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I'm Hopeful the Power of Sport Will Expand to Spur Social Change

By **Richard E Lapchick**
UCF Forum columnist
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I teach a class in the DeVos Sport Business Management graduate program at the University of Central Florida on ethical and moral principles in sport. Last week we welcomed a distinguished panel to our class, which included: Charlie Freeman, executive vice president of the Orlando Magic; Linda Landman-Gonzalez, vice president for government affairs and community relations for the Orlando Magic; Brett Lashbrook, chief operating officer of Orlando City Soccer; and Keith Lee, the chief operating officer of the National Consortium of Academics and Sport.

I opened the session by talking about what a problematic year it has been for professional sport in terms of ethical issues. The year was dominated by the story of former Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice, domestic violence in the NFL, and the issue of race with two owners in the National Basketball Association. Interspersed were stories about child abuse and several sport-specific cases such as the New England Patriots' "Deflategate" and the growing concern about concussions in many sports at almost all levels.

The case of the L.A. Clippers' former owner Donald Sterling, followed by the Atlanta Hawks ownership with Bruce Levenson, brought the spotlight on the NBA. Not only did NBA commissioner Adam Silver deal with them directly and promptly but months later the NBA used the All-Star game to continue the discussions.

I had just returned from the NBA All-Star weekend which was, of course, filled with great basketball-related events. Unlike other sports, which shy away from serious issues confronting our society and the sport at their sporting celebrations, the NBA, its players, and its retired players tackle the issues head-on.

On Thursday, night the National Basketball Retired Players Association hosted the world premiere of the new play, “The Harlem Rens,” focusing on the great all-black team, which won the first integrated professional national basketball championship in 1939, amidst a largely segregated America and in the face of significant racism and odds against them. It was a very powerful off-Broadway production and was a great complement to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar’s brilliant film, “On the Shoulders of Giants,” about the Rens, which stands for Renaissance.

On Friday night, the retired players honored Black History Month with a panel focusing on racial and gender issues. The panel included Spencer Haywood, Nate “Tiny” Archibald, Ralph Sampson, Theresa Witherspoon and myself.

On Saturday morning, the NBA Newsmakers Breakfast was all about race in America. The NBA brought together a panel, moderated by Soledad O’Brien, which featured U.S. Sen. Cory Booker of New Jersey, former U.S. Sen. Bill Bradley, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Georgetown professor and author Michael Eric Dyson. I have been part of and around many profound discussions on race for more than five decades, and this was one of the best.

On Saturday night, NBA All-Star and MVP candidate Stephen Curry showed support for Deah Shaddy Barakat’s family. Barakat was one of the three Muslim students recently murdered in North Carolina. Curry wrote #CurryForDeah and #RIPDeah on his shoes during the 3-point shootout that evening. It was reported that Barakat was a fan of Curry, and the basketball player said he would send the shoes to the victim’s family so they would know a lot of people cared about their terrible loss.

Curry’s solitary gesture during the All-Star break had me reflecting back on the year in which more players got involved with making statements about racial issues than ever before. The Clippers protested owner Sterling’s racism before a playoff game. Many players across different sports protested after the grand jury decisions about fatal racial confrontations in Ferguson, Mo., and Staten Island, N.Y. Major League Baseball players stood tall against human trafficking in public-service announcements.

Athletics departments on 10 college campuses this year also took a stand against human trafficking in a way that involved thousands of students on their campuses.

Also, the NFL showed public-service announcements about gender violence during regular season games and the Super Bowl. It was a painful road for the NFL to get there

but in the end they were making a contribution to society focusing on serious issues through the sports platform.

As someone who has tried to use the sports platform and the power of sport to address serious social issues during the past 50 years, it gives me great hope that we will use that sports platform in an expanded way in the years ahead. Society can only be better for it if we do.

Richard E. Lapchick is chair of UCF's DeVos Sports Business Management Program and director of The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport, which annually publishes racial and gender report cards on MLB, the NBA, WNBA, NFL, MLS, college sports, and Associated Press sports editors. He is the author of 16 books that primarily focus on racial and gender issues and ethics in college sport. He can be followed on Twitter [@richardlapchick](https://twitter.com/richardlapchick) and on facebook.com/richard.lapchick. He can be reached at rlapchick@ucf.edu.