

Chapter 76

Student Athlete Activism in a Millennial World: Recognizing Their Voice and Expressing Their Concerns

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ABSTRACT

College student athletes are among the most recognized students in their communities, across the country, and in some cases around the world. Their voices hold a significant esteem, and they can impact many societal and political issues. Some have postulated that college student-athletes are hesitant to be a part of these politics, but during the past few years, many have taken stands through social media and through protests on their campuses that have been in opposition to the stances of their coaches, their university's administration, and their teammates. Many, however, challenge the role that student athletes have in these protests. This chapter will explore the history of student athlete activism and its developmental aspects, highlight the more recent instances of such activism, and finally discuss how university administration and others can support and be responsive to the concerns that are expressed by this unique set of students.

STUDENT ATHLETE ACTIVISM IN A MILLENNIAL WORLD: RECOGNIZING THEIR VOICE AND EXPRESSING THEIR CONCERNS

As they took the podium to receive their gold and silver medals respectively at the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City, they initiated their well-orchestrated plan to publicly protest many injustices that they witnessed in their home country of the United States. They removed their shoes to exemplify the poverty that existed in their country. Many will remember the symbolic gesture of bowing their heads in defiance while raising their fists in the air to symbolize the Black Power movement that was prominent during this volatile time in the history of their country, but they also wore beads and scarfs around their necks to protest lynching. They slowly pulled the pair of black gloves out of their pockets that they strategically wore on those memorable fists as they walked to the podium, while wearing a black T-shirt over their team uniforms to connote the shame that they felt toward their country because it was so slow and oblivious to the struggles of their people. Tommie Smith and John Carlos did not realize that their efforts would become one of the major symbols of the Civil Rights' Movement in America. They were merely college students at San Jose State University who had made their country's Olympic team and subsequently placed first and second in the sport at this international event. The demonstration will live on as one of the most prominent symbols of athlete activism in the history of this country (Agyemang, Singer, & DeLorme, 2010; Brown, 2017; Edwards, 1969).

During this era, there were activist efforts throughout collegiate sports. Reese (2017) noted that the actions of Smith and Carlos emboldened black student athletes during that time to be vocal in their efforts to counter mistreatment, inequities, and threats to their physical, mental, and financial well-being. Many of these student athletes were dismissed at institutions like the University of Texas, El Paso and Indiana University because of their engagement in protests, and because they missed practices to participate in such activities (Wiggins, 1997). In October 1969, 14 black student athletes were removed from the University of Wyoming football team because they wanted to protest in a game against Brigham Young University because of their concerns about the discriminatory nature of the Mormon Church. In spite of the national good standing in the polls of the Wyoming team, the players wanted to wear armbands to protest the church. They were kicked off the team, and after a lawsuit that they lost, many other black student athletes joined in them to express similar concerns around the country (Goldman, 2015). Students at San Jose State University expressed their concerns by wearing black armbands in their protests also to spotlight the contentious climate that existed around the campus at local businesses, as well as their experiences with the on-campus fraternity and sorority life system (Wiggins, 1997). Student athletes during this time played a significant role in highlighting the injustices that existed in society. These occurrences demonstrate that sports historically have been a place where social issues can be advocated for or protested (Springwood, 2006).

Many will argue that today's student athletes have the access to the same opportunity to protest many of the injustices that exist in society, but it seems that they choose to remain silent. In 2015, 231 NCAA Division I schools generated a total of \$9.15 billion in revenue, with 24 of those schools producing \$100 million each (Gaines, 2016). In an industry that obtains billions of dollars in revenue each year through a plethora of sports, but with only a few being revenue generating and significantly populated by black student athletes, the opinion is that there is a reluctance of these athletes to participate in activities that will jeopardize their future, and they are discouraged from doing so because it is seen as being too incendiary by coaches and administrators. These leaders' perception of issues are also often in stark contrast to these students, which limits their interest in advocating for the causes of their student athletes

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