ARTICLES

BOOS, BANS, AND OTHER BACKLASH: THE CONSEQUENCES OF BEING AN ACTIVIST ATHLETE

Peter Kaufman
State University of New York at New Paltz

ABSTRACT

Athletes today are often criticized for their aberrant and deviant behavior; however, when activist athletes act with integrity and sincerity by promoting social and political justice, they often face a hate-filled backlash of scorn and contempt. In this paper I explore the negative consequences of being an activist athlete. Using in-depth interview data and secondary accounts, I examine reactions to athletes who engaged in social or political protest. I focus specifically on athletes who have protested against war, sweatshop labor, and racism. The study of activist athletes is important to sociologists for a number of reasons: It highlights the significance of analyzing sport sociologically, it makes explicit the connection between sport and politics, it identifies some of the personal consequences to activists as a result of their protests, and it has the potential to reshape our understanding of sport as a vehicle for progressive social change.

PERSONAL REFLEXIVE STATEMENT

In spring 2002, I taught a course on the sociology of sport. While discussing the prevalence of racism in sports, I engaged the class in a debate about whether athletes should use their position to be activists for progressive social change. After the class ended I began looking further into the issue of athletes who speak out against social and political injustice. I was aware of some famous historical examples but I wanted to learn about athletes who were currently using sport to address oppression. I decided to interview as many activist athletes as I could find as a way to gather data about their experiences and to give voice to their courageous and counter-hegemonic actions. In conjunction with this research I also work with the Center for the Study of Sport in Society at Northeastern University, the world’s leading social justice organization that uses sport to create social change, to advocate for and promote activist athletes.

Anyone who follows sports in the United States knows that considerable attention is given to the aberrant behavior of athletes (Delaney 2003). On any given day there are news reports of athletes engaging in criminal behavior such as gambling, driving drunk, using drugs, possessing weapons, and assaulting females, among other misdeeds. Lately, much has been said about the widespread use of performance enhancing substances in all sports and at all levels of sport. The focus on drug doping appears not only in the mainstream media but in scholarly works as well (Plymire 1999; Denham 2000 and 2004; Brewer 2002; Malcolm and Waddington 2006). Athletes who engage in doping or anti-social behavior are routinely labeled as deviants, and even criminals, and are blamed for destroying the integrity of sports. The belief that deviance is widespread in sports, especially with regard to performance enhancing drugs, reached historic proportions when the United States Congress held hearings on the matter in 2005. In an unabashed display of self-righteousness, one legislator after another lambasted athletes and professional sports leagues for running afoul of the norms of fair play. Deviance must be eliminated in sports, the politicians argued, so that we can all have faith in the integrity of the games.

What is ironic about this public and political outcry to bring integrity back to sports is that when some athletes act with integrity, honor, and sincerity, they actually run the risk of being criticized. This negative reaction is especially common when athletes become involved in progressive social and political causes. Those who dare voice opinions on issues such as social injustice and political oppression often face a hate-filled backlash of scorn and contempt from teammates, coaches, fans, and sponsors. As Candaeele and Dreier (2004) note, it may be acceptable for athletes to engage in seemingly apolitical acts of kindness by creating educational scholarships, making visits to hospitals, warning kids to stay in school and to steer away from drugs and crime. However, if athletes become “jocks for justice” and turn their attention to issues of human rights and social justice, they risk tarnishing their image and are “often met with derision and contempt” (p. 21).

The population of athletes who engage in social and political activism is not very large. Sage (1998) attributes this overwhelming political inaction to a “neutrality vision of sport” which assumes that sport exists outside the social, political and economic realms of society (p. 222). The dearth of activist athletes may be further explained by theories of network analysis. Why anyone becomes an activist and attempts to “make history” (Flacks 1988) is a question that has intrigued sociologists—particularly those who study social movements and social change (McAdam 1986, 1988; Snow, et al 1986). Much of the work in this area explores the process through which an individual assumes the personal and
social identity of an activist. In this framework it is not so much the character
traits of individuals but rather, the social interactions in which they find
themselves.

Emirbayer and Goodwin (1994) point out that social behavior does not arise
from individual norms and attributes nor does it arise from the categories that
people find themselves (or place themselves) in; rather, social behavior arises
from their involvement in structured social relations:

One can never simply appeal to such attributes as class
membership or class consciousness, political party affiliation,
age, gender, social status, religious beliefs, ethnicity, sexual
orientation, psychological predispositions, and so on, in order
to explain why people behave the way they do (p. 1414-5).

Instead, we need to focus on their patterns of relationships. Unlike most other
activists whose actions not only emanate from their social relations but also
transpire within the company of these social relations, the activist athlete often
acts alone. The group that influenced and inspired their actions is usually (and
literally) sitting on the sidelines. Most activists have the luxury, if we can call it
that, of exerting their agency in the supportive community of others. For such
activists, like the Freedom Riders McAdam (1988) studied, their social
relationships not only cultivated their activist orientation but served as the
socially interactive content and context through which their actions occurred.
The activist athlete, more often than not, must be prepared to stand alone and
bear the consequences. Although the athlete probably has a network of
supporters, unless the supporters are other athletes they are relegated to the
backstage and the athlete finds herself or himself unaccompanied on center stage.
Subsequently, the reactions to the activism, both positive and negative, are aimed
directly at the athlete.

Despite the small number of athletes who have engaged in progressive
activism there are a fair number of issues for which they have struggled. In the
United States and abroad, athletes have fought for a variety of human rights
causes including racial, gender, and sexual equality, unionization and worker
rights, peace and social justice, freedom from political persecution, ability rights,
religious freedom, and free speech (Edward 1969; Scott 1971; Kidd and
Donnelly 2000; Kidd 2003; Pelak 2005; Zirin 2005). In this paper I examine the
negative consequences experienced by athletes who have addressed war,
sweatshop labor, and racism. Although activist athletes do have supporters, I
focus on the disapproval they face when they speak out against social and
political injustice. As I discuss, these negative reactions come from a variety of
sources including other athletes, coaches, administrators, journalists, politicians,
and fans.
THE SOCIOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDYING ACTIVIST ATHLETES

Admittedly, the majority of athletes do not become social and political activists. Nevertheless, the personal and social processes activist athletes experience as they fuse sports and politics are important for sociologists to consider for a number of reasons. First, like many of the “marked” groups (Brekhus 1998) sociologists study, activist athletes deserve our attention because they challenge the taken-for-granted expectations of other athletes and society in general. Activist athletes are norm breakers and are treated like others who reject behavioral norms. The negative repercussions they face are experienced personally, but they also serve as warnings to other athletes to think twice before becoming involved in social or political causes.

Activist athletes are treated like deviants. However, to the extent that they engage in voluntary and honorable deviations from the norm, they may be characterized as “positive deviants” (Spreitzer and Sonenshein 2004). Activist athletes seem to garner more negative reactions than other entertainer activists such as musicians, actors, and writers. Moreover, other entertainer activists seem more willing to express their political views in public venues like awards ceremonies, political rallies, or on the campaign trail and are less likely to suffer institutional repercussions for doing so. In his study of actors and activists Scholossman (2002) argues that the worlds of art and politics are often interconnected and blurred so that this intersectionality results in a symbiotic relationship beneficial to both groups. The same cannot be said for activists and athletes. Although sports are inextricably political, politics are not necessarily infused with sports. Moreover, there is no evidence that activists and athletes are engaged in a mutually beneficial relationship. In this sense, activist athletes are a unique group to study not only in the context of sports but in realm of entertainment.

Examining activist athletes, especially the social and cultural responses of their political actions, brings us closer to Washington and Karen’s (2001) goal of studying the intersection of sport with other institutions. Activist athletes “explode forever the myth that sport is an innocent pastime that exists outside the realm of economic and political forces” (Birrell and McDonald 2000, p. 5). The actions of activist athletes compel us to consider the dynamics of power in sport much like we study power in other social institutions. For example, sociologists often talk about issues of hegemony and resistance. The athletes discussed in this paper confronted and resisted multiple hegemonies. In addition to challenging the dominant view of sports as apolitical terrain, they challenged the hegemony of America, whiteness and capitalism. Moreover, student athletes and coaches must also contend with the prevailing expectations in education.
Another benefit to studying negative reactions to activist athletes is that their experiences help fill a gap in the social movement literature. While much has been written about the personal consequences that result from activists’ involvement in protest movements (Brown and Feguson 1995; Sherkat and Blocker 1997; Culley and Angeliqbe 2003) we know little about the reactions activists face for their social and political actions. Our knowledge of these reactions is largely anecdotal and comes from media images or our personal experiences. For example, many people are aware that fire hoses and police dogs were used against Civil Rights activists and some of us may have experienced the wrath of counter protestors. However, we do not have enough systematic accounts of what happens to activists when they put themselves on the line. To better understand why certain individuals stay committed to social movements and others drop out (Passy and Giungi 2000), it is instructive to explore the immediate consequences athletes experience as a result of their activism.

Finally, studying activist athletes may help reshape our understanding of sport, politics, and society. Most dissenters argue that athletes should play and not pontificate; however, sports and politics are undeniably linked (Houlihan 2000). Historically, this is certainly the case as Barker (1988) points out in his account of sport in the western world:

Ancient Roman arenas, medieval tournaments, popular recreations in Stuart England, and nineteenth-century German gymnastics were all hedged about with political meaning. But pre-modern examples are mere momentary liaisons compared with the stolid union of sports and politics in this century (p. 187).

Similarly, in their review of American sports Gorn and Goldstein (1993) discuss the socializing and Americanizing role of sports for European immigrants in the early 1900s. Sports provided a sort of civics lesson that taught duty, patriotism, honor and obedience. Likewise, during World War I sports were used to promote a strong national front among civilians and to ready the troops for battle. President Woodrow Wilson even made a direct connection between sport and military might by declaring: “I hope that sports will be continued . . . as a real contribution to the national defense” (quoted in Gorn and Goldstein 1993, p. 178). More recently, Jansen and Sabo (1994) and Stempel (2006) demonstrated how sports were used by the mass media to bolster support for the United States invasions of Iraq during the first and second Gulf Wars. Given this long-standing connection between sports and politics, it is important to understand individuals who embrace this connection yet do so in ways that are decidedly counter hegemonic.
Methodological Hurdles: Finding Activist Athletes

My study of activist athletes derives from primary and secondary accounts. Where noted, cases come from personal interviews I conducted with activist athletes. Because the population of activist athletes is relatively small, gathering first-hand interview data was challenging. Most of the people I interviewed were found by reading news accounts, searching the Internet, and following the leads of other interviewees and colleagues. I also attempted to network with activist athletes by searching virtual communities such as MySpace and Facebook—both to no avail. Even when activist athletes were identified, tracking them down and gaining access to interview them was often complicated. This was particularly true when I had to go through agents or coaches to request permission and set up a time for the interview. Nevertheless, the athletes I eventually contacted were receptive to being interviewed and interested in this research.

I have interviewed twenty activist athletes, but focus on the ten who actively addressed war, sweatshop labor and racism (the others focused on issues like homophobia, sexism, ableism, and eco-sustainability). I considered athletes in all sports and at professional, collegiate, amateur and recreational levels. As long as these athletes used sport or their role as athletes to promote social and political change and were at least eighteen years old, they were included in the sample. Because the sample was relatively small, I grouped all activist athletes together despite their different levels of participation. Therefore, some of the nuances of their experiences may have been lost through this decision. For example, it is possible that the reactions to a professional athlete taking an activist stance will differ from the reactions to a recreational athlete taking a similar stance. Although there may be some noteworthy sociological patterns to explore here, such insights will have to wait until I locate more individuals for each category.

The interviews I conducted generally lasted between one to three hours. Of those discussed in this paper, seven were tape-recorded over the phone, two were completed via e-mail and one was tape-recorded in person. The interview schedule contained questions on four main themes: the athlete’s upbringing, the development of their athletic and activist identity, a description of their activism including why they engaged in it, and the reactions they received. The analysis presented here focuses on the last two themes. To supplement the interview data, I included examples of historically important activist athletes. Because so much has been written about Muhammad Ali, Jackie Robinson, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, I did not attempt to contact them but relied on the literature.
ATHLETES AGAINST WAR

In 1966, Muhammad Ali, the reigning heavyweight boxing champion of the world, was drafted for the Vietnam War. When served his draft papers Ali uttered one of the first and most famous anti-Vietnam war statements: “Man, I ain’t got no quarrel with them Vietcong.” Later, in the company of a number of reporters, Ali offered a more developed reason for his political activism:

Why should they ask me to put on a uniform and go 10,000 miles from home and drop bombs and bullets on Brown people in Vietnam while so-called Negro people in Louisville are treated like dogs and denied simple human rights? No I’m not going 10,000 miles from home to help murder and burn another poor nation simply to continue the domination of white slave masters of the darker people the world over. This is the day when such evils must come to an end. I have been warned that to take such a stand would cost me millions of dollars. But I have said it once and I will say it again. The real enemy of my people is here. I will not disgrace my religion, my people or myself by becoming a tool to enslave those who are fighting for their own justice, freedom and equality. If I thought the war was going to bring freedom and equality to 22 million of my people they wouldn’t have to draft me, I’d join tomorrow. I have nothing to lose by standing up for my beliefs. So I’ll go to jail, so what? We’ve been in jail for 400 years (quoted in Marqusee, 1999, p. 214-5).

When he uttered these words the anti-Vietnam war movement was in its infancy and he went against prevailing norms. Being a black male and a world champion athlete magnified the aberrant nature of his actions. As a result of his activism, Ali was vilified and disparaged in the press and in the court of public opinion. Baseball player Jackie Robinson observed that Ali was not only the greatest heavyweight boxing champion he was also the most despised “because he is a Muslim. . . [and] because he speaks his mind” (Robinson [1967] 1998). Ali had his phone wiretapped by the FBI, lost his championship status, and was sentenced to five years in jail, even though the typical sentence for this act was eighteen months. Although he never went to jail, in part because of his ongoing appeals effort, Ali was kept out of boxing for three prime years of his athleticism. In addition to losing the support of many Americans, it is estimated that Ali lost millions of dollars in purses and endorsements (Reed 2004).

Muhammad Ali was not the first athlete to speak out against armed conflict nor was he the last, but such public anti-war positions are quite unusual in the world of athletics. Although few athletes have deviated from the presumed patriotic norms of sports, one recent anti-war athlete garnered tremendous
attention despite her relatively low athletic profile. Toni Smith was a college senior at Manhattanville College, a small liberal arts institution outside of New York City, when she decided to turn her back to the flag when the national anthem was played before her basketball games. Smith did so to protest the economic structure in the United States and the military initiative underway in the Middle East. As Smith told me, her decision to turn her back to the flag was not an easy one given the normative expectations she felt pressured to follow, especially as team captain. She said

I’m a teammate and I’m a captain and I have to set an example for the rest of my team. And it was my first year being captain and the team had always been my number one priority and I was very much dedicated to the team. And this was my fourth year on the team and you know I’d been through so much on this team and I’m finally captain and I’m going to be a good captain.

At first, Smith’s actions garnered little attention. This was not too surprising given that Manhattanville College is a Division III school that routinely played its games in front of 40-50 fans, mostly family and friends. But after a game at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy her protest became worldwide news:

TS: It went from nothing to an international broadcast in about two days. One day there was one reporter, the next day there were five and the next day the AP was there. And that was it. And after that I was getting calls from radio stations, Good Morning America.

PK: How did that happen? Do you know what the trigger was?

TS: Yeah I do. We played a couple of schools and someone got angry at one of the schools. So the next team we were going to play was the Merchant Marine Academy. So they called the Merchant Marine Academy and tipped them off about what I was doing. So when we went to the Merchant Marine Academy, and I was forewarned by my coach about this, and when we got to the game it, I can’t even, you’ve never seen anything like this before in your life. There were, everyone in the entire school was there I think. And they were all in uniform and they all had flags. And they had people lined up against the sidelines, they had people yelling stuff at me. It was absolutely unbelievable, it was so surreal I couldn’t fathom going through, I didn’t even think that they made, that there were so many flags in the state, you know.

PK: What were people yelling at you?
TS: Go home, go to your country, leave our country, remember 9/11, curses, a lot of curses, a lot of name calling I don’t even want to appear to remember, um, just like, they had chants going about me.

As an athlete, an activist, a student, a non-white female, and an American, to name a few of her salient identities, Smith’s decision to turn her back to the flag garnered a wide array of negative reactions. Only two of her teammates publicly supported her while most of her teammates “wanted to outcast me.” On campus, “a lot of people stopped talking to me who I wasn’t close with but people who would say hi to me, they would stop saying hi to me.” There were a number of opposing players “who wouldn’t shake my hand either before or after the game” and some the referees who officiated made “calls that were so obviously planned” to retaliate against her activism. The most disconcerting reaction was a threatening letter she received at her campus address that “was pretty much I’m gonna kill you. And that was scary. After that it was very tense because we were still in the middle of the season, or it was the end of the season. So I still had to go to games after that being concerned that someone would actually try to physically hurt me.”

On the national stage the backlash against Toni Smith was articulated most forcefully by ESPN broadcaster Dan Patrick who intoned, “Boundaries have been crossed. It’s one thing to voice an opinion, but it’s completely different to turn your back—literally, not figuratively. In turning her back on the American flag, Smith is doing more than making her point—she’s rejecting everything the flag and this country represent” (Patrick 2003). Frank DeFord, long time contributor to Sports Illustrated and to NPR’s Morning Edition expressed a similar sentiment when he said “Once you put on your Manhattanville uniform you cede certain individual prerogatives. Once the game is over, you may protest in any fashion you wish, but you made the personal decision to try out for this team, so now you are one of us and you must respect us, as a group, even if you don't respect the flag that the rest of us do” (DeFord 2003). Geno Auriemma, University of Connecticut women’s basketball coach, expressed a sentiment shared by many other college coaches that he would not tolerate Smith’s behavior on his team. “It’s disrespectful and, as a coach, I would have the right not to have that person on the team” (quoted in Jackson 2003).

Smith’s activism not only produced a widespread debate and negative responses, it also produced at least one imitator. Deidra Chatman was a basketball player at the University of Virginia when she heard of Smith’s protest and was so impressed she decided to follow suit. Unlike Smith who was playing basketball in relative obscurity, Chatman played Division I basketball in the Atlantic Coast Conference. This high-profile setting may help account for the reaction she received from her athletic program, particularly her coach. While
Smith maintained her protest all season, Chatman’s lasted only one game after she received unmistakable pressure from her coach and the university’s athletic director to stop. In our interview, Chatman described how her coach, Debbie Ryan, told her what she thought about her protest:

Yeah, so she calls my room and she's like, “What the hell did you do at the beginning of the game?” And I told her exactly what I did. I remember her being really upset and she said, “Why did you do that?” And I told her why. She's like, you know, if you don't like this country you could leave. And she was just going off on a tangent. And so I was kind of upset by then. So she hung up and I hung up.

Besides the lack of support from her coach, Chatman, like Smith, discovered her teammates were not too fond of her activism either. “I got kind of nasty looks and whispers. They're like, ‘She just did it for the attention.’” Interestingly, most of the support Chatman received came from her international teammates.

In addition to these athletes, others have protested wars and the involvement of the United States in international conflicts. In the following three cases, the athletes were unmistakably rebuked. First, during the first Gulf War, Italian college student Marco Lokar played on the Seton Hall University basketball team. He declined to wear an American flag patch on his uniform suggesting, to no avail, an Italian or United Nations flag patch instead. Lokar endured death threats, taunts, and other intimidating tactics until he finally quit the team, dropped out of school, and went back to Italy.

Second, in 1996 Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf was accused of being un-patriotic and suspended by the National Basketball Association (NBA) for refusing to stand for the playing of The Star-Spangled Banner. In addition to invoking his religious beliefs, Abdul-Rauf also stated that the U. S. flag was a "symbol of oppression, of tyranny. This country has a long history of that. I don't think you can argue the facts." Eventually, he agreed to stand for the national anthem and pray while it was being played. Abdul-Rauf played in the NBA for only two more years and then finished his career playing professionally overseas.

Third, when the US invaded Iraq in March 2004, Carlos Delgado was an All-Star baseball player for the Toronto Blue Jays. Delgado made the decision not to stand on the dugout steps when ‘God Bless America” was played during the seventh inning stretch—a policy that Major League Baseball decreed after 9/11. Delgado criticized the war in Iraq as “one of the stupidest ever” and went on to suggest: “The reason why I didn't stand for ‘God Bless America’ was because I didn't like the way they tied ‘God Bless America’ and 9-11 to the war in Iraq in baseball. I say God bless America, God bless Miami, God bless Puerto Rico and all countries until there is peace in the world” (Wine 2005). Not surprisingly, Delgado’s action was met with boos, jeers, and chants of USA, USA.
According to Hughson, Inglis, and Free (2005), no other social or cultural institution rivals sport in its ability to foster a national identity and an overwhelming sense of patriotism. "Sport seems able to bind the politically minded with the non-politically minded together into an imagined national community, where the nation does not exist beyond sport...[Sport] reproduces a particularly insidious variant of the patriotism mustered during time of war" (p. 124). It is in this socio-political context that activist athletes embark on their efforts to speak out against war. In effect, anti-war activist athletes face a version of double jeopardy. In addition to confronting the patriotic fervor that often accompanies war they must also contend with the near patriotic devotion that often accompanies sport. As such, one may wonder about the meaning behind the negative backlash directed at anti-war activist athletes. Are Muhammad Ali, Toni Smith, Deidra Chatman, and others disparaged because they are against the country at war, or are they disparaged because they are against the country qua sport?

**Athletes Against Sweatshop Labor**

In 1998, Jim Keady was a semi-pro soccer player and an assistant soccer coach at St. John’s University, the defending national champions. At the time, Keady was also a graduate student at the university working on a Masters degree in theology. It was the intersection of his religious studies and his athlete participation that propelled Keady to activism. He took issue with the university’s business association with Nike, a multi-million dollar deal that made Nike the sole sportswear provider of the school, and he began to pressure the university to act in a manner that reflected its principles and mission. As he argued in an unpublished term paper, Keady found it problematic and hypocritical for a university that espoused the principles of Catholic Social Teaching to benefit "from profits made on the backs of the poor" (Keady, 1998, p.13). Even on a very basic level, Keady believed that being a Catholic required one to fight against oppression. He expressed this sentiment clearly during our interview: "As a Catholic, I firmly believe if you’re not doing work on behalf of justice, pursuing social justice, you don’t necessarily understand what it means to be Catholic."

In addition to the pressure he put on St. John’s administration and athletic department, Keady also started a dialogue with Nike. When they said working conditions in Indonesia were fair and up to standard, he requested to work in one of its Indonesian factories to gain a first-hand understanding of the labor conditions. Ultimately, Keady’s actions were thwarted. He was not allowed to work in one of the Indonesian factories and St. John’s, tired of the pressure he put on the University, gave him an ultimatum: wear the Nike-issued clothing and
drop the issue or resign. Keady chose the latter and quit his position with one of
the best collegiate soccer programs in the United States.

In their analysis of positive deviance among athletes, Hughes and Coakley
(1991) suggest that some athletes over conform to the sport ethic of hard work
and dedication and are subsequently too committed to prevailing norms. Jim
Keady was in a similar situation when he embraced a literal interpretation of
Catholic Social Teaching and applied it to St. John’s business dealings. For other
activists in the fight against sweatshop labor and adherents of Catholic Social
Teaching, Keady’s action was to be applauded and celebrated. As such, he has
become a sought after speaker who details the labor abuses of companies like
Nike. In contrast, many people in the athletic department at St. John’s and in the
larger soccer community found his actions highly problematic. Many of these
people refused to acknowledge Keady, much less interact with him: “One of my
best friends, it’s devastated our relationship, a guy who I’ve played with since I
was six and seven years old.”

Keady also recounted the time he went to a convention of soccer coaches to
network and interact with some of his old friends. When he walked into the room
the reaction was chilling: “I swear to God it was like something out of a movie
like where the needle gets dragged across the record and everybody just stops
and looks and like I mean there were some guys who I’ve known for years who
looked at me it was like they were all deer in head lights.” What was particularly
telling about this reaction, according to Keady, was that the response of his
acquaintances was not necessarily based on their disagreement with Keady’s
activism; rather, their reaction derived from worry and apprehension about what
his activist identity might portend for them: “There were guys who I’d played
with, and was very good friends with, who wouldn’t even look at me and shake
my hand, out of fear, not of anger, you know they didn’t give a fuck what went
down at St. Johns, but out of fear.” Keady’s peers were concerned that they
would be guilty by association, that they too would be seen as activists and risk
jobs and networking opportunities.

I asked Keady about players and coaches who might agree him. His answer
highlights not only his own personal journey as an athlete activist but it suggests
the extent to which athletes may be savvy enough to distinguish between
harmless altruism and backlash-producing activism:

**PK:** But I mean some of these people [fellow athletes and
coaches] might even, if you really got down to it, they might
even support your cause.

**JK:** Yeah but not at their personal risk. And that’s the
difference between charity and justice

**PK:** What do you mean by that?
JK: Well if I said, “Hey I wanna do a benefit; let’s have a
game, a charity game, for poor people in Indonesia that are
making the clothes we wear as athletes. If I said, “Look you
know they’re really poor, hey let’s do this match, we’ll get
coaches from all over the country and we’ll play this game for
charity and we’ll get some national team players and really
drum it up.” They’d have no problem doing it cause its charity.
[Now] let’s talk about justice. Let’s ask the question why
they’re poor? And then point fingers at the people in the
system that are maintaining their poverty or keeping them
oppressed in poverty.

PK: Including us.

JK: Exactly, and now hey you know what that 3.5 million
dollars we took in that endorsement deal, that’s right out of
their mouths and off their dinner tables so now what are we
going to do? You know? That personal service agreement that
you have that’s part of your contract with Nike, you’d give it
up? For justice? You have access to the president of a
multibillion dollar sportswear company are you going to go in
there and tell him he’s a greedy son of a bitch? It’s not gonna
go over well and that’s where you know using the clichés the
rubber hits the road, for me as Catholic it’s like where the
gospel goes from being a warm and fuzzy Jesus to the guy that
they hunted down and hung in a dump to die as an example.

In considering Jim Keady’s activism, it is important to recognize that he was
fully prepared to deal with the repercussions of his actions. In effect, he allowed
himself to become a deviant and be labeled an outcast by certain audiences.
Keady could have toned down or stopped his protest, continued working as an
assistant, and moved up the college soccer coaching ranks. Instead, he chose to
be an activist. Not everyone has the resources to endure the potentially negative
and costly reactions associated with this choice. Consider the case of Kevin
McMahon, for example. McMahon is a two-time Olympian and two-time U.S.
national champion hammer thrower. Like Keady, he is bothered by the working
conditions of those who toil in overseas factories that produce the clothes that he
wears and endorses. During our interview, he recounted his process of
awakening to this social injustice:

People are doing honest work and they’re being exploited. I
might not be an NBA basketball player, but I do have a form
in my life when I walk out with logos all over me. I previously
had no qualms wearing Reebok or Adidas. I’m an athlete, so it
was cool that that’s what you were wearing. And it was free.
Why wouldn’t you wear it? But it nearly sickened me to think
that for those however many years I was advertising for these people. That I was promoting their stuff. That I, in my ignorance, had possibly caused harm to these people that are just being exploited. And I think there was that sense of guilt and that sense of responsibility. If you just look at the countries that they've [the sportswear companies] hopped from one to the other, it's a who's who of countries that really desperately need jobs, desperately need money and they take advantage of that. And it's great that they give them jobs but they could treat them more like human beings.

When McMahon decided to engage in some form of activism and speak against sweatshop labor he realized that his choices for action were limited by the power structure he relied on. McMahon depended on the governing body of his sport, USA Track and Field (USATF), for health insurance and other benefits necessary for his Olympic pursuits. In talking with McMahon about his desire to address the injustices of sweatshop labor, the officials of USATF were both unnerving and unflinching in their reaction: “And some of their arguments were frankly quite scary to me because I depend on my health insurance. My wife’s health insurance depends on my doing well with USA Track and Field and if I violate one of their rules they could take that away. And my wife has been sick for a long time and I was like man, this is scary.” Threatening to halt McMahon’s health care coverage was unstated but understood, and it was just one of a number of threats that he heard from USATF as they tried to convince him to abandon his activism:

They didn’t mention it but I knew that and they knew I knew that. But you know they brought up a lot of issues, “hey listen, our chief sponsor is Nike at this point and if we don’t have that sponsorship athletes like you might not be medal contenders, we may not be able to pay for you to be able to go to the games.” Like basically you should be grateful that you’re getting what you’re getting from funds that we’re getting from Nike.

Ultimately, McMahon decided to take restrained action. He wore a white ribbon on his singlet and warm-up jacket during the 2001 Goodwill Games to signify “solidarity with all workers in the athletic apparel industry whose efforts and great dire circumstances are going unrecognized and underpaid.” This act may seem somewhat innocuous but it was historic; no other American athlete had ever done this (Purdy 2001). In fact, many people close to McMahon expressed concern that his symbolic gesture was a significant departure from the norms for an athlete competing in a world-class event. They believed that his deviation from the norms was a potentially costly mistake:
I had lots of people who, people who I really love and respect say, ‘I don’t know why you’re doing this now. You’ve got the world championships right in front of you and you’re throwing well. Why do you want to breathe all this controversy and all this distraction? Why do you want to make things more complex than necessary?’

Although McMahon thought that he was staying well within the range of acceptable behavior and was not sanctioned by USATF, others reacted as if he was going too far.

By taking action against the sportswear industry, Keady and McMahon challenged one of the most lucrative and powerful industries in the sports world. Although other lesser-known athletes like former world champion Belgian mountain biker Filip Meirhaeghe and Canadian gold medal skier Beckie Scott have spoken out against sweatshop abuses, there has yet to be a major athletic figure who protested the abhorrent working conditions endemic to the global sportswear labor market. This silence is not too surprising given that these companies spend billions of dollars to advertise and promote their products, with much of this money going to endorsement deals for teams, individuals, and leagues. In fact, some athletes and coaches make more money from endorsements than they do from their salaries. In this economic environment, athletes who dare speak out against sportswear companies may significantly compromise their earning power. This financial effect, coupled with the negative reactions to being an activist athlete, seems to be enough to deter most athletes from aligning themselves with the global workers who make the equipment and clothes they wear.

**Athletes against Racism**

Much has been written about the historical and on-going presence of racism in sport (Lapchick 1991; King and Springwood 2001; Wiggins and Miller 2003). Not surprisingly, the most famous examples of athletic activism come from individuals who have fought racial injustice. Jackie Robinson is probably the most well known athlete to challenge white hegemony and “break the color line.” Robinson’s activism made him subject to vicious abuse and brutal treatment by fans, journalists, and other players (Robinson 1995; Rampersad 1997). Nearly twenty years after Robinson integrated Major League Baseball, Tommie Smith and John Carlos made their famous protest at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. At the medal ceremony for the 200 meter sprint, gold medalist Smith and bronze medalist Carlos raised their glove-covered fists in the Black Power salute. The meaning of their protest was multi-layered, as Smith detailed one year after the
Games:

My raised right hand stood for the power in black America. Carlos’s raised left hand stood for the unity of black America. Together they formed an arch of unity and power. The black scarf around my neck stood for black pride. The black socks with no shoes stood for black poverty in racist America. The totality of our effort was the regaining of black dignity (quoted in Edwards, 196, p.104).

Their actions were the culmination of a long and intense planning process of the Olympic Project on Human Rights (OPHR), led by the sociologist Harry Edwards. Originally, OPHR had called for a boycott of the 1968 Olympics by all black athletes but when these plans failed to materialize, Smith, Carlos, and a few other athletes, engaged in individual gestures.

The reaction to this gesture was intense. Smith and Carlos were banished from the Olympic village, stripped of their medals, ruthlessly attacked in the media, and harassed when they returned to the United States. In addition to losing countless sponsorship opportunities, they suffered severe economic stress for years later as they had trouble finding work (Bass 2002; Hartmann 2003). In 1977, Smith’s wife committed suicide. As he recounted many years later, he believed the backlash from the Olympic protest played a role in his wife’s death:

It had a lot to do with 1968. If you were a woman with ideas of a nice life and you never knew if you were gonna eat or have a roof, and you saw your man having to pass a hat after giving a speech, and heard people inventing salacious lies to undermine your family, you would find it hard to handle. She felt she was in a no-win situation. She just couldn’t take it (quoted in Moore 1991, p. 70).

Today, many people regard Smith and Carlos, like Jackie Robinson, as heroes and images of their protest appear on various artifacts of popular culture. Despite mainstream acceptance of these activist athletes, racial inequality is still part of the social landscape. So while we idolize early activists for fighting for racial justice we continue to reproduce the conditions they sought to eradicate. Even today there is little patience or interest when socially conscious athletes call attention to racial disparities. The following examples show the derision and scorn athletes often experience for their activism.

In 1998, Ramogi Huma was a sophomore linebacker for the UCLA Bruins football team. Some of the black players on the team, in conjunction with a black student organization at UCLA, organized a symbolic protest of Proposition 209 during UCLA’s nationally televised game against the University of Miami. The players planned to wear black wristbands and to issue a press release expressing
their opposition to the proposition. As a way to get the support of all of the players, the leaders of the protest arranged for John Carlos to address the team. In our interview, Huma indicated how listening to Carlos was both informative and inspirational, particularly in terms of being an activist athlete:

He was talking about what it was like to make his stand. Basically, that at the time he was in a position to where he had a platform in front of the whole entire world. And at the time when black people didn’t have equal rights. His athletic talent put him in front. [It] gave him a certain amount of potential that he could choose to channel or not to channel. He made the experience real for us. He talked about why he did it. He said that really it wasn’t even so much just a black thing. There were people throughout the world being abused and taken advantage of and mistreated. It was more of an empowerment. It was a sign to show that the status quo wasn’t good enough. He went on to talk about how hard it was to deal with the aftermath. He knew going into it that he was taking a big risk but in the aftermath he talked about the death threats, being harassed by the FBI and he went on and on. He made it clear that it was a sacrifice for his stance, his political stance. He said he felt like he had to make it. By the time John Carlos finished, players kind of realized that we could do something. Right there [we were] transformed from just players to I guess you can say potential activists.

Although the players were prepared for criticism, they did not anticipate the negative reaction and strong collective pressure they received from the UCLA football coaches and athletic department when the coaches got wind of this protest. The week leading up to the game against Miami was fraught with tense meetings between players and coaches, and among the players who initially supported the protest. The reaction of the coaches, and increasingly of some players, was the playing field was not the appropriate venue for political statements. Huma tried to make a case to the coach and to his teammates that the protest had to be made now:

One of his (the coach’s) statements was that you guys get free education, you guys get a free ride, you guys get all this stuff handed to you, by and large you should be happy with that. You guys might have a social conscious and want to do other things and that’s great but football’s not the way to do it. You guys are already taken care of. I opened my mouth and was like, well coach we feel yeah it’s a good opportunity and everything but at the same time there’s a lot of people making a lot of bucks. I’m looking at him making big salaries and making a living and selling products because of us too. We’re not the only ones benefiting and it’s not like we’re sitting here
getting professional salaries. We earn everything we get and I said one of the ways we realize we can make up the difference of what we don’t get is to use our position, our talent, our fame as another benefit basically. As a college athlete you don’t have a job so why not use our fame? I said look we’re only here for 4 or 5 years, we’re gone. We only have a certain amount of time where people would even hear what we say. In the off-season nobody’s listening. Nobody wants to listen to us in the off-season. When we’re graduating nobody is gonna listen. I said this is something we feel we need to do now because the whole nation is gonna be watching it. I could tell in his face he was flustered by that time.

In the end, the coaches dissuaded the players from breaking the norms for athletes’ behavior by becoming activists and no on-field actions materialized. This incident illustrates how even the threat of being an activist athlete can result in the same negative reactions as actually engaging in protest. Although they never actually engaged in the protest, merely considering it garnered a swift and unambiguous response from coaches and administrators. An interesting postscript to this incident is that UCLA lost the game to Miami. The coach and some of the players blamed the loss on a lack of focus due to the ruckus caused by the planned protest. As Huma noted, “They blamed the loss on the wristbands and that just divided everything. It was never brought up after that. Nobody said, what about those wristbands let’s go do it, nobody.” Huma finds the whole experience hard to swallow:

It’s even hard to bring up with some of my close friends that were on the team at the time. The loss was painful but the fact that we didn’t make our stand was even more painful and that’s why it’s hard to talk about. Every guy on that team that played in that game they know about this. It’s buried in their memories. I don’t have the best memory but I remember enough about it. It really brings a lot of emotions out of me. I’m sure every player has that feeling. Whether or not it’s completely bitter and they ain’t learned very much from it or learned not to get involved with politics and not to take a stand. Or if they’re more on the level of where I’m at which is where I just regret not having been a part of that situation and taking a stand. But I guarantee every player remembers it. They’ll remember that forever and it was some kind of education.

Receiving an education from their activism was a common theme among activist athletes. Many of them did not expect their actions to result in such intense reactions. As Toni Smith recalled to me: “I think my action was very innocent but because of the reaction I got from it, it kind of threw me into this position that I had no idea I was getting myself into. . . [I]t really brought out a
lot of myself that I didn’t really know I had.” Moreover, as Jim Keady’s case showed, one of the most costly “lessons” an activist athlete can have is the realization that they are no longer welcome in their sport. In 1997, former NBA player Craig Hodges sued the NBA for blacklisting him from the league because of his political activism.

When the Chicago Bulls won the NBA championship in 1991, they were invited to the White House to be congratulated by the President. For the occasion, Hodges decided to wear a dashiki and deliver a letter to George Bush, Sr. asking him to address some of the racial injustices in America such as urban blight and the lack of Black head coaches in professional sports. Hodges’ activism was not limited to this one instance, however. He often criticized other NBA players, including his teammate and megastar Michael Jordan, for not speaking out against social and political issues of the day. Hodges believed that athletes like Jordan could leverage their fame to make people more aware of the dire social conditions in the United States. He said,

I’m not going to tell Michael [Jordan] what to do. At the same time, I cannot go talk to young kids and not use Michael as an example of what is possible because he has so much and he has children in the palm of his hands. Leadership in America is the athletes and entertainers. That’s why I feel I have to start speaking out (quoted in Rhoden 1992, p.12).

In his lawsuit, which was thrown out due to a statue of limitations, Hodges claimed that it was these critical political views that resulted in him being banished from the league. As Zengerle (1997) argues, Hodges’ argument may not be far off the mark.

Did Hodges fail to attract an offer because of his politics? It would make some sense. As a trip to any professional basketball arena will demonstrate, the racial dynamics of the NBA are unusual: 80 percent of the players on the court are black, while 80 percent of the fans in the stands are white. . . . [T]he league takes great pains to present its black athletes as unthreatening cartoon superheroes. The NBA has embraced hip-hop styles without embracing hip-hop politics, because the latter, which would undoubtedly be a form of racial politics, might threaten the league's white fans. Thus Hodges's dashiki-clad activism may have been a political eruption the league felt it was better off without (p.101-2).

Arguably, no issue is more explosive or more salient in sports than race. Race largely defines sport and yet, it seems as if the players, coaches, fans and sports writers go to great lengths to avoid discussing it. Athletes like Ramogi Huma, Tommie Smith, John Carlos, and Craig Hodges refuse to be silent about the
intersection of race and sports despite efforts to quiet them. Through their actions, they draw attention to how race impacts sports and society as a whole. Sport, like other social institutions, can help eradicate racial injustices. But as Coakley (2007) notes, “This happens only when people in sports plan strategies to encourage critical awareness of ethnic prejudices, racist ideas, and forms of discrimination built into the cultures and structures of sport organization” (p. 319).

CONCLUSION: SPORTS, POLITICS, AND PROGRESSIVE SOCIAL CHANGE

From being booed by fans to being banned from their sport, athletes who take a stand for social and political justice face intense backlash. However, not all of the responses to these athletes were negative; activist athletes did receive support from some teammates, coaches and fans. Nevertheless, the loudest reactions and the reactions from those who brandished institutional power were overtly negative. The underlying message was athletes should keep their social and political views separate from their athletic lives because sports and politics do not mix.

Despite the popular notion that sports and politics are mutually exclusive, sports and politics are intricately connected. But must sports always reinforce the status quo? Can athletes be agents of progressive social change? Furthermore, is it possible to have a “fully democratized sport” which fosters egalitarianism, humanism, anti-discrimination, and views sport participation as a right for all (Donnelly 1993)? Giulianotti (2005) makes an affirmative case for this position in his critical sociological interpretation of sport. He said

Major sports events occasion global fascination, and thereby represent cultural media through which their followers can more vividly imagine the community of humankind. Sports participation enables the dissemination of humanitarian messages and the implementation of contemporary policy initiatives (p. 216).

Thus, sport engenders the ideals of a liberal-democratic ideology as it encourages “sportsmanship,” “fair play” and other humanitarian ideals and has the potential to promote these ideals on a grand scale.

Consider the case of Joey Cheek, an athlete whose activist experience embodies Giulianotti’s vision of sport as a tool for change. Cheek won a gold medal in the 500m and a silver medal in 1000m speed skating events at the 2006 Olympics in Turin, Italy. He donated his medal-winning bonuses ($40,000) to Right to Play, a global humanitarian organization created by Norwegian speed skating legend Johann Olav Koss. After the Olympics, Cheek continued his
activism by deferring admission to Princeton University so he could promote the relief efforts in Darfur. What is particularly interesting about Cheek’s activism is that it has garnered little, if any, negative reaction. When I asked Cheek why this was so, he pointed to a number of intersecting factors including the sum of his donation, the cause of his activism (genocide) and the brashness and haughtiness displayed by some of his Olympic peers. He said,

You combine a cause that is hard for anyone in this nation to disagree with, with the Olympics which we really talk about it as being something that can bring the world together, and then you combine it with a media that was really hoping to find at least one good thing they can spin out of it. Then I think you end up in a situation like that.

Despite the negative experiences of other activist athletes discussed in this paper, the responses to Joey Cheek’s actions are encouraging. We cannot expect athletes to eradicate global problems such as genocide, racism, and sweatshop labor by themselves. However, we hope that their efforts will be respected, applauded, and replicated by athletes and non-athletes alike.

REFERENCES


