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# How athletes are changing the conversation around racism

## The powerful impact of 50 years of activism.

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Five decades may have passed since Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their black-gloved hands in protest on the Olympic platform, but the 1968 and 2018 parallels are lost on no one. Whether raised fists or dropped knees, protests by prominent African American athletes command our attention — and highlight our division — as the same conversation of racial injustice continues.

Today, the public watches as the National Football League's modern version of that protest extends into its third year. Both these modern and historic athletes put their professional careers on the line in a time of political unrest. And while the ultimate impact of this new protest remains uncertain, the American public seems more poised now to entertain the athletes' concerns than in the past.

At the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, the U.S. national anthem played as the new 200-meter world-recorder holder and gold medalist Smith and bronze medalist Carlos stood heads bowed and arms raised in the black power salute. With only a single pair of black gloves between them, Smith raised his gloved right hand and Carlos his left. As a deeply divided nation looked on, the American champions were quickly and widely shunned. In many respects, they protested the same oppressive society that Colin Kaepernick would 50 years later.

Like Kaepernick's protest, the protest of Tommie Smith and John Carlos was a calculated move. The two had been students at San Jose State University, where sociologist Harry Edwards had led a campaign to boycott the Mexico City games. On the winners' podium, Smith and Carlos stood without shoes to symbolize poverty plaguing black Americans, necks draped with a black scarf and beads, a reminder of lynching. The message was deliberate.

It's difficult to overestimate the sense of unrest and division in the United States as the Mexico City Olympics approached. Over a matter of just a few months, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy had been assassinated. Race riots the previous summer and in the wake of King's death had resulted in well over 100 fatalities. And the war in Vietnam waged on. Amid this heightened anxiety, the general public was in no mood to entertain an orchestrated political statement at the Olympic medal ceremony.

Smith and Carlos, like other athletes before and after them, used celebrity to draw attention to racial injustice. And like many others, they paid a price. Some protested overtly, like Muhammad Ali, who refused to be inducted into the military to fight in Vietnam, arguing conscientious objection. Ali was then stripped of his heavyweight title. For others, though, the political message was more subtle.

Professional baseball player Curt Flood took his protest of Major League Baseball all the way to the Supreme Court. In 1969, the St. Louis Cardinals traded Flood to Philadelphia as part of a multiplayer deal, but Flood refused to go. The player, who had been active in the civil rights movement, offered strong resistance to the trade: "I do not regard myself as a piece of property to be bought or sold irrespective of my wishes."

Flood received scant support from players and his teammates, and even got death threats from baseball fans. At the Supreme Court, the league prevailed in *Flood v. Kuhn* (1972) — though just a few years later, in 1975, a federal court would force baseball to recognize the free agency of its players, a development Flood made possible.

The confrontational actions of Ali and Flood were highly visible. But other athletes have avoided, sometimes deliberately, taking potentially controversial positions on race. Early 20th-century boxer Jack Johnson's flight from identity politics was legendary: "I have found no better way in avoiding race prejudice than to act with people of other races as if prejudice did not exist." In a more modern era, silence on matters of race by prominent athletes like Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods is considered telling, taken as their reluctance to become mired in the politics of race. But exactly what silence means is not always clear.

Dallas Cowboy Duane Thomas was known for avoiding the media. After a spectacular performance in Super Bowl VI, Thomas — in a much-scrutinized postgame interview — offered a stark answer to a reporter's question, "Are you really that fast?" Thomas's one-word response: "Evidently." He had been a credible selection for Super Bowl MVP, yet was passed over, the nod instead going to quarterback Roger Staubach.

Thomas never received the Wheaties box and lucrative product contracts that typically accompanied notable performances on the field. Some interpreted Thomas's reticence as a sign of protest — arrogance, signaling that he refused to stay in “his place,” and the MVP slight a reaction to that. But later, reflecting on his silence, Thomas said he was nervous and didn't know what to say.

Smith and Carlos's message in 1968 had been brazen, like those of Ali and Flood, and the results similar. The athletes were derided by the International Olympic Committee as a “disgrace to the United States” and found little support among the American public. Historian Douglas Hartmann describes the nation's intense reaction: “Smith and Carlos were seen by most Americans — even those in the ostensibly neutral and objective American media — as radicals or renegades, villains or traitors, and described in emotionally charged language usually reserved for the most violent and threatening figures Americans could possibly imagine: terrorists, communists, even Nazi stormtroopers.”

Given this reaction, it comes as no surprise that the Olympic medals of Smith and Carlos failed to produce product endorsements, or even much of a future in professional sports. As with Ali, Flood and Thomas, activism — whether real or perceived — came at a cost.

And that's one key difference today.

Kaepernick first knelt during the playing of the anthem on Sept. 1, 2016, after sitting for the anthem — largely unnoticed — during preseason games that year. Kaepernick said that the choice to move from sitting to kneeling was deliberate, intended to show respect for those who served yet still draw attention to oppression facing African Americans and the need for reform of the criminal justice system. Other players followed Kaepernick's lead, and the practice of taking a knee fanned out across professional sports, and even to college and high school teams. It was a steady, sustained protest, gaining added political significance when President Trump weighed in, beginning with tweets in the fall of 2017 that decried protesting players and the NFL.

The president's actions helped maintain the nation's focus on the anthem protest into this year. And Americans have been deeply divided.

A recent national poll by [Grinnell College](#) found that more than 70 percent of the public holds strong opinions on the NFL protests, divided evenly between those insisting that players stand during the anthem and others believing they should be allowed to kneel. Opponents of kneeling

cast the practice as an affront to the flag as a national symbol — and to the men and woman who have risked and sacrificed their lives for it. But an overwhelming majority of Americans — a full 78 percent — calls itself patriotic, meaning that patriotism alone cannot account for diverging positions on this controversy.

Even attitudes toward Trump, as polarized as they are, don't translate cleanly into the anthem debate. Yes, those who approve of the president gravitate toward the strongly-held view that players should stand, while those who disapprove lean toward strong acceptance of kneeling. Still, positions on Trump don't explain everything. Nor does race. Black Americans tend to hold strong views that players should be able to kneel, with almost three-fifths taking that stance. But while blacks are more likely than whites and Hispanics to accept kneeling, 3 of out of every 10 white Americans also feel strongly that players should be able to take a knee.

But this time, while Kaepernick has suffered — essentially being blacklisted from the NFL — Nike has given Kaepernick supporters a way to commodify their opinions and reward him for his bravery. His new contract with the shoe giant has seemed to pay off for both Kaepernick and Nike as consumers do just that.

While he likely isn't making what he would as a starting quarterback in the NFL, Kaepernick has found more opportunities than what Smith and Carlos received. Unlike the universal opprobrium they received, a significant proportion of the American public expresses its support for the anthem protest. That the nation still struggles to work through it, even though a full two years has passed since Kaepernick first took a knee, is itself a promising development.

### 0 Comments



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