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Carlos and Smith, Black Protest, and the Black Athlete

Richard C. Crepeau
University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

University of Central Florida

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On of the most indelible images of sport in the Sixties was the
picture of Tommy Smith and John Carlos standing on the victory
podium with their black gloved fist salute during the playing of
the American national anthem. That image returned to me this
past week when ESPN presented a three-part series on the social
role of the Black Athlete.

Ironically this symbol of the decade was in a way the result of
the failure of the attempt by Harry Edwards to organize a
boycott of the Olympics by Black Americans. Lew Alcindor of UCLA
was the most prominent black athlete to refuse to participate in
the games. When the boycott failed Edwards called for black
athletes at the games to protest in their own way. Thus Smith
and Carlos' gesture of defiance.

The 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City came in the middle of the
most eventful year of a turbulent decade. In the mid-sixties
Black athletes were caught up in the struggle for civil rights
and by Muhammad Ali's defiance of the draft. A more successful
boycott took place against the 100th anniversary of the New York
Athletic Club Track and Field Event. Other issues in the air
were the participation of South Africa and Rhodesia in the
Olympic games, the racial policies of the Mormon church and
therefore athletic participation against Brigham Young, the
hiring of black coaches and assistant coaches at all levels, and
the "stacking" practices common in many sports.

Coaches found they were dealing with a new kind of athlete who
resented their racism and refused to conform to the dictatorial
control over their personal lives. In addition to issues of
dress codes and hair length, black athletes were called upon to
take up causes of civil rights and war, and many did. Coaches
were in shock at what they termed the "ungrateful" attitudes
being expressed by the black athletes.

Much of course has changed over the years. At the end of the
century the black athlete is a much more commonplace figure, is
making much more money from sport, and in a few cases making
undreamed of sums in endorsements. In some ways the black
athlete is in a much more powerful position in society than ever
before. This may explain why some are surprised by what seems
like a relatively quiescent attitude on the part of black
athletes toward social issues and racial issues.

Not surprisingly the highest profile black athlete in the world, indeed the highest profile athlete of any color or gender, Michael Jordan has taken a great deal of criticism on these issues. Michael has been pressed to comment on the labor policies of Nike in Asia. Arthur Ashe criticized Michael for his failure to endorse Harvey Gant in his race for the Senate against Jesse Helms; an election whose outcome might have been within Michael's to reverse. Indeed Michael has been urged to support any and every cause, racial and non-racial. For the most part he has declined the numerous invitations, choosing instead to keep a very low profile on such issues.

Jim Brown, Hall of Fame football player and social activist, wondered aloud last week what Michael Jordan is doing. Brown said that with all that money and power Jordan ought to be the boss of something. Indeed, Brown wonders if Michael is the boss of anything, especially himself.

Defenders of Michael point out that he has given extensively to the United Negro College Fund, to teachers, and to many other causes. Defenders of the modern black athlete point out that the charitable contributions and activities of these athletes are quite extensive.

What remains clear however is that mass marketing of people, whether they are athletes or not, requires that person to avoid what marketing people term "negative publicity." Among other things this means avoiding public controversy and conflict of any kind. For the black athlete it means avoiding taking controversial public positions on issues of public concern. More precisely, avoiding any public stance on racial issues such as the hiring of coaches, the makeup of front offices, or the labor policies of companies with whom they have endorsement contracts.

In point of fact the first casualty of any controversy is endorsements. For the black athletes who have had difficulty getting white companies to give them endorsements in the first place, caution is the most important guide in any judgement involving their public persona. The more endorsements they have, the less freedom they have. They may have more money, but it often comes at the cost of the power to effect change.

Still it is difficult to understand the black athletes of the late 90s who numerically dominate professional sports and big time college sports, but who refuse to involve themselves in such basic issues as coaching, executive, and ownership opportunities. Their silence is eloquent and speaks to the fear

that players still have for their jobs, as well as issues of public popularity and endorsements

Unless athletes are among the top performers they are driven at least in part by the insecurity of their position. Players who rock any boat can easily be dismissed as not quite talented enough, or as not fitting into the team concept, or for disturbing team chemistry. These lessons have been driven home so many times as to be commonplace and part of the conventional wisdom.

The fact of the matter is that for anyone, athlete or otherwise, to take an unpopular public position on anything requires a certain amount of courage and in some cases a willingness to risk ones well being. Athletes are no different than other people. This sort of courage is in short supply everywhere. Athletes are driven by the same economic imperatives as everyone else, and the more there is to lose, the less likely is the willingness to risk.

What is perceived as a comparative decline in athletic activism in the 90s as compared to the 60s may simply be a sign of success, especially of an economic nature. If that is so, it is both good news and bad news.

The good news is that the black athletes of the 90s have built on the gains made by their predecessors. The bad news may be that they are less willing to sacrifice for further gains for their successors.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.