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Sport in the Middle of Crisis

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - SPORT IN THE MIDDLES OF CRISIS
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It has been two weeks since the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, an event that has thrown American society into a state of shock and mourning, followed by protest, marches, and rioting. It has been over fifty years since the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the city of Memphis. That event also sent the country into a state of shock and mourning, with protest, marches, and rioting.

In matters of race these two murders and the events that followed are two of the most significant markers involving race in America in my lifetime. Both of these killings brought the United States, and particularly white Americans, face to face with the realities of race in American life, realities that most white Americans have willfully ignored and refused to confront.

The assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. was the culmination of over a decade of protest and violence, doubled up by the impact of the Vietnam War. The decade of the Sixties was loaded with civil disturbances and assassinations on many fronts, and the killing of Dr. King underlined both the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement. These movements were central to the life and work of Martin Luther King Jr., and they seemed to have culminated at that moment in time.

What followed was much soul searching by white Americans shaken by events and appalled by the assassination. There was considerable talk of the need to address the injustices in the society of both a racial and economic character. Some will remember that the assassination was followed by the Poor People's Campaign and March on Washington that had been planned by Dr. King.

There was a massive public outpouring of grief and a commitment to change, and indeed much did change. The America of 2020 is not the America of 1968. In many ways economic opportunity has increased, political access has largely improved, and the social parameters on race have eased in some areas.

The World of Sport has also changed considerably in terms of participation, access, and opportunity, although it remains limited in the governance of sport. As in so many areas of American life, the landscape whitens moving up the ladder of wealth and power. Executive leadership and ownership in sport continue to be controlled by white Americans. The increased participation and success by African Americans in a number of sports has not translated into areas of management or ownership.

Race continues to be factor in both sport and society. The last few years has underlined this reality. The social statistics on income, education, medical care, and nutrition, all show a bias. Poverty still remains stubbornly entrenched in society. In percentages, African Americans are over-represented among the poor, although in sheer numbers, there is a greater equality at the bottom of society. The gap between the rich and poor has grown significantly, and, for all who are poor, there are additional consequences that reach across the spectrum of American life.

What the Coronavirus has shown us is that those likely to contract the disease and die are the Black, the Brown, and the Elderly. The shutdown of the economy has hit those at the bottom of the workforce hardest. When taken together, economic pain, virus vulnerable, and inequality of treatment before the law, the levels of angst increased until one startling event produced an explosion.

One of the things that seems different to me between 2020 and 1968 is that there is a wider spectrum of people in society looking for change. There is a greater number of citizens, both in sport and in society, stepping forward to serve as agents of change. Large numbers of African American sportspersons and their white teammates have stepped forward to assume leadership roles. This is one major difference today compared to 1968.

As we have been reminded repeatedly in the past several days, it was only four years ago that protest against police brutality by Colin Kaepernick was roundly criticized across the world of sport. Executives and owners denounced the protest. The white press, both sporting and political, was nearly universal in its condemnation of the protest. The refusal to recognize taking a knee as a form of protest against police brutality was widespread within a large portion of white society. There was an acceptance of the analysis on the right that Kaepernick's action

was an attack on the flag and a profoundly unpatriotic act. This view was accelerated by the President of the United States.

This interpretation of taking a knee has turned and spun in the past two weeks as George Floyd's death changed the immediate meaning of that phrase for most Americans. This connection has not been lost on many, particularly in the world of sport.

In sport after sport, in country after country, there has been a spontaneous outpouring of shock and disgust over the events in Minneapolis. Individual players, coaches, and owners have joined a chorus of protest. Leagues and organizations have issued statements expressing various degrees of concern.

One of the most interesting of these reactions have been that coming from the National Football League players who have spoken out on the killing and more generally on the issue of police brutality and harassment in the black community. Accounts of racism have come pouring out of athletes who have related incident after incident from their daily lives.

After nearly two weeks of being nearly mute, Roger Goodell was forced to react substantially on the issue. The statement issued by young African American NFL stars shamed Goodell to backtrack on protest before NFL games. He acknowledged his interpretive error. The only holdout was Goodell's unwillingness to utter the name of Colin Kaepernick.

There have been many other statements and calls for reform and in many ways it seems as if there has been a shift in the landscape of America. I would hope this is the case, but I go back to 1968 when there was a similar feeling.

I remember a young man in Detroit, an African American and political activist, who said that all the marches, protests, and discussion in the society were interesting and admirable, but his fear was that after a few months that would end. Then, those young people, so full of energy and ready to change the world, would return to college, graduate, and move into the corporate world where they would ultimately lose their commitment to change and to equality. Then, in a few decades, there would be another explosion over many of the same issues of racial inequality.

Maybe this time it will be different.

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.

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