaborator, and counselor, and Carlos has taken on a lead role in the contemporary athletic activist movement, promoting their racial causes and defending athletes' right to speak out. So situating the athletic activism of today in the context of the history of 1968 is not only about abstract connections, but about concrete historical precedents and direct social comparisons.²⁷
- 31 The parallels are notable. Today's athlete activists—like those who came before them in 1968—are well-informed, deliberate, and reflective, responding thoughtfully to social issues such as police brutality and profiling, persistent racial gaps in education or income, and even hateful gender and sexuality policies outside the world of sport. They are, moreover, voicing these concerns in concert with other public and community leaders and often in direct collaboration with other, non-sport activists and organizers. Sometimes their motivations are quite personal, stemming from their own ongoing individual experiences with racism and discrimination (tennis player James Blake's experience with police brutality comes to mind). More often, activist athletes speak and act in support of communities of color — their communities — that continue to face persistent racism and discrimination.
- 32 In a society that continues to be plagued by disproportionate police brutality, persistent racial gaps, and overt bigotry and bias, Black athlete activists do not take their activities lightly or think of them as disrespectful or anti-American. Quite the contrary and in the legacy of 1968, they understand activism as consistent with the higher moral standards,

ideals, and aspirations of both American democracy and sport culture. These athletic activists, it seems apparent, also know that their demonstrations are unlikely to produce concrete social change, on the one hand, and that they will confront backlash and opposition on the other. Indeed, for many the whole point is to call attention to issues that are otherwise being ignored.

- 33 Much like the Olympic mobilization of the late 1960s, the current wave of African American athletic activism did not materialize overnight. Although Colin Kaepernick's "take a knee" campaign has occupied much of the current public attention, the immediate roots of this awareness and protest can be traced to back several years to the anger and outrage that emerged in the black community and beyond about police brutality and the shootings of young black men such as Trayvon Martin and Mike Brown—and the subsequent emergence and consolidation of the Black Lives Matter movement. LeBron James and his Miami Heat teammates tweeting out a picture of themselves in hoodies, with heads bowed in support of Trayvon Martin, a few years back was just one prominent early example. St. Louis Rams football players entering the field in the "hands up" gesture of Ferguson protestors was another. Others recall when the entire Phoenix Suns team wore jerseys in solidarity with Latinos who felt threatened by proposed anti-immigration legislation in Arizona. Since then, we've witnessed an array of NBA players led by Chris Paul threatening to boycott the NBA All-Star Game unless something done to disavow the blatant racism of then-owner Donald Sterling, and WNBA players standing in support of protesters calling out police brutality and unjust shootings across the country.²⁸ And perhaps most amazingly, in the fall of 2015 members of the University of Missouri football team used the threat of a boycott to help force the removal of their university's President for his (mis)handling of instances of racial bigotry on campus at that institution.²⁹
- 34 Setting this activism—just a partial representation of all the race-based athletic activism of the present—in the context of the athletic protests of 1968 also helps highlight what is extraordinary and indeed historically distinctive about the current wave of activity.
- 35 One of characteristics that is most unique is the size, scale, and sustainability of the athletic mobilization we are witnessing today. The activism of the current era is not limited to a small set of the most elite, Olympic caliber or even college scholarship athletes, but extends broadly to include an extremely large numbers of athletes and supporters across the full spectrum of the sporting system. Sports all across the athletic landscape have witnessed a range of gestures, statements, and protest actions, and this mobilization has occurred at all levels of sport ranging from professional athletics to collegiate and university sport and including high school and even youth athletics.³⁰ While a full documentation of the larger movement as a whole remains to be done, it is apparent nonetheless apparent that we are not just talking about dozens of activists and actions (as was the case in the 1960s), but hundreds and even thousands of actions and activists all across the country.³¹
- 36 My own interviews and tracking suggests that a broad base of involvement has been in place since the early days of the larger Black Lives Matter movement; however, the size and scope of the movement was particularly evident in response to Kaepernick taking a knee to push back against systemic racism and police brutality. In the days, weeks, and months that followed his initial actions, hundreds of demonstrations of support and solidarity appeared at high school and recreational sports fields across the country.³² Drawing inspiration from Kaepernick, activists and demonstrations moved from the

spectacle of Fox NFL Sunday or 80,000 seat stadiums to the playing fields of interscholastic high school sports and local parks and recreation centers with old rusty bleachers and a few hundred friends and family. There is much room to investigate the relationship between the gestures of professional black athletes and youth emulating their actions, but clearly sports activism in the new era is grassroots as well as elite.

- 37 Another historically unique feature of the current wave of activism is the role of female athletes of various races. The social awareness and public stances against racism and other social injustices of professional athletes such as Serena and Venus Williams, soccer player Megan Rapinoe, and the entire Minnesota Lynx WNBA team obviously come to mind.³³ Though often not embraced in the press, public, and scholarly arenas, it seems to me that women have been particularly active and influential—if, sometimes, behind the scenes—in mobilizing athletic resistance in colleges and universities and at more local, grassroots levels. For example, in the upper-midwestern colleges and universities where I have been observing, it is female athletes—and especially female athletes of color—who have been far more likely to take a knee or speak out in support of athletic activism in public. And as details about the University of Missouri football boycott become public, it will likely be clear that it was women of color activists who really pushed the behind-the-scenes discussions of what and how African American athletes could use their status to contribute to larger social causes. This, of course, is in marked contrast to 1968 when female athletes (including the great Wyomia Tyus) and women in general were marginalized and ignored in both the boycott organizing effort as well as attempts to stand in support of Smith and Carlos in the aftermath of their protest.³⁴
- 38 The support and involvement of white teammates, coaches, managers, and owners is also at a much higher level today than it was in the past. It is not entirely unprecedented for white coaches and teammates to stand in support of their players' right to free speech or even larger projects of racial justice: the late Dean Smith, basketball coach at the University of North Carolina, comes to mind, as does San Jose State track coach Bud Winters or UCLA's legendary John Wooden. But the number of white teammates and coaches and others who have come out in support of athletic activism and even joined the fray themselves today is at a whole new level. White players and coaches all across the sporting landscape have stood in support of their teammates right to free speech and political expression even if they have not always gone so far as to endorse their actual causes and analyses. The actions of the NBA and WBNA have been unprecedented in this respect. The leagues have been extremely proactive in support of the racial and social justice advocacy of their players (including moving their annual All-Star Game in the wake of homophobic policies passed in North Carolina), and coaches such as Greg Popovich (of the San Antonio Spurs) and Steve Kerr (of the multi-time champion Golden State Warriors) have been outspoken not only in support of activist athletes and their causes but also in terms of actively opposing the President's racial rhetoric and policy agenda. Together, professional basketball coaches and players have been the preeminent modern day athletic actors to seize the platform for public awareness and advocacy afforded by the sports arena.
- 39 While the sporting establishment may appear to be more tolerant and accommodating of athletic activism today than in 1968, this is not necessarily because sports leaders/elites have become more supportive of Black athletes and their causes. More likely, it is because they are far more dependent on—and aware of—the labor of African American athletes than they have in the past.³⁵ This can be seen in collegiate circles where the NCAA has, for

the most part, acknowledged the rights to speech of student-athletes yet also taken steps to minimize opportunities for public attention and controversy. It is perhaps most evident in the case of the NFL where owners, who are among the most politically conservative in the sporting establishment (not to mention the fan base), have repeatedly been forced to negotiate agreements on various racial and social issues with its African American-dominated players union.³⁶ The increased structural power of Black athletes is, in my view, among the primary lessons of one of the most remarkable and yet still underappreciated episodes of the current era of Black athletic activism: the threatened football boycott at the University of Missouri in 2015.

- 40 On a Saturday afternoon that fall the news came that some 30 African American members of the University of Missouri football had announced they would not practice or play until the President of their institution resigned. Just as this was sinking in, a second unexpected and almost entirely unprecedented thing happened: Missouri football coach Gary Pinkel, and a host of players and coaches tweeted his/their support of the protest and their commitment to honor the boycott unless the student-athletes' demands were met. The boycott threat bears many of the characteristics and traits I have highlighted above. Like the athlete activists of 1968 or LeBron and his teammates in Miami, these young men were not only protesting against mistreatment within the world of sport, they were also trying to use the platform that their prominence as athletes afforded them to speak to racism on campus and in society. Additionally, they worked in concert with other student activists on campus—in this case, with African American students who were protesting about racism and the inattention to racism on campus, especially in the aftermath of the events in Ferguson, Missouri, just outside of the St. Louis metro where many of these students grew up. The Missouri football players were not just sympathetic to the grievances and demands of the student groups, they were in direct communication with them.³⁷ Once again, this broader historical context and social connections to others in the activism community, in other words, were crucial.
- 41 What was exceptional about the activism of the athletes on this highly ranked team was their demands and their insistence that changes need to be taken before they would play football for the University. Harkening back to the Olympic boycott threat of the 1960s, this was more than just using sport as a platform of political expression. Exactly what role the football players boycott threat had in hastening the President (and the Chancellor's) departure is still being debated, but surely the chain of events was linked. The University of Missouri would have reportedly been assessed a million dollar penalty if the team did not lay its scheduled game against BYU the next weekend—and this amount does not even begin to factor in the revenue that would have been lost from ticket sales, concessions, and television rights and advertising the would have been lost if the special game at Arrowhead Stadium in Kansas City had not happened.
- 42 At base, this episode encapsulates the prominence and real power of African American athletes in sports, on campus, and in American society more generally. All of the money and attention we lavish on athletes and athletics in this country has put African American athletes in a unique and, frankly, powerful material or institutional position. What we are witnessing today is athlete activists and their allies using the power afforded to them by virtue of how the institutions of sport and the public rely upon them and their athletic performances. Some—such as the NFL "Player's Coalition"—have begun to use this power to push for concrete social change in the world of sport as well as outside of it, but it remains to be seen if this approach will gain momentum and find success.³⁸

- 43 The extent to which the most profitable enterprises of the entire sports industry in the United States are dependent upon African American personalities and performances also helps us to understand another of the most significant and historically unprecedented aspects of contemporary athletic activism: the corporate support they have received. Again, it is undoubtedly Colin Kaepernick who has made the biggest headlines on this front with his endorsement deal with Nike in the fall of 2018. But this was not a corporate one-off. Numerous corporate partners and sponsors ranging from Under Armor to Ford Motor Company issued statements in support of athletes and their right to free speech in the aftermath of Trump's comments regarding players and the national anthem in the fall of 2017.³⁹ Such statements and corporate campaigns represent a stark, 180 degree shift from the corporate presentation and use of racial images and political issues in the apolitical, Michael Jordan-era marketing of the 1990s.
- 44 Of course, not all corporations and business entities were on board. For example, NFL activist Brandon Marshall was dropped as a spokesperson for Century Link and the Air Academy Federal Credit Union when he knelt in September of 2016. And John Schnatter of Papa John's Pizza blamed protests for a drop in sales and a 24 percent fall in company stock value in fall of 2017, claiming the controversy was "polarizing the customer, polarizing the country."⁴⁰ But while there were corporate cleavages, the fact remains that Nike not only retained Kaepernick as a spokesperson but doubled down on him in 2018 with a new campaign that featured images of Kaepernick (who had not played football in two years) superimposed against the tag line "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything." The advertising campaign provoked an immediate backlash in some circles (with some critics destroying Nike gear publicly on social media), but it also resulting in a record 31 percent sales increase for branded merchandise in the same week. Real questions can be posed about whether Kaepernick's deal is, in the words of Carrington and Boykoff, "activism or just capitalism?," but never before have corporations been so involved and active—not only in tolerating but in terms of actively marketing activism and protest.⁴¹
- 45 If the size, scope, sustainability, and support of contemporary athletic activism stands in contrast to that of 1968, the two movement waves have several features in common that deserve attention. For one, like Smith, Evans, and Carlos before them, the activist athletes of today understand their focus as being about racism, prejudice and discrimination in society rather than in sport—an attempt to use their prominence as athletes to call attention to larger societal injustices associated with race. In the last two years alone, athlete activists have explained their activism as protests against "systematic oppression," "[in]equality and social justice," "racism and injustice in our criminal system," and "oppression of people of color in the United States."⁴² And others, like football player Michael Bennett, have challenged their fellow athletes to become a "force for real social change" in America.⁴³
- 46 A second point of commonality or continuity between the two eras of athletic activism involves the larger social context and the direct social connections of athletes to other social activists.⁴⁴ Those athletes who have chosen to use their status as public figures to speak out on social issues are not just speaking off the cuff, nor are they isolated malcontents. They are responding to social issues such as police brutality and profiling or hateful gender or sexuality policies outside of the world of sport and working in concert with other public leaders and, more often than not, in close communication with other activists and organizers.

- 47 With a few exceptions, athletic activists today also appear to be less focused on pushing for concrete, tangible goals or reforms, and more oriented—perhaps drawing out the lessons of 1968—on making statements or sending messages designed to drawing attention to racial causes and related social issues. The NFL anthem demonstrations, and others before and after them, brought renewed attention to issues of racism and police brutality that athletes like Kaepernick and so many others had hoped to put onto the national agenda. More than this, these protests and demonstrations forced Americans — of all different backgrounds and political orientations — to take sides, or at least to no longer remain passive or ignore these issues. Sports pundits, fans, talk-radio, op-ed columnists, bloggers, and mainstream news networks have spent much air time and ink taking positions in favor or opposition of protest and athlete activism, and diagnosing how sports leagues should operate with regards to social issues.
- 48 To be clear, this public attention and discussion is not necessarily all in support of progressive racial visions and causes. Quite the opposite, this advocacy tends to provoke conflict and opposition as much as sympathy or support—which brings me to one of my final and most important points of comparison between the sport-based movements of 1968 and those of today: backlash and opposition.
- 49 That athletic activism is polarizing and provokes backlash is far from new. Public opinion was strongly divided in the 1960s with the strong majority of Americans condemning Smith and Carlos then (just as they did with otherwise, now revered figures like Martin Luther King Jr. or Muhammad Ali). So, too, with the activism of the early 21st century. Polls from media sources including Yahoo News and YouGov as well as HuffPost, YouGov, and Morning Consult show a starkly divided public in terms of opinions about athletic advocacy and activism.⁴⁵
- 50 What is new, however, is the way in which right wing politicians, reporters, and public opinion leaders are using sport and athletic activism more generally for their own organizing, mobilizing, and political posturing, to solidify their own constituencies and positions. President Trump's threats against NFL players in the fall of 2017 serve as Exhibit A. Trump's public complaints about the NFL and the potential of protests are significant because if anything, the "take a knee" campaign seemed to be dying down as Kaepernick himself was blackballed out of the league. But Trump used the threat of athletic protest as a rallying cry for his base. While presidents have always used sport for political effect, they have almost always have done so carefully and cautiously, to build solidarity and consensus rather than provoke division. Obviously what has happened in the last few years was different—and not entirely unsuccessful. In June of 2018, in fact, pollsters predicted Trump would continue his attacks precisely because the media attention they received and the ways the polling numbers worked to play to his base so effectively.⁴⁶
- 51 The dynamics here are fascinating, and have their own effects on athletic activism itself. To wit: Trump's challenge seems to have emboldened athletic activists and may even have brought some others into the fold; keep in mind that with Kaepernick having been blackballed out of the league, activism among football players in the 2017 season had been almost non-existent until after Trump's September press conference.⁴⁷ The key point, however, is that sport-oriented protests, politics, and movements have come to be as much about counter-protest as about protest, and thus turned into multi-party, conflict-driven dramas with complicated and multi-directional impacts on political mobilization all across the ideological spectrum.⁴⁸ I am reminded here of how LeBron

James took the admonition of Fox New's Laura Ingraham to "shut up and dribble!" in early 2018 as an invitation to share his thoughts on race and racism in American society.⁴⁹ An intriguing exchange in itself, one wonders also how it was received by different audiences and communities and if any minds at all were changed.

- 52 Scholars should begin studying more carefully the dynamic dance of sport-based protest and counter-protest, how it plays for different constituencies in society, and how it impacts athlete activists (and potential athlete activists) themselves. On this latter front, it stands to reason that backlash against sports-based activism is going to be harsher and be more consequential for athletes who are less successful and prominent. In other words, it is not the LeBron James' or Colin Kaepernick's of the world to be worried about; it is the young African American men and women athletes and their supporters in colleges and high schools or in even at local playgrounds with a conscience and a voice and a desire to speak out. Perhaps the last word on this polarization, backlash, and conflict should be given to these athletic activists—who well understand that their advocacy is not necessarily about finding immediate sympathy and support but rather about the more basic, baseline goal of bringing attention to and provoking conversations about racial injustice in America.
- 53 An African American Division III collegiate soccer player in Minnesota named Olivia House told a story at a "Take a Knee" rally in Minnesota in the leadup to the 2018 Super Bowl that makes the point powerfully.⁵⁰ The story was about House's own national anthem demonstrations before competitions at her school. She talked about how she was initially disappointed that her gestures failed to provoke a great deal of attention among those in attendance. "I kneeled and a few of my teammates put their arms on my shoulder in support, but that was about it. Nothing else really seemed to come of it." But then House started hearing from her teammates about conversations they had had with their parents who were at the games. These parents were far from supportive of her demonstration and indeed in some cases were openly critical of her, the coaches who allowed her protest, and members of the team who supported her. According to House, her teammates told her about exchanges at the family dinner table that were tense, testy, and sometimes confrontational. And here, finally, she felt vindicated. Such conversations were, for this relatively unknown female athlete, the essence of success—not because they produced any concrete action or even changed anyone's minds; rather, because her symbolic stand had forced folks who probably did not know or care much about racism in America to have to think and talk about it.

3. Some Larger Lessons and Implications: Protest, Politics, and the Culture of Sport

- 54 To talk about issues of racism and social injustice—or, really, social problems of any sort—in an arena that aspires to be apolitical, a culture that is conflict-averse, and a political moment that is chock full of unrest is difficult to say the least. But if this review and overview has demonstrated anything, it is that sport *can* provide a platform for socially-minded, change-oriented athletes and supporters to call attention to racial issues and injustices and, more generally, to provoke difficult conversations and public debate on topics that are otherwise ignored, minimized, or avoided. Note that I said "can provide"—not that it always will or necessarily does. This brings us to two sets of questions: first,

when this is possible and what it requires; and, second: what can stand in the way and/or, how can it go wrong.

- 55 Answers to the first set of questions can be extracted from the material above and summarized fairly concisely. Key factors that are necessary (though not always sufficient) to produce sport-based, racially-oriented activism include: the presence of broader movements of activism and change; a critical mass of well-positioned, highly motivated, and self-conscious activists and supporters; an understanding among those activists that athletic activism is largely about using sport as a platform for communication and self-expression; and, the recognition that sport-based advocacy is more likely to engender blow-back and opposition than support or concrete social change.
- 56 The second set of questions about the challenges and even barriers faced by athletic advocacy is significantly more complicated. One point is that sport-based activism faces many of the same, basic challenges that all social movements confront. As identified in the sociological literature, this would include factors such as finding resources, building social infrastructure and networks, and coordinating across otherwise varied interests and disparate communities.⁵¹ And this is not even to delve into the incredible difficulty of making social change in the first place: power, after all, does not give itself up without a fight.
- 57 I will not go into all of these general movement dynamics and social forces here. Rather, what I want to do is focus on the particular challenges faced by athletically-based activism and organizing. At the core of the special challenges of athletic activism is the unique cultural status of sport itself—what I have called sport’s “serious-play” cultural status and the deeply rooted normative prohibitions for the separation of sport and politics.⁵² These animating and defining characteristics are what we might think of as the “deep cultural structure” of sport and its unique place in Western culture and American social life. And race, it turns out, is central here as well—in particular, its normative whiteness and its commitment to colorblind meritocracy.⁵³
- 58 In the last year or two—especially in the public discussions and debates that unfolded in the fall of 2017 with Donald Trump’s attacks on athletic activists—there has been a lot of talk about whether athletes actually have a right to protest or not. Some have construed this as a legal or first amendment / free speech issue. Others think of it more as a labor issue, focusing on contracts and agreements between leagues and conferences and their players or unions (depending upon if they are collegiate or professional). But the most common refrain among sports fans and American sports reporters who oppose athletic activism is a sense of frustration, annoyance, or exhaustion derived from the belief that the sports world *simply is not the right place* for such demonstrations, discussions, and debates. Even if they sympathize the players and their social and political views, adherents to this critical line of thinking just do not see sports as a proper venue, especially not during the crucial moment of the national anthem or other traditional sporting ceremonies and rituals.⁵⁴
- 59 At least two different variations on this theme have played out. One comes from fans (and others) who see sport as purely a form of entertainment. These folks watch and consume sports precisely for the purpose of getting away from the regular news, from the muddy complexities and social conflicts of everyday life. This is a low-brow, don’t-want-to-be-bothered mode of objection. It has yielded some extreme and often racially-charged reactions (Laura Ingraham’s “shut up and dribble”), but generally is seen in the more

innocuous request for sports to just be a site of leisure, a distraction, or even an escape from the stresses and problems of the modern world. These critics want their athletes to play the game and not bring any social problems into the safe, innocuous space of sports, much less such contentious issues as racism, brutality, and injustice. In this view, protest or any sort of talk of non-sport social issues is simply out of place.

- 60 Other protest critics take a higher road (one that is both culturally complicated and analytically revealing). In this second, more idealistic view, the athletic realm stands, or at least is supposed to stand, on higher moral ground than other popular pursuits. According to this way of thinking, sports, when practiced properly, are believed to be an inherently positive social force — breaking down barriers, transcending the social fray, and contributing to unity, solidarity, and a larger social good. The use of anthems, flags, and ceremonies only enhances sport's special cultural status and social function. Sport is, in this vision, already and almost inevitably a positive, progressive social practice and force; the inverse implication of this idealized conception of sport is that activism and protest should not be necessary in the first place.
- 61 As is often the case in American culture and society, idealized beliefs about race and racial progress are an important component of this romantic ideal of sport as a powerful, inherently progressive, and almost sacred social space.⁵⁵ Sport leagues themselves often tout themselves as a leader in racial advancement, celebrating their history of openness and access to people from all racial backgrounds. Further, they often attribute this history to a deeper moral commitment to fairness, meritocracy, and the virtues of unfettered competition. For sport scholars, these ideals have obvious limitations and shortcomings. For example, in variations on theories of colorblindness and colorblind racism championed by the sociologist Eduardo Bonilla Silva and others,⁵⁶ critics argue that such ideals make it tough to see racism and discrimination within the world of sport or yield an individualistic, meritocratic vision of racial justice wherein it is difficult to address larger institutional or systemic inequities. And this is not to mention how African American athletic prowess too often reinforces some of the worst Western stereotypes about black bodies, moralities, and mentalities. But the key point in this context is that the idealized conception of sport as a progressive space means that any kind of activism, protest, or advocacy in or through sport is not only unnecessary, it actually undercuts the conviction of sport's inevitable and ongoing contribution to advancement for people of color, inter-racial harmony, and racial justice.
- 62 These colorblind, individualist ideals are at the heart of another deeply entrenched belief in the American imagination and the culture of Western sport: namely, that sport and politics need to be kept separate from one another. There is a very certain naiveté in viewing sport as a special or sacred and thus apolitical space. As Kyle Green and I have written, sports and politics have long been intertwined in American culture.⁵⁷ American football is a prime example. The abundance of football's "political" entanglements can be traced back to the early 1900s when, only a few years after the sport's origin, then-President Theodore Roosevelt stepped in to "save" football with the creation of the NCAA (part of the whole muscular Christianity movement). Or, perhaps more relevant to today's American professional sports landscape, one can look to the introduction of the national anthem in the context of World War II or the now-common use of military flyovers and ceremonies for the purposes of recruitment into the American Armed Services today. Are these political or not? Though many Americans do not think of these practices as "political," they clearly promote specific visions of national unity and

solidarity — visions of the nation that not everyone may agree with. Nevertheless, the desire to keep politics and protest out of sports, just one other dimension of the serious-play paradoxes that define the cultural status and function of modern sport, remains fairly constant and almost an article of faith among many American sports enthusiasts.

- 63 Athletic activists and their allies (as well as their opponents) are almost always caught within prevailing, paradoxical double-standards of sport as a somehow special, sacred, or apolitical cultural space. To give an example that goes back to the protests of 1968: while public opinion polls in the 1970s showed that some saw athlete activists like Tommie Smith and John Carlos as heroes and many others saw them as villains, almost everybody agreed that sport was not a place for politics. The two sides simply disagreed on what counted as protest and politics. Those who sided with Smith and Carlos did not seem them as political protesters but rather as athletes standing up for what was good, right, and morally just—in the idealistic way that high-minded sport supporters have long celebrated sport. In contrast, the majority who were against them saw Smith and Carlos's demonstration as disruptions of the social status quo, thus political and inappropriate in the context of sports.⁵⁸
- 64 Something similar is going on with the polarized public opinions about athletic activism today.⁵⁹ What tends to divide people is whether they see race-based statements and stands in the realm of sport as legitimate (in which case they are receptive to advocacy which they see as not only acceptable but socially justice, moral) or not (in which case they are dismissed as political and thus inappropriate and out-of-place). On this point, I would note that in recent years African American athletes have been criticized for being political when they have declined to go to the Trump White House after championship seasons, when there was no such outcry when New England Patriots quarterback declined Obama's invitation earlier in the decade. At issue, here, are not the principles or high ideals about sport, but rather which or whose statements are accepted within some conventional or mainstream view of national identity and social solidarity and which are deemed as protest and thus inappropriate—or, in short, political.
- 65 Yet it should also be noted that adherents to visions of sport as somehow sacrosanct are often as annoyed by Donald Trump's attention to protest and the racial politics of sport as they are by the actions of athlete activists. From what I am calling a "low-brow perspective," both Trump and the athletes protesting are seen as guilty of making too big a deal of sports, games, and play; from the higher-brow, sport-as-sacred perspective, Trump is seen as sullyng the purity and inherent social positivity of athletic pursuits with his with brazen and profane destruction of the barrier between sports and politics. These latter critiques especially can be seen in the impassioned defenses of the sanctity of football that have filled pre-game shows in recent years, players and coaches linking arms to protect "the Shield" during the national anthem, or New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft invocation of unity and a color-blind harmony when announcing his painful break with his old friend at the highpoint of the NFL national anthem protests in 2017. In these cases, the back-and-forth between the anti-police brutality protests and Trump's attacks on them disrupted the normally comfortable set of assumptions that have justified sport as deeply intertwined with traditional democratic ideals of meritocracy and liberal individualism.
- 66 In the starkly polarized context of current politics and race relations, these conflicting, serious-play ideals about sport and politics and racial justice have meant that enacting any kind of racial advocacy or consciousness-raising is invariably identified and thus

dismissed as playing politics with athletics. And when Trump entered the sport-based/racial activist fray in earnest in 2017 (albeit as an aggressive critic), these idealized cultural conceptions seem to have made it easier for many in the mainstream, especially white Americans, to effectively opt out of the discussion of race altogether even if they purported to sympathize with athletic activists. This happened in at least two different ways.

- 67 On the one hand, Trump's right-wing political conservatism allowed those in the mainstream to frame athletic activists as left-wing, racial extremists and then settle into a comfortable middle-ground that was dismissive of talk of race in and around sport no matter what it was about or who was saying it. On the other hand, even as African American athletes and others managed to make racism and racial injustice a part of the public discussion, much of the conversation has come to focus on individual athletes and whether their personal experiences rendered their statements legitimate or acceptable. How has racism impacted them? Are their complaints legitimate? Instead of talk about the seriousness of systemic racism within the criminal justice system and the persistence of racism in American life, public dialogue focused on the individuals doing the protesting and their relationships with the league and fans. Reflective of liberal and individualistic approaches to thinking about race and sport, this watered-down otherwise complicated conversations about racism, and often contained them strictly within the boundaries of sport. In either case, we see once again how American ideals — about individualism, sport as sacred, and visions of race, race relations, and racism — allow some conversations, but make other, more sociological ones more difficult.
- 68 What is at stake in understanding the unique cultural status of sport when it comes to race, protest, and politics is not just whether we agree with the particular causes of athlete activists, African American or otherwise. What is also at stake is how we understand sport and athletes in society, especially when it comes to issues of racial justice and social change. Will the prevailing cultural stereotypes and norms about athletes and political and protest hold or change? Can we begin to see sport as something more than an arena for entertainment and release, or some other kind of cultural arena and space? If social change is hard, sometimes cultural change of this sort may be even harder.
- 69 I am more sympathetic than most Americans when it comes to recognizing, thinking through, and ultimately taking action on the racial problems African American athletes feel compelled to prioritize for public conversation. However, if the sports world — by which I would include reporters and commentators as well as owners, managers, and even fans — wants to be true to the ideals of sport as an arena for racial progress, social mobility, and fairness, these are conversations that cannot and should not be avoided. In many ways, in fact, athletes raising fists or kneeling or speaking out — about racism or police brutality or other social issues — puts that conversation and our ideals about sport and politics and social change on the table, and forces sports fans of all racial backgrounds and political orientations to consider the larger social and racial issues of the society in which they live. This requires us all to think about sport not only on its own terms, but in terms of how it is situated and functions in the larger social context—a context which includes a world marked by deep and persistent racial inequalities and injustices. Remembering these basic facts is imperative — not only for our scholarly understandings of sport and race and activism, but for any hope we may have to use our

collective obsessions with athletics to make the world a better, less racist, and more equitable place.

70 **Proper Names:**

Muhammad Ali, Carmelo Anthony, Michael Bennett, James Blake, Ralph Boston, H. Rap Brown, Jim Brown, John Carlos, Harry Edwards, Lee Evans, Craig Hodges, Olivia House, Laura Ingraham, Kareem Abdul Jabbar, LeBron James, Gene Johnson, Michael Jordan, Colin Kaepernick, Steve Kerr, Robert Kraft, Louie Lomax, Joe Louis, Martin Luther King, Jr., Brandon Marshall, Jesse Owens, Chris Paul, Gary Pinkel, Greg Popovich, Mahmoud Abdul Rauf, Meghan Rapinoe, Jackie Robinson, Theodore Roosevelt, Bill Russell, John Schnatter, Dean Smith, Tommie Smith, Donald Sterling, Donald Trump, Wyomia Tyus, Dwayne Wade, Serena Williams, Venus Williams, Bud Winters, John Wooden.

NOTES

1. See Lindsay Gibbs, "Carmelo Anthony Issues A Powerful Plea To Fellow Athletes In The Wake Of Violence," *ThinkProgress*, 8 July 2016. Accessed 16 October 2018. <https://thinkprogress.org/carmelo-anthony-issues-a-powerful-plea-to-fellow-athletes-in-the-wake-of-violence-4cf02a6ebc4a/>; Char Adams, "Serena Williams' Wimbledon Win Photo Is Important," *Bustle*, 25 April 2018. Accessed 16 October 2018. <https://www.bustle.com/articles/171600-why-serena-williams-victorious-raised-fist-photo-at-wimbledon-is-important>; "LeBron James on Social Activism: 'We All Have to Do Better'," *ESPN.com*, 14 July 2016. Accessed 16 October 2018. http://www.espn.com/esps/2016/story/_/id/17060953/esps-carmelo-anthony-chris-paul-dwyane-wade-lebron-james-call-athletes-promote-change; Christina Cauterucci, "The WNBA's Black Lives Matter Protest Has Set a New Standard for Sports Activism," *Slate Magazine*, 25 July 2016. Accessed 16 October 2018. http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2016/07/25/the_wnba_s_black_lives_matter_protest_has_set_new_standard_for_sports_activism.html; David Aldridge, "Decision on All-Star 2017 Looms over Hornets, Charlotte," *NBA.com*, 25 July 2016. Accessed 16 October 2018. http://www.nba.com/2016/news/features/david_aldrIDGE/07/25/morning-tip-nba-moves-2017-all-star-game-from-charlotte/.

2. There were exceptions, of course. For example, NBA players Craig Hodges speaking out against racism in the city of Chicago or Mahmoud Abdul Rauf refusing to stand for the National Anthem. See, Bryant, Howard, *The Heritage: Black Athletes, a Divided America, and the Politics of Patriotism* (Beacon Press, 2018). But these were the acts of individuals who failed to find support among other players or among the general public and who were rather quickly isolated and ostracized by the league.

3. Harry Edwards, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* (New York: Free Press, 1969).

4. Douglas Hartmann, *Race, Culture, and the Revolt of the Black Athlete: The 1968 Olympic Protests and Their Aftermath* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); idem, "Activism, Organizing, and the Symbolic Power of Sport: Reassessing Harry Edwards's Contributions to the 1968 Olympic Protest Movement," *Journal for the Study of Sports and Athletics in Education* 3:2 (2009): 181-195; Amy Bass, *Not the Triumph but the Struggle: The 1968 Olympics and the Making of the Black Athlete* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004);

Kevin Marinelli, "Placing Second: Empathic Unsettling as a Vehicle of Consubstantiality at the Silent Gesture Statue of Tommie Smith and John Carlos," *Memory Studies* 10:4 (2016): 440-458; Dana D. Brooks and Ronald Althouse, "Revolt of the Black Athlete: From Global Arena to the College Campus," *Journal for the Study of Sports and Athletes in Education* 3:2 (2009): 195-214. Fritz G. Polite and Billy Hawkins, *Sport, Race, Activism, and Social Change: The Impact of Dr. Harry Edwards' Scholarship and Service* (San Diego: Cognella, 2012); David J. Leonard and C. Richard King, "The Legacies of Harry Edwards for Sport Sociology," *Journal for the Study of Sports and Athletes in Education* 3:2 (2009): 133-252; Othello Harris, "Muhammad Ali and the Revolt of the Black Athlete," in *Muhammad Ali: The People's Champ*, edited by Elliot J. Gorn (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 54-69; David K. Wiggins, "The Future of College Athletics Is at Stake: Black Athletes and Racial Turmoil on Three Predominantly White University Campuses, 1968-1972," *Journal of Sport History* 15:3 (1988): 304-333.

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6. The early accounts of "the revolt" were dominated by Harry Edwards (Edwards, *The Revolt* and idem, "The Olympic Project for Human Rights: An Assessment Ten Years Later," *The Black Scholar* 10:6-7 (1979): 2-8. doi:10.1080/00064246.1979.11414041. See also Vincent Matthews and Neil Amdur, *My Race Be Won* (New York: Charterhouse, 1974)—who not only played a leading role in the events of 1968 but also emerged as a leader of the nascent field of sport sociology and sport studies more generally (see Harry Edwards, *Sociology of Sport* (Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press, 1973). See also Leonard and King, "The Legacies"; Hartmann, "The Symbolic Power"; David K. Wiggins, "The Struggle That Must Be': Harry Edwards, Sport and the Fight for Racial Equality," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 31:7 (2014): 760-77). However, in the late 1970s and 1980s a more formal history or historiography began to take shape: A.H. Grundman, "Image of Collegiate Protest and the Civil Rights Movement: A Historian's View," *Arena Review* (October 1979): 17-24; Donald Spivey, "Black Consciousness and Olympic Protest Movement," in *Sport in America: New Historical perspectives*, edited by Donald Spivey (Westpoint, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), 239-262; Edwards. "The Olympic Project". A new wave of popular reporting

and public history culminating in an extraordinary two-part, *Sports Illustrated* cover story based upon Kenny Moore's extensive and exclusive interviews with Tommie Smith (Kenny Moore, "A Courageous Stand," *Sports Illustrated*, 5 August 1991 and idem, "The Eye of the Storm," *Sports Illustrated*, 12 August 1991). In the following decade a more formal and extensive historiography on the movement was produced (Harris, "Muhammad Ali"; Douglas Hartmann, "The Politics of Race and Sport: Resistance and Domination in the 1968 African American Olympic Protest Movement," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 19:3 (1996): 548-66; Bass, *Not the Triumph*; Hartmann, *Race, Culture, and The Revolt*) along with a series of retrospectives on the life and career of Harry Edwards himself (Leonard and King, "The Legacies"; Leonard and King, eds., *Journal for the Study of Sports and Athletes in Education* 3:2 (2009); Wiggins, "The Struggle").

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ABSTRACTS

This overview of the 1968 African American Olympic protest movement provides historical context and a comparative touchstone for understanding the current wave of Black athletic activism in the United States. At a basic level, the exercise reminds us that sport-based activism is not unprecedented and, when it emerges, tends to be connected with the larger social movements of the day (the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s and Black Lives Matter more recently). The comparison also shows contemporary activism to be the biggest and broadest mobilization of African American athletes and their supporters in American history, propelled especially by the participation of women and athletes across multiple sports and levels of participation. However, athletic activism remains as polarizing as ever and the most significant impacts of athletic activism still appear to be primarily symbolic or cultural. The final section of the paper highlights the cultural dimensions of sport—its "serious play" status, normative prohibitions against politics, and its individualistic, colorblind visions of race and social justice—that make athletically-based activism of all sorts challenging.

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