

**“More than an Athlete”: Race, Sport, and Activism in Present Day
America.**

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Abstract

The purpose of this dissertation is to uncover the vast infrastructure of athlete-activism that exists in contemporary society. The term infrastructure refers to the huge network of athlete-activists who are not necessarily united under one organization or structure, but nonetheless form an expansive framework of diverse, yet interconnected social justice activism. The broad scope of the thesis will look to shine a spotlight on actions that can often be overshadowed by more visible instances of political defiance.

The dissertation will begin by charting the history of athlete-activism to establish that athletes today represent a long tradition of athletic involvement in the Black Freedom Struggle. Included in this historical context will be the period of the late twentieth century, this era is frequently dismissed as witnessing a decline in athlete-activism but using the juxtaposing examples of Craig Hodges and Michael Jordan the thesis will present this as an important era in creating the conditions for contemporary athlete-activism.

The contemporary focus of the dissertation will take place in the period from the summer of 2016 up to the present day. This era has witnessed the emergence of a broad network of athlete-activism and the thesis will explore this network through four different strands of contemporary activism. Firstly, symbolic forms of activism that take place within the sporting arena. Secondly, the community-based grassroots activism of athletes. Following this, the case study of the 2020 election will show that athletes comprise a key group of voting rights activists in post-Shelby County America. Finally, the relationship between athletes and major corporations will show how athletes are navigating their corporate relationships to amplify their activism.

The ultimate aim of this dissertation is to consider the vast infrastructure of athlete-activism that exists today and in doing so amplify the role of athlete-activists in the Black Lives Matter moment. This will complete the argument that athletes form a powerful bloc of activists in present day America and are much more than an addendum or attachment to the Black Lives Matter movement.

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Introduction

“America’s response to what the Black athlete is saying and doing will undoubtedly not only determine the future course and direction of American athletics, but also will affect all racial and social relations between Blacks and whites in this country.” – Harry Edwards, 1969.¹

On August 26th 2020, the Playoffs of the National Basketball Association (NBA) came to an abrupt halt. The Milwaukee Bucks who were supposed to be playing against the Orlando Magic chose to stay in the locker room rather than take to the court. The wildcat strike that was initiated by the Bucks’ players was a historic moment in political expression amongst American athletes. Their decision came in response to the extrajudicial killing of Jacob Blake in Kenosha, Wisconsin – the home state of the Bucks. The reaction to Blake’s death marked the zenith of a tumultuous summer of American race relations which saw widespread protests against the deaths of African American citizens such as George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor. From financially supporting protestors that were arrested, to engaging in peaceful protests in the street, athletes displayed their willingness to participate in these demonstrations. Scholar Harry Edwards stated that the boycott sent the message to owners that “this madness has to stop...we’re going to stop business as usual until you use your resources to help us.”² Despite the significance of the boycott, the activism of professional athletes in 2020 went beyond their involvement in the Black Lives Matter protests, beneath this visible involvement there exists a vast framework of athlete-activism that is underrepresented in popular media outlets. From their involvement in grassroots orientated activism aimed at improving the everyday lives of their communities, to campaigns such as “More Than a Vote” and #VoteWarnock in which athletes helped shape the outcome of the 2020 Presidential election, sporting figures such as LeBron James, Naomi Osaka, Colin Kaepernick, Kenny Stills, and many more have demonstrated how athletes have emerged as central figures in contemporary racial politics.

The aim of this dissertation is to consider the vast infrastructure of athlete-activism that exists today and in doing so establish the critical importance of athlete-activists in the contemporary era of the Black Freedom Movement. The term “vast infrastructure” refers to the broad network of athlete-activists who are not necessarily united under one organization or political structure, but nonetheless form an expansive network of activists with diverse yet interconnected social justice

¹ Harry Edwards, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete: 50th Anniversary Edition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018): 8.

² Harry Edwards, “The NBA Boycott and the Fifth Wave of Sports Activism.” *OTB Sports*, September 1, 2020, <https://www.otbsports.com/podcasts/highlights-from-off-the-ball/dr-harry-edwards-nba-boycott-fifth-waves-sports-activism> (Accessed: 25/10/20).

agendas. The project will present the political involvement of today's athletes as a continuation of the long evolution of athlete-activism. In the remit of this dissertation, the contemporary moment will be defined as the period from the summer of 2016 up to the present day. The core chapters of the thesis will analyse this period and unpack how it has witnessed athletes become legitimate political activists alongside the Black Lives Matter movement.

An essential prerequisite to any discussions of activism stemming from the sporting arena is to establish that sport is inherently political and has always been a platform that amplifies wider political debates – both in the politicisation of sporting events and the actions of politically conscious athletes. The belief that sport exists as an apolitical space manifests itself in the “stick to sports” argument, a trope that is consistently used to undermine the political activism of athletes. The “stick to sports” narrative stems from the idealistic belief that sport functions as an escape from socio-political issues. Howard Bryant argued that fans want athletes to avoid any controversial or political actions and therefore provide a “pure form of entertainment.”³ The belief that sport does not belong alongside politics also stems from the argument that athletes are not legitimate political actors. This was witnessed when Fox News host Laura Ingraham told LeBron James to “shut up and dribble” after he denounced the Presidency of Donald Trump.⁴ However, this argument only appears when political commentators such as Ingraham disagree with an athlete's argument and cannot provide a more effective rebuttal. Whilst the rhetoric is different, the sentiment remained the same, Ingraham and other such right-wing political commentators believed that sport and politics should remain separate. However, this argument is fundamentally flawed as remaining neutral on political issues reinforces the existing conditions, and therefore for athletes, silence is also political.⁵ As contemporary athletes continue to display their political power, it is clear that any demand for athletes to “stick to sports” constitutes an attempt to stifle social justice movements that are challenging hegemonic forces. The targeting of sportspeople by conservatives not only underlines the importance of athlete-activism, but points to the potential political power sport has in society. Furthermore, the belief that sport and politics can remain separate is contradicted by the historical intersection between sport and social movements throughout the 20th century. Peter Kaufman and Eli Wolff argued that sport has always provided an arena that can work to promote progressive

³ Howard Bryant, *The Heritage: Black Athletes, a Divided America, and the Politics of Patriotism* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2018): 1.

⁴ Emily Sullivan, “Laura Ingraham Told LeBron James to Shut Up and Dribble; He went to the hoop,” *NPR*, February 19, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/02/19/587097707/laura-ingraham-told-lebron-james-to-shutup-and-dribble-he-went-to-the-hoop> (Accessed: 4/8/22).

⁵ Cathal Kilcline, “Sport and Protest: Global Perspectives,” *International Journal of the History of Sport* vol. 34, no. 3 (2017): 159.

social change.⁶ This view was furthered by Douglas Hartmann when he defined sport as a racially contested terrain that “refracts, contests, and challenges existing social arrangements.”⁷ These arguments suggest that sport is an inherently political tool that can be used to challenge social inequality. In the context of the Black Freedom Struggle, Michael E. Lomax used the example of Jackie Robinson and the integration of Major League Baseball in the 1940s to illustrate the way that sport functioned as a site to push for racial equality in wider society.⁸ On the other hand, scholars such as Damion Thomas have illustrated how sport has been utilised as a political tool by hegemonic structures. Thomas outlined how the U.S. government used African American athletes as political pawns during the Cold War, with a specific focus on the Harlem Globetrotters. Thomas stated that the Globetrotters were used to “showcase African Americans as pre-eminent citizens rather than victims of racism,” in an effort to offset Soviet propaganda that focused on American race relations.⁹ Jules Boykoff echoed Thomas’ argument using the example of the Olympic games to highlight the political deployment of sport by governments and other divergent political groups.¹⁰ Although this scholarship is not directly connected to contemporary athlete-activism, the views of Hartmann, Kilcline, and Thomas establish that sport has always been an inherently political practice. This will set the precedent that athletes’ position in society is political and therefore “sticking to sports” is impossible, especially in the contemporary climate of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Despite historians such as Hartmann and Lomax focusing on the socio-political importance of sport alongside the Black Freedom Struggle, the contributions of athletes in the long movement for racial equality have often been overlooked. Some historians have downplayed or completely ignored the role of Black athletes in the 20th century Black Freedom Movement. For instance, historical texts on the classical civil rights era have either excluded prominent Black athletes such as Muhammad Ali, Bill Russell, and Wyomia Tyus, or simplified their contributions to a side-note.¹¹ This historical

⁶ Peter Kaufman & Eli Wolff, “Playing and Protesting: Sport as a Vehicle for Social Change,” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* vol. 34, no. 2 (2010): 154.

⁷ Douglas Hartmann, “Rethinking the Relationship Between Sport and Race in American Culture: Golden Ghettos and Contested Terrain,” *Journal of Sociology of Sport* vol. 17, no. 3 (2000): 229.

⁸ Michael E. Lomax, “Jackie Robinson: Racial Pioneer and Athlete Extraordinaire in an Era of Change,” in *Out of the Shadows: A Biographical History of African-American Athletes* ed. David K. Wiggins, (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2006).

⁹ Damion Thomas, “Around the World: Problematizing the Harlem Globetrotters as Cold War Warriors,” *Sport in Society* vol. 14, no. 6 (2011): 780.

¹⁰ Jules Boykoff, “Protest, Activism and the Olympic Games: An Overview of Key Issues and Iconic Moments,” *Sport and Protest: Global Perspectives* vol. 34, no. 3 (2017).

¹¹ Historical texts that have overlooked or simplified the contributions of athletes include: Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), Adam Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality, 1890-2000* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), Peniel E. Joseph, *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (New York: Routledge, 2006) and, Stephen Tuck, *We Ain’t What We Ought To Be: The Black Freedom Struggle From Emancipation to Obama* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

marginalization of African American athletes is problematic because it overlooks the way that athletes have worked alongside activists in the struggle for racial equality. Howard Bryant defined athletes as the most influential Black employees in America, because unlike scholars, academics, or politicians, they mostly avoided the roadblocks of segregation and discrimination.¹² Furthermore, scholars such as Douglas Hartmann, Harry Edwards, and Louis Moore have all made the assertion that the value of Black athletes existed in their ability to provide visible victories and signs of progress in relation to the wider Black Freedom Movement.¹³ Edwards and Moore also stated that as well as their symbolic importance, athlete-activists formed a powerful bloc of individuals working alongside traditional activists in the struggle for racial equality, and therefore their contributions should not be ignored.¹⁴ There is an ever-increasing amount of research focused on the role of athletes in contemporary Black activism, this was evident in the *Journal of African American History's* "New Directions in African American Sports History" Volume that was released in Spring 2021. However, the role of athletes in contemporary Black activism has been largely overlooked or side-lined in early literature on the broader Black Lives Matter movement, this can lead to a misunderstanding of the value of athlete-activists today.¹⁵ But, more recent works on contemporary Black activism have begun to discuss the importance of athletes in the Black Lives Matter moment. Barbara Ransby's 2018 book *Making All Black Lives Matter* recognised the significance of Colin Kaepernick and the take a knee movement in the context of broader Black political activism.¹⁶ This greater appreciation of the work of athlete-activists in later studies supports the periodisation of the thesis in the post-2016 timeframe, as this appeared to be the era in which athletes gained greater appreciation as legitimate political actors.

Before entering into a discussion of the themes that the dissertation will look to explore, it is pertinent to outline how "activism" will be defined throughout the thesis. In Cooper et al's 2014 paper, activism was defined as the "engagement in intentional actions that disrupt hegemonic systems by challenging a clearly defined opposition while simultaneously empowering individuals

¹² Bryant, *The Heritage*, 1.

¹³ See: Douglas Hartmann, "Activism, Organizing, and the Symbolic Power of Sport: Reassessing Harry Edwards' Contributions to the 1968 Olympic Protest Movement," *Journal for the Study of Sports and Athletes* vol. 3, no. 2 (2009), Louis Moore, *We Will Win the Day: The Civil Rights Movement, Black Athletes, and the Quest for Equality* (U.S.: ABC-CLIO, 2017), and Harry Edwards, "The Fourth Wave: Black athlete protests in the second decade of the 21st century," Keynote Address at the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport conference, Tampa Bay, FL, November 3, 2016.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Books that have omitted or side-lined the role of sport in the Black Lives Matter movement include: Laurie Collier Hillstrom, *Black Lives Matter* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2018), Christopher J. LeBron, *The Making of Black Lives Matter* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2016).

¹⁶ Barbara Ransby, *Making All Black Lives Matter* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018): 80.

and groups disadvantaged by inequitable arrangements.”¹⁷ This fits a consensual definition that activism is intended to target hegemonic issues. Scholar Brian Martin agreed with this consensus but added that activism must go beyond “conventional politics” – ruling, legislation, and the judiciary.¹⁸ The case studies featured in this dissertation all focus on how athletes are using their platform to challenge systemic racism in the U.S. and overcome the damage that this inflicts on poor, minority communities. Although the term “activism” manifests itself in a variety of ways throughout the thesis, the examples included all look at actions that are working against hegemonic oppression to uplift the Black community, and therefore fit within the definition outlined above.

To fully understand the activism of contemporary athletes their actions need to be contextualised alongside the long history of Black athletic activism in America. The first section of the dissertation will show how athlete-activism has evolved alongside the movement for racial equality since the beginning of the 20th century. Harry Edwards’ “wave theory” provides a key framework to understand how sport has intersected with the different eras of the Black Freedom Struggle. The theory states that in order to understand the activism of athletes their actions must be considered alongside the ideological substance of the time.¹⁹ Case studies of athletes from the pre-war, post-war, and classical civil rights eras will be used to highlight the evolution of athlete-activism throughout the 20th century. By showing the historic intersection between athletes and the Black Freedom Movement, the dissertation will demonstrate that contemporary athletes are upholding “the heritage” of African American athletes – the historic responsibility of Black athletes to uplift their community.²⁰ However, this dissertation will also look to build on this history to improve the understanding of the political engagement of athletes in today’s society.

Jennifer E. Bruening once wrote, “the whiteness of gender analysis in sport and the maleness of racial analysis in sport renders Black women invisible.”²¹ Bruening’s argument reflects a major criticism of historical interpretations of athlete-activism; the contributions of female athletes – especially Black women – are too often side-lined or overlooked entirely. Amira Rose Davis has focused on the activism of female athletes such as Wyomia Tyus, Rose Robinson, and Wilma Rudolph to illuminate the historic involvement of African American women in the intersection

¹⁷ Joseph N. Cooper et al., “Race and Resistance: A Typology of African-American Sport Activism,” *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* vol. 54, no. 2 (2017): 154-55.

¹⁸ Brian Martin, “Activism, Social and Political,” in *Encyclopaedia of Activism and Social Justice*, eds. Gary L. Anderson & Kathryn G. Herr (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007): 19.

¹⁹ Harry Edwards, “The Fourth Wave: Black athlete protests in the second decade of the 21st century,” Keynote Address at the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport conference, Tampa Bay, FL, November 3, 2016.

²⁰ Bryant, *The Heritage*, viii.

²¹ Jennifer Bruening, “Gender and Racial Analysis in Sport: Are All the Women White and All the Blacks Men?” *Quest* vol. 57, no. 3 (2012): 330.

between sport and the Black Freedom Struggle.²² Davis stated that the influence of Black female athletes needs to be considered given the significance of female athletes in the contemporary climate of athlete-activism.²³ This will be reflected in the dissertation with the focus on female athletes such as Natasha Cloud, Naomi Osaka, and members of the WNBA. Although Edwards' wave theory does discuss the contributions of athletes such as Althea Gibson and Wilma Rudolph, in the 2018 edition of his 1969 book *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* he stated that female athletes had taken on a "secondary significance" during his interpretation of athlete-activism in the civil rights era.²⁴ Additionally, Bryant's discussion of the heritage was almost entirely focused on the activism of male athletes. These interpretations are damaging because they downplay the contributions of female athletes and in doing so limit a full understanding of the scope of athlete-activism that is on display in contemporary society.

Another intervention in the historiography of athlete-activism will be to re-evaluate the period between 1970-2000 in the context of contemporary athlete-activism. This era has previously been dismissed as a "period of stagnation", which is problematic for two reasons.²⁵ Firstly, as scholars like Susan Ware and Robert Trent Vinson have shown with their work on Billie Jean King and Arthur Ashe, athlete-activism did not stagnate in the 1970s, but rather exemplified the proliferation of Black protest movements and modes of activism that had been side-lined in the 1960s.²⁶ Ware's book *Game, Set, Match* outlined how King brought the feminist movement into the sporting arena and in doing so paved the way for other female athletes to use their platform to support the movement for gender equality.²⁷ Meanwhile, Vinson outlined how athletes such as Ashe used the international spotlight provided by sport to challenge international injustices such as South African apartheid.²⁸ These examples demonstrate how American athlete-activism went beyond the domestic struggle for racial equality and did not stagnate in the 1970s, but rather contributed to the evolution of athlete-activism in America.

²² Amira Rose Davis, "Sixty Years Ago, She Refused to Stand for the Anthem," *Zora*, September 26, 2019, <https://zora.medium.com/sixty-years-ago-she-refused-to-stand-for-the-anthem-cf443b4e75c7> (Accessed: 4/5/21).

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Edwards, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete*, xxii.

²⁵ Edwards, "The Fourth Wave."

²⁶ Stephen Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought to Be: The Black Freedom Struggle from Emancipation to Obama* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010): 358.

²⁷ Susan Ware, *Game, Set, Match: Billie Jean King and the Revolution in Women's Sports* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

²⁸ Robert Trent Vinson, "Up From Slavery and Down With Apartheid! African-Americans and Black South Africans Against the Global Colour Line," *Journal of American Studies* vol. 52, no. 2 (2018); South Africa would continue to be barred from major sporting events (Olympics, World Cups, Davis Cups) until the end of apartheid in the 1990s, reinforcing the intersection between sport and apartheid.

The second chapter of the dissertation will use the conflicting examples of Craig Hodges and Michael Jordan to show how broader social conditions factored into the fragmentation of athlete-activism in the late twentieth century and simultaneously present the intervention that this period should be discussed for its contribution to the evolution of athlete-activism. Although African American athletes have always possessed an elevated cultural status, scholars such as Naomi Klein and David Andrews have asserted that it was in the late twentieth century that sport stars reached cultural superstardom. Klein argued that it was the intersection between prominent athletes and the marketing boom of the 1990s that propelled athletes such as Michael Jordan into the cultural spotlight.²⁹ Whilst Andrews studied the role of the sports media industry in turning sport into “the collective glue of cultural consciousness in American society.”³⁰ Although neither of these scholars suggest a link between the late twentieth century and athlete-activism, they provide necessary context to the period that transformed Black athletes into “Hollywood-style superstars.”³¹ The contribution of this era to the evolution of athlete-activism is witnessed in the ways that contemporary athletes are leveraging their financial and cultural influence to further their activist efforts. This was recognised by Harry Edwards when he stated, “athletes are learning to leverage their power and their money towards progressive social change.”³² However, the scholarly emphasis on the cultural power and influence possessed by contemporary athletes has tended to overlook the era in which this power was accrued – the late twentieth century. The juxtaposing careers of Jordan and Hodges introduce the relationship between athletes, activism, and major corporations. These relationships, which were a central factor in the fragmentation of athlete-activism in the late twentieth century, continue to comprise an important element of athlete-activism today.

In my undergraduate dissertation I wrote about the problems that athletes face when they decide to engage in activism, with a primary focus on the media distortion and public backlash experienced by Colin Kaepernick in response to his decision to kneel during the playing of the national anthem. However, upon reflection the project failed to discuss the variety of approaches that contemporary athletes use to engage in activism. Through an analysis of four key, but not exhaustive ways that athletes use their platform to create social change; activism within the sporting arena, community orientated activism at the grassroots level, election based activism, and activism that takes place within a corporate framework, this dissertation will look to advance the work of my undergraduate thesis by considering the wider scope of contemporary athlete-activism.

²⁹ Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (London: Harper Collins, 2000).

³⁰ David Andrews, “Sport in the Late Capitalist Moment,” in *The Commercialisation of Sport*, ed. Trevor Slack (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004).

³¹ Klein, *No Logo*, 51.

³² Edwards, “The Fourth Wave.”

The contemporary focus will begin by discussing the emergence of athlete-activism in the Black Lives Matter era, this will analyse activism that takes place within the sporting arena with the goal of facilitating broader social change. This chapter will begin with a discussion of symbolic activism, with a specific focus on the take a knee movement. Steve Martin and George McHendry used the example of Colin Kaepernick to discuss how athletes can transcend a symbolic action to generate a conversation around an important issue, in the case of Kaepernick this entailed kneeling during the anthem to bring police brutality and social injustice into the spotlight.³³ This chapter will then move on to look at how activism within sport evolved to embody a more direct threat in the case study of the boycott movement that took place in August 2020. These examples will establish that protests that take place within sport are far more than “gesture politics” and show that in the Black Lives Matter era sport operates as an important arena for political activism.³⁴

The fourth chapter will focus on the attempts of athletes to create tangible change at the grassroots level. The relationship between athletes and grassroots activism has existed throughout the Black Freedom Struggle, however, its academic relevance has been largely overshadowed by debates focused on more “famous” examples of athlete activism – such as the take a knee movement.³⁵ The grassroots chapter will use the case studies of Kenny Stills, Natasha Cloud, and LeBron James to illustrate the variety of approaches that athletes are using to counter hegemonic issues at the community level. The fifth chapter centres on the 2020 election and the role that athletes played in shaping its outcome. The chapter will unpack the historic relationship between Black activists and the vote, then, using the examples of the “More Than a Vote” organization and the #VoteWarnock campaign illustrate how athletes are upholding this tradition in contemporary electoral politics. Both of these examples will look to highlight how athletes shaped the electoral discourse in 2020 and further undermine the idea of “gesture politics” by showing the existence of a framework of athlete-activism beyond that which takes place in the sporting arena.

The final chapter will discuss how athletes are navigating their corporate relationships to engage in activism. This will look at the change in attitude amongst contemporary athletes in relation to their corporate relationships and further discuss how athletes are negotiating their position with major corporations to ensure that their activism is not being diluted, whilst also pushing brands to take more radical public policy positions. Then corporate social responsibility initiatives will be

³³ Steven Martin & George F. McHendry, “Kaepernick’s Stand: Patriotism, Protest, and Professional Sports,” *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* vol. 6, no.3/4 (2016): 90.

³⁴ Gesture Politics is defined by Oxford Dictionary as a “political action or position to gain publicity that requires little effort or has no significant impact.”

³⁵ “Famous” in this regard alludes to activism that generates a significant media community and becomes a societal talking point.

considered, the chapter will draw out the constrained nature of these initiatives, before moving on to discuss the impactful programs that athletes are implementing within these frameworks to show how athletes are navigating this relationship to uplift their community.

This dissertation will predominantly focus on the activist actions of professional athletes, this is not intended to undermine the role of amateur athletes in the past and present of the Black Freedom Movement. In fact, there is a rich history of amateur athletes engaging in activism and contributing to the push for racial equality. In his recent book *The Kaepernick Effect: Taking a knee, changing the World*, Dave Zirin explores the emergence of protest and activism amongst amateur athletes in America to highlight how the take a knee movement proliferated outside of the cultural spotlight of professional sport.³⁶ The decision to focus on professional athletes in this dissertation allows for a greater focus on the influence of personal wealth and superstardom which remains more prominent amongst professional athletes at this time.³⁷

Athletes today are a definitive force in the Black Lives Matter moment and not just because of the acts of symbolic activism that generate a substantial media community – such as the take a knee movement. Alongside these “famous” instances of activism, there exists a vast infrastructure of athlete-activism that needs to be uncovered to broaden our understanding of what it means to be an athlete-activist in today’s society and further appreciate why athletes comprise such an important strand of contemporary Black activism. This wider focus is necessary to prevent discussions of athlete-activism revolving around acts of symbolic defiance that draw attention away from less “famous” forms of athlete-activism. Moreover, the thesis will look to dismiss any belief that athlete-activism possesses little tangible relevance in broader political debates, this view – that presents itself in the “gesture politics” and “stick to sports” arguments – will be repudiated, thus allowing a full appreciation of the significance of athlete-activism in the contemporary era of the Black Freedom Struggle.

Chapter 1: The Evolution of Athlete-Activism Over the 20th Century

“Like the Sankofa Bird of African mythology, we have to look backward to see our way forward. Studying a history of how Black athletes have confronted and mastered a series of

³⁶ Dave Zirin, *The Kaepernick Effect: Taking a Knee, Changing the World* (New York: The New Press, 2021).

³⁷ The recent changes to NIL (Name, Image, and Likeness) legislation suggests a rapid expansion of wealth and influence for amateur American athletes.

obstacles and dilemmas over the last century, gives insight into the contemporary dilemma.”

- William C. Rhoden. *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*.³⁸

In 1950, the all-Black Harlem Globetrotters basketball team went on tour to Europe and Northern Africa in an attempt to “spread the gospel of basketball”.³⁹ After the tour, the Globetrotters were praised for leaving “an unusually wide and deep impression of open friendliness both inter- racially and inter- nationally.”⁴⁰ At a time when America and the Soviet Union were engaged in the ideological conflict of the Cold War, the U.S. state department recognised the power of sport to bridge political and cultural barriers outside the U.S. In 1951, the all-Black Globetrotters were sent into West Berlin to play against the Boston Whirlwinds in front of 75,000 people in an attempt to undermine the Soviet propaganda that focused on the poor state of U.S. race relations. In the decade that followed, the Globetrotters travelled all around Europe as goodwill ambassadors for the U.S., this was part of the state department’s plan to persuade the world that the capitalist, democratic ideology of the U.S. was preferable to the Communism of the Soviet Union.⁴¹ The utilisation of the Harlem Globetrotters by the U.S. government illustrated the political power of sport and the way that it intersected with American race relations during the Cold War. Furthermore, the prominence of the Globetrotters in U.S. foreign policy undermined the belief that American sport was an apolitical space.

The connection between sport and racial politics extends beyond the ideological struggle of the Cold War. Since the beginning of the 20th century, sport has functioned as an important space in movements for racial and social equality. The role of athlete-activism in such movements supports Douglas Hartmann’s argument that sport both reflects and challenges existing social arrangements.⁴² In spite of research that shows the significance between sport and society – one such example being Hartmann’s belief that sport functions as a microcosm of society where cultural practices and ideologies are reflected – athletes are too frequently overlooked in seminal texts on American culture in the 20th century.⁴³ The example of the Globetrotters and their goodwill tours implicates sport as a political tool and demonstrates that athletes have been relevant to major developments in American history. The examples of athletes such as Jackie Robinson, Muhammad Ali, Wyomia Tyus

³⁸ William Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006): 6.

³⁹ Thomas, “Around the World,” 778.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Hartmann, “Rethinking the Relationship Between Sport and Race in American Culture,” 229.

⁴³ Douglas Hartmann, “Activism, Organizing & the Symbolic Power of Sport: Reassessing Harry Edwards’ Contributions to the 1968 Olympic Protest Movement,” *Journal for the Study of Sports and Athletes* vol. 3, no. 2 (2009): 191.

and many others will demonstrate the important role that athletes have played in the history of the Black Freedom Movement.

Like the symbolism of the Sankofa bird, the purpose of this chapter is to study past athlete-activism to understand and give context to the actions of contemporary athletes. This focus will build on the framework of Harry Edwards' "wave theory" of African American athlete-activism. Edwards' theory contextualised the actions of Black athlete-activists alongside the wider social and political movements of their eras, giving historical context to the actions of contemporary athlete-activists. This chapter will use this framework to chart the evolution of athlete-activism from the dawn of the twentieth century up to the 1970s. This will begin by looking at Jack Johnson and the pre-war struggle for Black legitimacy in a white dominated society, then the chapter will look at how athletes such as Jackie Robinson and Althea Gibson embodied the post-war movement for integration in sport and society, before moving on to the intersection between the Black Power movement and African American athletes through the lens of Muhammad Ali and his demand for dignity in the 1960s. Finally, using the examples of Billie Jean King and Arthur Ashe the chapter will expand on Stephen Tuck's assertion that movements that had been side-lined in the classical civil rights era proliferated in the 1970s. The athletes who have been chosen as case studies for each wave are not the sole examples of athlete-activism from each era, however they typify the key themes of athletic activism for each period.

The framework of Edwards' theory is effective as it highlights the historical intersection between sport and wider social movements, therefore reinforcing the fact that activism in sport is not a new phenomenon. However, Edwards' theory can be criticised for overlooking the contributions of Black, female athletes to the Black Freedom Movement. By Edwards' own admission female athletes took on a "secondary significance" in his earlier work.⁴⁴ However, this is not solely a criticism of Edwards, there has been too little recognition given to the work of Black female athlete-activists throughout the twentieth century, athletes such as Althea Gibson, Wyomia Tyus, Rose Robinson, and Wilma Rudolph have frequently been overshadowed by the actions of male athletes from their eras. The inclusion of these athletes will look to expand Edwards' framework to become more applicable to the contemporary era of athlete-activism that has continued to witness female athletes as key organizers in their communities. The following case studies will work to illustrate how the activist work of contemporary athletes mirrors a long history of organizing in the context of the Black Freedom Struggle. Although the actions of athletes such as Colin Kaepernick, Naomi Osaka, LeBron James, and members of the WNBA can feel unprecedented they reflect the work of generations of

⁴⁴ Edwards, *Revolt of the Black Athlete*, xxii.

athletes who refused to stick to sports and used their platform to further the Black Freedom Movement.

Jack Johnson and the Fight for Black Legitimacy

In 1895, the editor for the *New York Sun*, Charles Dana wrote “We are in the midst of a growing menace. The black man is rapidly forging to the front ranks in athletics especially in the field of fisticuffs. We are in the midst of a black rise against white supremacy.”⁴⁵ Thirteen years later, in 1908, African American Jack Johnson defeated Canadian Tommy Burns in fourteen rounds to become the first African American Heavyweight champion of the world. The title that was once a symbol of white strength and superiority now belonged to a Black man, proving Dana’s prophecy to be correct.⁴⁶

At a time when Jim Crow laws were in full force in America, Johnson’s victory was more than just symbolic. The American racial hierarchy was dominated by white supremacy and by defeating the incumbent white champion Johnson dealt a major blow to this ideology. In the wake of Johnson’s title victory, white Americans sought to find a “Great White Hope” – a cultural prerogative to find a white boxer who could defeat Johnson and reclaim the Heavyweight title. In 1910, Jim Jeffries took up the mantle of “the white hope” to fight Johnson in a match that was advertised as “Beauty and the Beast: civilisation vs. animalism.”⁴⁷ Johnson defeated Jeffries in fourteen rounds and was praised by commentators for his sportsmanship and talent, this helped to dispel the notion that he only won because of his “animalistic traits.”⁴⁸ The aftermath of the fight was cataclysmic, race riots exploded around the U.S. and some white men even committed suicide.⁴⁹ Subsequently viewing of the fight was banned in several states and the similarly white supremacist nation of South Africa, as they feared that it would galvanise the Black population.⁵⁰

Jack Johnson’s boxing career mirrored the struggle of African American intellectuals to gain legitimacy in a deeply segregated, white dominated society.⁵¹ His visible challenge to the white power structure reflected the growing ideology against “racial scientism” – the scientific belief that

⁴⁵ Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*, 1.

⁴⁶ Colin Tatz, “Race, Politics, and Sport,” in *Sport Politics Volume 4*, ed. Johnathan Grix (London: Sage, 2016): 97.

⁴⁷ Tatz, “Race, Politics, and Sport,” 96.

⁴⁸ Elliott McCormick, “July 4, 1910: Johnson vs Jeffries,” *Fight City*, July 4, 2020, <https://www.thefightcity.com/july-4-1910-johnson-vs-jeffries-jack-johnson-james-jeffries-corbett-sullivan-tommy-burns-fight-of-the-century/> (Accessed: 20/12/20).

⁴⁹ J. Corey Williams, “The Oppressive Seeds of the Colin Kaepernick Backlash,” in *Protesting on Bended Knee: Race, Dissent, and Patriotism in 21st Century America*, ed. Eric Burin (Grand Forks, ND: The Digital Press at the University of North Dakota, 2018): 159.

⁵⁰ Vinson, “Up From Slavery & Down With Apartheid,” 303.

⁵¹ Edwards, “The Fourth Wave.”

whites were superior to Blacks and therefore white supremacy was in line with the laws of nature. The opposition to this “social Darwinism” was a core tenet of the activism of Black intellectuals such as W.E.B. Du Bois and institutions like the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) and National Association of Coloured Women (NACW). Johnson’s victories over Burns and Jeffries provided tangible evidence against the myth of Black inferiority. Given the struggle of Black intellectuals to overcome segregation and the infancy of the NAACP, sport provided a central platform for African Americans to challenge the cultural hegemony of white supremacy in the U.S. This “first wave” of Black athletic activism set the precedent that sport could act as an instrument within the wider Black Freedom Struggle.

It is difficult to argue that Johnson was an athlete-activist in the mould of later figures such as Rose Robinson, Muhammad Ali, or Colin Kaepernick. But his presence challenged the hegemonic social order, which is a core characteristic in definitions of activism.⁵² Johnson’s approach to race relations has led him to be defined as a “reluctant hero” – “one who helps to dispel the myth of Black inferiority by excelling in their respective field, but simultaneously renounces their connections to other Black people.”⁵³ His outspoken bravado and conspicuous consumption outside of the ring clashed with the belief that respectability was key to racial progress in the early 20th century.⁵⁴ Regardless of this discord with the contemporary politics of the 1910s, Johnson’s dominance in the ring and unwillingness to be controlled by white America provided a visible figure for the struggle against white supremacy. His status as a “reluctant hero” would be mirrored by later athletes such as Althea Gibson and Allen Iverson who would both become politically significant without a deliberate effort to be so.

In the pre-war era, not all sports allowed Black athletes the opportunity to compete against white athletes in the way that Johnson had. The de facto segregation of American society extended firmly into the sporting arena. Andrew “Rube” Foster resented this and believed “it would be a crime for the Negro who has such an abundance of talent to sit idly by and watch his race be forever doomed to baseball.”⁵⁵ In 1920, Foster founded the Negro National League (NNL), a parallel organization to Major League Baseball that offered opportunities to talented Black athletes. Foster’s goal was to create a foundation for the eventual integration of professional baseball, not just by developing Black players, but also Black coaches and owners. The creation of the NNL symbolised the

⁵² Cooper et al., “Race and Resistance,” 154.

⁵³ Denise C. Morgan, “Jack Johnson: Reluctant Hero of the Black Community,” *Akron Law Review* vol. 32, no. 3 (1999): 3.

⁵⁴ Theresa Runstedtler, *Jack Johnson, Rebel Sojourner: Boxing in the Shadow of the Global Colour Line* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012): 15.

⁵⁵ Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*, 103.

intersection of sport and the cultural separatism of the Harlem Renaissance, an era in which the Black community in America embraced and celebrated African American culture. The Renaissance is predominantly associated with art and music; however, Black baseball offered a canvas to express a new art form, this was evident in the distinctive style of baseball that was a signature aspect of the NNL.⁵⁶ As well as reflecting the ideology of Black separatism in America in the 1920s, the “Negro leagues” provided another platform for African-Americans to gain legitimacy for the broader Black community.

Jack Johnson may not typify the contemporary conceptualisation of an athlete-activist, but in an era that was dominated by social Darwinism his actions established sport as a platform for racial minorities to gain legitimacy. Furthermore, the intersection between the NNL and the Harlem Renaissance introduced the way that sport could explicitly manifest the ideology of a wider popular movement. Johnson may not be as widely recognised in popular culture as athletes such as Jackie Robinson and Muhammad Ali, but his fight to gain legitimacy against the backdrop of white supremacy was a critical step in the evolution of Black athletic activism. As America entered into the Second World War, African Americans were “stimulated by the democratic ideology of the war and began re-examining their position in American society.”⁵⁷ This marked the beginning of the movement for racial integration, a movement that would forever change the American sporting landscape.

Jackie Robinson, Althea Gibson, and the Post-War Push for Integration

On November 1, 1945, the first Major League Baseball (MLB) season after the Second World War began. The focus in the national newspapers was not the return of war veterans like Warren Spahn and Yogi Berra but rather the newest addition of the Brooklyn Dodgers, African American Jackie Robinson. The *Michigan Chronicle* remarked “the signing of Robinson means that in a new and dramatic fashion the fact that a negro is a citizen with talents and rights is being heralded to the nation.”⁵⁸ Robinson was signed to the Dodgers’ minor league affiliate the Montreal Royals in 1945, and in 1946 he became the first African American – since the 19th century – to break the colour line in professional baseball. Similarly, in 1946 the Los Angeles Rams signed African American Kenny Washington to end segregation in the NFL and by 1950, with the signings of Earl Lloyd, Chuck Cooper, and Nat Clifton the NBA’s colour line had also been broken.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 104.

⁵⁷ Richard M. Dalfiume, “The “Forgotten Years” of the Negro Revolution,” *Journal of American History* vol. 55, no. 1 (1968): 97.

⁵⁸ Bill L. Weaver, “The Black Press and the Assault on Professional Baseball’s “Colour Line”, October 1945-April 1947,” *Phylon* vol. 40, no. 4 (1979): 306.

Jackie Robinson's career characterised a new wave of athlete-activism. In this wave, activism in sport reflected the "use of athletic prestige in the pursuit of Black rights."⁵⁹ The post-war civil rights movement built on the NAACP's "Double-V" campaign of World War 2, which sought a victory for African American freedom overseas and at home. The ideology of the Civil Rights Movement in this era centred on the "acquisition of political access and positional diversity in previously white dominated spaces."⁶⁰ Acquiring positional diversity involved the granting of rights and opportunities to African Americans that had previously been denied, whilst "political access" referred to the movement to gain voting rights and political representation.⁶¹ In relation to these wider social movements sport functioned as a microcosm of society. The integration of team sports such as baseball demonstrated how Blacks and whites could travel together, room together and shower together, as opposed to just competing against each other, as was the case in boxing and tennis.⁶² This supported the argument that "If whites and Blacks could compete together, then segregation would eventually collapse."⁶³ In a climate of challenges to the established racial order, that included comparisons between Nazi anti-Semitism and American racism, the Black athlete comprised "the most visible face of change."⁶⁴ Robinson's entrance into Major League Baseball conveyed to mainstream America that "African Americans should have rights, jobs, education, and the equality of opportunity to achieve."⁶⁵ This claim, made by the *Michigan Chronicle* in 1945 suggested that the integration of professional sport was a contributing factor to the landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* verdict in 1954, which led to the desegregation of education and set the legal precedent that would be used to dismantle Jim Crow segregation.⁶⁶

Jackie Robinson also continued Jack Johnson's struggle to gain legitimacy. His rookie of the year award in 1947 silenced his preseason critics, this included a *Sporting news* article that had declared "a black man would find it impossible to succeed in organized baseball."⁶⁷ In addition, Robinson's activism was similar to Johnson in that he was not explicitly using his platform to protest, it was his presence and performance that made his position so meaningful.⁶⁸ However, unlike Johnson,

⁵⁹ Tatz, "Race, Politics, and Sport," 99.

⁶⁰ Cooper et al., "Race and Resistance," 157.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Bryant, *The Heritage*, 30.

⁶³ Weaver, "The Black Press and the Assault on Professional Baseball's "Colour Line"," 306.

⁶⁴ Edwards, "The Fourth Wave."; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past." *Journal of American History* vol. 91, no. 4 (2005): 1247.

⁶⁵ Weaver, "The Black Press and the Assault on Professional Baseball's "Colour Line"," 306.

⁶⁶ James T. Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and its Troubled Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001): 108.

⁶⁷ Jackie Robinson, *I Never Had it Made* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995): 68.

⁶⁸ This is not to say that Robinson was a "reluctant hero" like Johnson, but rather alludes to the importance of his position more than his external activist efforts.

Robinson was conscious of the fact that he could not antagonize white America. A central part of Robinson's significance was that he knew he could not fight back or respond to the backlash against his entrance into a previously white dominated space. An example of this came during a game against the Philadelphia Phillies on April 22, 1947, in which the Phillies manager Ben Chapman threw every racial insult imaginable at Robinson throughout the course of the game. Robinson later revealed that he felt "tortured and desired to retaliate," but he knew the precarity of his position, and he refused to rise to Chapman's racist abuse.⁶⁹ Robinson knew that he had to "bear these indignities and humiliations without complaint" or else he would have risked "jeopardizing the chances of Blacks who would follow him if he broke down the barriers."⁷⁰ Robinson's remarkable career successfully established the presence of African American athletes in mainstream professional sport.

Althea Gibson was another African American athlete in the post-war era who reflected the growth of positional diversity in society and sport. Gibson continued to demonstrate the legitimacy of Black athletes when she integrated professional tennis in 1950 and became the first African American, male, or female, to win Wimbledon, the French Open and the U.S. Open. Gibson's achievements in tennis were remarkable, she not only entered a previously "white only" space but, dominated it at the highest level. Despite her apparent political importance, Gibson is historically underrepresented, whilst African American superstar Arthur Ashe had a stadium named after him in Flushing Meadows, Gibson did not have so much as a court named after her and it was not until 2019 that her statue was erected at the site of the U.S. Open. Gibson's presence in professional tennis had huge symbolic importance to the Black community, yet she refused to see it that way, in an interview discussing the importance of her position Gibson stated, "I'm not a representative of my people, I am thinking of me and no one else."⁷¹ Her professional career illustrated that the increased political access and positional diversity available to African American athletes was not restricted to men, yet Gibson's refusal to acknowledge her importance in the Black community is reminiscent of Jack Johnson's position as a "reluctant hero".

The racial integration of professional sport in the post-war era reflected the wider civil rights ideology of achieving political access and positional diversity in American society. The highly visible integration of athletes such as Jackie Robinson and Althea Gibson exemplified how sport evolved into a space that provided visible victories of African American integration into previously white

⁶⁹ Lomax, "Jackie Robinson," 173.

⁷⁰ Robinson, *I Never Had it Made*, 59; Chris Lamb, "'I Never Want to Take Another Trip Like This One': Jackie Robinson's Journey to Integrate Baseball," *Journal of Sport History* vol. 24, no. 2 (1997): 185.

⁷¹ Cecil Harris, *Different Strokes: Serena, Venus, and the Unfinished Tennis Revolution* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020): 89.

dominated areas of society. The actions of athletes mirrored the ideology of peaceful racial assimilation that was being proffered by A. Phillip Randolph and the NAACP in the late 1940s. In the context of athlete-activism in the 21st century, this era was pivotal in building towards the platform that Black athletes possess today. During the post-war era historian Louis Moore argued that Black athletes such as Robinson were content to “let their play act as their politics...in the notion that their success promoted democracy.”⁷² However, as Robinson’s career came to its end and the civil rights movement expanded into the 1960s, Black athletes became increasingly outspoken and involved in the wider push for racial equality. In a letter to President Eisenhower in 1958, Robinson wrote, “We want to enjoy the rights that we are entitled to as Americans. This we cannot do unless we pursue aggressively goals which all other Americans achieved over 150 years ago.”⁷³ Robinson’s transition reflected the evolution of the Black Freedom Struggle from the non-violent ideology of the NAACP in the 1950s to the demand for dignity and respect that epitomised the Black Power activism of the late 1960s. Against the backdrop of the Black Power movement Black athletes became aggressively outspoken on the state of American race relations.

Black Power, Muhammad Ali, and the Revolt of the Black Athlete

In the 1960s, Black athletes became “action orientated, outspoken critics of the American social order.”⁷⁴ No figure embodied the new relationship between athletes and the Black Power movement like Heavyweight World Champion Muhammad Ali. His unapologetic denunciations of white supremacy and economic oppression were inspired by the Black Power rhetoric of Stokely Carmichael and Malcolm X. Despite the existence of other prominent athlete-activists in this era, Ali was the figure who transcended sport to become a true role model and his “unwavering integrity” served as inspiration for other athletes such as NBA superstar Kareem Abdul-Jabbar to become more socially conscious.⁷⁵

Harry Edwards stated that this era witnessed the “Revolt of the Black Athlete” – “the Black athlete has left the façade of locker room equality and justice to take his long vacant place as a primary participant in the Black revolution.”⁷⁶ The emergence of a racial and social consciousness amongst American athletes in the 1960s reflected the American counter-culture that developed as a result of

⁷² Louis Moore, *We Will Win the Day: The Civil Rights Movement, the Black Athlete, and the Quest for Equality* (United States: ABC-CLIO, 2017): 139.

⁷³ National Archives, “A Letter From Jackie Robinson: Civil Rights Advocate,” April 21, 2021, <https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured-documents/jackie-robinson> (Accessed: 5/3/2022).

⁷⁴ Cooper et al., “Race and Resistance,” 160.

⁷⁵ Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*, 16; Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, “Kareem Abdul-Jabbar’s Stand for Justice,” *Slam*, August 26, 2020, <https://www.slamonline.com/the-magazine/kareem-abdul-jabbar-story/> (Accessed: 4/5/21).

⁷⁶ Edwards, *Revolt of the Black Athlete*, 7.

the Civil Rights Movement, the Anti-Vietnam war protests, and the rise of second wave feminism.⁷⁷ Similar to how the integration of professional baseball mirrored the social movement to end segregation, athletes such as Muhammad Ali emulated the demand for dignity and respect that was central to the Black Power ideology.⁷⁸ It was not just from an ideological stand point that sport and broader social movements intersected in the 1960s; the sit-ins, op-eds, and symbolic protests that epitomised the American counter-culture were also adopted by athletes as a form of political resistance. In 1961, Bill Russell and the Boston Celtics copied the tactics of the famous Montgomery bus boycott when they refused to play a game in Kentucky after being denied service at a local coffee shop.⁷⁹

Muhammad Ali's professional career began in 1960, when he won the Olympic gold medal in boxing aged only 18 years old. In the years that followed he quickly became one of the greatest boxing talents of all time. He was viewed as a reincarnation of former world champion, Jack Johnson, not just because of his athletic talent, but also for his emulation of Johnson's boisterous, outspoken persona. Ali's unapologetic denunciations of American race relations clearly emulated Johnson's willingness to challenge the hegemony of white America. However, unlike Johnson, Ali's defiance against white America was more altruistic, as he used his platform to draw attention to the social inequality of poor and Black Americans. Furthermore, Ali's resistance took on a religious tone when in 1964, he announced his conversion to the Nation of Islam. Despite being a more implicit challenge to the American hierarchy, the belief that the Nation of Islam was an "anti-white hate group" facilitated major disdain towards Ali's decision.⁸⁰ In the aftermath of his conversion, Ali was "pilloried by the press like no other athlete had ever been before."⁸¹ The confrontational nature of Ali's activism exemplified the political feeling of Black Power and reflected a significant change from the post-war era.

The negative response that Ali received when he converted to the Nation of Islam was nothing compared to the backlash to his refusal to be drafted into the Vietnam war. This was arguably Ali's greatest act of defiance; he defended his position by explaining: "War is against the teachings of the Qur'an...We are not supposed to take part in no wars unless declared by Allah."⁸² When he was

⁷⁷ Amy Bass, *Not the Triumph but the Struggle: The 1968 Olympics and the Making of the Black Athlete* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004): xviii.

⁷⁸ Cooper et al., "Race and Resistance," 158.

⁷⁹ Moore, *We Will Win the Day*, 153.

⁸⁰ Gerald Early, "Muhammad Ali: Flawed Rebel With a Cause," in *Out of the Shadows: A Biographical History of African-American Athletes*, ed. David K. Wiggins (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2006): 269.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Jessica Wakelin, "Fighting for Religious Freedom: Muhammad Ali and his Battle Against the U.S. Supreme Court," (Undergraduate Honours Thesis, William & Mary, 2020): 18.

asked to elaborate on his opposition to the Vietnam war Ali later said “My conscience won’t let me go shoot no darker people... for what? They never called me nigger, they never lynched me.”⁸³

Opposition to the Vietnam war amongst Black Power activists embodied the internationalist sentiment of the movement’s ideology. Stokely Carmichael believed that Vietnam represented “white people sending lack people to make war on yellow people to defend land they stole from red people.”⁸⁴ Through his opposition to the draft, Ali exemplified the belief that the fight for racial equality was an international struggle, which was an important tenet of the Black Power movement in the late 1960s. This further demonstrates that athlete-activism was inspired by and played a part in advancing the racial politics of the time.

Furthermore, Ali’s opposition to the Vietnam war represented the willingness of athletes to protest against patriotic symbols to make a political statement. He challenged the legitimacy of the Vietnam war to draw attention to the racial oppression of coloured people domestically and internationally. Similarly, nine years before Tommie Smith and John Carlos infamously raised the Black Power salute at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics, U.S. High Jumper Rose Robinson protested during the playing of the national anthem at the 1959 Pan-American games. By refusing to stand to attention Robinson demonstrated her belief that the flag stood for “war, injustice and hypocrisy.”⁸⁵ Her actions at the Pan-American games followed her refusal to be a “political pawn” on a goodwill tour to Russia in 1958. Unlike the Harlem Globetrotters, Robinson refused to be used as a symbol of positive race relations that she knew did not exist.⁸⁶ The willingness of athletes to challenge symbols of American patriotism was significant because it directly challenged American democracy in an internationally visible space. The examples of historic athletes such as Robinson, Smith, and Carlos draw a direct line to the symbolic activism of contemporary athletes. As well as using the platform of international sporting events to highlight American racial injustice, these demonstrations allow a greater discussion around what “patriotism” means and how athletes can use their cultural status to challenge America’s failure to meet their proposed ideals.

Ali used the platform that being a professional athlete brought him to make a statement against the war in Vietnam, however, he would pay a dear price for his decision. He was stripped of his boxing title and his license to fight in the U.S. was revoked, this essentially robbed him of his prime years

⁸³ DeNeen L. Brown, “‘Shoot Them For What?’ How Muhammad Ali won his greatest fight,” *Washington Post*, June 16, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2018/06/15/shoot-them-for-what-how-muhammad-ali-won-his-greatest-fight/> (Accessed: 20/4/22).

⁸⁴ Tuck, *We Ain’t What We Ought to Be*, 339.

⁸⁵ Davis, “Sixty Years Ago.”

⁸⁶ Ibid.

and cost him hundreds of thousands of dollars. Rose Robinson suffered a similar fate, as she was arrested in 1960 for her refusal to pay the insignificant sum of \$368 in tax.⁸⁷ This theme of backlash remains prevalent today, athlete-activists who engage in polarizing politics can find that they have to pay a significant personal and professional price. In the civil rights era this was experienced by Ali and Robinson, in the 1990s it was Craig Hodges and Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, and in the 21st century it is Colin Kaepernick. As a defence against this backlash athletes need to show solidarity. This was witnessed in the 1960s by the “Cleveland Summit”, a meeting between some of the top Black male athletes in America at that time, including Bill Russell, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, and Jim Brown. Although not all of these athletes agreed with Ali’s decision to skip the draft, they believed a display of unity amongst professional athletes was crucial. The Summit made a statement to white America that Black athletes were united in support of Ali, and that their right to speak out was not restricted to the ring, the court, or the field.⁸⁸ This powerful display of unity is something that has re-emerged amongst professional athletes and is seen in contemporary displays of activism.

Despite the all-male cast that assembled for the “Cleveland Summit”, female athlete-activists also played a key role in the civil rights era. Along with Rose Robinson, U.S. sprinter Wyomia Tyus was another prominent female Black athlete-activist who made significant contributions in the 1960s. At the 1968 Olympics Tyus showed solidarity with Tommie Smith and John Carlos when she wore black shorts to symbolise her support for human rights and racial equality. Simultaneously, Tyus became the first ever Olympic athlete to win consecutive 100m gold medals. In the midst of a rising revolution in women’s sport, Tyus’ achievements helped to legitimise female athletic talent, which reinforced the feminist ideology that “women were not weak, did not choke, and could perform under pressure.”⁸⁹ Female athlete-activism has historically been obscured by the actions of male athletes, but, the example of Tyus alongside other notable athlete-activists such as Robinson, Wilma Rudolph and Billie Jean King give context to the contemporary activism of female athletes such as Naomi Osaka, Natasha Cloud, and the WNBA.⁹⁰

Activism in the Post-Civil Rights Era

Despite a belief that President Nixon’s focus on “law and order” led America into a post-protest era, Stephen Tuck asserted that the 1970s witnessed the proliferation of movements that had previously

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Jamiles Lartey, “The ‘Ali Summit’: A turning point in sports’ fight against injustice,” *Guardian*, October 23, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2017/oct/23/colin-kaepernick-muhammad-ali-summit-sports-activism> (Accessed: 19/2/22).

⁸⁹ Ware, *Game, Set, and Match*, 2.

⁹⁰ Edwards, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete*, xxii.

taken on a secondary significance during the classical civil rights era.⁹¹ This argument can be seen in how the activism of American athletes mirrored the broader political struggles of this decade. In this post-civil rights period, the actions of Billie Jean King intersected with the rise of second wave feminism, whilst Arthur Ashe worked to bring the attention of the American public onto South African apartheid. These examples illustrate the way that American athlete-activists engaged in movements that had been overshadowed in the classical civil rights era and in doing so supported Tuck's assertion that protest in America proliferated in the 1970s.

There is an argument that athlete-activism "stagnated" in the 1970s due to the decreased number of athletes who protested in comparison to the 1960s.⁹² However, this argument overlooks the intersection between sport and the rise of second wave feminism, despite the activism of Wyomia Tyus in the 1960s, it was not until the 1970s that female athletes began to command serious public attention. The legitimisation of female athletes in this period can largely be attributed to the career of tennis legend Billie Jean King. The most notable example of this was in the 1973 "Battle of the Sexes" in which King defeated former men's U.S. Open champion Bobby Riggs and "did more for the cause of women than most feminists can achieve in a lifetime."⁹³ Through her involvement with the Women's Sport Foundation, King worked alongside Black female athletes such as Tyus to fight for reforms that would enhance the presence of female athletes in sport. This included a testimony in front of the U.S. congress in 1972, which "all but guaranteed the passage of Title IX."⁹⁴ This legislation guaranteed equality of resources available in higher education and would prove to be critical in the landscape of amateur women's sport. King would also become a foremost advocate for pay equity in professional tennis, a movement that would greatly benefit future tennis superstars and activists such as Naomi Osaka, Serena, and Venus Williams. King's activism marked a crucial point in the evolution of women's sport and given the importance of female athletes in contemporary movements for racial justice, her influence cannot be dismissed because she did not explicitly advance movements for racial equality. The examples of King, Tyus, and the intersection between sport and second wave feminism suggests that athlete-activism in the post-civil rights era did not decline, but rather fragmented in support of separate, yet interrelated struggles.

At the same time that King used her sporting platform to support the women's rights movement, Arthur Ashe used the pedestal of professional tennis to "focus the attention of the American public

⁹¹ Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought To Be*, 354.

⁹² Edwards, "The Fourth Wave."

⁹³ Ware, *Game, Set, and Match*, 2.

⁹⁴ Caitlin Thompson, "Billie Jean King: The First Female Athlete-Activist," *New York Times*, August 17, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/17/books/review/all-in-billie-jean-king.html> (Accessed: 2/9/22).

and the international sporting community on South Africa.”⁹⁵ Unlike Muhammad Ali, Ashe was not an outspoken activist during the civil rights era, and he felt the Black Power movement was too abrasive.⁹⁶ However, like Ali, Ashe was a pan-Africanist who viewed the struggle for racial equality as a transnational issue.⁹⁷ In 1970 he was denied a VISA to participate in the South African open, he had hoped that by competing and winning in South Africa he would follow in the footsteps of Jack Johnson and “debunk white supremacist theories of Black inferiority.”⁹⁸ However, his VISA application was denied, this proved to be a key factor in South Africa’s exclusion from that year’s Davis Cup tournament. Eventually, in 1973, Ashe’s VISA was granted and – in spite of opposition from some South African activists – he visited South Africa and competed in the Open. He reached the final in the singles and won the doubles, which reinforced his challenge to South African white supremacy. Ashe strengthens the argument that, rather than declining, athlete-activism fragmented into the 1970s.

Conclusion

In his 2018 book, *The Heritage* Howard Bryant outlined the historic intersection between activism and sport as the “special inheritance” of Black athletes.⁹⁹ He stated that throughout the 20th century African American athletes constituted the most influential Black employees in America, more so than Black intellectuals who were “roadblocked by segregation”.¹⁰⁰ From Jack Johnson’s fight to gain legitimacy, to Jackie Robinson and Muhammad Ali’s influential roles in the civil rights movement and leading up to the activism of athletes in early post-civil rights America, sport has provided a critical platform for athletes to amplify the message of broader social movements. The idea of “the heritage” reflects the core purpose of this chapter: to illustrate that the actions of contemporary athletes are rooted within a longer history of athletic activism.

The conclusion of this chapter comes back to the mythology of the Sankofa bird. To understand the athlete-activism of today, it must be considered alongside the evolution of athletic activism throughout the 20th century.¹⁰¹ Although the approaches used by historical athletes were not the focal point for this chapter, the discussion of these historic activists has demonstrated that the

⁹⁵ Eric J. Morgan, “Black and White at Centre Court: Arthur Ashe and the Confrontation of Apartheid in South Africa,” *Diplomatic History* vol. 36, no. 5 (2012): 818.

⁹⁶ Damion Thomas, “‘The Quiet Militant’: Arthur Ashe and Black Athletic Activism,” in *Out of the Shadows: A Biographical History of African-American Athletes*, ed. David K. Wiggins (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2006): 279.

⁹⁷ Bryant, *The Heritage*, 132.

⁹⁸ Vinson, “Up From Slavery and Down With Apartheid,” 322.

⁹⁹ Bryant, *The Heritage*, 50.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, vii.

¹⁰¹ Edwards, “The Fourth Wave.”

actions taken by contemporary athletes are reminiscent of the actions of earlier athletes. However, there is a reason that this chapter ends in the 1970s. In post-1980 America, athletes became embroiled in the broader economic conversations of Reagan and post-Reagan America. A variety of factors meant that athlete-activists became the exception rather than the norm amongst professional athletes. The beginnings of this trend were evident in the career of Buffalo Bills running back, O.J. Simpson.

In an interview with the New York Times in 1968 Simpson recounted a tale in which he was labelled as a Black man. “That sort of thing hurts me” he told reporter Bob Lipsyte, “I strive for people to look at me as a man first, not a black man.”¹⁰² These comments would later be reduced to a much more familiar remark; “I’m not Black, I’m O.J.” In 1975, Simpson became the first African-American man to lead an advertising campaign, however, this was not a barrier breaking act in the mould of Jackie Robinson’s entrance in Major League Baseball, but rather an example of how Simpson discarded his racial heritage to “enjoy the riches America had to offer.”¹⁰³ Unlike athletes of previous generations who had embraced their “blackness” to champion causes for racial equality, Simpson realised that he was uniquely positioned to capitalise on America’s self-purported colour-blindness – as long as he steered clear of racially conscious actions. As a financially successful African American, Simpson became a figurehead for the disillusioned belief of post-civil rights America; that true racial equality had been achieved.¹⁰⁴ The career of O.J. Simpson reflected Robin D.G. Kelley’s argument that “After the modern-day civil rights movement ended, Blacks had to decide whether they would devote their time to making money and transitioning into the mainstream or continue to fight for social justice.”¹⁰⁵ Simpson’s detachment from movements for racial justice prefaced a fragmentation in athletes’ attitudes towards socially conscious activism. This fragmentation was manifested in the actions of athletes like Simpson, or Michael Jordan who, within the context of Reagan’s America, moved away from the activism of previous athletes and inspired the belief that athlete-activism was in a period of “stagnation”. However, as the next chapter will show, this fragmentation did not mean that activism disappeared completely, nor does it mean that the late twentieth century should be overlooked in discussions of the evolution of athlete-activism.

¹⁰² Robert Lipsyte, “Behind the Easy Smile, O.J. Was Hard to Read,” *New York Times*, June 19, 1994, <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/06/19/sports/behind-the-easy-smile-o-j-was-hard-to-read.html> (Accessed: 4/5/21).

¹⁰³ Bryant, *The Heritage*, 82.

¹⁰⁴ Cooper et al., “Race and Resistance,” 161.

¹⁰⁵ Joshua Wright, “Be Like Mike? The Black Athlete’s Dilemma,” *Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men* vol. 4, no. 2 (2016): 9.

Chapter 2: “The Jordan Rules”: The Landscape of Athlete-Activism in the Late Twentieth Century

“Hey Hodge, do you want to fill in for me at this wreath ceremony? This is your thing, not mine.”- Michael Jordan.¹⁰⁶

In January 1991, Michael Jordan was invited to a wreath laying ceremony in Atlanta to commemorate the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr. With the statement above – “This is your thing,

¹⁰⁶ Craig Hodges, *Long Shot: The Triumphs and Struggles of an NBA Freedom Fighter* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017): 138.

not mine” – Jordan deferred this responsibility to Craig Hodges, a back-up shooting guard for the Chicago Bulls. Hodges was far from the superstar that Jordan was, however in the eyes of Howard Bryant, Hodges was one of the few Black athletes in the 1990s who continued to uphold “the heritage” – the historic responsibility of Black athletes to uplift the African American community.¹⁰⁷ Hodges felt that athletes constituted the most visible, influential African Americans and therefore had an obligation to speak out on issues of racial and social injustice.¹⁰⁸ However, he lacked the star power of previous athlete-activists like Muhammad Ali, and the social climate of post-Reagan America restricted the solidarity that was exemplified by the “Cleveland Summit” in the civil rights era. This was demonstrated in April 1992 when the police officers charged with the beating of Rodney King were acquitted. The decision sparked six days of riots in Los Angeles and Hodges believed athletes had to do something, but superstars like Jordan, Magic Johnson, and Scottie Pippen refused to support Hodges’ attempts to organize in solidarity with the protesters. These superstar athletes felt that they had to avoid any gestures or actions that could be perceived as controversial in order to protect their commercial value. As Jordan once infamously said, “Republicans buy shoes too”.¹⁰⁹ The actions of contemporary athlete-activists are more reminiscent of Hodges than Jordan. However, the political silence of athletes like Michael Jordan introduces an intriguing contradiction in the evolution of athlete-activism. Jordan’s career simultaneously marked a perceived end to “the heritage”, but also contributed to the resurgence of contemporary activism that would occur in the 21st century.

This chapter will explore the climate of athlete-activism in post-1970s America through the comparison of Craig Hodges’ and Michael Jordan’s approaches to activism. An important part of dissecting the relationship between these two athletes is looking at how their individual approaches to social justice reflected the broader fragmentation of athlete-activism in Reagan and post-Reagan America. This chapter will demonstrate how both men illustrated opposite sides of Kelley’s assertion that African Americans had to decide whether they would devote their time to making money or continuing the fight for social justice.¹¹⁰ Hodges’ efforts at social justice activism in the late twentieth century reflected the problems that African Americans faced when they decided to engage in socially conscious activism at this time. Whilst Jordan will illustrate the opposing view that African Americans who prioritised individualism and making money over social justice activism prospered under the wave of conservatism that epitomised America in the late twentieth century.

¹⁰⁷ Bryant, *The Heritage*, viii.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹⁰⁹ Sam Smith, *The Jordan Rules: The Inside Story of Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls* (New York: Diversion Books, 2012): 12.

¹¹⁰ Wright, “Be Like Mike?” 9.

These juxtaposing careers highlight how capitalist, commercial forces constrained athlete-activism in the late twentieth century. The economic expansion of sport that occurred in this period greatly increased the economic and cultural influence possessed by professional athletes and the emergence of this substantial platform in the late 1980s and 1990s was a crucial moment in the evolution of athlete-activism, as it facilitated the cultural and economic power that contemporary athletes are using to create positive social change today. However, this social significance has always come with the stipulation that athletes will avoid any controversial actions to protect their sponsors, this need to balance activism with maintaining corporate relationships is a tightrope that athletes continue to walk today.

Craig Hodges v. Michael Jordan – Activist v. Capitalist

In the 1984 NBA Draft the Chicago Bulls selected Michael Jeffrey Jordan out of the University of North Carolina. Jordan would go on to become arguably the greatest athlete of all-time, but despite his athletic greatness, one of Jordan's lasting legacies would be the union between the celebrity athlete and American capitalism.¹¹¹ Historically, Jordan has been castigated for his prioritisation of commercial opportunities over movements for social justice.¹¹² But this scholarship can sometimes overlook the complexity of racial politics in the late twentieth century. To fully understand Jordan's role in the discussion of athlete-activism his career must be discussed in the context of two important social developments – the rise of American conservatism under the Presidency of Ronald Reagan and the economic explosion of the sporting industry during the 1980s and 90s. Using the comparison of Jordan and Hodges the first section of this chapter will discuss how these developments contributed to the fragmentation of athlete-activism in the late twentieth century. Jordan demonstrated the benefits of athletes avoiding controversial political stances, whilst Hodges exemplified how these social developments constrained athlete-activism.

On the court, Hodges was the perfect complement to Jordan. Jordan's style of basketball required players around him who could shoot the ball from deep, as one of the greatest 3-point shooters of all-time, Hodges fitted the bill, and became an important member of the 1991 and 1992 championship winning Chicago Bulls teams. However, off the court, the two athletes held diametrically opposed views of their responsibility as prominent Black athletes. Howard Bryant observed that the pair "embodied the heritage in repose," whilst Jordan side-stepped politically controversial actions to become incredibly wealthy and successful in Reagan's post-racial America,

¹¹¹ Nicole R. Fleetwood, "The Black Athlete: Racial Precarity and the American Sports Icon," in *On Racial Icons: Blackness and the Public Imagination*, ed. Nicole R. Fleetwood (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015): 87.

¹¹² Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*, 6.

Hodges embraced his responsibility to his community and continued to challenge racial injustice, despite the personal and professional ramifications.¹¹³ These antagonistic approaches were apparent in what was probably Hodges' most famous act of political activism – his visit to the White House in October 1991. To celebrate winning the NBA championship, the Bulls were invited to the White House as part of an annual tradition in American sport. Rather than wear a suit and tie, Hodges wore a Dashiki to “communicate his Black history without even speaking.”¹¹⁴ Furthermore, Hodges brought with him a letter addressed to the President that discussed the grievances of the African American community. The letter opened with: “The purpose of this letter is to speak on behalf of the poor people and minorities, who are not able to come and meet the leader of the nation in which they live.”¹¹⁵ The letter mostly focused on mass incarceration, slavery reparations, street violence, and the urban plight of African Americans.¹¹⁶ What is largely missing from the understanding of this visit is the status of Michael Jordan. Not only did Jordan not make the trip to the White House, but his excuse – that was not officially released – was explicitly political, “I’m not going to the White House. Fuck Bush. I didn’t vote for him.”¹¹⁷ This example is not intended to show Jordan’s political nature, but rather highlight how these athletes approached their politics in opposing ways. Hodges publicly used his platform to fight for the African American community, whereas Jordan kept his political views private to avoid antagonizing any potential fans, which he knew would have ramifications for his commercial value. By protecting his public image over making an explicit political statement, Jordan illustrated how some African American athletes’ dedication to capitalistic principles constrained – or even nullified – their engagement in socially conscious activism.

Craig Hodges’ activist career began at the age of 5, when he participated in the Chicago Freedom Movement – partly – organized by Martin Luther King Jr. For Hodges, Jordan’s invitation to the wreath laying ceremony for Dr. King’s birthday meant more than it did to most other African American athletes. As well as attending the marches led by Dr. King in his hometown of Chicago, Hodges’ mother had held numerous meetings with Dr. King during her activist career in her community during the civil rights movement. There have been previous studies into the relevance of Michael Jordan’s middle-class upbringing to his future apoliticality, whilst it is questionable whether Jordan’s background influenced his political outlook, it is undeniable that Hodges’ upbringing influenced his.¹¹⁸ When he entered the league in 1982, Hodges’ political orientation was quickly

¹¹³ Bryant, *The Heritage*, 130.

¹¹⁴ Hodges, *Long Shot*, 3.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹⁸ Wright, “Be Like Mike?” 4.

recognised as he became the first ever rookie to be named as an NBA union representative for the then San Diego Clippers.¹¹⁹ His position in the NBA's union symbolised his willingness to run counter to the dominant political ideology, which is an important theme for the rest of this chapter.¹²⁰

Under the Presidency of Ronald Reagan, America entered into a comprehensive wave of conservatism that intended to cut-back on the liberal reforms of the previous two decades. In his 1980 Presidential campaign Reagan stated that American virtues had been undercut by the protests and reforms of the previous two decades. The conservative rhetoric of Reagan's campaign sought to target the American "silent majority" who felt the liberalism of the 1960s and 70s had threatened the moral fabric of the nation, especially in the context of racial progress.¹²¹ Reagan's ideology was rooted in the capitalist belief that wealth was the great indicator of success, and that "personal perseverance, not race, was the primary determinant of individual achievement."¹²² This characterised the belief that America had become a "post-racial" nation following the civil rights era. As an incredibly successful African American Jordan epitomised Reagan's colour blind ideology. He demonstrated that through hard-work, dedication, and embracing the principles of capitalism African Americans could prosper in Reagan's America. Famous Black athletes – and other celebrities – were used to "condemn the struggling African American masses for lacking the personal resolution which, according to Reagan's doctrine, was all that was required to survive."¹²³ This post-racial lens – aided by the visible success of Black athletes – caused the continued existence of racial inequality to be ignored in the late twentieth century.

Unlike in the 1960s, when athletes explicitly advocated on behalf of the Black community, Jordan's approach was more individualistic and reflective of the broader, conservative socio-political climate; he prioritised setting an example of how to be successful over directly working to help the African American community.¹²⁴ Hodges, however, believed that it was the responsibility of wealthy, successful African Americans to continue to uplift their communities. After he won his third consecutive 3-point contest in 1992, Hodges received a check for \$20,000 in the Chicago Bulls locker room, and in an impassioned speech, asked the other players to pool their money together to publicly challenge the poverty, inequality, and pain that was experienced in their local –

¹¹⁹ Hodges, *Long Shot*, 60.

¹²⁰ In August, 1981, Reagan had fired 13,000 Air Traffic Control Union members for striking, showing his hostility towards organized labour.

¹²¹ Andrew Hartmann, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015): 6-7.

¹²² David L. Andrews & Steven L. Jackson, *Sports Stars: The Cultural Politics of Sporting Celebrity* (London: Routledge, 2001): 26.

¹²³ Andrews & Jackson, *Sports Stars*, 27.

¹²⁴ Netflix, *The Last Dance*, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81002659?trackId=255824129> (Accessed: 8/6/21).

predominantly Black – communities.¹²⁵ However, Hodges’ appeal was met with an indifferent response of “I hear where you’re coming from Hodge, but I gotta talk to my guy first.”¹²⁶ Their “guy” being their agent, accountant, or other representative who would discourage the idea. This response illustrated the uncertainty that surrounded athletes using their resources to support community focused actions in the early 1990s. Despite the failure to accrue support for his plan, Hodges’ desire to capitalise on the wealth of professional athletes to benefit the African American community marked a clear difference from Jordan.

A large part of this intolerance towards helping the Black community was the tenet of Reagan’s conservative ideology that framed racism as “an irrelevant remnant of the past.”¹²⁷ This obscured the continued existence of racial inequality and in doing so prevented the widespread national attention that had been granted to movements for racial equality during the 1960s.¹²⁸ In a climate hostile to social movements Black activists struggled to organize an effective national strategy. Despite the continued existence of activism and protest at the grassroots level, the lack of a defining ideology and movement that would frame and inform the activist positions of athletes was a crucial issue in the fragmentation of athlete-activism in the late twentieth century.¹²⁹ Just as the examples of Rube Foster, Jackie Robinson, and Muhammad Ali can be framed alongside national movements and ideologies, the lack of activism displayed by Michael Jordan could be a result of an era of conservatism that stymied attempts to organize a national movement for racial justice. This argument was furthered by Harry Edwards: “I believe that Jordan’s real concern was that he would be left out there alone, turning in the wind, lacking an established black ideological context and directive.”¹³⁰

The perceived fear that Jordan would be “left out there alone” was reflected, to an extent in the pre-Chicago Bulls career of Craig Hodges. During his time playing for the Milwaukee Bucks, Hodges attempted to persuade his teammates to attend Nation of Islam (NOI) services held by the controversial minister Louis Farrakhan in Milwaukee.¹³¹ To Hodges’ disappointment none of his teammates joined him, and even worse, Hodges was traded a week after the service. In a later phone call with Tom Enlund, a sportswriter for the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* Hodges discovered that his ousting from the Bucks stemmed from his relationship with Farrakhan and the NOI.¹³²

¹²⁵ Hodges, *Long Shot*, 160.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 161.

¹²⁷ Andrews & Jackson, *Sports Stars*, 26.

¹²⁸ Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty: An American History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016): 1062.

¹²⁹ Bryant, *The Heritage*, 65.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹³¹ Hodges frequently attended services held by Farrakhan throughout his adult life.

¹³² Hodges, *Long Shot*, 88.

Athletic ties to the NOI had always received a negative response – as was exemplified earlier in the discussion of Muhammad Ali. However, unlike Ali, Hodges’ affiliation with the NOI and Farrakhan could not be contextualised within a wider social framework like that of the Civil Rights Movement. This led Hodges to be antagonized by American conservatives who continued to distrust the NOI and did not understand Hodges’ reasoning behind his relationship with Farrakhan. However, the view that the lack of a wider ideology was the key factor that caused athlete-activism to fragment in the late twentieth century overlooks the economic factors that were prominent in the antagonistic approaches taken by Hodges and Jordan. This was infamously demonstrated by Jordan in the 1990 North Carolina Senate race, in which he refused to endorse Democrat candidate Harvey Gantt, over known white supremacist Jesse Helms, because “Republicans buy shoes too.”¹³³

Jordan’s refusal to endorse Gantt showed the prevalence of economic factors in the fragmentation of athlete-activism in the late twentieth century. In the 1990s, athletes began to possess unprecedented levels of financial, economic, and cultural capital. However, this money and cultural influence was only available to Black athletes if they avoided the racial politics and anger of earlier generations.¹³⁴ Jordan’s “Republicans buy shoes too” comment showed one side of the argument, whilst on the other hand, Hodges continued to call for social justice reform, in spite of the consequences. In an interview after game 2 of the 1992 NBA finals, Hodges publicly denounced Jordan for “failing to use his visibility to call attention to pressing social and political issues.”¹³⁵ He went on to challenge the lack of diversity amongst NBA head coaches and described the racially charged riots in Los Angeles following the beating of Rodney King as a “war”.¹³⁶ This type of language had been foreign to the rhetoric of Black athletes since the Black Power inspired activism of the late 1960s. In his memoir *Long Shot: The Story of an NBA Freedom Fighter*, Hodges stated that neither Jordan nor any members of the NBA front office publicly, or privately responded to his comments, however, he felt that it was the final nail in the coffin of his NBA career. After the 1992 playoffs, Hodges, aged only 31 years old, was released by the Bulls and shortly afterwards parted ways with his agent, he would never play in the NBA again. Hodges believed he was blacklisted by NBA management for “corrupting the minds of players and compromising the relationships with corporate sponsors.”¹³⁷ This view was reinforced in 2003, when journalist Dave Zirin asked players why they did not engage in activism and the stock response was, “You don’t want to be like Craig

¹³³ Bryant, *The Heritage*, 89.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹³⁵ William C. Rhoden, “Hodges Criticizes Jordan For His Silence on Issues,” *New York Times*, June 5, 1992, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/06/05/sports/basketball-hodges-criticizes-jordan-for-his-silence-on-issues.html> (Accessed: 8/2/22).

¹³⁶ *Ibid*

¹³⁷ Hodges, *Long Shot*, 171-73.

Hodges.”¹³⁸ The abrupt end to Hodges’ career represented the lack of corporate tolerance for controversial political activism. Whilst Jordan was effectively rewarded for remaining apolitical, Hodges lost his livelihood because of his desire to speak out on behalf of the Black community. The dichotomy between the corporate response to Hodges and Jordan illustrates the balance that athletes need to achieve between speaking out on social justice issues and protecting their livelihood. How athletes navigate their corporate relationships to maintain their activism remains a key theme in discussions of athlete-activism, as chapter 6 of this dissertation will demonstrate.

The Economic Expansion of Sport in the Late Twentieth Century

The concept of athletes remaining silent on political issues coincided with the expansion of sport into a financial behemoth that possessed significant cultural capital. The two most prominent arguments for this expansion focus on the growth of the sport media industry and the co-optation of athletes as commercial commodities by big name brands such as Nike.¹³⁹ These arguments will illustrate how capitalist forces facilitated the expansion of the sporting industry in the 1990s. They will also outline how these economic factors inhibited athletes from engaging with social justice issues, and simultaneously give context to the argument that the conditions for contemporary athlete-activism – in the context of financial, economic, and cultural capital – were created in the late 1980s and 1990s.

In 1986 the American sporting industry had an estimated value of \$47 billion, by 1999, this figure had risen to \$213 billion.¹⁴⁰ Sport scholar David Andrews argued that this vast economic expansion was primarily due to the influence of the sports media industry. In 1993 FOX sports paid \$1.58 billion for the viewing rights to half of the NFL’s games, television deals of this magnitude became common place in sport. Alongside the economic expansion facilitated by these enormous entertainment deals, athletes became a recurring fixture on American television and sport was transformed into an “intrusive and influential cultural practice.”¹⁴¹ It is because of this that Andrews argued sport in the late twentieth century replaced work, religion, and community to become “the cultural glue of collective consciousness in American society.”¹⁴² This gave athletes a much bigger platform to become role models and shape wider cultural discussions. However, in the 1990s, this social

¹³⁸ Donald McRae, “Craig Hodges: Michael Jordan didn’t speak out because he didn’t know what to say,” *Guardian*, April 20, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2017/apr/20/craig-hodges-michael-jordan-nba-chicago-bulls> (Accessed: 10/7/22).

¹³⁹ Klein, *No Logo*, 45.

¹⁴⁰ Trevor Slack, *The Commercialisation of Sport* (New York: Routledge, 2004): xxiii.

¹⁴¹ Andrews, “Sport in the Late Capitalist Moment,” 3.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

significance was predicated on athletes remaining neutral on controversial topics, this was illustrated by the expulsion of Hodges after his public comments denouncing racial inequality in the NBA and America more broadly. However, the entertainment value and cultural resonance of sport was only part of the reason for the expansion of the sport-media industry. Another important reason was the exceptional ability of sport to attract the attention of the 18-34 year old male demographic, which was highly sought after by corporate advertising companies at that time.¹⁴³ This would suggest that the economic expansion of sport intersected with the rise of corporate advertising and marketing campaigns in the late capitalist era.¹⁴⁴

The discussion of the relationship between advertising, commercialism, and sport in the late twentieth century will always lead back to the same place, Michael Jordan. O.J. Simpson may have been the first commercialised Black athlete, but Jordan “forever changed the relationship between black athletes, commercialism, and professional sports.”¹⁴⁵ In the 1990s the practice of advertising and marketing became a central part of the American economy, as a result of this an expansive range of brands adopted what Naomi Klein refers to as the “co-optation formula”, this is when “a company takes a cool artist (or athlete), associates them with their brand, and hopes that it makes them cool too.”¹⁴⁶ This, to an extent is what Nike did with Michael Jordan, they took a notoriously “cool” athlete and used him to “catapult themselves to branded heaven”.¹⁴⁷ In the 1980s Jordan was quickly becoming the best basketball player on the planet, but, it was through a series of Nike commercials beginning in 1985, that he became a universally adored “Hollywood-style superstar”.¹⁴⁸ Although historic athletes such as Jack Johnson, Jackie Robinson, and Muhammad Ali transcended sport to become cultural icons, their influence largely resonated in the Black community.¹⁴⁹ Jordan, through his prioritisation of commercial success over racially conscious activism, had risen to become an influential cultural icon in mainstream America. This built towards the cultural influence that Black athletes possess in contemporary society.

Klein’s co-optation formula can also be inverted to understand why commercially successful athletes were dissuaded from engaging with controversial topics in the late twentieth century. Just as companies such as Nike wanted to associate themselves with “cool” athletes to improve their marketability, they also wanted to avoid a relationship with controversial athletes who would

¹⁴³ Ibid., 8.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 6.

¹⁴⁵ Fleetwood, “The Black Athlete,” 8.

¹⁴⁶ Klein, *No Logo*, 45.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 52.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 51.

¹⁴⁹ It is worth noting that Ali, Johnson, and other Black athletes such as Jackie Robinson are retrospectively considered American sporting icons, however, this was not the case during their careers.

associate their politics with their brand and alienate potential customers. A large part of Jordan's appeal was that unlike other historic athletes such as Hodges, Johnson, or Ali, he was idealized as a "non-threatening" Black man.¹⁵⁰ This was because Jordan, like Simpson before him, did not publicly associate with movements that sought racial equality. Historian Shelby Steele described Jordan's aversion to racial politics as "the smartest business move he could make."¹⁵¹ The inversion of the co-optation formula also supports the alienation experienced by Hodges at the hands of the NBA. As a predominantly black league existing in post-racial America, the NBA had to protect its status amongst its white audience, this meant that the league had to distance themselves from the polarizing politics of an athlete like Hodges, whilst keeping apolitical athletes such as Jordan in the spotlight.

The confluence of factors that facilitated the multi-billion dollar expansion of sport in the late twentieth century were on display at the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona. For the first time in history the Olympics permitted professional basketball players to compete at the summer games, so the U.S. responded by sending arguably the greatest basketball team ever assembled. The "Dream Team" symbolized the international cultural significance of American sport in the 1990s; unlike every other athlete at the games, the U.S. team stayed outside of the Olympic village because they were "besieged by autograph requests wherever they went – even from other athletes."¹⁵² After the gold medal victory over Croatia, Jordan took to the medal podium in a Reebok made team USA tracksuit, with an American flag draped over his right shoulder. This was not a display of patriotism reminiscent of George Foreman at the 1968 Olympics, but rather a deliberate act to hide the logo of Reebok out of loyalty to Nike.¹⁵³ Just four months after violent riots spread around the U.S. in the wake of the acquittal of the policemen who savagely beat Rodney King, Jordan, alongside other African American NBA superstars such as Charles Barkley and Magic Johnson decided not to follow in the footsteps of Tommie Smith and John Carlos to draw attention to the racial unrest in the U.S. The 1992 "protest" illustrated that capitalism and corporate loyalty were the central forces shaping the attitudes of successful African American athletes in the 1990s. Furthermore, the fact that these athletes faced minimal criticism for not using the ceremony to raise awareness of the L.A. riots is indicative of the wider social climate of activism in the 1990s.

¹⁵⁰ Wright, "Be Like Mike?" 3.

¹⁵¹ Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*, 213.

¹⁵² Steve Richardson, "Dream Team Besieged by Everyone, Defends Staying Outside Village," *Morning Call*, July 26, 1992, <https://www.tribpub.com/gdpr/mcall.com/> (Accessed: 5/4/21).

¹⁵³ At the 1968 Olympics George Foreman waved American flags after winning the heavyweight gold medal. The act was a direct response to the podium protest of Tommie Smith and John Carlos.

The concept of the “colourless athlete” that was conceived of by O.J. Simpson and mastered by Michael Jordan provided a new model for professional black athletes – “to establish their sense of being, above and beyond their racial identity.”¹⁵⁴ Jordan and the athletes who followed in this model effectively transcended their race, “when black athletes become stars, they are no longer perceived of being of colour. The colour sort of vanished.”¹⁵⁵ This model, which had survived the threat from the socially principled activism of Craig Hodges, would later face a devastating challenge from Allen Iverson, an “anti-hero” who refused to alter his image to fit with what the media and white America expected of a famous African American athlete.¹⁵⁶ Unlike Hodges, who despite being a phenomenal shooter was not a true NBA superstar, Iverson’s power came from the fact that he was a generational talent and therefore could not easily be removed from the league in the way that Hodges had been. The contempt for Iverson’s image was illustrated when the NBA magazine airbrushed their cover photo of him to remove his tattoos and present a more “acceptable” image, as tattoos at the time were considered to be a “penitentiary look”.¹⁵⁷ Scholars such as Shaun Powell believed that Iverson offered a damaging stereotype for the African American community, however Iverson’s defiant individualism marked a necessary break from the racial detachment of the Jordan model. The disdain for Iverson as a Black role model mirrored the criticisms of Jack Johnson at the dawn of the 20th century, but like Johnson, Iverson’s defiance made him a “conscious social statement” without engaging in an explicit form of activism. Iverson was still a far cry from the historic actions of Black athletes in the 1960s, yet his separation from the “Jordan model” marked an important point in the evolution of athlete-activism. Despite his “anti-hero” persona Iverson proved to be incredibly commercially successful and – in spite of the media’s disdain – was adored by the public.¹⁵⁸ In the context of contemporary activism Iverson established the precedent that talented Black athletes maintained a high degree of self-determination, they could achieve financial success on their own terms and did not need to “Be Like Mike”.¹⁵⁹

Conclusion

Historians have lamented post-civil rights America as witnessing a stagnation of athlete-activism. This has largely led to the significance of this period to be overlooked in the context of contemporary, sport-based activism. Jordan himself has been heavily criticized for his refusal to

¹⁵⁴ Todd Boyd, *Young, Black, Rich, and Famous: The Rise of the NBA, the Hip Hop Invasion, and the Transformation of American Culture* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003): 104.

¹⁵⁵ Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*, 201.

¹⁵⁶ Bryant, *The Heritage*, 189; Boyd, *Young, Black, Rich, and Famous*, 4.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid. 153.

¹⁵⁸ Bryant, *The Heritage*, 189.

¹⁵⁹ Boyd, *Young, Black, Rich, and Famous*, 159.

speak out on political issues, for instance William C. Rhoden accused him of “abandoning his responsibility to his community with treasonous vigour.”¹⁶⁰ However, this disdain is problematic for two reasons, firstly, the immediate dismissal of Jordan’s political stance, or lack of, overlooks how his actions were framed by the wider social climate of his era. Additionally, this view has largely prevented a discussion of how the late twentieth century factored into the evolution of athlete-activism. As has been stated throughout this chapter Black athletes, led by Michael Jordan and powered by the combination of capitalism, advertising and television deals, entered the stratosphere of popular culture in this period.¹⁶¹ Craig Hodges was one of the few athletes who recognised the power potential imbued in this cultural influence, but, the complex environment of sponsorship deals, corporate interests, and a wider-social political climate that was hostile to racially conscious activism of any form restricted this generation of athletes from capitalising on their burgeoning power. In his comments at the end of game 2 in the 1992 finals, Hodges stated, “leadership in America is the athletes and entertainers.”¹⁶² This emulated the view that Black activists have held since the beginning of the Black Freedom Struggle: If African Americans could break into popular culture it would lead to advances in wider society.¹⁶³ The failure of athletes beyond Hodges to use their platform in the 1980s and 1990s damaged this theory, however, the following chapters of the dissertation will look to unpack how contemporary athletes are using the cultural capital that was accrued in the late twentieth century to bolster their engagement in socially conscious activism and in doing so show that they are fulfilling the prophetic belief in the power that African Americans in popular culture possess.

Chapter 3: The Emergence of Athlete-Activism in the Black Lives Matter Era.

On August 3rd, 2016, players for the San Francisco 49ers and San Diego Chargers assembled, ready to stand to attention for the playing of the national anthem, with one notable exception. In a blurry photograph that was posted on twitter after the game, Colin Kaepernick could be seen remaining seated whilst the anthem played. This marked the beginning of the take a knee movement that spread across the NFL and dominated the media discourse for the next year.¹⁶⁴ Kaepernick’s intention was to use the publicity that kneeling would accrue to draw attention to and inspire

¹⁶⁰ Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*, 6.

¹⁶¹ Boyd, *Young, Black, Rich, and Famous*, 87.

¹⁶² Hodges, *Long Shot*, 167.

¹⁶³ Tuck, *We Ain’t What We Ought To Be*, 374.

¹⁶⁴ Following a conversation with NFL player and former Green Beret Nate Boyer, Kaepernick would change his stance from remaining seated to kneeling.

change around “the oppression of people of colour and ongoing issues with police brutality.”¹⁶⁵ The historical significance of Kaepernick’s protest can be seen in the way his approach mirrored the historic activism of athletes such as Tommie Smith, John Carlos, and Rose Robinson, who all also protested against social injustice during the playing of the national anthem. Kaepernick’s willingness to use his platform in protest of police brutality and racial injustice signalled a renewed activist spirit amongst athletes that emerged alongside the Black Lives Matter movement.

Kaepernick’s decision to protest during the playing of the national anthem reflected the wider social climate of America in the 2010s. Social justice movements had become increasingly prominent in response to a variety of social ills that disproportionately affected the African American population. Mass incarceration continued to ravage the Black community, economic inequality had worsened since the Reagan era, and consequently the 2008 financial crash had excessively impacted poor Americans, a large amount of whom were minorities.¹⁶⁶ On top of this, the hope and then frustration prompted by the election of America’s first Black president, Barack Obama forced African Americans to “confront the hard reality that a Black family in the White House was not going to save Black families in general.”¹⁶⁷ In her book, *Making All Black Lives Matter*, Barbara Ransby argued that coming to terms with the limits of a Black leader “set the stage for the explosion of protests and organizing that began in 2012.”¹⁶⁸ Arguably the most notable organization in this explosion of racially motivated activism was Black Lives Matter (BLM). BLM was originally founded in 2013 as a social media platform in the wake of George Zimmerman’s acquittal after he killed African American teenager Trayvon Martin. It came to international attention the following year when protests exploded in Ferguson, Missouri after police officer Darren Wilson shot and killed unarmed teenager Michael Brown.¹⁶⁹ After Ferguson, Black Lives Matter migrated from the virtual world of social media into a policy platform that aimed to “eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities.”¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁵ Mark Sandritter, “A Timeline of Colin Kaepernick’s National Anthem Protest and Athletes Who Joined Them,” *SB Nation*, September 25, 2017, <https://www.sbnation.com/2016/9/11/12869726/colin-kaepernick-national-anthem-protest-seahawks-brandon-marshall-nfl> (Accessed: 1/4/20).

¹⁶⁶ Barbara Ransby, *Making All Black Lives Matter: Reimagining Freedom in the Twenty-First Century* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018): 22.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁶⁹ Jelani Cobb, “The Matter of Black Lives,” *New Yorker*, March 6, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/03/14/where-is-black-lives-matter-headed> (Accessed: 7/6/21).

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Harry Edwards believed that BLM represented the first time since the 1970s that a sustained ideology existed to inform activist positions amongst athletes.¹⁷¹ Edwards's belief was reflected in the intersection between Black Lives Matter and the sporting arena post-2013. In solidarity with the Ferguson protests, five members of the St. Louis Rams walked onto the field in the "Hands up, Don't Shoot" pose deployed by protestors in the aftermath of Brown's death.¹⁷² Additionally, Derrick Rose, LeBron James, and Kobe Bryant were amongst the NBA players who wore pre-game "I can't breathe" t-shirts to protest the viral video of Eric Garner being suffocated by police in 2014. Then in July 2016, members of the WNBA's Minnesota Lynx wore "Justice and Accountability" t-shirts to protest the police killings of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile. These examples of athletes engaging in socially conscious activism through symbolic protests illustrated how the popular exposure of professional sport was being leveraged to create a broader dialogue and discussion surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement – and the change that the movement sought to create. This chapter will begin to look at how athletes are engaging in activism today, starting with the symbolic activism of the take a knee movement and then moving onto the NBA-led boycott of 2020. The chapter will unpack the power and pitfalls of activism that takes place within sport, whilst connecting these moments to the broader ideology of the 21st century Black Freedom movement. The aim is to recognise the importance of these forms of activism and repudiate the idea that such actions have little to no practical effect – as is insinuated when athletes are criticized for engaging in "gesture politics". These are not exhaustive examples of how athletes are engaging in activism today, but they provide a good starting point to understand the full scope of contemporary athlete-activism.

Colin Kaepernick and Symbolic Activism

Before entering into a discussion of the social ramifications of the take a knee movement, it is important to establish what the term "symbolic activism" means. This type of activism was defined by Joseph N. Cooper as "deliberate actions exhibited by athletes to draw attention to social injustices and inspire positive change in wider society."¹⁷³ Cooper's definition states that symbolic protests are an effective strategy for their ability to disrupt the normative standards of societal operation and in doing so enhance awareness about specific issues, or even lead to substantive change.¹⁷⁴ The act of kneeling that was used by Kaepernick exemplified this definition. By disrupting the spectacle of the national anthem, Kaepernick was attempting to draw attention to police violence against people of colour, this was reflected in his statement; "I'm seeing things happen to

¹⁷¹ Edwards, "The Fourth Wave."

¹⁷² Charles Modiano, "The NFL, Activism, and #BlackLivesMatter," in *Football, Culture and Power*, ed. David J. Leonard, Kimberley B. George, Wade Davis (New York: Routledge, 2018): 228.

¹⁷³ Cooper et al., "Race and Resistance," 166.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

people that don't have a platform to talk and have their voices heard. I'm in the position where I can do that and I'm going to do that for people that can't."¹⁷⁵ By bringing this conversation to the massive audience of the NFL, Kaepernick was putting pressure onto the continuing forms of systemic racism that needed to be addressed and changed – and subsequently pressuring the government officials who had the power to implement this change. This shows that this form of activism possesses a practical impact alongside its symbolism.

Steve Martin and George McHendry stated that a central tenet of this form of activism is to transcend the protest action. This is when a protestor attempts to divert attention away from the method of protest, and instead place a focus on the social conditions that called the act into being.¹⁷⁶ When asked about his decision to kneel, Kaepernick made sure to place a consistent focus on the continuing forms of racial injustice that his activism sought to challenge, namely the deaths of unarmed Black men and women at the hands of police.¹⁷⁷ Kaepernick's desire to leverage the power of contemporary sport to bring the continued existence of racial injustice to the national media's attention highlights how this form of activism carries more than a symbolic importance. However, athletes often struggled to keep the focus on the target of their protest. This was evident in one of Kaepernick's post-game interviews, in which he consistently evaded his interviewers' attempts to divert attention away from police brutality to discuss kneeling, his career, and his personal experience with oppression.¹⁷⁸ This introduces the way that media coverage can distort symbolic activism by creating a discourse that diverts attention away from the true meaning of the protest. In the context of Kaepernick, this was illustrated by right wing journalists and politicians who focused on the perceived disrespect embodied by kneeling to create a divisive, nationalistic rhetoric that ultimately overlooked the continued acts of police brutality that were the target of the protest. Laura Ingraham's article in *LifeZette* exemplified this, "Someone needs to tell these young men that kneeling for the anthem is seen by most of us as an extremely offensive attack on the country."¹⁷⁹ This media phenomenon is encapsulated in the concept of the "protest paradigm" which will be discussed in more depth later in the chapter.

Kaepernick's decision to protest during the national anthem constituted what Natasha Brown and Sarah Brison labelled as symbolic counter-speech. This refers to the way that protestors "employ a

¹⁷⁵ Jules Boykoff & Ben Carrington, "Sporting Dissent: Colin Kaepernick, NFL Activism, and Media Framing Contests," *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* vol. 55, no.7 (2019): 829.

¹⁷⁶ Martin & McHendry, "Kaepernick's Stand," 92.

¹⁷⁷ Boykoff & Carrington, "Sporting Dissent," 840.

¹⁷⁸ Martin & McHendry, "Kaepernick's Stand," 93.

¹⁷⁹ Laura Ingraham, "Hey 'Kneelers,' Lets' Get a Few Things Straight," *Lifezette*, September 25, 2017, <https://www.lifezette.com/2017/09/ingraham-hey-kneelers-lets-get-things-straight/> (Accessed: 5/9/21).

symbol to be used as a vehicle for a counter-message.”¹⁸⁰ Effectively, activists use a powerfully symbolic event such as the national anthem to direct attention towards social injustice that they believe violates what the symbol they are protesting should stand for.¹⁸¹ This was evident in Kaepernick’s rhetoric: “when the flag represents what it’s supposed to represent and this country is representing people the way it’s supposed to, I’ll stand.”¹⁸² This speaks to Kaepernick’s appeal to American democracy, which mirrored the patriotic rhetoric of historic Black activists such as Frederick Douglass or W.E.B. Du Bois.¹⁸³ The intersection between patriotism and the take a knee movement will also be considered in more depth later in the chapter. As is shown in the definitions above, Kaepernick exemplified the way that athletes use symbolic activism to engage in national debates on racial injustice and push for progressive social change by disrupting the status quo of sporting events. This case study also highlights the problems of distortion and backlash that have plagued athletes who have used sport as a platform to protest.

Symbolic activism in sport has been prominent throughout the Black Freedom Struggle, historic athletes such as Rose Robinson, Tommie Smith and John Carlos utilised public demonstrations to draw attention to persistent racial inequality in American society. Demonstrations of this kind continued into the “post-protest” era of Reagan and post-Reagan America as athletes such as Craig Hodges, Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, and Toni Smith-Thompson continued to use their platform despite a climate hostile to politically conscious activism. However, unlike these previous examples, athletes today possess far more cultural and economic power. This can largely be attributed to the continued expansion of the sporting industry since the late twentieth century. The media presence of professional athletes has maintained an upward trajectory since the Michael Jordan era, however, unlike in the Jordan era, an increased number of contemporary athletes are leveraging the economic and cultural exposure of the sporting industry to strengthen their activism. This is evident in the example of Colin Kaepernick as he sought to take full advantage of the popular exposure of the NFL, which in the 2016 season recorded viewing figures of 17 million people per game, plus the millions of other followers of the league.¹⁸⁴ This not only speaks to the popular exposure of contemporary

¹⁸⁰ Sarah Brown & Natasha Brison, “More Than an Athlete: Constitutional and Contractual Analysis of Activism in Professional Sports,” *Sports & Entertainment Law Journal Arizona State University* vol. 7, no. 2 (2018): 259.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Jared Dublin, “Colin Kaepernick: I’ll keep sitting for anthem until meaningful change occurs,” *CBS Sports*, August 28, 2016,

<https://www.cbssports.com/nfl/news/colin-kaepernick-ill-keep-sitting-for-anthem-until-meaningful-change-occurs/> (Accessed: 8/9/21).

¹⁸³ Chad Williams, “W.E.B. Du Bois and the Fight for American Democracy.” *Washington Post*, August 27, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2018/08/27/w-e-b-du-bois-and-the-fight-for-american-democracy/> (Accessed: 4/2/22).

¹⁸⁴ Christina Gough, “NFL TV Rating and Viewership 2016-17,” *Statista*, July 29, 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/631288/nfl-viewership-figures-ratings/> (Accessed: 8/2/22).

sport, but also the way that Kaepernick strategically leveraged this exposure to apply greater pressure on manifestations of systemic racism and amplify the message of social movements such as Black Lives Matter. As traditionally domestic American sports have become more internationalised, protests such as the take a knee movement have resonated around the world. In a show of solidarity with Kaepernick, members of the German football team Hertha Berlin also knelt prior to their fixtures.¹⁸⁵ Although Smith and Carlos' protest also drew the international eye, it occurred at the Olympic games, a huge international event; Kaepernick was kneeling during pre-season and regular season NFL games which have far less international appeal than the Olympics. This ultimately shows that there is a clear link between the expansion of the American sporting industry in the late twentieth century and the power that exists in the symbolic activism of contemporary professional athletes. The take a knee movement exemplified how athletes could use the popular exposure of contemporary sport to amplify existing social discontent and spark a national discussion on racial injustice.

Athletes today possess an elevated status due to the popularity and wealth that they have accrued, and this has worked to give their acts of protest a greater reach. However, this power did not insulate Kaepernick's activism from being distorted. The distortion of symbolic activism has been a constant feature in the history of athlete-activism, at the 1968 Olympics, Smith and Carlos' Black Power salute was described in the American media as a "Nazi-like salute".¹⁸⁶ This damaging comparison undermined the legitimacy of the protest and focused the discourse on the method of protest rather than the target of the protest. The distortion of athletes' protests can be understood within Douglas McLeod's framework of the "protest paradigm".¹⁸⁷ This was initially conceived as a framework to understand how mainstream media outlets cover social protests; however, it can be adapted to consider how the media responds to instances of athlete-activism. McLeod stated that the paradigm occurs when media coverage creates a dysfunctional discourse by focusing on the controversial method of protest, rather than the wider social conditions that the protest is attempting to draw attention to.¹⁸⁸ This could be seen in the coverage of Kaepernick's activism as the media focus was placed upon the act of kneeling at the expense of the issues of police brutality and racial injustice that the protest attempted to discuss. Even supportive media outlets defended Kaepernick's actions at the expense of focusing on the core issues that he was protesting against,

¹⁸⁵ Johan Lindholm, "From Carlos to Kaepernick and Beyond: Athletes' Right to Freedom of Expression," *International Sports Law Journal* vol. 17, no. 1 (2017): 1.

¹⁸⁶ Will Grimsley, "Olympians Vary in Reaction to Protest," *Oakland Tribune*, October 17, 1968: 37-38.

¹⁸⁷ Douglas M. McLeod, "News Coverage and Social Protest: How the Media's Protest Paradigm Exacerbates Social Conflict," *Journal of Dispute Resolution*, no. 1 (2007): 185.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

thus further distorting the protest. This was exemplified in NFL legend Jim Brown's response, "he's within his rights and telling the truth as he sees it."¹⁸⁹ Brown appears to support Kaepernick's protest, but simultaneously makes no reference to the core focus of Kaepernick's activism. The protest was not just distorted in the media, Republican senator Ted Cruz, targeted the act of kneeling as a method to trigger a divisive, nationalistic rhetoric to gain popularity amongst his right-wing constituents, "To all the athletes who have made millions in America's freedom: stop insulting our flag, our nation, and our heroes."¹⁹⁰ This quote exemplifies that the distortion of the take a knee movement was not limited to the media, it was also used as a wedge issue by right wing politicians to gain support.

Another criticism that right-wing commentators use to denounce the symbolic activism of athletes is that the protests are nothing more than "gesture politics". This is defined as a "political action or statement that is made chiefly as a symbolic gesture that has little or no practical effect."¹⁹¹ This argument, that has been a consistent criticism of symbolic activism, especially in sport, completely misses the point of why these protests are important. Kneeling during the playing of the national anthem was an attempt to bring racial injustice and the continued existence of police brutality into the cultural spotlight that sport provided and spark a national agenda that did not just intend to discuss these issues – or the Black Lives Matter movement – but focus on the specific policy issues that needed to be changed. This was evident in Kaepernick's reasoning when he said, "There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave to get away with murder."¹⁹² His desire to bring these issues into an international spotlight reflected James Baldwin's belief that "nothing can be changed until it's faced."¹⁹³ The protests forced a polarizing conversation on crucially important political topics, so despite its definite symbolism, this form of activism cannot be described as having "little or no practical effect". The broader significance of the take a knee movement can be seen in the way that kneeling has become synonymous with Black Lives Matter as a sign of solidarity for anti-racism movements beyond the sporting environment.

¹⁸⁹ Eric Branch, "Sit and Cause Uproar: White House, Trump, Harbaugh weigh in on Kaepernick," *SF Gate*, August 30, 2016, <https://www.sfgate.com/49ers/article/Sit-and-cause-uproar-White-House-Trump-9191817.php> (Accessed: 8/2/22).

¹⁹⁰ Betsy Klein, "Cruz Condemns Athletes' Anthem Protests," *CNN*, September 12, 2016, <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/09/12/politics/ted-cruz-athletes-national-anthem-tweets/index.html> (Accessed: 4/10/21).

¹⁹¹ "Gesture Politics," *Merriam Webster*, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gesture%20politics#h1> (Accessed: 5/2/22).

¹⁹² Steve Wyche, "Colin Kaepernick Explains Why He Sat During National Anthem," *NFL*, August 27, 2016, <https://www.nfl.com/news/colin-kaepernick-explains-why-he-sat-during-national-anthem-0ap3000000691077> (Accessed: 22/6/21).

¹⁹³ James Baldwin, "As Much Truth As One Can Bear," *New York Times*, January 14, 1962.

The negative response to symbolic protests in sport has consistently embodied the “stick to sports” belief. This manifests itself in the argument that sport is an inappropriate forum for political debates and therefore athletes should avoid such topics. This was a prominent feature in the discourse surrounding the take a knee movement as numerous commentators attested to the inappropriateness of political action within sport, including ESPN president Jimmy Pitaro who stated in an interview “without question, our fans do not want us to cover politics.”¹⁹⁴ This rhetoric is commonly used to delegitimize athletes’ political contributions, Senator Cruz reaffirmed his opposition to Kaepernick by calling him “that knuckle-headed quarterback that doesn’t understand the national anthem.”¹⁹⁵ These comments portrayed Kaepernick as ignorant in an effort to undermine his legitimacy as a political activist. The prominence of the “stick to sports” rhetoric means that the location of the protest – the sporting arena – is used to undermine its impact.

The vitriolic response to the take a knee movement was not just the result of the “shut up and play” ideology, the reaction can be understood within the “patriotic counter-speech” element of the protest.¹⁹⁶ The mainstream coverage of the national anthem protests descended into a discourse on patriotism and what constituted an “appropriate” way to protest in America. Kaepernick’s use of the flag and anthem as a form of symbolic counter-speech mirrored a long legacy in the Black Freedom Struggle of patriotic symbols being used to challenge American democracy. Simon Hall outlined how Black activists in the civil rights movement “presented their struggle as one that was working to fulfil America’s own democratic promises.”¹⁹⁷ This was reflected in Kaepernick’s rhetoric, “America stands for freedom, liberty, and justice for all. And it’s not happening for all right now.”¹⁹⁸ The protest reflected a broader debate of what it means to be a patriot. Kaepernick’s teammate and fellow protestor Eric Reid quoted James Baldwin in defending his stance, “I love my country...and for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.”¹⁹⁹ This constitutes a constructive form of patriotism; challenging societal practices that are perceived as violating American democratic principles to promote progressive social change.²⁰⁰ Whilst on the other hand, some Americans believe that criticising patriotic symbols is inherently un-American and unpatriotic, this illustrates

¹⁹⁴ Kwame J.A. Agyemang et al., “‘Agitate! Agitate! Agitate!’: Sport as a Site for Political Activism and Social Change,” *Organization* vol. 27, no. 6 (2020): 953.

¹⁹⁵ Klein, “Cruz Condemns Athletes’ Anthem Protests.”

¹⁹⁶ Brown & Brison, “More Than an Athlete,” 259.

¹⁹⁷ Simon Hall, *American Patriotism, American Protest: Social Movements Since the Sixties* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011): 9.

¹⁹⁸ Dublin, “Colin Kaepernick.”

¹⁹⁹ Eric Reid, “Why Colin Kaepernick and I Decided to Take a Knee,” *New York Times*, September 25, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/25/opinion/colin-kaepernick-football-protests.html> (Accessed: 6/7/21).

²⁰⁰ Jeffrey Montez De Oca & Stephen Cho Suh, “Ethics of Patriotism: NFL Players’ Protests Against Police Violence,” *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* vol. 55, no. 5 (2019): 576.

what some psychologists label “blind patriotism”; “an unquestioning positive evaluation and intolerance of criticism of the nation – or patriotic symbols.”²⁰¹ This was illustrated in how Donald Trump responded to the protest: “He (Kaepernick) should not be allowed to disrespect our great American flag and should stand for the national anthem. If not, you’re fired.”²⁰² Trump’s denunciation of Kaepernick illustrated the belief being proffered by right-wing media outlets – such as Ingraham’s statement earlier – that dissent geared towards symbols of American patriotism is inherently un-American. Furthermore, Trump’s comments – along with those of Cruz and Ingraham – also show how the divisive patriotic discourse that surrounded the act of kneeling worked to divert attention away from the core issues of police brutality and systemic racism that Kaepernick sought to spark a national debate on.

However, unlike historic instances of symbolic protests being distorted, contemporary examples were less susceptible to media distortion due to the prominence of social media, and other media outlets that allow athletes to circumvent the traditional control that the mainstream media possess over sporting storylines.²⁰³ The resurgence of contemporary athlete-activism has built on this technological advancement, platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook provide activists with tools that are fundamentally different to anything that has existed before in the Black Freedom Struggle.²⁰⁴ This reflects the broader importance of social media alongside the contemporary framework of social justice activism. Movements such as Black Lives Matter have capitalised on the organizational ability of social media and the virality of platforms like Twitter to orchestrate effective mass demonstrations and bring widespread attention to recorded instances of police brutality. For athletes, social media has allowed them to address their thoughts in a way that will not be co-opted or reframed by media outlets. This is a marked difference from previous eras of athlete-activism, the inability of Smith and Carlos to correct the comparison to Nazism illustrated the control that the media possessed over how protests were defined, additionally, in the 1990s when Craig Hodges was traded from the Milwaukee Bucks for his ties to the Nation of Islam, he had no way to outline his reasoning behind visiting the services.²⁰⁵ Despite the continued distortion of symbolic activism that

²⁰¹ Ibid., 573.

²⁰² Bryan Armen Graham, “Donald Trump Blasts NFL Anthem Protestors: ‘Get that son of a bitch off the field.’” *Guardian*, September 23, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2017/sep/22/donald-trump-nfl-national-anthem-protests> (Accessed: 9/8/21).

²⁰³ Bijan Stephen, “Social Media Helps Black Lives Matter Fight the Power,” *Wired*, 2015, <https://www.wired.com/2015/10/how-black-lives-matter-uses-social-media-to-fight-the-power/> (Accessed: 4/5/21).

²⁰⁴ Stephen, “Social Media Helps Black Lives Matter Fight the Power.”

²⁰⁵ Hodges revealed in his memoir that his visits to the NOI services were for the messages of racial empowerment. Whilst this may not have received a positive response in post-Reagan America, it would have given Hodges more control of the storyline.

was seen in the response to Kaepernick, social media could act as a forum to counter the problematic framework of the protest paradigm. This was evident in the creation of the Facebook group “#VeteransforKaepernick”. Part of the negative backlash against the act of kneeling during the anthem was that it was “anti-military”. Facebook provided a forum for servicemen to counter this narrative and demonstrate their support for the take a knee movement. Additionally, social media has given athletes an unmediated platform to discuss their activism in a way that kept the focus on the message of the protest, therefore avoiding the distortive narrative that results from mainstream media coverage in the context of the protest paradigm.

At the end of the 2016 NFL season, Kaepernick and the 49ers parted ways, and like so many athlete-activists before him, it is likely that his playing career is over as a result of his activism. The take a knee movement gradually declined in the NFL, and in 2019 only one player (Kenny Stills) continued to kneel during the playing of the national anthem. Despite the continued existence of protest in other sporting arenas – one such example being Gwen Berry’s Black Power salute at the 2019 Pan-American games – athlete-activism within the sporting arena was falling out of the cultural spotlight. However, that all changed in 2020.

2020, Boycotts and the Evolution of Activism Within Sport

Amidst a global pandemic, American race relations entered the international spotlight in April 2020 when Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin knelt on the neck of George Floyd for nine minutes, ending Floyd’s life. This extrajudicial killing was recorded and uploaded to social media. Following Floyd’s death protests exploded around the United States – and the world – as Black Americans were tired of seeing another unarmed African American being the victim of police brutality. Athletes became central figures within these protests, they walked alongside protestors in the streets, spoke in front of crowds, and used their financial capital to pay any legal fees accrued by protestors.²⁰⁶ As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, all of this activism occurred at a time when all major sports leagues were postponed – between March and July there were no games being played. When professional sport returned in July it was far from business as usual, athletes across all sports knelt in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter protests and slogans such as “Black Lives Matter”, “End Racism”, and “Equality” were ever-present at sporting events. Throughout the summer, sport and politics collided at a level that had not been seen since the 1960s, but unlike the civil rights era, there was an unprecedented level of tolerance for the expression of explicitly political sentiment. In the context of

²⁰⁶ Tommy Beer, “Colin Kaepernick Offers to Pay for Lawyers for Protestors Arrested in Minneapolis,” *Forbes*, May 29, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tommybeer/2020/05/29/colin-kaepernick-offers-to-pay-for-lawyers-for-protesters-arrested-in-minneapolis/?sh=7bd72efe3690> (Accessed: 8/2/22).

a tumultuous summer of race relations that saw Black Lives Matter truly emerge as a prominent political force, sport firmly established itself as an extension of the political sphere.

However, for some, this new dynamic between sport, politics, and protests was a mirage. In an article for ESPN Howard Bryant outlined a belief amongst athlete-activists that attempts to promote racial equality within sport had “become co-opted, performative and corporatized.”²⁰⁷ This belief was mirrored by Amira Rose Davis who stated that by August, “the performative gestures rang hollow, and at times they diluted the protests and possibilities of change.”²⁰⁸ This partly speaks to the intersection between athlete-activism and corporate involvement that will be discussed in later chapters, but in the context of this chapter the universality and general acceptance of protest actions such as kneeling in the return of professional sport undermined their impact. Actions that had previously disrupted the sporting environment became normative behaviour that was now a part of sport’s pre-game routine. However, this changed on the 26th of August when police officers in Kenosha, Wisconsin shot Jacob Blake in the back seven times. In the wake of this tragedy athletes moved away from their previous performative actions to employ a new tactic to challenge racial injustice – they boycotted.

Boycotts have been effectively deployed by African American activists throughout the Black Freedom Struggle, they were especially effective in the classical civil rights era to challenge the continued presence of Jim Crow in American society. Probably the most famous example being the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955-56. After 42-year old Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger on her bus home from work, African Americans in Montgomery, Alabama refused to use the city’s public transport. The boycott lasted 380 days and ended with the *Browder vs. Gayle* Supreme Court ruling that established a precedent that would undermine segregated public transport in the U.S.²⁰⁹ Boycotts in the civil rights era also permeated the landscape of sport. In 1961, when some of the Boston Celtics players were denied service in a coffee shop in Lexington, Kentucky, Celtics legend and future Hall of famer Bill Russell led a boycott of the scheduled game against the St. Louis Hawks. Russell stated after the boycott “As long as you go along with it, everybody assumes it’s the status quo...If I can’t eat, I can’t entertain.”²¹⁰ Similarly, in

²⁰⁷ Howard Bryant, “The Reality of Black Pain is Breaking Sports’ Status Quo,” *ESPN*, August 27, 2020, https://www.espn.co.uk/nba/story/_/id/29749948/the-reality-black-pain-breaking-american-sports-status-quo (Accessed: 4/5/21).

²⁰⁸ Amira Rose Davis, “No More Games: Understanding the latest wave of athletic activism,” *Organization of American Historians*, August, 2020, <https://www.oah.org/tah/issues/2020/history-for-black-lives/no-more-games-understanding-the-latest-wave-of-athletic-activism/> (Accessed: 4/5/21).

²⁰⁹ Adam Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality, 1890-2000* (London: Penguin Books, 2001): 233.

²¹⁰ Moore, *We Will Win the Day*, 153.

1964, prior to the NBA All-Star game, players, led by another future Hall of famer Oscar Robertson refused to take to the court in a deliberate attempt to force the NBA to recognise their union. In an act that foreshadowed the 2020 boycott, the players leveraged the potential consequences of the game being cancelled and ultimately succeeded as the NBA agreed to their terms and recognised their union.²¹¹ The timing of the 2020 boycott was reminiscent of 1964, however the way that today's athletes leveraged their power potential on behalf of the Black community shows a marked difference between the two instances of athlete-activism.

The NBA-led walkout began twenty minutes before the Milwaukee Bucks were scheduled to play against the Orlando Magic in the 2020 NBA playoffs, when Bucks point guard George Hill revealed to his teammates that he would not be playing in the game. Hill felt that in the wake of the Jacob Blake shooting by Kenosha police – and the deaths of two people protesting the shooting – he was not going to be able to play.²¹² Rather than shun Hill for refusing to play in a potentially crucial playoff game his teammates rallied around him. Led by reigning MVP (most valuable player) Giannis Antetokounmpo the Bucks decided that they would refuse to play, and in doing so sparked a boycott movement that would bring the entire sporting world to a standstill. The NBA-led boycott did not resemble the way that boycotts have historically been deployed in the Black Freedom Struggle. Traditionally, to boycott meant to withhold labour, custom, or involvement to directly protest the issue that called the boycott into being. Despite the wider social ramifications of Bill Russell and the Celtics boycott in 1961, it was fundamentally in response to the Jim Crow segregation directly experienced by the Celtics players. The NBA-led boycott in 2020 however, was not a direct protest in this sense, as the Bucks players who initiated the walkout were doing so on behalf of Jacob Blake and millions of other African Americans who could not speak out on police brutality.²¹³ Additionally, the Bucks players were not content with drawing attention to Blake's shooting, they looked to place direct pressure on the government, "it is imperative for the Wisconsin State Legislature to reconvene after months of inaction and take up meaningful measures to address issues of police accountability, brutality and criminal justice reform."²¹⁴

²¹¹ The 1964 All-Star game was the first time that the All-Star game would be televised; Hodges, *Long Shot*, 143-44.

²¹² Tim Bontemps, "George Hill Withheld Plans to Sit Out From Bucks at First: 'Didn't want to put that pressure on my teammates,'" *ESPN*, August 30, 2020, https://www.espn.co.uk/nba/story/_/id/29769271/george-hill-withheld-plans-sit-bucks-first-want-put-pressure-my-teammates (Accessed: 20/7/21).

²¹³ Jordan Greer, "Bucks Players Deliver Statement After Boycotting Game 5 vs. Magic: 'We are calling for justice for Jacob Blake,'" *Sporting News*, August 27, 2020, <https://www.sportingnews.com/ca/nba/news/bucks-boycott-magic-game-5-jacob-blake/129i4v38gkja31883tsdrkmf8l> (Accessed: 24/7/21).

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

The players' intention to focus on the extrajudicial killing of Jacob Blake imitated Kaepernick's desire to transcend the act of kneeling to bring broader social issues into the spotlight. This link was strengthened in the announcement of the boycott, "In the wake of the shooting of Jacob Blake our focus today cannot be on basketball...we are calling for justice for Jacob Blake and demand the officers be held accountable."²¹⁵ However, despite this similarity, the boycott also marked a clear departure from the take a knee movement. Unlike the protests in 2016, which sought to use the popular exposure of sport to make a statement and spark a national discussion, the boycott looked to send a message to owners, fans, and other stakeholders in the NBA: "you want to see basketball, we have some demands to make."²¹⁶ This illustrated the desire of the boycott to leverage the power of the sporting industry into facilitating broader social change. Harry Edwards defined the boycott as the athletes sending the message to owners; "we're going to stop business as usual until you use your resources to help us."²¹⁷ The rest of this chapter will use the case study of the 2020 NBA-led boycott to look at how contemporary protests in sport have continued to evolve in relation to the take a knee movement in 2016.

The aim of the boycott epitomised the wider social climate that existed in America in the summer of 2020. In 2016, the decision to kneel during the playing of the national anthem was primarily orientated towards making a statement that would draw attention to police brutality and racial injustice.²¹⁸ Whilst athletes continue to draw attention to these issues with their protest actions, the widespread attention accrued by Black Lives Matter in 2020 created a greater awareness of the persistence of racism in contemporary society, and the continuation of police brutality against African Americans motivated athletes to use their platform to force change. This was reflected in the Bucks statement, "Over the last few days we've seen the horrendous video of Jacob Blake being shot in the back...and the additional shooting of protestors. Despite the overwhelming plea for change, there has been no action."²¹⁹ Amidst a summer filled by Black Lives Matter protests, and a sporting environment filled with anti-racism messages and gestures, Jacob Blake's shooting signalled to athletes that these gestures were not enough and more had to be done. The Bucks' focus on creating tangible change was reinforced by their discussion with Wisconsin Attorney General Josh Kaul and Lieutenant Governor Mandela Barnes to find out how they could further the boycott into meaningful change.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Edwards, "The NBA Boycott and the Fifth Wave of Sports Activism."

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Douglas Hartmann, "'The Olympic Revolt' of 1968 and its Lessons for Contemporary African American Athlete-Activism," *European Journal of American Studies* vol. 14, no. 1 (2019).

²¹⁹ Greer, "Bucks Players Deliver Statement After Boycotting Game 5 vs. Magic."

In comparing the two case studies – the take a knee movement and the 2020 boycott – a prominent difference is the lack of a distortive discourse generated by the mainstream media. Whilst both instances of activism looked to bring attention to the continued extrajudicial killings of African Americans, the walkout avoided the patriotic discourse that emanated from the take a knee movement in 2016. Subsequently, right wing media outlets and conservative commentators found it more difficult to distort the protest – despite Donald Trump’s aide Jared Kushner’s attempts to cast the boycott as NBA players “exercising their financial privilege.”²²⁰ The boycott witnessed athletes move beyond the patriotic symbolism that has defined previous protests in the sporting arena, and instead saw athletes use sport as more than a platform for political expression. Rather than protesting in a way that could be challenged definitionally, as the take a knee movement was, the boycott avoided a distortive discourse and therefore kept a direct focus on the core issues of the protest.²²¹ Avoiding a distortive discourse was crucial to the effectiveness of the boycott, but it did not contribute to the power that the protest possessed. This stemmed from the cultural and economic influence that athletes have increasingly possessed since the expansion of the sporting industry in the late twentieth century. Whilst Kaepernick sought to use the popular exposure of sport, the NBA-led walkout actively leveraged the cultural power of the sporting industry to build towards tangible social change.

The use of symbolic resistance to support a movement’s practical demands aimed at wider social change was first witnessed at the collegiate level. The Missouri campus boycott in 2015 highlighted the way that athletes can leverage the resources provided by sport into forcing positive change. In the wake of a swarm of racially charged incidents on the Missouri University campus, students formed the group “Concerned Student 1950” which issued a list of demands that included the removal of Tim Wolfe as the University’s President. After a week of protesting there was little progress towards creating any change, but at this point the University’s American Football team got involved. The team refused to practice or play games until the University accepted the students’ demands – the boycott would cost the University \$1 million dollars if the team had to forfeit their upcoming game against Brigham Young University. After just 48 hours of the team’s involvement Wolfe had resigned as President. Despite occurring at the collegiate level, the Missouri boycott serves as an example of how contemporary athletes can and will leverage their resources to facilitate wider social change. Although the NBA walkout was not as deliberately planned as the

²²⁰ Neil Vigdor, “Jared Kushner: Real estate scion, says boycotting NBA players have the ‘luxury’ to ‘take a night off from work.’” *New York Times*, August 27, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/27/us/elections/jared-kushner-a-real-estate-scion-says-boycotting-nba-players-have-the-luxury-to-take-a-night-off-from-work.html> (Accessed: 8/2/22).

²²¹ Edwards, “The NBA Boycott and the Fifth Wave of Sports Activism.”

Missouri boycott, the players ultimately leveraged the potential losses that the NBA would accrue had the boycott continued. These losses were arguably greater given the bio-secure “bubble” that had cost the NBA up to \$190 million dollars to create so that the season could be finished amid the Covid-19 pandemic.²²² What the Missouri players discovered in 2015, and the NBA players found in 2020, is the power that they possess as the engine that drives a multi-billion dollar industry. NFL superstar Tom Brady’s agent Don Yee once stated, “what the players don’t realize is that they are the game, and when you are the game, you are everything.”²²³ This statement speaks to the power that athletes possess, and the 2020 boycott, just like the Missouri boycott witnessed athletes using the leverage provided by this power to push for social change in wider society.

The power potential outlined in this chapter is not possible without athletes displaying a united front. A key area of both boycotts outlined above is the solidarity of the protestors. This is not just in reference to the Bucks players choosing to join George Hill when he refused to play, but also the unity of the rest of the players in the bubble, as the entire league came to a standstill. Had Hill not been joined by his teammates it is likely that he would have been cast as a rebellious outlier, and his career could have suffered as a result. This is reflected in the treatment of previous athlete-activists who have stood alone and subsequently been portrayed as an isolated minority. The take knee movement for instance, was framed as “Kaepernick’s protest” to undermine the support he received from other athletes.²²⁴ The individual frame that the media deployed seriously damaged the public perception of the athletes, as they were cast as “rebellious outliers”.²²⁵ Furthermore, the solidarity of athletes who boycotted insulated them from the professional backlash that has plagued historic athlete-activists such as Hodges, Rose Robinson, and Kaepernick. This primarily stems from the fact that owners cannot remove their whole team for protesting.²²⁶ The solidarity of the boycott went beyond the NBA, in the aftermath of Jacob Blake’s shooting sports all around the world came to a halt, as athletes refused to offer a distraction from where international attention should be. Tennis superstar Naomi Osaka exemplified this by saying, “there are far more important matters at hand

²²² Reuters Staff, “NBA ‘Bubble’ Cost Over \$150 Million,” *Reuters*, July 1, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-basketball-nba-nba-bubble-cost-idUSKBN24275J> (Accessed: 7/9/21).

²²³ Bryant, *The Heritage*, 202.

²²⁴ Danielle Sarver Coombs, “Flag on the Play: Colin Kaepernick and the Protest Paradigm,” *Howard Journal of Communications* (2019): 325.

²²⁵ Sam Carp, “‘Our Voices Are Louder When We Stand Together’: How 2020 ushered in a new era of athlete-activism,” *Sports Pro Media*, January 22, 2021, <https://www.sportspromedia.com/from-the-magazine/athlete-activism-wnba-nneka-ogwumike-marcus-rashford-social-justice/> (Accessed: 5/6/22).

²²⁶ Davis, “No More Games.”

that need immediate attention, rather than watching me play tennis.”²²⁷ The solidarity of the 2020 boycott was a key component of its effectiveness in pushing towards wider social change.

Conclusion

The initial focus of this chapter looked to establish that despite efforts to distort its purpose, symbolic activism in sport is far more than “gesture politics”. By engaging in this form of activism, athletes are leveraging their influence in contemporary society to fuel national debates over racial inequality and challenge existing policies that contribute towards the existence of systemic racism. In 1992, Craig Hodges believed that power lay with the athletes and entertainers, in that era key figures such as Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson, and Charles Barkley did not use that power to uplift their community. Athletes today, however, have established themselves as key individuals in the contemporary struggle for racial equality. Figures such as Colin Kaepernick, George Hill, Gwen Berry, and many others, have shown that they will not stick to sports and will continue to use the platform provided by sport to shine a cultural spotlight on the continued existence of systemic racism.

But despite the significance of athletes leveraging the power of sport to facilitate wider social change, this type of activism has overshadowed other – equally important – areas of athlete-activism. In his criticism of the NBA boycott Jared Kushner stated, “I think we need to turn from slogans and signals to actual actions that will solve the problem.”²²⁸ Firstly, this quote does not understand the fact that no protest is ever just symbolic, and secondly, Kushner’s absence of knowledge on the other ways that athletes’ engage in activism speaks to the lack of coverage given to the multitude of ways that athletes are working to create progressive social change outside of the sporting arena. The following chapters will look to shed light on the vast infrastructure of athlete-activism that exists outside of the sporting arena. With a primary focus on the engagement of athletes at the grassroots level, and the role that athletes played in shaping the outcome of the 2020 U.S. election. Although athletes gain their fame, money, and power from their performances on the field, court, or track, their activism is not restricted to this space, and it is important to understand that there is a wide framework of athlete-activism that takes place outside of the sporting arena.

²²⁷ Tumaini Carayol, “Naomi Osaka Pulls Out of Western & Southern Semi in Protest at Racial Injustice,” *Guardian*, August 27, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2020/aug/26/naomi-osaka-beats-kontaveit-in-three-and-reaches-western-southern-semi> (Accessed: 6/2/22).

²²⁸ Vigdor, “Jared Kushner.”

Chapter 4: “What Was I Going to Kneel For Thirty More Years?”: Athletes Engaging in Community-Focused Grassroots Activism.

In September 2021, during his appearance on the *I Am Athlete* podcast, former NFL wide receiver Dez Bryant criticised Colin Kaepernick for not doing enough for the “people who stood beside

him...and the people he was standing up for.”²²⁹ As is suggested by Bryant’s comments, Kaepernick’s status as the figurehead of the take a knee movement has caused the full scope of his activism to be overlooked. Alongside his act of kneeling, Kaepernick has made considerable contributions to grassroots organizations in and around San Francisco. His self-expressed love for “the people” was reflected in his charitable donations to various local non-profits that worked at the grassroots level.²³⁰ His work in the local community did not end at charitable donations, in 2016 Kaepernick founded the Know Your Rights organization. Know Your Rights ran several camps that were part of a bigger mission to “advance the liberation of Black and Brown communities.”²³¹ Inspired by the Black Panther party’s 10 point program from the 1960s, Kaepernick devised a 10 point plan aimed at uplifting the local Black community, and through education, self-empowerment, and mass-mobilization, the camps sought to inspire the next generation of change leaders.²³² Grassroots activism has always been a key part of political organizing throughout the Black Freedom Struggle and has continued to play a crucial role in the contemporary Black Lives Matter era. But despite this importance, locally focused athlete-activism has largely been overshadowed by the symbolic activism outlined in the previous chapter – both in popular mediums and academia.²³³ The focus on grassroots activism looks to move the focus towards instances of athlete-activism that have not generated a major media community and illustrate how the symbolic activism of athletes such as Kaepernick is often accompanied by direct involvement in the community, thus furthering the argument that such protest movements in sport are rarely just symbolic. This chapter will begin to uncover the independent efforts of athletes to effect social change and establish that athletes are legitimate political actors rather than an attachment or addendum to the Black Lives Matter movement.

This chapter will move away from the focus on activism that takes place within the sporting arena to look at athletes who are simultaneously upholding the tradition of grassroots activism and re-imagining the approach in contemporary society. The first of these athletes will be NFL player Kenny Stills and his work against the systemic problem of police brutality in the city of Miami. Stills’ work

²²⁹ Dez Bryant, *I Am Athlete* (Podcast), September 27, 2021, <https://podcasts.google.com/feed/aHR0cHM6Ly9mZWVkcyc5zaW1wbGVjYXN0LmNvbS85cXU0TDhJcA/episode/QnV6enNwcm91dC05MjY1MTY1?hl=en-GB&ved=2ahUKEwiqzqqd46D4AhWXLXcAKHXDdCK0QjrkEegQIDRAF&ep=6> (Accessed: 30/9/21).

²³⁰ Greg Bishop & Ben Baskin, “What Colin Kaepernick’s Philanthropy Tells Us About His Vision for Social Change in America,” *Sports Illustrated*, December 6, 2017, <https://www.si.com/sportsperson/2017/12/06/colin-kaepernick-charity-giving-donations> (Accessed: 16/8/21).

²³¹ Know Your Rights, 2021, <https://www.knowyourrightscamp.com/> (Accessed: 14/8/21).

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Know Your Rights is mentioned in academic papers and gained some media coverage, but its significance is consistently understated.

focuses on improving relationships between local residents and police officers, specifically by working with local organizations. Then the focus will shift to WNBA player Natasha Cloud, and her work to reduce gun violence in Washington D.C. through applying pressure on local officials. Finally, the chapter will look at NBA superstar LeBron James and his “I Promise” initiative to discuss the way that he uses his substantial capital to challenge the inequality of the American public school system in the city of Akron, Ohio. These three select examples have been chosen to show the intersection between athletes and grassroots activism today, they are not intended to offer a comprehensive analysis of how community orientated activism has functioned throughout the entire Black Freedom Struggle. Before moving on to discuss these case studies, the chapter will outline how “grassroots activism” will be conceptualised for the purpose of this dissertation and discuss the significance of this form of activism in the context of the broader Black Freedom Struggle, including its central importance in the current Black Lives Matter moment.

The History of Grassroots Activism

In the context of the Black Freedom Struggle, Stephen Tuck described grassroots activism as being “less concerned with set-piece confrontations and the politics of symbolism and more concerned with longer-term efforts to improve the everyday lives of African Americans.”²³⁴ This definition encapsulates how this dissertation will also envision grassroots activism, especially the focus on improving the everyday lives of African Americans. This chapter will highlight two interrelated, but separate ideas on how grassroots activism can lead to change. This is not to say that there is a rift between local activists, but rather speaks to the belief that there are multiple ways that grassroots activism can be used to improve the lives of the African American community. Furthermore, it is worth noting at this point that the examples selected for this chapter do not provide a comprehensive analysis of how grassroots activists have operated in the Black Freedom Struggle but have been selected to highlight how athletes have become involved with this form of activism. The first area of this discussion will use Kwame Agyemang’s idea that athletes engage in this form of activism by “creating organizations or programs aimed at countering hegemonic norms or forces in society.”²³⁵ All the examples of grassroots activism that are included in this chapter aim to alleviate hegemonic norms or forces in local communities – specifically police brutality, gun violence, and educational inequality. The area of Agyemang’s statement that separates these differing areas of grassroots activism is how he envisions athletes countering these issues – the creation of organizations and programs, rather than relying on local government to implement these changes.

²³⁴ Tuck, *We Ain’t What We Ought To Be*, 395.

²³⁵ Agyemang et al., “Agitate! Agitate! Agitate!” 963.

This speaks to the socio-political awareness of athletes to recognise the issues that need to be addressed, as well as their willingness to actively involve themselves in the fight against these problems. This approach was evident in Kaepernick's Know Your Rights camps, Kaepernick sought to challenge hegemonic forces in society that disproportionately impact the Black community, this is shown in his camp's focus on the importance of higher education and interaction with law enforcement.

The second idea on how grassroots activism can lead to social change is that local activists are working to focus the attention of government officials on local issues and subsequently change will be created through the pressure that is applied on these politicians. This was exemplified in Todd C. Shaw's book *Now is the Time!* which focused on how local activism in the city of Detroit attempted to create progressive social change by applying pressure on public officials through grassroots activism. Shaw defined grassroots activism as "the broad repertoire of collective actions lower-income activists take to demand government accountability."²³⁶ This area of grassroots activism will be apparent in the case study of Natasha Cloud and her efforts to challenge gun violence in Washington D.C. This form of grassroots activism also targets hegemonic forces, however, the difference in approach places more pressure on local government to implement the change, as opposed to relying on initiatives and local organizations. These conceptualisations of grassroots activism are fundamentally connected by the belief that this type of activism is aimed at improving the everyday lives of people in the local community. In the broader discussion of racially conscious activism, community focused organizing is essential, not just because the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement is "fundamentally a grassroots organization" but also because of the relevance of this form of activism in the history of the Black Freedom Struggle.²³⁷

It is difficult, if not impossible to conceive of the Black Freedom Struggle without discussing the role of grassroots activism. Despite W.E.B. Du Bois' claim "that the Negro race...is going to be saved by its exceptional men," recent scholarship has challenged this leader-centric narrative of the civil rights movement as overlooking the contributions of local activists and small organizations, which "enabled the grand moments we associate with the civil rights era."²³⁸ The infrastructural importance of grassroots activism is mirrored in the structure of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP). Arguably the most prominent organisation throughout the long civil rights movement, the NAACP was dependent on field secretaries – members of the

²³⁶ Todd C. Shaw, *Now is the Time! Detroit Black Politics and Grassroots Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009): 2.

²³⁷ Cobb, "The Matter of Black Lives."

²³⁸ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Talented Tenth* (Amazon Digital Services, 2020): 1; Cobb, "The Matter of Black Lives."

organization who connected the main office to the local chapters – to maintain support for the broader Black Freedom Movement, both in an emotive sense and a pragmatic, financial sense.²³⁹ The NAACP co-ordinated a large number of local chapters that fought hard to pursue local campaigns that were effective because local organisers possessed a greater understanding of issues in their community. A number of key victories were won by local activists in the post-war era, this led historian David Garrow to argue that if we were to identify the individuals who achieved the most substantive accomplishments in this era of the civil rights movement “the vast majority of names will be ones that are unfamiliar to most readers.”²⁴⁰ The importance of grassroots activism in the classical civil rights era can be seen in the example of former NAACP field secretary Ella Baker. Baker would become one of the foremost advocates for the importance of grassroots activism, her philosophy centred on the belief that “effective leadership came from local people.”²⁴¹ This is evident in her relationship with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). During the classical civil rights era Baker acted as a senior advisor to SNCC and emphasized that part of the strategy of the organization was “to shift as much responsibility as soon as possible to local handling.”²⁴² The importance of grassroots activism is partly rooted in the belief that local people are more willing to organise if they recognise the problems as local issues that impact their everyday life, as Baker stated in 1960 “you must let the oppressed themselves define their own freedom.”²⁴³ In most cases this freedom was impeded by hegemonic oppression, therefore the community based organising inherent in Baker’s philosophy provided a framework to challenge these issues at the local level.

This focus on grassroots activism in the civil rights movement also reveals a connected history between athletes and community organizing. The relationship between athletes and grassroots activism has always existed, yet in the popular discussions of famous athlete-activists this is not apparent. Jackie Robinson was immortalised as the man who integrated professional sport in America, but a lesser heralded area of his activism was the Jackie Robinson Construction Company that was created to build homes for lower income minority families. Similarly, the majority of historic athlete-activists who were outlined in the first chapter of this dissertation were important figures at the grassroots level. Wilma Rudolph used her Olympic stardom to focus attention on

²³⁹ Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker, and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003): 9.

²⁴⁰ Charles M. Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996): 3.

²⁴¹ Tuck, *We Ain’t What We Ought To Be*, 230.

²⁴² Fairclough, *Better Day Coming*, 260.

²⁴³ J. Todd Moya, *Ella Baker: Community Organizer of the Civil Rights Movement* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2013): 3.

desegregating her home-town of Evansville, Tennessee, Rose Robinson's introduction to activism was her work to desegregate local skating rinks in Cleveland and Arthur Ashe became involved in activism through translating his tennis skills, and the socio-economic opportunities they afforded him into community involvement. Numerous other athletes such as Bill Russell of the Boston Celtics used their involvement with the local chapters of the NAACP to work towards local change in their communities. The case studies that will be used throughout the rest of this chapter will highlight the continued tradition of athletes engaging in community focused activism, whilst also outlining how this tradition is being re-imagined in contemporary society.

The focus on grassroots athlete-activism is increasingly relevant given the role of community activism in the present day Black freedom struggle. Contemporary Black Lives Matter activists advocate towards a "horizontal ethic of organizing, which favours democratic inclusion at the grassroots level."²⁴⁴ This community orientated approach of BLM activists mirrors Ella Baker's philosophy for the Black Freedom Movement, "there is a preference for ten thousand candles rather than a single spotlight."²⁴⁵ The following case studies will look to affirm that community focused athlete-activists are mirroring the broader grassroots strategies of the Black Lives Matter movement, but are also working independently to challenge racial inequality.

The actions of these athletes illustrate the change in how rich, famous athletes are using their wealth and influence to help their local communities. This is a marked contrast to the example of Michael Jordan that was outlined in chapter 2. In 1996, Douglas Hartmann stated, "athletes who benefit from social arrangements are frequently unwilling to part with their privilege and status."²⁴⁶ As was outlined in the second chapter, Jordan's lack of public support for the African-American community epitomised this belief. In the late 1980s and 1990s athletes witnessed their pay-checks, presence in popular media, and status as "Hollywood-style superstars" balloon as sport became the cultural phenomenon it is today. At the time this was accompanied by an expectation that athletes would avoid politically controversial topics – the consequence of which was seen in the career of Craig Hodges. The way that athletes are using this same wealth and influence today to facilitate progressive social change reinforces the argument that the economic expansion of sport in the late twentieth century helped to create the conditions for contemporary athlete-activism. This generational shift is highlighted in an anecdote mentioned earlier in the dissertation; when Craig Hodges presented the idea of using his, and his teammates combined wealth to help the Black

²⁴⁴ Cobb, "The Matter of Black Lives."

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ George B. Cunningham et al., "A Site to Resist and Persist: Diversity, Social Justice, and the Unique Nature of Sport," *Journal of Global Sport Management* vol. 6, no. 1 (2019): 34.

community and he was dismissed by his teammates with the response, “I gotta talk to my guy first.”²⁴⁷ A large number of athletes today have shown themselves to be willing to engage in the community focused activism proffered by Hodges, thus moving further away from Hartmann’s outlook on athletes from 1996. The rest of the chapter will focus on the case studies of athletes who embodied Craig Hodges’ belief that they could use their wealth and influence to uplift their local communities, starting with NFL wide receiver Kenny Stills and his work to challenge police brutality in his professional cities of Miami and Houston.

Kenny Stills: Improving the Lives of Black Communities Through Local Initiatives and Organizations

Kenny Stills, like many other contemporary athletes credits his involvement in socially conscious activism to the inspiration of Colin Kaepernick and his decision to kneel during the national anthem. During the 2016 NFL season, Stills joined the take a knee movement to protest police brutality and racial injustice. The protest helped Stills realise the power that he possessed because of his platform, but he always felt that his activism had to go beyond his symbolic protest, “there’s so much more I want to do...I want to help bring people together.”²⁴⁸ Stills’ vision for bringing people together saw him go into his community to improve relationships between the police and the local Black population in the city of Miami. To help achieve this vision he founded a Miami chapter of the “OK Program”, an initiative aimed at connecting young Black men with police officers. Improving these interpersonal relationships further reflected the belief that societal change goes beyond legal reform – legal changes may outlaw police brutality, but they will not help to improve relationships, which remain problematic. Stills exemplified the idea that grassroots activism works to improve the everyday lives of the community through initiatives and local organizations, rather than politicians and the government. He is an excellent example of how athletes are using their fame and influence to work alongside local activists in creating positive social change at the grassroots level.

The focus on Kenny Stills begins on an evening in late November 2018, two years after he first knelt during the anthem. Along with three of his Miami teammates, Stills visited the Centre Court Apartment complex in North Miami with half a dozen police officers to create a positive interaction between local law enforcement and the Black community.²⁴⁹ The officers and Dolphins players handed out drinks, took photos, and played football with the residents. The meet-up was a complete

²⁴⁷ Hodges, *Long Shot*, 160.

²⁴⁸ Jason Reid, “Dolphins’ Kenny Stills: ‘We have to get people to understand what racism is,’” *Undefeated*, October 6, 2017, <https://theundefeated.com/features/dolphins-kenny-stills-we-have-to-get-people-to-understand-what-racism-is/> (Accessed: 19/8/21).

²⁴⁹ Cameron Wolfe, “Kenny Stills’ Activism is Not for Show,” *Undefeated*, January 11, 2019, <https://theundefeated.com/features/kenny-stills-activism-isnt-for-show/> (Accessed: 4/5/21).

success and helped improve the perception of the police for the Centre Court residents, one of the police officers remarked on the importance of such an event, “If you’re respecting people, it can eliminate fear. It’s a two-way street.”²⁵⁰ This encapsulates Stills’ ideology in promoting these events; to improve the relationship between the police and the local Black community, “If we can have good relationships with law enforcement, we can change perspectives.”²⁵¹ Furthermore, Stills’ role in founding a Miami branch of the OK program, a non-profit initiative that connects young Black men with Black police officers continues the focus on improving the local relationship between law enforcement and the young Black population, in a grassroots effort to challenge police brutality. This reinforces Stills’ focus on changing perspectives in his local community, “if you can change ideas, or just get people to be more comfortable around each other, that’s real progress.”²⁵² This perspective further illustrates the socio-political awareness of athletes like Stills, he recognises that legal reform cannot change the fundamental relationship between police officers and the community, therefore improving these relationships functions as an important part of challenging the presence of police brutality in Black communities – even if it does not explicitly lead to political reform.

These actions may not attempt to polarize opinion in the way that the take a knee movement did, but the palatability of Stills’ activism, and his willingness to work with philanthropic initiatives such as the RISE foundation should not detract from the political significance of his activism. Alongside the importance of his symbolic activism, Stills’ grassroots work impacts tangible change in his local community whilst maintaining a focus on challenging police brutality. This reflects the idea that the different approaches to activism being used by professional athletes are ultimately working towards the same goals. Furthermore, the difference in approach highlights the nuances of different forms of athlete-activism. Stills’ decision to kneel during the national anthem sought to use the popular exposure of sport to challenge police brutality, whereas his community-focused actions largely avoided this media attention to promote the authenticity of the event. The response of local Miami activist Luther Campbell reflects the belief that Stills’ activism is better received because of the lack of attention it garners, “He comes by with no cameras, no Instagram pictures...he’s genuine. Because of that, I respect everything he does.”²⁵³ This is not to say that the take a knee movement was not genuine, nor does it mean that grassroots activism does not need exposure, it shows the broader point that some areas of contemporary activism can, and do operate outside of the cultural

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Reid, “Dolphins’ Kenny Stills.”

²⁵³ Wolfe, “Kenny Stills’ Activism is Not for Show.”

spotlight, but this lack of attention does not take away from the importance of these forms of activism.

In an interview with ESPN journalist Cameron Wolfe in 2020, Stills outlined his “action plan for real change.”²⁵⁴ The plan focused on “connecting with local activists in every NFL city throughout the season to amplify the work they are doing.”²⁵⁵ Rather than enter each individual city with an NFL mandated plan of action, Stills’ goal is to promote existing, independent activist frameworks and amplify their work – whilst maintaining a degree of separation from the NFL. This action plan is important in the wider discussion of athlete-activism because it reflects the grassroots philosophies of historic activists such as Ella Baker and the horizontal organization of Black Lives Matter activists. In the classical civil rights era, Baker and SNCC saw their principal role as “helping local people help themselves.”²⁵⁶ This premise is replicated in Stills’ statement, “there is a need to recognise leaders outside of major organizations and understand that these leaders are the ones driving their communities towards prosperity.”²⁵⁷ This statement highlights the grassroots philosophy that change comes from the work of local activists rather than a singular organization, or the involvement of government officials. Stills reinforced his viewpoint in 2020 when he stated, “we have to understand what the next steps are and realize it’s not going to come from politicians. It’s going to come from local activists and organizers.”²⁵⁸ However, this argument contrasts with the ideology of other grassroots activists who deliberately attempt to put pressure on local government to improve the everyday lives of their local community. The following case study of Natasha Cloud, and her activism aimed at gun reform in Washington D.C. will look at the ways that athletes are engaging in grassroots activism aimed at pressuring local officials into implementing progressive social change.

Natasha Cloud: Grassroots Pressure on Local Officials

Just like Kenny Stills, Natasha Cloud’s activist awakening occurred in 2016, when her WNBA team, the Washington Mystics decided to wear “Black Lives Matter” t-shirts despite the announcement that the league office would fine players for doing so. “That was the first moment I realized, oh,

²⁵⁴ Cameron Wolfe, “Texans’ Receiver Kenny Stills Talks Activism, Arrest, and Real Change,” *ESPN*, September 6, 2020, https://www.espn.co.uk/nfl/story/_/id/29808039/texans-receiver-kenny-stills-talks-activism-arrest-real-change (Accessed: 4/5/21).

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁶ Fairclough, *Better Day Coming*, 260.

²⁵⁷ Sean Watterson, “Kenny Stills Makes a Social Justice Journey in the South,” *Non-Profit Quarterly*, March 16, 2018, <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/kenny-stills-makes-social-justice-journey-south/> (Accessed: 4/5/21).

²⁵⁸ Wolfe, “Texans’ Receiver Kenny Stills Talks Activism, Arrest, and Real Change.”

what we do has impact” Cloud told the *Washington Post*.²⁵⁹ Since 2016, the Mystics point guard has become a foremost advocate for social reform in Washington D.C., rather than playing overseas in the offseason – as most players do due to the lack of income compared to their male counterparts – Cloud used this time to invest in her community. The discussion of her approach to activism seeks to illustrate how grassroots athlete-activists apply pressure on local government officials to lobby for social reform, which will lead to positive change in the local community.²⁶⁰ This differs from the previous discussion of Stills, as he avoided the involvement of politicians in favour of the work of local organizations and initiatives. Both of these activists are ultimately working towards the same goal of improving the everyday lives of their communities, however, their difference in approach speaks to the nuances of athlete-led grassroots activism.

Despite the plethora of issues that Cloud has fought against during her activist career in the D.C. area, the focus of this case study will be her endeavour to implement gun reform in the nation’s capital. Cloud’s attention was focused on the problem of gun violence in Washington in June 2019 on a visit to Hendley elementary school, when she learned that the school had been hit three times by stray bullets in the last month.²⁶¹ “It was an ‘a-ha’ moment for her,” said Mystics coach David Thibault, “she took on gun violence as her first major cause to stand up for in D.C.”²⁶² Immediately after the visit, Cloud posted a video on Instagram saying, “Trayon (White) – D.C. council member for Hendley’s district – I’m calling you out. A bullet went through the window of Hendley elementary school today, in fact it’s the third bullet this month. And nothing is being done.”²⁶³ Despite appealing to White and later Washington mayor Muriel Bowser, there was no official response to Cloud’s statement, therefore after the Mystics game against the Seattle Storm the following day, the team held a media blackout led by Cloud, in which the players would only discuss the problem of gun

²⁵⁹ Justin Wm. Moyer, Ava Wallace, & Perry Stein, “Mystics Player Says She Will Only Publicly Talk About Gunfire Incident at a D.C. School Until She Sees Action,” *Washington Post*, June 14, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/washington-mystics-player-vows-a-media-blackout-after-gunfire-at-dc-school/2019/06/14/bb12ad8a-8eb2-11e9-adce-5d4d3eeb38ec_story.html (Accessed: 9/2/21).

²⁶⁰ Cloud is not solely involved in activism that pressures local officials; this is merely the focus for this section.

²⁶¹ Moyer, Wallace, and Stein, “Mystics Player Says She Will Only Publicly Talk About a Gunfire Incident at a D.C. School Until She Sees Action.”

²⁶² Aaron Dodson, “Why Natasha Cloud Decided to opt Out of the 2020 WNBA Season,” *Undeclared*, July 24, 2020, <https://theundefeated.com/features/why-natasha-cloud-decided-to-opt-out-of-the-2020-wnba-season/> (Accessed: 10/8/21).

²⁶³ Mike Wise, “How Washington Mystics Point Guard Natasha Cloud Became the WNBA’s Unofficial Minister of Social Justice,” *Washingtonian*, July 8, 2021, <https://www.washingtonian.com/2021/07/08/how-washington-mystics-point-guard-natasha-cloud-became-the-wnbas-unofficial-minister-of-social-justice/> (Accessed: 12/8/22).

violence in the city of Washington, “we will only discuss this topic until it’s fixed.”²⁶⁴ The players announced that the blackout would continue until they were approached “with a solution, or a sit-down for a solution.”²⁶⁵ The media blackout provoked by the gun shots that hit Hendley elementary school illustrated how Cloud – with the support of her teammates – used her platform as a professional athlete to apply pressure on local government officials to act on the issue of gun violence. The inclusion of “or a sit-down for a solution,” in the team’s statement further speaks to the willingness of athletes to engage in local politics that will benefit the community. Following the Mystics’ media blackout, Councilman White has been in contact with local police in Hendley’s district to discuss how they can prevent further shootings in the area surrounding the school.²⁶⁶ This suggests that the pressure from the Mystics players effectively pushed local officials towards making a change.

Despite gun reform being the key issue that Cloud has devoted her attention towards, in the summer of 2020, the Mystics point guard played a prominent role in the Black Lives Matter protests in Washington D.C. In June, Cloud, along with Washington Wizards All-Star Bradley Beal, led a march through the streets of Washington to protest police brutality under the banner of Black Lives Matter. The march, which was organised by the athletes, speaks to the power that these individuals possess in their community, and further highlights their desire to keep pressure on political leaders. After the protest Beal said, “It’s time we hold everyone accountable...Everybody who deems themselves enforcers of the law have to be held accountable.”²⁶⁷ Although the march was part of a national framework of activism, it represented the power of athletes in organizing within their local communities and illustrated the strategy of applying pressure onto politicians through locally focused activism. Additionally, in the summer of 2020 Cloud’s decision to forego the playoffs of the WNBA season which, like the NBA, were scheduled to take place in a bio-secure bubble, exemplified her dedication to social justice. “There is so much momentum behind Black Lives Matter...So you have to capitalise on that. Going into the bubble, being off front lines, that’s not capitalising.”²⁶⁸ Her

²⁶⁴ Moyer, Wallace, and Stein, “Mystics Player Says She Will Only Publicly Talk About a Gunfire Incident at a D.C. School Until She Sees Action.”

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Natalie Delgadillo, “The Mystics’ Natasha Cloud Organizes Media Blackout to Call Attention to Gun Violence at Southeast Elementary School,” *Dcist*, June 14, 2019, <https://dcist.com/story/19/06/14/the-mystics-natasha-cloud-organizes-media-blackout-to-call-attention-to-gun-violence-at-southeast-elementary-school/> (Accessed: 12/8/21).

²⁶⁷ Jerry Bembry, “‘Together We Stand’: Bradley Beal and Natasha Cloud lead march in Washington,” *Undefeated*, June 19, 2020, <https://theundefeated.com/features/bradley-beal-natasha-cloud-lead-march-in-washington/> (Accessed: 12/8/21).

²⁶⁸ Dodson, “Why Natasha Cloud Decided to opt Out of the 2020 WNBA Season.”

decision to dedicate her time to social justice reform speaks to her authenticity as an activist and reinforces the legitimacy of athletes as independent political actors.

The discussion of Natasha Cloud's grassroots activism represented the second of the two approaches to community-based activism that were outlined earlier in the chapter. Specifically, the way that athletes leverage their influence to apply pressure on government officials with the aim of creating progressive social reform in their local communities. Despite the difference in approach between Stills and Cloud, both athletes demonstrate an awareness of the power and influence that they possess to facilitate change in their communities. Similarly, both athletes recognise that their value in their cities is more than what they achieve on the court or on the field. This belief is crucial in understanding the importance of athletes engaging in grassroots activism. However, neither of these athletes have developed a greater attachment to their city than the athlete who the next case study will focus on, LeBron James and his home town of Akron, Ohio.

LeBron James: Economically Sourced Community Uplift Activism

As a player, LeBron James has endured Michael Jordan comparisons since he was in high-school, throughout his career the debate has raged as to which of the two is the "GOAT" (the Greatest of All Time). Their similarities do not end on the court either, in 2021 James became the second Black athlete to accrue a billion dollars in career earnings – Jordan was the first.²⁶⁹ However, aside from their athletic feats, and their vast wealth, James has proven to be completely different to Jordan in his pursuit of social justice – the 2008 Olympics notwithstanding.²⁷⁰ Since 2012, he has become one of the leading voices for social activism in American sport, from protesting against police brutality, continually denouncing the Presidency of Donald J. Trump and finally, his role in the More Than a Vote organization – which will be a focal point in the following chapter. This case study introduces a third example of how athletes are engaging in community orientated activism, using economic investments to improve the everyday lives of poor, struggling communities in a way that goes beyond "check-book activism" – "writing a check and hanging out behind the velvet rope."²⁷¹ James' approach is in stark contrast to Jordan's refusal to lobby Nike to create more jobs in local Black communities in America, there were a variety of reasons for this decision, but nonetheless, Jordan's

²⁶⁹ Weston Blasi, "LeBron James' Off-court Earnings are Actually Higher Than His Earnings from the NBA," *Market Watch*, July 26, 2021, <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/lebron-james-has-earned-1-billion-the-first-u-s-team-sport-athlete-to-do-it-while-still-active-11627064527> (Accessed: 9/9/21).

²⁷⁰ At the 2008 Beijing Olympics James stated, "sport and politics just don't match" in reference to the Chinese human rights violations in Darfur.

²⁷¹ Bryant, *The Heritage*, 19.

apathetic response of “I’m not in a position to do that,” speaks to the difference in attitude between the two superstar athletes and further illustrates the shift from the 1990s to today.²⁷²

After winning the NBA championship in 2016, James announced to the world, “I’m not even supposed to be here, I’m just a kid from Akron.”²⁷³ This emotional outburst after the game alluded to James’ recognition of how different his life could have been.²⁷⁴ As a child who grew up with a poor, single mother, James struggled with poverty in Akron and in the fourth grade he was considered an “at-risk” student after missing 83 days of school.²⁷⁵ However, James found himself well supported by coaches who recognised his athletic potential; he is fully aware of the fact that if not for his athletic gifts, he probably would have fallen through the gaping holes in the Akron education system.²⁷⁶ Following his emergence as one of the signature athletes of this generation, James has focused heavily on improving the lives of the local population in Akron, with a specific emphasis on the education system. This began back in 2005 when James founded the LeBron James Family Foundation with the goal of investing resources, time, and attention on children from Akron.²⁷⁷ In 2014, James announced that the foundation was investing \$41 million to provide scholarships to local children at the University of Akron, this marked the beginning of the “I Promise” initiative, which was launched with the goal of improving the graduation rates in Akron public schools.²⁷⁸ In 2018, the initiative worked with the local school board to open the I Promise school, a public school aimed at helping children that, like James, were identified as “at risk” and likely to drop out before graduating. James’ involvement in the local community outlines an extension of Kwame Agyemang’s definition of grassroots activism; athletes working with – or in this case founding –

²⁷² Hodges, *Long Shot*, 124.

²⁷³ Stephen Douglas, “LeBron James’ NBA Finals MVP Speech: ‘I’m not even supposed to be here,’” *The Big Lead*, June 21, 2013, <https://www.thebiglead.com/posts/lebron-james-nba-finals-mvp-speech-i-m-not-even-supposed-to-be-here-01dxk0rrx573> (Accessed: 28/9/21).

²⁷⁴ Akron holds a 23.5% poverty rate, over double the U.S. average of 10.5%

²⁷⁵ Erica L. Green, “LeBron James Opened a School That Was Considered an Experiment. It’s Showing Promise,” *New York Times*, April 12, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/12/education/lebron-james-school-ohio.html> (Accessed: 4/8/21).

²⁷⁶ Jesse Washington, “LeBron’s New Documentary Tells the Story of His I Promise School in Akron,” *Undefeated*, April 6, 2020, <https://theundefeated.com/features/lebrons-new-documentary-tells-the-story-of-his-i-promise-school-in-akron/> (Accessed: 20/8/21).

²⁷⁷ LeBron James Family Foundation, 2021, <https://www.lebronjamesfamilyfoundation.org/> (Accessed: 17/8/21).

²⁷⁸ Jennifer Pignolet, “‘The Best Decision’ LeBron James Ever Made: I Promise inaugural class graduates high school,” *Akron Beacon Journal*, 2020, <https://eu.beaconjournal.com/story/news/2021/06/02/akron-schools-kids-lebron-james-i-promise-program-graduate-look-future-class-2021-graduation-rate/5189153001/> (Accessed: 12/9/21).

initiatives that confront systemic problems in their community, which in this case was educational inequality.

This personal connection to the problem of educational inequality separates James' investment into his community from examples of corporate initiatives that operate in a similar way.²⁷⁹ His involvement is connected to his desire to help children who face similar problems to him, rather than boosting his brand or appearing socially conscious. On the surface James' involvement in his local community can be perceived as a philanthropic investment. Philanthropy is defined in the Oxford dictionary as "the desire to promote the welfare of others, expressed especially by the generous donation of money to good causes." However, the implication that James' involvement in his local community is merely "a generous donation" overlooks the wider importance of the initiative in challenging hegemonic forces that are negatively impacting the Akron community, specifically in relation to the public school system. The broader goal of the initiative was to build a schooling system that would "create a new model for urban public education."²⁸⁰ Whilst it may be far-fetched to believe that the I Promise school could revolutionise the whole public education system, the apparent success of the initiative supports the argument that James' foundation is positively improving the everyday lives of the Akron community, therefore despite the philanthropic roots of the initiative, I Promise fits within the conceptualisation of grassroots activism.²⁸¹

James' role in creating the I Promise school is not entirely unprecedented, numerous other influential celebrities have been involved in the creation of schools. One such example being Will and Jada Pinkett Smith's founding of the New Village Academy in Los Angeles in 2008. However, unlike the Smiths' private academy, I Promise is not a charter school that can "select and reject students based on income or ability."²⁸² In fact, I Promise actively looked to enrol children who were struggling financially and academically. Whilst the district funds the school, James' foundation provides the financial support for teaching staff, after-school programs, and tutors, all of which are part of the formula that separates I Promise from other public schools. What also separates I Promise is the supportive infrastructure that the school has created for the families of the pupils. James provides resources to help parents with health and legal services, as well as supporting them to finish their education as adults. Furthermore, the school has a variety of supportive measures for parents who are struggling to provide for their children – such as clothes and food.²⁸³ This speaks to

²⁷⁹ For instance, the NFL's focus on education inequality as part of their "Inspire Change" initiative.

²⁸⁰ LeBron James Family Foundation Website, 2021, <https://www.lebronjamesfamilyfoundation.org/> (Accessed: 17/8/21).

²⁸¹ Green, "LeBron James Opened a School That Was Considered an Experiment."

²⁸² Washington, "LeBron's New Documentary Tells the Story of his I Promise School in Akron."

²⁸³ Green, "LeBron James Opened a School That Was Considered an Experiment."

the wider importance of the school in helping to improve the situation of the wider community in Akron. The supportive framework offered by the I Promise initiative demonstrates how it uplifts the wider population in Akron, and therefore is more than a philanthropic venture.

The I Promise initiative itself is not explicitly political, nor is it an advocacy to change the existent systems of power, in this sense it may not fit within some definitions of grassroots activism. However, the I Promise initiative presents a pragmatic intervention that aims to improve the everyday lives of the local community in Akron. In this sense, James' involvement in his local community demonstrates how athletes today are using their substantial wealth to overcome hegemonic issues, which despite not being explicitly political still fits within this dissertation's conceptualisation of grassroots activism. Although James did not personally finance the entire school, he provided significant resources that have changed the lives of over a thousand children in Akron. Athletes today are using their economic power to give back to their communities, and improve the lives of poor, impoverished citizens through investing in ventures that, like I Promise, resemble philanthropy but also represent grassroots attempts to disrupt hegemonic inequality. Whilst this concept is not new – Craig Hodges was a keen advocate for such measures in the late twentieth century – the unprecedented amount of financial capital possessed by athletes today has re-imagined the possibilities of this form of grassroots activism.

Conclusion

In February 2021, Crystal Dunn and the U.S. Women's National Soccer team stood for the national anthem, it was the first time since 2016 that the team stood together in unison. When asked about the decision to stand Dunn replied, "what, was I going to kneel for thirty more years?"²⁸⁴ Dunn believed that the focus on athlete-activism should shift towards "the work that we are doing behind the scenes...we're past the point of bringing awareness. Now people need to be acting."²⁸⁵ This belief reinforces the fact that athlete-activism goes beyond the popular demonstrations that dominate the media attention, and further alludes to the way that symbolic activism and subsequent criticisms of "gesture politics" or "grandstanding" can delegitimise athletes as political actors and divert attention away from the infrastructure of athlete-activism that exists outside of the cultural spotlight. The historic examples of athletes such as Jackie Robinson, Wilma Rudolph, and Bill Russell highlighted the long tradition of grassroots activism amongst Black athletes. The case studies of Stills, Cloud, and James in this chapter illustrated how athletes are using their expanded media

²⁸⁴ Rhia Chohan & Simon Stone, "Racism in Football: 'Was I going to kneel for thirty more years?' – Crystal Dunn," *BBC*, March 30, 2021,

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/56565873> (Accessed: 5/9/21).

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

presence, wealth, and cultural influence to simultaneously uphold and re-imagine this historical tradition of community-based organising. This echoes Amira Rose Davis' claim that contemporary athlete-activism is "reminiscent of earlier activism and unlike anything that we have ever seen."²⁸⁶

As well as upholding the tradition of community based organising, athletes are also continuing the practice of ballot-orientated activism that has been present throughout the Black Freedom Struggle in the 20th – and into the 21st – century. The following chapter will use the 2020 U.S. election as a case study to explore how contemporary athlete-activists used their power to protect the right to vote in minority communities and shaped the electoral discourse of important political races – such as the Georgia Senate race. In a climate that has witnessed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 face increasing levels of legal scrutiny and the Presidency of Donald Trump on the cusp of achieving a second term, the 2020 election was a pivotal moment for voting rights activists. Athletes used this moment to demonstrate their significance in the arena of electoral politics.

²⁸⁶ Davis, "No More Games."

Chapter 5: “We have a responsibility to take those protests and take that energy and march all the way to the polls”: Athletes, Electoral Politics, and the 2020 U.S. Election

“It is not enough to shout defiant words or to raise Black-gloved fists. The battle must be carried to the ballot box, where this country’s most vital races are won and lost.” – Claude Harrison Jr., *Philadelphia Tribune*, 1968.²⁸⁷

In his coverage of the 1968 Olympic protest by Tommie Smith and John Carlos, Harrison made this statement and despite them being over 50 years old his words capture the climate of athlete-activism today. In the second half of 2020, as symbolic activism accrued a consistent presence at sporting events, athletes turned their attention towards the ballot to build on the protests that had engrossed the nation throughout April, May, and June. WNBA player Renee Montgomery mirrored the rhetoric of Harrison when she stated, “We can’t just protest. We have a responsibility to take those protests and take that energy and march all the way to the polls.”²⁸⁸ Athletes’ engagement with electoral politics also mirrored the work of contemporary Black activists such as Stacey Abrams, a one-time Gubernatorial candidate who has since become a leading voice for minority voting rights in America. In the build up to the 2020 election, Abrams worked with her voting rights organization “Fair Fight” to register up to 800,000 voters in the state of Georgia – a swing state that was crucial for the Democrats in the election. Furthermore, in an article for the *New York Times* Abrams implored African Americans to “vote, because we deserve leaders who see us, who hear us and who are willing to act on our demands.”²⁸⁹

The work of activists such as Abrams symbolised two key themes in the 2020 election. Firstly, her work with the “Fair Fight” organization illustrated the fight against voter suppression that has been increasingly prevalent in the aftermath of the Supreme Court’s *Shelby County vs. Holder* ruling in 2013 that gutted key sections of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, a key piece of legislation that had protected minority voters since the 1960s. Secondly, Abrams’ rhetoric in her article speaks to the importance of the 2020 election as “one of the most important of our generation.”²⁹⁰ Some Black activists – and athletes – view electoral politics as limited, in 2016 Colin Kaepernick denounced

²⁸⁷ Moore, *We Will Win the Day*, 183.

²⁸⁸ Astead W. Herndon, “LeBron James and a Multimillion-Dollar Push for More Poll Workers,” *New York Times*, April 24, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/24/us/politics/lebron-james-poll-workers.html> (Accessed: 15/9/21).

²⁸⁹ Stacey Abrams, “I Know Voting Feels Inadequate Right Now,” *New York Times*, June 4, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/04/opinion/stacey-abrams-voting-floyd-protests.html> (Accessed: 19/9/21).

²⁹⁰ Edward-Isaac Dove, “Why 2020 is the Most Consequential Election Ever,” *Atlantic*, May 17, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/membership/archive/2019/05/why-2020-most-consequential-election-ever/589732/> (Accessed: 5/10/21).

voting, “To me, the oppressor isn’t going to allow you to vote your way out of oppression.”²⁹¹

Additionally, activist Derecka Purnell stated “Voting didn’t stop the police killings...The solutions don’t match the problems.”²⁹² These comments illuminate a scepticism amongst some activists that the vote is an ineffective solution, but, in the context of the 2020 election, bringing an end to the Presidency of Donald Trump and his white nationalist agenda was widely viewed as a necessity to improve American race relations. Athlete-activism during the election embodied these two themes as athletes worked to ensure free and equal access to the vote in spite of attempts at voter suppression and also used their platform to endorse candidates who “see us, hear us, and are willing to act on our demands.”²⁹³

This chapter will use the 2020 U.S. election as a case study to outline two prominent areas of athlete-led engagement in electoral politics. Firstly, the focus will be placed on the work of the More Than a Vote organization in challenging contemporary efforts at voter suppression and highlight how the organization sought to preserve the right to democracy amongst the Black community in the election. This theme is particularly important in post-Shelby County America as right-wing attacks on the voting rights act have expanded the necessity of voting rights activism.

Secondly, the chapter will look at how athletes shaped the electoral discourse by endorsing candidates who would be most beneficial to the Black community. This will use the WNBA’s #VoteWarnock campaign that saw Reverend Raphael Warnock gain the Georgia Senate seat over the incumbent Kelly Loeffler – an avid Trump supporter and Atlanta Dream co-owner. Following these case studies, the focus will be placed on the aftermath of the 2020 election – particularly the voter suppression laws that were passed by southern state legislators – to show that athletes’ involvement in electoral politics was not restricted to the build-up of the election but has established a framework that will be influential in electoral politics for the indefinite future. These case studies are intended to highlight how athletes can use their cultural influence to shape the national political agenda in a way that reaches far beyond the criticisms of “gesture politics”. This will continue to highlight the vast infrastructure and importance of contemporary athlete-activism that can be obscured by more controversial acts of political resistance.

²⁹¹ Nick Wagoner, “Colin Kaepernick on Sitting Out Election: ‘It would be hypocritical for me to vote,’” *ESPN*, November 14, 2016, https://www.espn.com/blog/nflnation/post/_id/221299/colin-kaepernick-on-sitting-out-election-it-would-be-hypocritical-for-me-to-vote (Accessed: 19/10/21).

²⁹² Derecka Purnell, Twitter post, April 12, 2021, 3:43pm., <https://twitter.com/dereckapurnell/status/1381618884101476352> (Accessed: 10/9/21).

²⁹³ Abrams, “I Know Voting Feels Inadequate Right Now.”

The work of activist groups such as Fair Fight, More Than a Vote, and the WNBA players involved in the #VoteWarnock campaign continued a long tradition of activism orientated towards the ballot. The freedom to vote has always been a critical point of emphasis amongst Black activists and the work of contemporary athletes in this arena illustrated a continuance from the historical Black Freedom Movement to today. Furthermore, the case studies included in this chapter will highlight the ways that athletes are leveraging their exposure and influence afforded by their celebrity to implement pragmatic solutions that protected minorities who have seen their right to vote be restricted since 2013. This marked a clear difference from athletes in the 1990s who minimised their involvement in electoral politics to protect their commercial interests – “Republicans buy shoes too”. The next phase of the chapter will look to unpack the historical importance of ballot orientated activism and simultaneously showcase how the issues athletes are working against today are embodied in a long, contested history of African American voting rights.

The History of Voting Rights Activism in the Black Freedom Struggle

The Fifteenth Amendment marked the beginning of Black suffrage in America, when it was ratified in 1870 the Amendment prohibited states from denying citizens the right to vote “on account of race, colour, or previous conditions of servitude.”²⁹⁴ As is suggested by the creation of the Fifteenth Amendment, Black suffrage took centre stage in the era of Reconstruction. Prominent Black activists such as Frederick Douglass used the new language of “equality” and “freedom” as an appeal to African American voting rights, “Here, where universal suffrage is the fundamental idea of the government, to rule us out is to make us an exception, to brand us with the stigma of inferiority.”²⁹⁵ In the aftermath of the Civil War it was the work of activists like Douglass who lobbied the government to pass the Fifteenth Amendment and enfranchise Black Americans. However, the eventual right for suffrage did not open the doors of democracy for African American voters, there was significant opposition from white supremacists who used whatever means necessary to make voting as difficult as possible. This manifested itself in overt displays of violence intended to intimidate minority voters, as well as political devices that were “soaked in racially neutral justifications to cover the discriminatory intent.”²⁹⁶ This included measures such as property ownership, poll taxes, and literacy tests that were all designed to block non-white voters. Black disenfranchisement was made official in 1890 when Southern state constitution conventions

²⁹⁴ U.S. Constitution, Amendment XV.

²⁹⁵ Eric Foner, “Rights and the Constitution in Black Life During the Civil War and Reconstruction,” *The Constitution and American Life: A Special Issue* vol. 74 no. 3 (1987): 873.

²⁹⁶ Carol Anderson, *One Person, No Vote: How Voter Suppression is Destroying Our Democracy* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018): 14.

followed the lead of the Mississippi government in “establishing Jim Crow in the south.”²⁹⁷ The influence of Jim Crow laws on Black political participation can be seen in the reduction of registered Black voters in the 1890s, in Louisiana the number of Black voters decreased from 130,000 in 1896 to 5000 in 1900.²⁹⁸ Contrary to the protections offered by the Fifteenth Amendment, African Americans were largely disenfranchised at the beginning of the twentieth century.

In the face of repressive voting laws Black activists fought to regain their right to inclusion in American democracy. The new century witnessed an emergent spirit in the Black community to regain their voting rights. This spirit was witnessed in the work of W.E.B. Du Bois, “may the conscience of a great nation rise and rebuke all dishonesty and unrighteous oppression toward the American Negro and grant him the right of franchise and security of person and property.”²⁹⁹ In 1910 Du Bois became a founding member of the National Association of Coloured People (NAACP) which quickly became a major body in challenging the political exclusion of African Americans. In the pre-second world war era, activists in the NAACP launched several challenges against disenfranchisement, these battles largely took place within the court room with challenges to anti-voting measures such as white primaries and the grandfather clause.³⁰⁰ It was not until 1944, with the *Smith vs. Allwright* ruling, that the Supreme Court ruled White Primaries unconstitutional. In the aftermath of this decision Black activists mobilized to boost Black voters, this led to a surge in voter registration – from 150,000 in 1940 to 595,000 in 1947 in Southern states.³⁰¹ After the Second World War ended, African Americans used the hypocrisy of being asked to fight for democracy overseas while segregation persisted at home to advance the NAACP’s “Double-V” campaign. This was successful to an extent as the Truman administration passed several acts aimed at civil rights reform in the late 1940s, however, most – if not all – of these reforms failed to remove the political devices that prevented the full participation of Black voters – the poll tax, a consistent threat of violence, and literacy tests that continued to be arbitrarily administered.³⁰²

The two decades that followed the war witnessed a dramatic increase of voter-orientated activism, this included contributions from prominent Black athletes such as World champion boxer Joe Louis.

²⁹⁷ Charles M. Blow, “Welcome to Jim Crow 2.0,” *New York Times*, July 14, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/14/opinion/jim-crow-voter-suppression.html> (Accessed: 24/9/21).

²⁹⁸ Selwyn Carter, “African American Voting Rights: An Historical Struggle,” *Emory Law Journal* vol. 44, no. 3 (1995): 866.

²⁹⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Illustrated Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Routledge, 2016): 8.

³⁰⁰ White Primaries outlawed the inclusion of Black voters and the Grandfather Clause meant that voters could not register if their ancestors had not voted.

³⁰¹ Chandler Davidson, “The Voting Rights Act: A Brief History,” in *Controversies in Minority Voting: The Voting Rights Act in Perspective*, ed. Chandler Davidson and Bernard Grofman (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1992): 12.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 13.

Louis, who has been defined as an exemplary of the “shut up and play” ideology, used his platform in the late 1940s to “go straight to the problem of disenfranchisement of Black southerners.”³⁰³ In the build up to the 1948 election Louis described the vote as “the best weapon to fight racial injustice, to end Jim Crow, and to eliminate the poll tax.”³⁰⁴ Louis’ focus on the vote in the 1940s was mirrored in the 1960 Presidential election, as numerous Black athletes endorsed John F. Kennedy as “the right choice for Blacks.”³⁰⁵ However, this recognition of the importance of the vote was not translated into pragmatic means designed to gain equal access for the Black community, that was predominantly left to activists who used legal challenges, locally focused activism, and peaceful demonstrations to assert their right to vote.

Arguably the most famous demonstration occurred in Selma in 1965, the small town in Alabama became “the field on which a decisive battle for the vote was fought.”³⁰⁶ The ugly demonstrations in which peaceful protestors were beaten by police officers and state troopers on national television triggered the national conscience and was a deciding factor in President Lyndon Johnson’s passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965. Unlike previous civil rights acts that have been labelled “paper tigers” for their inability to protect the right to vote, the bill was written with the ultimate aim of preventing the backslide to disenfranchisement that had occurred in the 19th century.³⁰⁷ This was achieved by giving the federal government the power to supervise voting laws across several states – mostly in the south – to protect against suppressive laws, no matter how “race-neutral” they appeared.³⁰⁸ It was this federal control that made the bill so effective, this was demonstrated in 1971 when Mississippi attempted to redraw its district boundaries, which would have diluted the Black vote by forcing 40% of Black voters to re-register. Under the Voting Rights Act, the Department of Justice intervened, and the plans were squashed.³⁰⁹ But, this federal intervention also created opposition amongst right-wing politicians and southern state governments, which laid the foundation for the *Shelby County vs. Holder* Supreme Court decision and the subsequent re-emergence of voter suppression in the 21st century.

In the *Shelby County v. Holder* decision in 2013 the Court invalidated a “coverage formula” that had been created as a part of the Voting Rights Act in 1965. The formula had meant that jurisdictions

³⁰³ Louis Moore, “The Black Athlete and the Vote,” *Black Perspectives*, August 9, 2021, <https://www.aaihs.org/the-black-athlete-and-the-vote/> (Accessed: 9/9/21).

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁵ Such athletes included Gene Lipscomb, Buddy Young, Ralph Metcalf, and Hank Aaron; Moore, *We Will Win the Day*, 146.

³⁰⁶ Davidson, “The Voting Rights Act,” 15.

³⁰⁷ Anderson, *One Person, No Vote*, 25.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

with a history of discriminatory voting laws could not pass voting-related reform unless approved by the federal government – this is also referred to as “preclearance”. The decision that was made with a 5-4 majority “gutted” section 4 of the voting rights act and largely left minority voters without any protections from the federal government.³¹⁰ In the majority opinion Chief Justice John Roberts wrote, “Racial disparity at the time was compelling evidence justifying the preclearance remedy and coverage formula. There is no longer such a disparity.”³¹¹ The decision has been denounced for removing the solution because it is solving the problem; Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg wrote for the minority, “Throwing out preclearance when it has worked and is continuing to work to stop discriminatory changes is like throwing away your umbrella in a rainstorm because you are not getting wet.”³¹² Without preclearance, there has been a rapid increase in laws aimed at suppressing minority voters in the South, such as Georgia’s decision to decrease the number of polling stations available in 2020, which had the effect of increasing voters’ waiting time by up to 5 hours in some cases.³¹³ As has always been the case with recent attempts at voter suppression the laws are constructed using racially neutral terms which hide the true discriminatory intent. Post-2013 the federal government has lost the power to protect the rights of minority voters from such laws. In her dissenting opinion against the *Husted v. A. Philip Randolph Institute* decision in 2018, Justice Sonia Sotomayer appealed to voting rights activists by “praising their vigilance but also indicating that they are now on their own.”³¹⁴ In a political climate devoid of federal protection for minority voters, athlete-activists have stepped up to challenge voter suppression and protect the right to free and equal opportunities to vote, further reinforcing the importance of this area of athlete-activism.

More Than a Vote: Athletes in the 2020 Election

In June 2020, LeBron James partnered with a group of athletes, celebrities, and political organizers to form the “More Than a Vote” organization, with the goal of “commuting systemic, racist voter suppression by educating, energizing, and protecting our community.”³¹⁵ As it has become increasingly harder for minority citizens to vote in post-Shelby County America, the aim of More

³¹⁰ Ibid., 38.

³¹¹ Vann R. Newkirk, “How *Shelby County v. Holder* Broke America,” *Atlantic*, July 10, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/07/how-shelby-county-broke-america/564707/> (Accessed: 31/9/21).

³¹² Ellen D. Katz, “Justice Ginsburg’s Umbrella,” in *A Nation of Widening Opportunities? The Civil Rights Act at Fifty*, ed. Samuel R. Bagenstos and Ellen D. Katz (Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan Publishing, 2015): 264.

³¹³ Sam Levine, “Does Mail-in Voting Lead to Fraud – and Does it Help Democrats? The facts,” *Guardian*, October 26, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/aug/20/mail-in-voting-us-election-the-facts> (Accessed: 11/2/22).

³¹⁴ Newkirk, “How *Shelby County v. Holder* Broke America.”

³¹⁵ Moore, “The Black Athlete and the Vote.”

Than a Vote constitutes an incredibly important avenue of activism. This importance was doubled in 2020 by the upcoming election between Donald Trump and Joe Biden, which, following four years of Trump’s divisive, white supremacist leadership was viewed as being the “most consequential in a lifetime.”³¹⁶ More Than a Vote is a co-ordinated effort of numerous athletes and entertainers to direct “the widespread fury of 2020” towards the ballot box and not just say “let’s go out and vote” but rather actively look to challenge the underlying issues that would impact the Black vote in the 2020 election.³¹⁷ Just like the earlier examples of Joe Louis, Ralph Metcalfe, and Buddy Young, athletes involved in the More Than a Vote organization recognised the importance of the Black vote, however contemporary athletes went beyond the actions of these historic athletes to offer practical solutions that protected the promise of free and equal access for minority voters. These solutions were implemented through various campaigns that were all aimed at increasing minority participation in the election. Firstly, there were pragmatic solutions to problems that were limiting the accessibility of polling stations for minority voters – such as the earlier example in Georgia. Secondly, the organization worked to overcome the contemporary problem of voter misinformation that had disproportionately targeted Black and minority voters in the 2016 election.³¹⁸ Finally, the organization worked against the felon disenfranchisement laws in Florida that also have a disproportionate impact on the Black community.

Central to the end of the NBA walkout in August 2020 was the agreement that NBA arenas would be opened as polling stations in the 2020 election. This was an extension of More Than a Vote’s “Protect Home Court” campaign that saw athletes from various sports lobby for their team’s stadium to be opened as a “safe place to vote in person.”³¹⁹ This was increasingly important given the attempts of Republican politicians to undermine mail-in ballots in the build-up to the election.³²⁰ The example of Primary elections in Georgia that was alluded to earlier speaks to the practical importance of this campaign as the long waiting times had caused some people to give up and go

³¹⁶ Domenico Montanaro, “The Most Consequential Election in a Lifetime,” *NPR*, November 2, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/11/02/930077437/the-most-consequential-election-in-a-lifetime-and-this-time-they-mean-it> (Accessed: 4/2/22).

³¹⁷ Emmanuel Morgan, “More Than a Vote is More Than a Statement for LeBron James and Other Athletes,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 30, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/sports/story/2020-07-30/more-than-a-vote-lebron-james> (Accessed: 22/9/22).

³¹⁸ Shannon Bond, “Black and Latino Voters Flooded with Disinformation in Election’s Final Days,” *NPR*, October 30, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/10/30/929248146/black-and-latino-voters-flooded-with-disinformation-in-elections-final-days> (Accessed: 2/10/22).

³¹⁹ More Than a Vote, “Protect Home Court” webpage, 2021, <https://www.morethanavote.org/protect-home-court/> (Accessed: 5/9/21).

³²⁰ Levine, “Does Mail-in Voting Lead to Fraud.”

home.³²¹ Additionally, voters in Milwaukee, Wisconsin suffered a similar fate after the number of polling stations in the City was reduced from 180 to 5.³²² Athletes recognised that these polling disasters – that had a disproportionate effect on the Black community – would be alleviated with the accessibility and size that could be provided by sporting arenas and stadiums. In spite of attempts to undermine minority voters through closing polling stations and making it more difficult to vote via absentee ballots and mail-in votes, the “Protect Home Court” campaign overcame these issues and allowed over 300,000 voters a place to vote.

However, the creation of polling stations was only half of the problem, another key problem was the lack of poll workers. In Milwaukee for example, it was less a case of the city lacking places to vote, but rather lacking volunteers to work at these sites.³²³ The disproportionate impact that this had on polling stations in minority communities speaks to the underlying racial connotations of this problem, as local governments continued to dissuade voters from voting in person. In response to this, More Than a Vote launched the “We Got Next” campaign which allied with the NAACP legal defense fund to recruit over 40,000 poll workers and raise \$3 million to overcome a growing crisis of a shortage of poll workers.³²⁴ The push to recruit poll workers, along with the aim to open stadiums and arenas as polling stations amounted to a pragmatic intervention that was designed to ensure free and equal access to in-person voting, this was especially important given the increased difficulty of other forms of voting in the build up to the election. Although the issues that More Than a Vote targeted appeared to be circumstantial, the history of voter suppression in the U.S. speaks to the lack of coincidence in this area of U.S. politics. Furthermore, this proves the prophecy of Justice Sotomeyer in 2018 to be correct, voting rights activists, such as the athletes involved with More Than a Vote had to carry the burden to ensure free and equal access to the ballot continued to exist in 2020.

More Than a Vote also sought to protect Black voters from modern attempts at voter repression, specifically online efforts to misinform voters. Research into the 2020 election found that Black and Latino communities were “flooded with misinformation on social media in the run-up to the

³²¹ Sam Levine. “More Than 10-hour Wait and Long Lines as Voting Starts Early in Georgia,” *Guardian*, October 13, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/oct/13/more-than-10-hour-wait-and-long-lines-as-early-voting-starts-in-georgia> (Accessed: 11/2/22).

³²² Eric Nusbaum, “Sports Teams Have a More Powerful Voter Turnout Tool Than Their Stadiums,” *Slate*, October 14, 2020, <https://slate.com/culture/2020/10/nba-arena-voting-sites-milwaukee-fiserv-forum-turnout-impact.html> (Accessed: 15/9/21).

³²³ *Ibid.*

³²⁴ This problem was exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, which meant that older volunteers struggled to staff the polling stations. In previous elections 60% of poll workers were aged 60 and over.

election.”³²⁵ Messages such as “Democrats and Republicans are the same. There’s no point in voting” were largely experienced by minority voters throughout 2020.³²⁶ Although this was not explicitly a political machination that aimed to suppress the vote, this form of misinformation was clearly designed to reduce the influence of minority voters in the election. Andre Banks, co-founder of the “Win Black” campaign which guards potential voters from misinformation attempts, stated that voter misinformation is “a sustained campaign targeted at Black and Brown Americans to limit our political power.”³²⁷ In 2020, More Than a Vote partnered with Win Black in their “Under Review” campaign which utilised various modern outlets to educate voters against misinformation campaigns, and ensure that potential voters understood the importance of voting. This was evidenced by Atlanta Hawks’ All-Star Trae Young’s appearance on the NBA 2k video game to speak about voter suppression and the importance of the vote, “now, more than ever, my vote, your vote, every vote matters.”³²⁸ The example of using a famous athlete in a popular video game highlights how athletes are leveraging their fame and exposure to challenge voter misinformation. “Under Review” wanted to leverage this cultural influence to undermine misinformation campaigns, “the truth will cut through the misinformation if it’s delivered through trusted voices,” said More Than a Vote associate Jocelyn Benson.³²⁹ This campaign highlights the evolution of voter suppression in contemporary society, and further reinforces how contemporary athletes’ cultural influence strengthens their activism.

Finally, More Than a Vote also worked to overcome the problem of felon disenfranchisement for Black voters. Felon disenfranchisement laws are intended to prevent ex-convicts from voting in a form of “civil death” that was adopted from the European legal system in the 19th century. Today the laws continue to impact up to 2.2 million Americans and are four times more likely to prevent African Americans from voting.³³⁰ Whilst some states have eased these laws in recent years, certain states such as Florida have only amended the law, this has meant that ex-felons can only vote once they have paid any legal fees or fines that they have accrued.³³¹ Whilst this appears racially neutral, the laws have an undeniable impact in reducing the political power of African Americans in certain

³²⁵ Bond, “Black and Latino Voters Flooded with Disinformation in Election’s Final Days.”

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ Ibid.

³²⁸ Uninterrupted, “New Voters Like Trae Young Can Change This Election – NBA 2KTV,” YouTube video, 3:09 minutes, October 23, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h6JMi74PNaE> (Accessed: 11/2/22).

³²⁹ Morgan, “More Than a Vote is More Than a Statement for LeBron James and Other Athletes.”

³³⁰ Jean Chung, “Voting Rights in the Era of Mass Incarceration: A Primer,” *The Sentencing Project*, July 28, 2021, <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/felony-disenfranchisement-a-primer/> (Accessed: 1/10/21).

³³¹ Ibid.

states – such as Florida. More Than a Vote identified the problem of felon disenfranchisement and created the “Combating Felon Disenfranchisement” campaign. The campaign worked with the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition to help ex-convicts pay off their various fines and fees that were preventing them from voting. Although this did not directly challenge the existence of felon disenfranchisement laws, it represents another pragmatic effort to increase the accessibility of the ballot for the Black community.

The significance of More Than a Vote was not as an advocacy effort that said, “let’s go out and vote” for Joe Biden, in fact, the organization was registered as a “501 ©(4) non-profit organization”, this meant that their campaigns could not explicitly express their support for Biden’s Presidential bid. Instead, the importance of this organization lay in the athletes’ determination to protect minority voters through practical, pragmatic solutions that targeted efforts at voter repression in their communities. These solutions exemplify how athletes are leveraging their cultural power in contemporary society to uphold the historic tradition of voting rights activism in the Black Lives Matter era. This marked a stark contrast from the earlier actions of rich, famous athletes such as Michael Jordan, who avoided an overt foray into electoral politics to protect his commercial value, thus reinforcing the separation from the late twentieth century to today. Furthermore, the need for such voting rights activism in post-Shelby County America, alongside the ascension of athletes to fill this need legitimises the contributions of athlete-activism in the broader political struggles of the 21st century. But activism aimed at protecting the right to vote is not the only form of electoral politics that was demonstrated by athletes during the 2020 election. Athletes also highlighted their ability to shape the political discourse by using their platform to advocate for candidates who are most in tune with the needs of minority communities. This was reflected in the WNBA’s #VoteWarnock campaign.

#VoteWarnock: How Athletes Can Shape the Electoral Discourse.

Activism is not new to the WNBA, since the creation of the league in 1997 challenging the status quo has become a hallmark of the league’s players. In the summer of 2016, before Colin Kaepernick knelt during the playing of the national anthem, members of the Minnesota Lynx spoke out against police brutality and wore t-shirts with “Justice and Accountability” printed alongside a police badge in protest of the police killings of Philando Castile and Alton Sterling. As was shown with the example of Natasha Cloud in the previous chapter, the contributions of female athletes go beyond their work within the sporting arena and in 2020 members of the WNBA led protests in the street, worked with voting rights groups such as More Than a Vote, and when it restarted in July, dedicated their season to Breonna Taylor and the Say Her Name campaign. Despite all of this work, a defining moment in

the WNBA's activism this year was the #VoteWarnock campaign, which was described by historian Louis Moore as "the most significant thing to ever happen in U.S. athlete-activism."³³² Much like the example of the 1960 election in which famous Black athletes such as Metcalfe, Young, and Aaron endorsed the candidacy of John F. Kennedy, WNBA players used their platform as professional athletes to endorse the candidacy of Rev. Raphael Warnock in the Georgia Senate race.³³³ However, unlike these previous examples in the 1960s in which "the democrat party used the athletes to appeal to Black voters," Warnock was hand-picked by the WNBA.³³⁴ "He supported all the things that we supported and had talked about," said Elizabeth Williams of the Atlanta Dream.³³⁵ The WNBA's #VoteWarnock campaign represented the way that athletes shaped the electoral discourse to promote a candidate who increased the political representation for the needs of the Black community. Warnock was clearly the best choice for minority voters and the WNBA leveraged their exposure to ensure that he dominated the discourse of the Georgia Senate race – a race that would come to decide the balance of the U.S. Senate.

The original purpose of the #VoteWarnock campaign was to remove Georgia Senator and Atlanta Dream Co-owner Kelly Loeffler from power – both in the WNBA and the Senate. Loeffler is a pro-Trump politician who uses divisive wedge issues to increase her political popularity amongst far-right wing constituents – including former Ku Klux Klan leader Chester Doles.³³⁶ The campaign began with a letter written by Loeffler to the commissioner of the WNBA, Cathy Engelbert. After hearing reports that the WNBA would paint "Black Lives Matter" on their courts when the league restarted in July, Loeffler wrote, "I adamantly oppose the Black Lives Matter political movement, which has advocated for the defunding of police."³³⁷ Loeffler then went on to denounce the movement as "divisive" and "Marxist", whilst stating that the league should "be united in the goal to remove politics from sports."³³⁸ This was not Loeffler's first criticism of athlete-activism, on the topic of players kneeling during the anthem Loeffler commented, "The WNBA has fully embraced the BLM political movement and turned its back on the American flag."³³⁹ It is clear in Loeffler's rhetoric that she is

³³² Louis Moore, "Sports and Civil Rights History Panel," *University of Washington Department of History*, May 12, 2021.

³³³ Moore, *We Will Win the Day*, 146.

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ Sean Gregory, "'We Did That': Inside the WNBA's strategy to support Raphael Warnock – and help Democrats win the Senate," *Time*, January 7, 2021, <https://time.com/5927075/atlanta-dream-warnock-loeffler/> (Accessed: 10/10/21).

³³⁶ Jemele Hill, "The WNBA Can't Keep Loeffler Around," *Atlantic*, January 11, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/01/kelly-loeffler-doesnt-belong-in-the-wnba/617632/> (Accessed: 28/10/21).

³³⁷ Gregory, "We Did That."

³³⁸ Ibid.

³³⁹ Meredith Cash, "Ted Cruz, Kelly Loeffler, and Other Conservatives Are Blasting the WNBA After Teams Walked Off the Court Before National Anthem," *Insider*, July 27, 2020,

appealing to her right-wing constituents by alluding to the culturally divisive themes of defunding the police, and keeping politics out of sport, which is ironic considering the fact that Loeffler is using sport as a platform to advance her political standing.

Following her letter and consistent denunciation of the Black Lives Matter movement, WNBA players made it abundantly clear that they opposed her position. Atlanta Dream guard Tiffany Hayes stated, "I knew right away I wasn't with it."³⁴⁰ The WNBA players association (WNBPA) provided an even stronger response by tweeting, "Enough! Ger her out!"³⁴¹ However, the players' opposition to Loeffler, and their calls for her to be removed only played into Loeffler's political rhetoric. She used the opposition of the WNBA players as an example of the left-wing "cancel culture", Loeffler stated, "this is just more proof that the out of control cancel culture wants to shut out anyone who disagrees with them...it is clear that the league is more concerned with playing politics than basketball."³⁴² With this statement, Loeffler doubled down on her criticism of the politicisation of sport, and undermined the players' calls for her to be ousted by using them to gain political support. However, the players recognised this manoeuvre and in turn altered their response, in what Kurt Streeter of the *New York Times* labelled "protest jujitsu".³⁴³

"The more we fought her, the more we were calling for head, the more it was playing into her hands," said WNBA player Sue Bird.³⁴⁴ The players recognised their predicament, the more that they said Loeffler's name, the more she could use their opposition to fuel her rhetoric, "we had to find a better way," said Bird.³⁴⁵ The first move that the players made was to stop saying Loeffler's name in public, WNBPA President Nneka Ogwumike said, "Words have power. And to give energy to a name I think is very meaningful. So, we stopped saying that name."³⁴⁶ After this first move, the players made their second, more decisive move. Prior to a nationally televised game between the Atlanta Dream and the Phoenix Mercury on August 4, 2020 players arrived wearing t-shirts with "Vote

<https://www.insider.com/ted-cruz-tomi-lahren-kelly-loeffler-blast-wnba-anthem-protests-2020-7> (Accessed: 17/10/21).

³⁴⁰ Gregory, "We Did That."

³⁴¹ Cindy Boren, "A WNBA Owner Dismissed Player Protests. Now they're campaigning for her Senate opponent," *Washington Post*, August 5, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2020/08/05/wnba-players-are-so-livid-sen-kelly-loeffler-team-owner-theyre-backing-her-opponent/> (Accessed: 23/10/21).

³⁴² Sopan Deb, "WNBA Players Escalate Protest of Anti-BLM Team Owner," *New York Times*, August 4, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/04/sports/basketball/wnba-dream-loeffler-warnock.html?searchResultPosition=1> (Accessed: 15/10/21).

³⁴³ Kurt Streeter, "The One Name the WNBA Won't Say," *New York Times*, October 5, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/05/sports/basketball/wnba-loeffler-warnock-blm.html?searchResultPosition=1> (Accessed: 22/10/21).

³⁴⁴ Gregory, "We Did That."

³⁴⁵ Streeter, "The One Name the WNBA Won't Say."

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

Warnock” printed on the front.³⁴⁷ With this act, the players shifted the discourse away from Loeffler and her culture war rhetoric, and instead placed a focus on her opposition, Rev. Raphael Warnock. Warnock’s endorsement was not just a happy coincidence, the players handpicked him because, as Bird stated, “he stands for everything that we stand for...It was like ‘wow, we want this guy in the Senate.’”³⁴⁸ This exemplified how these athletes used their platform to engage in electoral politics as a step towards progressive social change. Elizabeth Williams reinforced Bird’s view by saying, “We are WNBA players, but we are also ordinary people with extraordinary vision. Rev. Warnock has spent his life fighting for the people and we need him in Washington.”³⁴⁹ These comments recognise the importance of politicians such as Warnock to amplify the concerns of minority communities at the highest levels of U.S. government, especially if he replaces a divisive and potentially harmful candidate such as Kelly Loeffler.

When Loeffler wrote her letter to Cathy Engelbert denouncing Black Lives Matter Warnock was polling at 9% and sat fourth in the Senate race, two months and \$240,000 in donations later, he had risen to 28% and led the Senate race, three months after that, Warnock finally defeated Loeffler in a run-off election that flipped the Senate to the Democrats. The WNBA players celebrated the fruits of their labour, Breanna Stewart tweeted, “Winning is cool, but have you ever flipped the senate?”³⁵⁰ It may be impossible to calculate the role of the WNBA’s endorsement on Warnock’s final victory, but the attention that the campaign accrued as well as the timing of his ascent suggests that the campaign had a distinct influence on the outcome of the race.

The discussion of the #VoteWarnock campaign reinforced the importance of athlete-activism in the 2020 U.S. election. Unlike the case study of More Than a Vote that looked at the role of athletes in protecting minority voters from suppressive voting laws, the WNBA’s campaign illustrated the role of athletes in shaping the electoral discourse and showed that through their social influence athletes can elevate politicians who they believe are most likely to work towards progressive social change. Unlike previous instances of athletes engaging in this form of electoral politics, such as the 1960 election, or LeBron James’ endorsement of Hillary Clinton in 2016, the #VoteWarnock campaign was unprecedented for its “co-ordination, strategy and for taking the time to meet a candidate and back

³⁴⁷ Meredith Cash, “WNBA Stars are Openly Endorsing Kelly Loeffler’s Opponent in her Georgia Senate Race Despite Her Ownership Stake in one of the League’s Teams,” *Insider*, August 5, 2020, <https://www.insider.com/wnba-stars-endorse-dream-owner-kelly-loefflers-senate-race-opponent-2020-8> (Accessed: 28/9/21).

³⁴⁸ Streater, “The One Name the WNBA Won’t Say.”

³⁴⁹ Gregory, “We Did That.”

³⁵⁰ Bryan Armen Graham, “How the WNBA Helped the Democrats Take Control of the U.S. Senate,” *Guardian*, January 7, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2021/jan/06/wnba-kelly-loeffler-raphael-warnock> (Accessed: 18/10/21).

them as a group.”³⁵¹ What is more remarkable is that Loeffler was also an owner of a WNBA team, “we’re not talking about going against a sponsor, or someone a little bit connected. We’re literally talking about a team owner,” stated Renee Montgomery.³⁵² This example speaks to the power that athletes possess in contemporary society, and as the demise of Kelly Loeffler exemplifies, athletes are not afraid to harness this power, regardless of the potential ramifications that this power struggle could present.³⁵³ The role of the WNBA in shaping the discourse of the Senate race in 2020 was a remarkable display of the influence athletes possess in the area of electoral politics, but the involvement of athletes in this field was not restricted to securing the desired result in the election, as Montgomery stated, “Voting is not the only step; it’s just the first step.”³⁵⁴

The Aftermath of the 2020 Election, “Jim Crow 2.0”, and Athlete-Activism

The success of Warnock’s victory, and subsequent flipping of the Senate was not celebrated for long. In the aftermath of his electoral defeat Donald Trump denounced the election as “the greatest fraud in the history of our country from an electoral standpoint.”³⁵⁵ In the eyes of some right-wing Americans the 2020 election was plagued by voter fraud that robbed Donald Trump of a rightful victory. The unproven allegations of fraud – that remain unproven despite some audits costing up to \$5.7 million – have inspired the belief among Republicans that the election was rigged.³⁵⁶ Behind this justification several states have implemented new laws aimed at “protecting the sanctity of the vote.”³⁵⁷ An example of this was Georgia’s “Election Integrity Act of 2021” which – among other changes – added restrictions to absentee ballots, ended voting hours earlier, and criminalized providing water to waiting voters – which had been up to five hours in 2020.³⁵⁸ The repressive voting laws passed in the aftermath of the 2020 election mirrored a long history of legislative attempts to undermine the power of Black voters. The race-neutral justifications are a guise designed to obscure the racial connotations of the legislation, these racist undertones were recognised by political

³⁵¹ Streever, “The One Name the WNBA Won’t Say.”

³⁵² Gregory, “We Did That.”

³⁵³ Ibid.

³⁵⁴ Moore, “The Black Athlete and the Vote.”

³⁵⁵ Blow, “Welcome to Jim Crow 2.0.”

³⁵⁶ Jonathan J. Cooper, “Trump Supporters Raise \$5.7 Million for Arizona Election Audit,” *AP News*, July 29, 2021,

<https://apnews.com/article/entertainment-arizona-senate-elections-9b626b0fb2714b17279d832339d8a878> (Accessed: 12/2/22).

³⁵⁷ Chris Cillizza, “Why the Trumpist Election Fraud Conspiracy Just Won’t Die,” *CNN*, September 28, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/09/28/politics/donald-trump-election-fraud-arizona/index.html> (Accessed: 4/10/21).

³⁵⁸ Steven Nelson, “Biden Calls Georgia Election Law ‘Jim Crow in the 21st Century,’” *New York Post*, March 26, 2021, <https://nypost.com/2021/03/26/biden-georgia-election-law-is-jim-crow-in-the-21st-century/> (Accessed: 14/9/21).

commentators: “These laws are not just restrictive voting laws; they are racist laws meant to suppress the vote.”³⁵⁹ In the second decade of the 21st century, without the protection of the Voting Rights Act and the Supreme Court, these laws are even more detrimental to the Black vote. Voting rights activists immediately responded to these changes, in March 2021, More Than a Vote launched the “Protect Our Power” campaign. This voting rights effort worked alongside local activists in states that have passed voter suppression laws to continue to protect minority voting rights, mostly through challenging legislation and mobilizing the public against these laws.³⁶⁰ The continued role of More Than a Vote in 2021 speaks to the organization’s aim to expand after their role in the election. At the beginning of 2021 James stated, “this isn’t time to put your feet up...for us, this was never about one election.”³⁶¹ The similarities between these laws and earlier, masked attempts to dilute minority power in the election are clear to be seen. In the twentieth century Black activists fought these attempts all the way to the voting rights act in 1965, a similar fight is now underway in contemporary America and athletes have positioned themselves on the frontline. This reinforces the connection between athlete-activism today and the historic struggle to defend the democratic rights of African American citizens.

Despite its origins as a voting rights organization, More Than a Vote’s focus in 2021 has expanded to broader systemic issues that are impacting the Black community, particularly the systemic roots of police brutality. This has included some work with local activists, but more so the organization has used its political power to support the passage of the George Floyd policing act – which despite being passed by Congress in March has yet to be implemented. Furthermore, in September 2021, James and a collective of athletes based in California lobbied the state government to pass Senate Bill 2, titled as the “Kenneth Ross Jr. Police Decertification Act”. This law would prevent police officers who have committed serious infractions from joining a new department rather than being dismissed. The expanded aim of the organization reinforces the point that there is a significant number of athlete-activists who are working against a variety of hegemonic issues to create progressive social change, and far from criticisms of “gesture politics” these examples show that as

³⁵⁹ Richard Fowler, “As More Oppressive Voting Rules Emerge, Black Women Journalists Lead the Headlines,” *Forbes*, September 29, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbestheculture/2021/09/29/as-more-oppressive-voting-rules-emerge-black-women-journalists-lead-the-headlines/?sh=5ded3ce54dbd> (Accessed: 1/11/21).

³⁶⁰ More Than a Vote, “Protect Our Power” webpage, 2021, <https://www.morethanavote.org/protect-our-power/> (Accessed: 30/9/21).

³⁶¹ Jack Turman, “LeBron James’ More Than a Vote Launches New Campaign to Defend Voting Rights,” *CBS News*, March 5, 2021, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/lebron-james-more-than-a-vote-voting-rights/> (Accessed: 17/9/21).

well as protesting on the field of play, in the streets, and in the local community, athletes are also playing an important role in national politics.

Conclusion

As is seen in Justice Sotomayer's dissenting opinion from 2018, the role of voting rights activists is crucial amid the contemporary climate of post-Shelby County America. With their involvement in the 2020 U.S. election athletes demonstrated their importance in this area of the contemporary Black Freedom Struggle. They not only worked to protect the right to vote by implementing pragmatic solutions and recognising modern forms of voter repression, but also used their influence to protect against another spell of a Republican dominated Senate. The 2020 election further demonstrated the political power possessed by contemporary athletes and reinforced their status as an impactful bloc of activists. This political success begins to explain why conservative politicians are so determined to denounce the political involvement of athletes. The actions of Joe Louis in the 1940s, and Buddy Young or Ralph Metcalfe in the 1960s show a clear correlation to today, however, as is the case throughout this dissertation, today's athletes are reimagining this tradition and using their power in an unprecedented way. Their involvement in the 2020 election – and its explosive aftermath – reveals the power of athlete-activists in the arena of electoral politics. The practical effect of the More Than a Vote organization and the decisive impact of the #VoteWarnock campaign repudiate the notion that athlete-activism is a form of "gesture politics" that has little or no practical effect. The chapter has outlined the broader impact of these campaigns and further reinforced the argument that there is a vast infrastructure of athlete-activism that exists alongside displays of symbolic activism.

It is also worth noting that despite More Than a Vote being a core case study for this chapter, it is not the only athlete-led organization that worked to protect the voting rights of minority communities in the build up to the 2020 election. The Players Coalition, established in 2017 also formed a powerful bloc that worked against restrictive voting practices such as felon disenfranchisement and a reduced number of polling stations. But, despite the work that the organization has carried out for the Black community, the Players Coalition has received scepticism for the circumstances surrounding its creation. The coalition was initially formed in 2017, in an agreement between a group of athletes and the NFL that was perceived as a *quid pro quo*, in which the players received funding in return for an end to their involvement in the take a knee movement, "the kneeling had negatively defined football, and the owners were using the Players coalition to put a stop to it."³⁶² The negative backlash to the Players Coalition when it was founded introduces a

³⁶² Bryant, *The Heritage*, 235.

necessary discussion surrounding the relationship between contemporary athlete-activism and big corporations or organizations. The popular explosion of athletes as cultural commodities in contemporary society has continued since the Michael Jordan era. However unlike in the late twentieth century, that witnessed Craig Hodges being blackballed for his beliefs and actions, athletes today – for the most part – have received a completely different reaction from major organizations and sponsors. The following chapter will look to unpack the relationship between athletes, activism, and corporate interests. Although this will not explicitly look at a specific approach to activism in the way that the previous chapters have, it is essential in the contemporary climate to understand how corporate interests and actions have shaped the environment of athlete-activism that exists today.

Chapter 6: Public relations or Public welfare? The Relationship Between Athletes, Major Corporations, and Activism.

In August 2016, Michael Jordan, now a minority stakeholder in the Charlotte Hornets NBA franchise, and the first ever African-American billionaire athlete spoke out on racial injustice for the first time. In a one-page letter written for *The Undefeated* entitled, “I can no longer remain silent”, Jordan stated, “I have been deeply troubled by the deaths of African Americans at the hands of law enforcement and angered by the cowardly and hateful targeting and killing of police officers.”³⁶³ Jordan’s letter was praised by some commentators as a huge departure from his previously apolitical persona, “for Jordan to say anything, no matter how small, is big.”³⁶⁴ However, other analysts denounced Jordan’s statement as missing the point of the Black Lives Matter movement and as merely an attempt to appear progressive amid the political climate in 2016. Despite its shortcomings, Jordan’s foray into social justice highlighted the paradigm shift of athletes choosing to engage with social justice issues. However, the wording of his statement also demonstrated how Jordan remained stuck in his old “Republican’s buy sneakers too” mindset from the 1990s.³⁶⁵ To a certain extent, Jordan’s comments echoed the conservative refrain of “all lives matter”, which was adopted as a reactionary rebuttal to the Black Lives Matter movement. Ultimately, his inability – even in the age of Black Lives Matter – to focus solely on Black lives illustrated the tension that exists between athlete-activism and corporate power. As a billionaire and major figure in corporate America, Jordan was caught between the expectation, or need to “say something” about racial violence, and the potential alienation of customers who did not agree with his stance. Whilst the visible support of a figure such as Jordan – and the companies that he represents – is important, his politically vague stance ultimately rings hollow in that there is no clear analysis, strategy or action that would have a meaningful impact for Black Americans in the twenty-first century.

Whilst Jordan was making race-neutral statements that had little impact, other athlete-activists have been openly engaging in polarizing political debates that identified a clear path to change – for example Naomi Osaka’s op-ed in *Esquire* that stated, “I support the movement to defund the

³⁶³ Michael Jordan, “I Can No Longer Stay Silent,” *Undefeated*, July 25, 2016, <https://theundefeated.com/features/michael-jordan-i-can-no-longer-stay-silent/> (Accessed: 10/10/21).

³⁶⁴ Khalid Salaam, “Why Michael Jordan Missed the Mark in 1st Attempt at Social Consciousness,” *Bleacher Report*, July 28, 2016, <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/2654445-why-michael-jordan-missed-the-mark-in-1st-attempt-at-social-consciousness> (Accessed: 13/10/21).

³⁶⁵ Although the example of Craig Hodges in chapter 2 did show that some professional athletes in the late twentieth century were willing to take a political stand, Jordan and many of his contemporaries often shied away from engaging in potentially controversial topics.

police.”³⁶⁶ This public stance subsequently put pressure on corporations to take a stand on the issue of racial justice, or else risk alienating their superstar athletes – as well as their millions of followers. The focus of this chapter will be the intersection between social justice activism, professional athletes, and major corporations in America. This takes place throughout advertising campaigns that spotlight social justice issues, the amplification of an athlete’s independent activist efforts or the implementation of effective programs in local communities. As was outlined in the second chapter, and then referred to as a consistent theme throughout the earlier case studies, the relationship between major organizations – both inside and outside of sport – and athletes has been a decisive factor in the world of athlete-activism in the modern sporting era. In today’s society athletes have an unprecedented platform to act against social injustice and in recent years this platform has been magnified by the support of major corporations. In some cases, it is apparent that athlete-activists are pushing brands to take more radical policy positions on social justice issues. However, these relationships are rarely straightforward, athletes must be wary that their activism is not being co-opted or diluted by the brand that they associate themselves with and these deals often maintain the stipulation that any controversial, or potentially antagonizing views must be avoided. This is evident in the continued blackballing of Colin Kaepernick from the NFL, as no NFL franchise wants to become associated with his politically polarizing status following the take a knee movement.³⁶⁷ As is seen in Jordan’s statement corporations want to appear progressive, whilst remaining as neutral as possible. Bearing this in mind, this chapter will seek to understand how athlete-activism exists within this corporate framework.

The chapter will be split into two sections, the first section will focus on the case study of Naomi Osaka to show the change in attitude amongst contemporary athletes towards social justice in comparison to athletes in the late twentieth century. The example of Osaka will also demonstrate how the political involvement of athletes is a contributing factor to major corporations’ public engagement with social justice issues. This is connected to the emergence of “Woke Capitalism” – big businesses aligning themselves with social justice movements for the purpose of marketing campaigns, with the desired impact of appearing progressive and therefore more attractive to younger, more left-wing consumers.³⁶⁸ The advertising campaigns featuring Colin Kaepernick with Nike in 2018 and Naomi Osaka with Beats By Dre in 2020 will be used to highlight how athlete-

³⁶⁶ Naomi Osaka, “I Never Would’ve Imagined Writing This Two Years Ago,” *Esquire*, July 1, 2020, <https://www.esquire.com/sports/a33022329/naomi-osaka-op-ed-george-floyd-protests/> (Accessed: 6/1/22).

³⁶⁷ There is compelling evidence that Kaepernick is in fact being blackballed – the NFL’s settlement in a collusion case as a prime example.

³⁶⁸ Carl Rhodes, *Woke Capitalism: How Corporate Morality is Sabotaging Democracy* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022): 8.

activists are involving themselves in progressive corporate marketing campaigns. This looks to unpack how these campaigns have become more centred on the athlete's political beliefs and the role that athletes have played in advancing the policy position of their sponsors. However, this section will also reaffirm the way that corporate advertising campaigns can dilute an athlete's activism and how they have generally failed to offer any means to further the Black Lives Matter Movement. The second section of the chapter will concentrate on corporate social responsibility initiatives within the sporting environment. This will focus on the NFL's "Inspire Change" initiative that was implemented in 2018 with an emphasis on unification and collaboration to offset the political polarization generated by the take a knee movement. The initiative will be discussed through the frame of Adam Rugg's criticism that the NFL's desire to remain universally palatable constrained the impact of the initiative. However, Inspire Change will also be used to show how athletes are working within the framework of these corporate initiatives to implement social justice programs that benefit the Black community. There is rightful scepticism at these corporate efforts in social justice, and the aim of this chapter is not to argue that corporate activism provides a flawless blueprint for athlete-activists to follow, but rather looks to understand that athletes today are aware of the limitations associated with corporate activism but nonetheless are navigating these corporate frameworks to amplify their social justice work.

Naomi Osaka and the Growth of "Woke" Capitalism

On August 26th, 2020, Naomi Osaka defeated Anett Kontaveit to advance to the Western & Southern Open semi-finals. After the match, Osaka was informed that the Milwaukee Bucks of the NBA had boycotted their playoff game against the Orlando Magic in response to the police killing of Jacob Blake in Wisconsin. After a short discussion with her agent, Osaka decided that she would join the movement initiated by the Bucks and pull out of the Open, in a statement released she wrote: "Before I am an athlete, I am a Black woman. And as a Black woman I feel as though there are much more important matters at hand that need immediate attention, rather than watching me play tennis."³⁶⁹ Despite her intention to boycott the rest of the tournament, the World Tennis Association (WTA) negotiated a compromise that meant Osaka's semi-final against Elise Mertens was postponed. Not only did the WTA postpone Osaka's match, but they also postponed all games that were scheduled to be played on August 27th. This mirrored the decisions of multiple other sports leagues including the NBA, NFL, and WNBA.³⁷⁰ As an international sporting superstar, and one of the

³⁶⁹ Simon Briggs, "Naomi Osaka Excels in Action and Activism," *Telegraph*, December 17, 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/tennis/2020/12/17/naomi-osaka-excels-action-activism/> (Accessed: 16/5/21).

³⁷⁰ It is also worth noting that the sports that did not postpone their fixtures or join the boycott movement (such as the NHL) were heavily criticised.

highest paid athletes in the world, Osaka's decision to boycott the Western & Southern Open initiates the discussion of how the relationship between athletes, sponsors, and major sporting organizations operates in contemporary society. Since sport has become a multi-billion dollar industry these relationships have comprised a crucial aspect of athlete-activism. This was true in the late twentieth century with Michael Jordan and remains true today. But unlike in the 1990s, athletes such as Osaka have shown that they are more willing to engage in activism that can be deemed as politically controversial, despite the potential commercial repercussions.

Osaka's rise in the tennis world began when she defeated Serena Williams in the 2018 final of the U.S. open aged only 20 years old. Williams had been the dominant force in women's tennis for the last 15 years and was considered one of the most iconic sporting figures of her generation. Following the final, Soraya Nadia McDonald of *The Undefeated* wrote, "If Serena is the bogeywoman who won't let anyone forget about race at large and American blackness in particular, then Osaka has been branded, without her consent, as the angel who will deliver us from such sordid unpleasantries."³⁷¹ As an African American, Williams' career has been marred by racist treatment from fans, media, and other players. This was illustrated in the aftermath of the 2018 final, when Williams' featured in an Australian cartoon that used racist tropes to portray her argument with Umpire Carlos Ramos.³⁷² Meanwhile, in the same cartoon, Osaka's racial identity was neutralized as she was depicted as having blonde hair and pale skin.³⁷³ This is an example of how the tennis world struggled to separate Williams from her blackness, whilst casting Osaka – and her shy, introverted nature – as less racially intimidating.

However, far from being an angel who would deliver a traditionally white sport away from the "sordid unpleasantries" of race, Osaka has become one of the loudest advocates for racial justice in the tennis community. Following her defiant stand at the Western & Southern Open, Osaka furthered her political activism at the 2020 U.S. Open by wearing masks with the names of victims of police brutality as she warmed up and made media appearances. This action reinforced her intention to use the spotlight of international tennis to focus on the systemic problem of police brutality in the U.S., "I thought about the best way to raise awareness and honour voices that have been silenced, it

³⁷¹ Nadia Soraya McDonald, "The One and Only Naomi Osaka," *Undefeated*, March 8, 2019, <https://theundefeated.com/features/the-one-and-only-naomi-osaka/> (Accessed: 12/8/21).

³⁷² Helen Davidson, "'Repugnant, Racist': News Corp cartoon on Serena Williams condemned," *Guardian*, September 11, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2018/sep/11/repugnant-racist-news-corp-cartoon-serena-williams-mark-knight> (Accessed: 7/1/22).

³⁷³ Andrew Lawrence, "How Naomi Osaka Became the Improbable, Indispensable Voice of Our Moment," *Guardian*, September 13, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2020/sep/12/naomi-osaka-racial-justice-activism-facemasks> (Accessed: 5/1/22).

was something I had to do.”³⁷⁴ Osaka’s protest was an ingenious display of symbolic activism that forced attention onto seven victims of police brutality – one for each round of the open. Moreover, in an interview with *Ad Week* after the tournament Osaka stated, “I wasn’t concerned about my sponsor relationships at all. Honestly, the thought never crossed my mind.”³⁷⁵ This attitude illustrated why Osaka’s activism at the U.S. Open was labelled a “pivotal moment for the sports marketing industry.”³⁷⁶ Her actions marked a clear departure of athletes from the “Jordan model” of the 1990s that had witnessed athletes become “too distracted by the trappings of mainstream society and blind to important issues.”³⁷⁷ Osaka’s actions at the U.S. Open drew her sponsors into the ongoing debates around racial injustice in contemporary society, as they were forced to issue statements on her protest. But, the response was epitomised by that of the tennis racket company Yonex, “We think Ms. Osaka’s actions reflect our basic stance, and we respect her actions.”³⁷⁸ Companies looked to support the protest whilst avoiding any mention of the more polarizing themes such as police brutality or systemic racism that were central to Osaka’s activism, “watching the continued genocide of Black people at the hands of the police is honestly making me sick to my stomach...when will it ever be enough?”³⁷⁹

What makes Osaka such an effective example for the change in attitude amongst contemporary athletes is that in 2020 she was the highest paid female athlete in history.³⁸⁰ The final of the 2018 U.S. Open symbolised a changing of the guard in women’s tennis, Williams was entering the twilight of her career meaning there was a vacancy at the summit of the sport. With her dominant performance on the court and unique personality off of it Osaka rose to this position; “in terms of a young, dynamic presence in female tennis who can appeal to a new generation of consumers, there isn’t really anybody right now that’s grabbing attention like Osaka.”³⁸¹ This perspective focused on

³⁷⁴ Elena Bergeron, “How Putting on a Mask Raised Naomi Osaka’s Voice,” *New York Times*, December 16, 2020,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/16/sports/tennis/naomi-osaka-protests-open.html> (Accessed: 14/1/22).

³⁷⁵ T.L. Stanley, “How Naomi Osaka Aces Her Brand Partnerships,” *Ad Week*, November 15, 2020, <https://www.adweek.com/performance-marketing/how-athlete-naomi-osaka-aces-her-brand-partnerships/> (Accessed: 17/12/21).

³⁷⁶ Sara Germano, “Sport and Politics: Naomi Osaka and the value of stars speaking out,” *Financial Times*, November 15, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/5b004c93-2e8d-48d5-bbea-e3cff1d79ea8> (Accessed: 9/1/22).

³⁷⁷ Wright, “Be Like Mike?” 13.

³⁷⁸ Germano, “Sport and Politics.”

³⁷⁹ Bergeron “How Putting on a Mask Raised Naomi Osaka’s Voice.”

³⁸⁰ Mike Chiari, “Naomi Osaka, Serena Williams Top 2020 Forbes Highest-paid Female Athletes List,” *Bleacher Report*, August 19, 2020, <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/2905332-naomi-osaka-serena-williams-top-2020-forbes-highest-paid-female-athletes-list> (Accessed: 24/1/22).

³⁸¹ Luigi Gatto, “Expert Explains Why Osaka Can be More Marketable than Cristiano Ronaldo,” *Tennis USA*, February 2, 2019,

Osaka's on-court status as fuelling her rise to financial superstardom. Whilst this is true, Osaka also brought a uniquely "authentic and unpretentious persona" that endeared her to fans all around the world – especially those of the commercially prized younger demographic.³⁸² These factors resulted in Osaka becoming one of the most commercially sought after athletes of this generation. But, in spite of this financial success, Osaka was not distracted from her pursuit of social justice. In her interview with *Ad Week* she reaffirmed her stance on her corporate relationships, "speaking out on any topic for me doesn't come with commercial consideration."³⁸³ This reinforces how prominent athletes today possess a far greater level of self-determination, athletes such as Osaka, are setting their own agenda and not looking for approval when it comes to speaking out on social injustice. Furthermore, as an inverse to the late twentieth century, this attitude is contributing to athlete's financial success.

A key difference in the comparison between Osaka and Jordan is the way that many major corporations have responded to athlete-activism today. Unlike in the Jordan era, when companies embraced the post-racial ideology of Reagan's America and avoided social justice activism, corporations today have been pushed by social protests to "take a stand" and be more vocal on social justice issues – such as the Black Lives Matter movement. This has led to brands actively employing athlete-activists as brand ambassadors to boost their company's commercial value. This corporate approach to activism has been identified as "woke capitalism"; which is outlined by Carl Rhodes as "a descriptor for the increasing number of corporations who align themselves with social movements whilst using that alignment in widespread publicity and marketing."³⁸⁴ Rhodes argued that by associating with "right-on political causes" companies attempt to gain customer support and therefore increase their commercial gain.³⁸⁵ This is especially geared towards the younger, more progressive demographic, which studies suggest are more supportive of brands that take a stand on social issues.³⁸⁶ We can understand this paradigm shift within the pre-existing framework of Naomi Klein's co-optation formula. In the late twentieth century, Klein outlined how companies aligned themselves with 'cool' athletes to make themselves appear cool too and therefore attract more

https://www.tennisworldusa.org/tennis/news/Tennis_Interviews/66353/expert-explains-why-osaka-can-be-more-marketable-than-cristiano-ronaldo/ (Accessed: 12/12/21).

³⁸² Ricky O'Donnell, "Naomi Osaka is the Perfect Athlete for the Next Generation," *SB Nation*, February 20, 2021,

<https://www.sbnation.com/tennis/22288890/naomi-osaka-tennis-superstar-grand-slam-butterfly-serena> (Accessed: 17/1/22).

³⁸³ Stanley, "How Naomi Osaka Aces her Brand Partnerships."

³⁸⁴ Rhodes, *Woke Capitalism*, 8.

³⁸⁵ Ibid.

³⁸⁶ Melissa Dodd, "Corporate Activism: The challenge for an age-old question," *Institute for Public Relations*, April 18, 2016,

<https://instituteforpr.org/corporate-activism-new-challenge-age-old-question/> (Accessed: 20/11/21).

consumers.³⁸⁷ These companies also avoided politically conscious athletes – Craig Hodges – to prevent any association with their controversial actions. However, brands today hold opposing views on the political activism of athletes. Less than looking for brands to appear “cool”, consumers are now looking for brands that take a stand on social justice issues, to fulfil this demand brands are co-opting the activism of athletes such as Osaka, LeBron James, or Colin Kaepernick within their marketing campaigns. This may appear to be a reversal of Klein’s original formula, however, the machinations behind the formula in the 1990s remain the same today – corporations are taking a politically conscious athlete, aligning them with their brand and using this relationship to attract – or retain – politically conscious consumers. . A key aim of this chapter is to unpack how this relationship between brands and athlete-activists can be both beneficial and limiting for the athletes involved.

This same conversation of “woke capitalism” is occurring amongst Black Lives Matter activists today. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor stated that the public support received by Black activists from major corporations such as Google or the Ford Foundation are “obvious attempts to connect the inherent progressive character of social movements to their ‘brand’.”³⁸⁸ Taylor’s statement shows that there is a broader framework of organizations aligning with progressive figures – or movements – to improve their bottom line, but also that this corporate support does not possess purely altruistic motivations. Similarly, Dave Zirin denounced these corporate marketing campaigns as the “commodification of dissent.”³⁸⁹ Zirin’s disapproval suggests that these corporate actions followed the same blueprint that was used by Michael Jordan in 2016; although the statements appeared supportive and suggested a move away from the political silence of the 1990s, they contained little substance or impact. NBA legend Kareem Abdul-Jabbar echoed this sentiment as he denounced these corporate statements as being “crafted more toward public relations than public welfare.”³⁹⁰ Nonetheless, this trend of “woke capitalism” along with the general unsustainability of corporate neutrality offers an unprecedented platform for athlete-activists, provided they prevent their activism from being diluted.³⁹¹

What can sometimes be overlooked or dismissed too abruptly in these discussions of “woke” corporate advertising is the opportunity that it presents for athletes to publicly address racial

³⁸⁷ Klein, *No Logo*, 45.

³⁸⁸ Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, “Five Years Later, Do Black Lives Matter?” *Jacobin Magazine*, September 30, 2019, <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/09/black-lives-matter-laquan-mcdonald-mike-brown-eric-garner> (Accessed: 25/11/21).

³⁸⁹ Dave Zirin, “WNBA Players – Again – Show the Meaning of Radical Dissent,” *Nation*, July 27, 2020, <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/layshia-clarendon-wnba/> (Accessed: 14/7/21).

³⁹⁰ Abdul-Jabbar, “Kareem Abdul-Jabbar’s Stand for Social Justice.”

³⁹¹ Dodd, “Corporate Activism.”

injustice. As was seen with Osaka at the 2020 U.S. Open, athletes' political engagement can increase the pressure on brands to take a stance on social injustice. But there remains a need for athletes to navigate their corporate relationships and ensure that their activism is not being diluted or constrained as corporations aim to walk the tightrope of appearing progressive, whilst also not alienating more moderate consumers. The problems and potential of these relationships present themselves in the examples of Nike's 2018 Just Do It campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick and Beats by Dre's 2020 "Flex That" advertising campaign including Naomi Osaka. Both of these examples feature major brands co-opting the political activism of professional athletes to create a progressive marketing campaign. Their rhetoric and how they connect with the wider politics of the athletes they feature speaks to the possibilities of these "woke" campaigns whilst reaffirming the limitations of corporate involvement in social justice.

As the figurehead for this generation of athlete-activists, Colin Kaepernick possessed a significant amount of commercial capital. This was identified by Nike when he became the frontman for the 30th anniversary edition of Nike's Just Do It campaign, featuring the slogan "Believe in something even if it means sacrificing everything." The campaign garnered a mixed response, some Nike customers took to social media to burn their Nike merchandise with the caption "#JustBurnIt" as a sign of disapproval. Additionally, right-wing commentators, such as then-President Donald Trump criticised Kaepernick's selection, "Nike is going to be killed by anger and boycotts."³⁹² However, Nike's decision garnered support in some camps, this included Serena Williams, who praised the campaign as "a powerful statement to a lot of other companies."³⁹³ Other commentators supported Nike's decision to endorse Kaepernick, but saw through the effort at social justice activism; Jemele Hill identified one simple reason for Nike's decision, "to make money."³⁹⁴ Analysing the campaign from a financial perspective illuminates the money-making power of athlete-orientated "woke capitalism". In the first 19 hours the advert received \$43 million in media exposure and became an international talking point – which brought even more attention onto Nike.³⁹⁵

But the example of Colin Kaepernick highlights how corporate marketing campaigns can dilute an athlete's activism to better suit their campaign. Nike used the symbolism of Kaepernick to appeal to

³⁹² Dennis Green, "Trump Says Nike ad Featuring Colin Kaepernick Sends 'a terrible message'," *Business Insider*, September 4, 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-comments-on-nike-colin-kaepernick-ad-2018-9?r=US&IR=T> (Accessed: 15/2/22).

³⁹³ Ibid.

³⁹⁴ Jemele Hill, "Nike's ad Featuring Colin Kaepernick Isn't Risky At All; It's Business," *Undefeated*, September 5, 2018, <https://theundefeated.com/features/nikes-ad-featuring-colin-kaepernick-isnt-risky-at-all-its-business/> (Accessed: 17/11/21).

³⁹⁵ Ibid.

their more progressive and often younger consumer base, whilst omitting the more controversial elements of his activism so as to not alienate more moderate customers. In a statement announcing their partnership with Kaepernick, Nike's VP of branding Gino Fisanotti said, "we believe Colin is one of the most inspirational athletes of this generation, who has leveraged the power of sport to help move the world forward."³⁹⁶ While this statement is clearly supportive of Kaepernick, it simultaneously avoids any specific reference to police brutality, racial injustice, or his wider political beliefs. Indeed, in 2021, Kaepernick published a book titled *Abolition for the People*, that featured a collection of essays geared towards the defunding of the police and abolition of the American carceral system.³⁹⁷ This reinforces the discrepancy between Kaepernick's radical political philosophy and his largely symbolic portrayal by Nike in 2018. Nike diluted Kaepernick's activism by using his radical symbolism to market the image of rebellion, whilst stripping that rebellion of its content.³⁹⁸ This is not a criticism of Kaepernick, as he was not relying on Nike to amplify his message. However, Nike's failure to include Kaepernick's specific policy demands and political worldview illustrated the limitations inherent in "woke" corporate advertising campaigns.

In 2020, Beats By Dre followed the blueprint of Nike's Just Do It advertisement by releasing their "Flex That" campaign to announce the launch of their new Beats Flex headphones. Just as Nike aligned themselves with Kaepernick, Beats looked to feature Naomi Osaka to capitalise on her progressive appeal. The campaign launched three vignettes that were designed to support the Black Lives Matter movement by "speaking to a demand and longing for change."³⁹⁹ One of these short videos featured Osaka as she prepared for a tennis match with the message "silence is violence" written into her braided hair. Taking place just two months after the U.S. Open, there is a clear connection between Osaka's symbolic protest and her desire to push her sponsors to take more explicit policy positions. In her statement released alongside the vignette she stated, "I'm grateful to be able to use my global platform to speak out against racial injustice. I do believe "silence is

³⁹⁶ Dave Zirin, "On Colin Kaepernick's Nike ad: Will the revolution be branded," *Nation*, September 4, 2018, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/on-colin-kaepernicks-nike-ad-will-the-revolution-be-branded/> (Accessed: 12/11/21).

³⁹⁷ Colin Kaepernick, *Abolition for the People: The Movement For a Future Without Policing and Prisons* (New York: Kaepernick Publishing, 2021).

³⁹⁸ Ben Carrington & Jules Boykoff, "Is Colin Kaepernick's Nike Deal Activism – or Just Capitalism?" *Guardian*, September 6, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/sep/06/colin-kaepernick-nike-activism-capitalism-nfl> (Accessed: 14/12/21).

³⁹⁹ I-Hsien Sherwood, "Naomi Osaka Won't Stay Silent in Poignant ad for Beats By Dre," *Ad Age*, November 24, 2020, <https://adage.com/creativity/work/naomi-osaka-wont-stay-silent-poignant-ad-beats-dre/2296521> (Accessed: 10/1/21).

violence” and we all have to do our part to help change the world for the better.”⁴⁰⁰ This demonstrated how Osaka managed her relationship with her sponsors to amplify her activism and increase the opportunity for political engagement with the Black Lives Matter movement. But, in spite of the permeation of Osaka’s message within the campaign, Beats By Dre still failed to offer any tangible support to the Black Lives Matter movement. The lack of a direct interaction with the themes of police brutality or racial injustice highlights the fundamental flaw in these marketing campaigns – the desire of major corporations to maintain a degree of political palatability prevents a full demonstration of support for the Black Lives Matter movement. There is some progress in comparison to Nike’s Just Do It campaign, which failed to reference Kaepernick’s broader political beliefs, but the somewhat vague message of “silence is violence” continues to offer little tangible impact to the Black Lives Matter movement and subsequently reaffirms the constrained nature of such “woke” corporate marketing campaigns.

It is necessary to point out that not all athletes today are openly speaking out on social injustice. The concept of athletes shying away from controversial political topics to protect their popularity and commercial value remains pertinent today, but there has been a vast increase in athletes who prioritise their involvement in social justice activism over protecting corporate relationships and even push their sponsors to take public stances on social justice issues. Similarly, it is important to state that not all brands have displayed a willingness to take more progressive policy positions in support of anti-racist politics, there are still brands that shy away from any controversial topics, however these are rapidly becoming the outlier rather than the norm. The initial focus on the activism of Naomi Osaka looked to demonstrate the change in attitude amongst prominent contemporary athletes in comparison to the 1990s. This is of fundamental importance in understanding the contemporary relationship between athletes and major corporations today. Furthermore, the examples of “woke capitalism” and the co-optation formula demonstrate the importance of athletes being able to navigate corporate relationships to ensure that their activism is not being diluted.

In her discussion of corporate involvement in social justice movements, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor denounced the development of corporate philanthropic departments as an effort to influence social debates, specifically by implementing a focus on moderation and compromise. Taylor’s argument stated that corporate involvement in social justice activism is not restricted to co-opting the activism of athletes to produce “woke” marketing campaigns. These companies are also creating their own

⁴⁰⁰ DeMicia Inman, “Naomi Osaka Stars in Beats By Dre ‘Flex That’ Campaign,” *Grio*, November 19, 2020, <https://thegrio.com/2020/11/19/naomi-osaka-beats-by-dre-flex-that-campaign/> (Accessed: 9/1/22).

social justice initiatives that aim to implement “practical solutions to advance a movement.”⁴⁰¹ However, these initiatives rarely target polarizing, systemic issues that divide popular opinion, instead they proffer a narrative of collaboration and progress that maintains a degree of universal palatability, so as to not alienate any potential consumers. The NFL’s “Inspire Change” initiative will be used to unpack the problematic nature of such corporate activism, whilst also discussing the idea that athletes are aware of these problems but are nonetheless using the corporate dedication to social justice to promote positive change in their communities.

“Inspire Change” and Corporate Social Responsibility Initiatives

In January 2019, the NFL launched their “Inspire Change” initiative. The initiative was a product of the negotiations carried out between the league and the Players coalition – a group of NFL players who continued to protest the national anthem in the post-Kaepernick NFL era. The initiative was praised by ESPN as “an unprecedented move by a major sports professional league.”⁴⁰² However, this praise oversold the initiative as it represented a consistent trend in corporate activism; it created a narrative focused on collaboration and community uplift to avoid potentially antagonizing political forms of activism. The purpose of this section is to use the Inspire Change initiative as a case study to unpack the limitations and complexities of corporate social responsibility initiatives in contemporary sport. This will begin by defining what is meant by corporate social responsibility today, before unpacking the constrained nature of the Inspire Change initiative and why this has led to cynicism amongst some activists and scholars. Finally, the case study will look to show that athletes are aware of the limitations of these corporate initiatives but are nonetheless using their emphasis on social justice to implement positive social programs.

The Inspire Change initiative was created as a branch of the NFL’s \$89 million social justice partnership with the Players Coalition in 2018. Some athlete-activists such as Malcolm Jenkins believed this offered a positive solution that the protest had been working towards, “What the league proposed, presented a bigger and better platform to continue to fluctuate positive change.”⁴⁰³ However, a minority of Players Coalition members, including Kenny Stills, viewed the

⁴⁰¹ Taylor, “Five Years Later, Do Black Lives Matter?”

⁴⁰² Jim Trotter and Jason Reid, “Players Debating NFL’s Proposed Donation to Social Justice,” *ESPN*, November 29, 2017, https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/21606390/nfl-offers-100-million-plan-social-justice-organizations-partnership-players (Accessed: 16/7/21).

⁴⁰³ Zach Berman, “Eagles Safety Malcolm Jenkins Will Not Raise Fist During National Anthem on Sunday,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 30, 2017, <https://www.inquirer.com/philly/sports/eagles/eagles-safety-malcolm-jenkins-protest-national-anthem-nfl-social-justice-awareness-20171130.html> (Accessed: 12/12/21).

agreement – and its lack of recognition for Kaepernick – as having “sold out the protest.”⁴⁰⁴ The NFL’s motivation became clear the day after the partnership was agreed upon when NFL owners voted to implement a new policy that made it compulsory to stand during the playing of the national anthem.⁴⁰⁵ The players were outraged and the mandate was ultimately rejected, but the timing of the attempted change, as well as the fact that Jenkins had asked other members of the Players Coalition to stop kneeling as a result of the partnership suggested that the owners viewed this as a culmination of the protests.⁴⁰⁶ Additionally, at an NFL owners meeting held in October 2017 – seven months before the partnership was announced – it was reported that the owner’s priority was to end the protests to protect against “the very real financial problems facing the NFL.”⁴⁰⁷ These events and reports signify that for the NFL, the investment into the Inspire Change initiative was not an effort at socially conscious activism, but rather an attempt to buy an end to the take a knee protest to protect their brand. The initiative’s focus on unification and collaboration, as well as the complete avoidance of any polarizing political rhetoric suggests that the NFL’s creation of Inspire Change was similar to the process of “movement capture” that was identified by Megan Ming Francis as having an impact on the NAACP in the 1920s. “Movement capture referred to the way that donors would use their funding to alter the organization’s political focus to become less threatening.”⁴⁰⁸ The example of the NFL and Inspire Change mirrors this, but also presents the caveat of using “movement capture” to protect the financial interests of the organization itself.

The Inspire Change initiative is a contemporary example of a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiative. Just like the endorsement deals given to athlete-activists that were discussed in the previous section of this chapter, these initiatives are intended to integrate social activism into the brand of a major corporation, with the aim of appealing to younger, more progressive consumers. Peter F. Drucker defined social responsibility in business as an effort to “tame the dragon, to turn a social problem into an economic opportunity.”⁴⁰⁹ In recent years sporting organizations have responded to the political turmoil resulting from their athletes involvement in social justice

⁴⁰⁴ Bryant, *The Heritage*, 234-35.

⁴⁰⁵ Kevin Seifert & Dan Graziano, “New Policy Requires On-field Players, Personnel to Stand for Anthem,” *ESPN*, May 23, 2018, https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/23582533/nfl-owners-approve-new-national-anthem-policy (Accessed: 15/2/22).

⁴⁰⁶ Bryant, *The Heritage*, 236.

⁴⁰⁷ Seth Wickersham & Don Van Natta Jr., “Gaffes, TV Ratings Concerns Dominated as NFL, Players Forged Anthem Peace,” *ESPN*, October 27, 2017, https://www.espn.com/espn/otl/story/_/id/21170410/gaffes-tv-ratings-concerns-dominated-nfl-players-forged-anthem-peace-league-meetings (Accessed: 22/12/21).

⁴⁰⁸ Megan Ming Francis, “The Price of Civil Rights: Black Lives, White Funding, and Movement Capture,” *Law & Society Review* vol. 53, no. 1 (2019): 276.

⁴⁰⁹ Peter F. Drucker, “The New Meaning of Corporate Social Responsibility,” *California Management Review* vol. 26, no. 2 (1984): 62.

movements by creating social justice programs that Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor identified as an effort made by big businesses to “redirect or reshape disruptions toward more reasonable means.”⁴¹⁰ This alludes to the relevance of “movement capture” in contemporary corporate social justice initiatives, the NFL’s aim was to use their investment in the social justice partnership to reorientate their athletes activism away from the polarizing take a knee movement towards a narrative of moderation and compromise. The emphasis on unification allowed the NFL to market themselves as socially progressive and therefore turn the “problem” of athletes protesting into an economic opportunity.

Although Inspire Change does focus on serious problems that are affecting communities, the NFL’s desire to avoid political confrontation prevents a focus on larger societal structures that are often the root cause of issues in poor communities, thus ensuring that the initiative remains palatable for all NFL fans. This was encapsulated in a commercial aired in 2018 to announce the creation of the Inspire Change initiative. The advert focused on the problem of gun violence in the city of Chicago. In 2018, Chicago represented an important space in gun control debates for various reasons, firstly Illinois’ gun control laws combined with the high levels of gun violence were being used by right-wing politicians to denounce gun control.⁴¹¹ Secondly, urban gun violence is seen by many as a result of a lack of resources and support in lower income neighbourhoods.⁴¹² Finally, Chicago is frequently used as a case study to purport racial stereotypes about “black on black” violence.⁴¹³ However, the NFL’s commercial did not focus on any of these contentious debates, instead the public introduction to the work of Inspire Change in Chicago focused on the politically vague narrative of “bringing people together and growing relationships.”⁴¹⁴ Ultimately, the themes of unification and positive outcomes that were centred upon in the commercial had the desired impact of moving away from the political confrontation of the take a knee movement to present “an audience-friendly enterprise that trades the demand for justice for the convenience of passive support that suits the commercial needs of the NFL.”⁴¹⁵ This shows how the NFL is “taming the dragon” of social justice activism and turning the previous “problem” of athlete’s protesting into an opportunity to present the league as a progressive corporation. The advertisement is not a substantial example of the work of Inspire

⁴¹⁰ Taylor, “Five Years Later, Do Black Lives Matter?”

⁴¹¹ Allyson Chiu, “‘Keep Our Name Out of Your Mouth’: Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot spars with Ted Cruz over gun control,” *Washington Post*, September 4, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/09/04/lori-lightfoot-ted-cruz-gun-control-chicago-violence/> (Accessed: 15/2/22).

⁴¹² Anthony A. Braga et al., “Race, Place, and Effective Policing,” *Annual Review of Sociology* (2019).

⁴¹³ Lincoln Anthony Blades, “Trump’s Obsession with Chicago Explained,” *Teen Vogue*, July 6, 2017, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/trumps-obsession-with-chicago-explained> (Accessed: 15/2/22).

⁴¹⁴ Adam Rugg, “Incorporating the Protests: The NFL, Social Justice, and the Constrained Activism of the “Inspire Change” Campaign,” *Sport Communication and Social Justice* vol. 8 no. 4-5 (2020): 619.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 623.

Change, but rather serves as a microcosm of the initiative's shortcomings. The NFL had an opportunity to engage in a politically relevant conversation that could unpack the major problem of gun violence, but instead the league chose to hide behind the politically vague – and safer – narrative of moderation and compromise that would not polarize their consumers. This “market friendly version of justice” is limited by its focus on superficial factors, hence Rugg's denunciation of the initiative as “constrained”.⁴¹⁶

The problems that manifest themselves in the Inspire Change initiative speak to the hazards of athletes allowing major corporations to co-opt their activism. Denunciations of the Inspire Change initiative are valid, and as is seen in the example of gun violence in Chicago the initiative is clearly constrained in its activism. However, the athletes who are engaging in this form of activism cannot be dismissed as being naïve or cast as “sell-outs”. Many athletes today who engage in this form of corporate activism are aware of the shortcomings but believe that they can use this relationship to create positive programs in their communities. Former NFL player, and member of the Players Coalition Derrick Morgan surmised this attitude, “they're saying, here, take this, shut up and stop talking about the issues...but, hey, we'll take the money because it's going to a good cause.”⁴¹⁷ Morgan fully understood that the NFL was not going to be a trailblazer, or fund an athlete insurrection against institutional racism, but he also recognised that athletes could operate within this corporate space to implement programs that benefit the Black community. This introduces us to the positive work that is being carried out within the framework of these corporate initiatives, work that can sometimes be overshadowed by the discussions of the shortcomings of corporate activism. This impact is highlighted by “the four pillars of Inspire Change.”⁴¹⁸ The NFL's social justice coalition that is formed of both players and owners identified four priority areas that were recognised as “barriers to opportunity for minority communities in the U.S.”⁴¹⁹ These areas included Education, Economic advancement, Police and community relations, and Criminal justice reform. The work that athletes are carrying out under the banner of Inspire Change in 2020 is geared towards helping communities in these areas. For example, Kelvin Beachum of the Arizona Cardinals recently launched his “Full Steam Ahead” program which helps sponsor minority children in the areas of Science,

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., 611.

⁴¹⁷ Jessica Bliss, “Titans Derrick Morgan Calls NFL's Social Justice Pledge ‘Hush Money’ But Says it's Also Progress,” *Tennessean*, April 25, 2019, <https://eu.tennessean.com/story/news/2019/04/25/nfl-draft-2019-social-justice-players-coalition-future/3551919002/> (Accessed: 25/11/21).

⁴¹⁸ Associated Press, “NFL Awards 13 New Grants Under Inspire Change Initiative,” *USA Today*, January 8, 2021, <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/sports/nfl/2021/01/08/nfl-awards-13-new-grants-under-inspire-change-initiative/43315537/> (Accessed: 15/2/22).

⁴¹⁹ Ibid.

Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics. His focus on education stemmed from his desire to “change the stereotypes associated with certain folks in education, and also change their role in the global economy.”⁴²⁰ In support of Beachum’s program, Inspire Change released advertising campaigns, a promotional video, and Beachum’s op-ed onto their website which all aimed to increase the awareness of his work targeting educational inequality. Within these there is a clear focus on the positives of the initiative, and it reinforces the importance of education as a social justice issue. But, just like the example of gun violence in Chicago, the Inspire Change series stops short of recognising the broader factors that exist in educational inequality. The way that Beachum uses the support of the Inspire Change initiative to bolster his activism supports the assertion that corporate social justice initiatives can be impactful and given the increasing volume of sporting organizations that are creating these initiatives it is important to consider them within the broader discussion of contemporary athlete-activism. Despite the work of athletes in this corporate framework being constrained, athletes are not naively engaging in this area of activism, they understand the corporate motivations, but nonetheless see how these initiatives can have a positive effect.

The focus on how athletes are navigating corporate relationships in the context of the Inspire Change initiative is not intended to refute Rugg’s claim that the initiative is a “strategic calculation that seeks to offset the devolution of the protests into a polarized partisan discourse.”⁴²¹ Rather, the aim of this section is to advance the discussion of corporate activism to consider how contemporary athletes have to manage their relationship with major corporations in relation to their activism. Corporate social responsibility initiatives such as Inspire Change are consistently undermined by big organizations’ desire to protect their economic viability by ensuring any initiatives are politically palatable. Furthermore, the NFL’s involvement in social justice reflects the practices of big business in co-opting Black activism in an attempt to redirect activism towards “more reasonable means.”⁴²² However, the scepticism surrounding corporate social responsibility should not detract from the work of athletes within these frameworks. For athletes such as Morgan they understand that the corporate motivations can be murky, but if the money is creating the opportunity for change, then

⁴²⁰ Howard Balzer, “Beachum Part of ‘Kelvin Connects’ That Stresses Importance of Education,” *Sports Illustrated*, October 26, 2021, <https://www.si.com/nfl/cardinals/news/beachum-featured-nfl-network-community-involvement> (Accessed: 16/1/22).

⁴²¹ Rugg, “*Incorporating the Protests*,” 623.

⁴²² Taylor, “Five Years Later, Do Black Lives Matter?”

that presents a positive outcome, “I think the end goal was positive, even if the motive wasn’t pure.”⁴²³

Conclusion

The relationship between athletes and major corporations today has shifted dramatically in comparison to the late twentieth century. Brands that had previously admonished athlete-activism are now being pushed by socially conscious athletes to take increasingly progressive positions on social inequality. Meanwhile athletes continue to use this opportunity to amplify their efforts at social justice activism – as well as the efforts of broader activist networks such as BLM. Alongside this paradigm shift athlete-activists must maintain a degree of caution. They must make sure that corporate co-optation is not diluting their activism or undermining their political philosophy. In most cases, athletes have shown that they are not going to allow themselves to be used as corporate pawns and some athletes have actively leveraged their influence to push brands towards more advanced policy positions. Critics may still argue that advertising and activism “don’t mix well”, but the work of athletes in pushing these organizations towards more progressive policy stances, at the very least constitutes a step in the right direction.⁴²⁴ An increased recognition of how athlete-activists today are managing and negotiating their corporate relationships comprises a crucial aspect of athlete-activism in our contemporary moment.

A large portion of this chapter was dedicated towards unravelling the scepticism that surrounds corporate efforts at social justice. This was intended to ensure that the chapter was not written under the illusion that corporate activism is always an authentic intervention. The efforts of big businesses are frequently orientated towards managing their public appearance, as opposed to bringing about tangible change. Whilst there may be some outliers to this statement, the examples in this chapter speak to the problematic nature of corporate social responsibility or “woke capitalism”. However, the chapter also looked to focus on the positive contributions that can emerge when athletes engage with these corporate frameworks. This aspect of corporate activism can sometimes be overlooked when considering whether corporate motivations are pure. The example of Derrick Morgan and the Inspire Change initiative was included to illustrate that oftentimes, players are aware of the perception of Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives, but simultaneously understand the positive outcomes that these initiatives are capable of implementing. Whilst it may be impossible in this space to completely determine whether increased corporate

⁴²³ Bliss, “Titans Derrick Morgan Calls NFL’s Social Justice Pledge ‘Hush Money’ But Says it’s Also Progress.”

⁴²⁴ Julia Sachs, “Beats Should Have Learned From Pepsi: Advertising and activism don’t mix well,” *Grit Daily*, January 5, 2021, <https://gritdaily.com/beats-flo-milli/> (Accessed: 20/1/22).

involvement in the activism of professional athletes is a net positive or negative, an increased understanding of this contemporary relationship gives greater context to the dissertation as a whole. Whilst it is justifiably met with distrust by a large portion of activists, the negotiation between athletes and major corporations has built towards athletes possessing a historically unparalleled level of freedom and visibility to discuss important social justice issues.

Conclusion

No athlete embodies the focus of this dissertation better than Colin Kaepernick. *The Kaepernick Effect* by Dave Zirin explored how the former-NFL quarterback inspired a whole generation of amateur and professional athletes to embrace the political power of their sporting platform.⁴²⁵ The book predominantly tells the story of the athletes who emulated Kaepernick by protesting during the playing of the national anthem.⁴²⁶ But to consider Kaepernick solely for his decision to kneel during the anthem would be underselling his importance as an athlete-activist. Kaepernick has since created a wide-ranging activist framework that seeks to improve the lives of the Black community. This started in 2016 with the founding of his grassroots Know Your Rights camps and has continued into 2021 with the creation of a publishing company and the release of a critically acclaimed Netflix series. Kaepernick's importance as an activist is not settled into one approach to activism, but rather he embodies the fact that athlete-activism is – as it always has been – complex, multi-faceted and far more than the actions that we see in popular media coverage. All too often Kaepernick is associated solely with his decision to kneel during the anthem, this is seen in criticisms such as that of Dez Bryant from chapter four, “you had the biggest opportunity in the world to help the people you was (sic) talking about. Where you at?”⁴²⁷ Just as it did with Kaepernick, the prominence of the take a knee movement and other displays of political resistance that generate a significant media community – such as the boycott of August 2020 – have caused less heralded acts of athlete-activism to be overshadowed in popular discussions. This is not an effort to downplay the significance of highly visible displays of political resistance, but rather looks to posit necessary attention on the broader scope of political action deployed by contemporary athletes. Throughout this dissertation a key focus was to show that athlete-activism today is comprised of a myriad of diverse yet connected strands of activism that are unquestionably more than “gesture politics”.

The dissertation began with a desire to show that athlete-activism did not emerge alongside the Black Lives Matter movement but rather is the product of an evolutionary process that took place alongside the Black Freedom Struggle in the 20th century. The analysis of historic athlete-activists including Jack Johnson, Jackie Robinson, Althea Gibson, Muhammad Ali, Rose Robinson, and many others was intended to contextualise the contemporary focus of the dissertation in the rich history of Black athletic activism. The second chapter's juxtaposition of the careers of Michael Jordan and Craig Hodges revealed the late twentieth century to be an important, and often overlooked era in

⁴²⁵ Zirin, *The Kaepernick Effect*.

⁴²⁶ Zirin also includes the work that Kaepernick is doing outside of sport, but the focus remained on the take a knee movement.

⁴²⁷ Bryant, *I Am Athlete* (Podcast).

the evolution of athlete-activism to the present day, as well as continuing the focus on how athletes' actions have been shaped by the broader political atmosphere of their time. The chapter highlighted how the financial, cultural, and social expansion of the sporting industry contributed towards athlete-activism today.

From there, the dissertation came to focus on the current landscape of athlete-activism. This began by looking at how athletes are leveraging the popular exposure of the sporting industry to engage in political activism. This looked to undermine the argument that athletes' displays of political resistance lacked tangible impact, and also discussed the NBA-led boycott of 2020 as an extension of Kaepernick's protest. From here the dissertation moved on to discuss the community orientated activism of contemporary athletes. From Kenny Stills' involvement with local organizations and initiatives, to Natasha Cloud's lobbying of local government officials over gun reform, and LeBron James' pragmatic intervention into the education system in his hometown of Akron, Ohio, this chapter focused on how athletes are building on the historic tradition of community organizing by improving the everyday lives of the African American community. The 2020 U.S. election witnessed athletes engage in another key tenet of contemporary athlete-activism. In the post-Shelby County vs. Holder climate of voting rights activism, athlete-led initiatives such as the "More Than a Vote" organization placed athletes on the frontlines of the battle to protect the right to vote in contemporary America. Furthermore, the #VoteWarnock campaign highlighted how athletes can shape the discourse of electoral politics. These examples illustrate how the landscape of contemporary athlete-activism extended into the arena of electoral politics. The final chapter analysed the contemporary relationship between athletes, major corporations and activism. Today, there exists an unprecedented level of corporate tolerance for athlete-activism, and the ways in which athletes are navigating these relationships shows how they are using this freedom and visibility to amplify their activism. Furthermore, the involvement of athletes in initiatives such as "Inspire Change" showed that these corporate relationships can result in positive outcomes, but nevertheless require caution. The focus on these separate avenues of activism was not intended to portray an exhaustive sample of athlete-activism, instead this looked to unpack the complexity of contemporary athlete-activism by exploring the broader infrastructure that exists today. Furthermore, this perspective recognises that athletes need to be considered as more than a symbolic attachment to the Black Lives Matter movement, but rather a powerful bloc of activists who are critical actors in contemporary racial politics.

This dissertation primarily unpacked the role of athletes in the Black Freedom Movement, both historically and contemporarily. However, there are several avenues that can be explored to understand the broader impact of athletes on society. Firstly, other domestic social movements have

found their goals amplified by the activism of athletes. The U.S. National Women's Soccer team have been at the forefront of pushing for gender equality with their lawsuit against the U.S. Soccer federation for equal pay, mirroring the historic actions of Billie Jean King against the World Tennis Association in the 1970s. Similarly, LGBTQ+ athletes are using their platform to advocate on behalf of their community, this can be seen in the WNBA's promotion of pride month, and NFL player Carl Nassib's status as the first openly homosexual NFL player. This holds a huge significance for beginning to breakdown the stigma against homosexuality in traditionally masculine sports by challenging the stereotype that gay man will not be accepted in "macho" spaces. In regards to breaking down stigmas, athletes have been at the forefront of advocating for people to take better care of their mental health. At the 2021 Olympics, Simone Biles, arguably the greatest gymnast of all-time, made waves for her decision to prioritise her mental well-being over competing. Similarly, NBA players such as Kevin Love and Demar Derozan have been open in the struggles with mental health disorders and this championing of the mental health crisis has helped set the example that it is okay to not be okay. These examples show how the study of athletes and social issues can be expanded within the scope of the U.S., but there are also numerous examples of the internationalisation of athlete-activism. At the European football championship in 2021, the England football team sparked a discussion around racism in English football when they knelt prior to their games and were abused following the final. This connection to the take a knee movement highlighted the transnational scope of athlete-activism. Furthermore, there is an intriguing discussion as to the role of contemporary athletes in international diplomacy, as current NBA player Enes Kanter Freedom has been an outspoken critic of the Chinese government, specifically the alleged genocide of the Uyghurs, in the Xinjiang province. Freedom's comments have resulted in the NBA being banned in China and can open a discussion into the role of athletes in these international debates. Unfortunately, the scope of this dissertation did not allow for the full study of these areas of athlete-activism, but there is a need for this research to take place as it opens a new lens to view the impact of these issues on our society.

Popular debates of athlete-activism all too often focus on specific, highly visible acts of political defiance performed by athletes, this in turn has led to a vast infrastructure of athlete-activism to be overshadowed in the popular understanding of what the term athlete-activist really means. An athlete-activist, within the format of this dissertation, is an athlete who uses their platform in American society to alleviate the manifestations of systemic racism that continue to plague minority communities today. Such activism does not have to take place at a prescribed time, place, or event, nor is it dependent on the media community or attention that it subsequently accrues. The case studies involved in this dissertation exemplify the fact that outside of the popular media's spotlight

there exists a significant number of athlete-activists who are working against systemic oppression in all its forms. Just as you cannot conceive of the Black Freedom Struggle with a sole focus on one form of resistance or method of organizing, it is impossible to understand the importance of Black athlete-activists by only focusing on one strand of athlete-activism. This vast scope of athlete-activism speaks to the prominence of athletes as legitimate actors in the contemporary era of the Black Freedom Struggle. Although contemporary athletes are leveraging their resources to facilitate their activism, the intersection between athlete-activists and Black Lives Matter is far more than athletes lending their celebrity to the movement. Far from any claims of “gesture politics”, athletes today maintain a prominent position as key figures in the contemporary era of the Black Freedom Struggle.

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