

**Reading: "After Ferguson, Staten Island, Cleveland, Athletes Are Becoming Activists Again"**

The past 25 years have been great for athletes as a "brand" - salaries have exploded, endorsement opportunities have multiplied and athletes are more aware of how to market themselves. But it has not been a very good period for the notion of athletes as activists. Political expression and social activism, central to the sports landscape of the 1960s and '70s, had come to be seen as too risky, bad for business.

But that accepted wisdom appears to be changing. As the United States again confronts racial polarization, prominent athletes are no longer avoiding these sensitive topics - and in some cases, are leading the public conversation.

On Sunday, five St. Louis Rams players entered the field together during pre-game introductions with a "Hands Up, Don't Shoot" gesture meant to show solidarity with Michael Brown, the black teenager shot dead by a white police officer in August in the St. Louis suburb of Ferguson.



Three days later, following another controversial non-indictment by a grand jury of a white police officer who killed an unarmed 43-year-old African-American man with a chokehold in Staten Island, University of Maryland wide receiver Deon Long took part in a peaceful protest on the College Park, Maryland, campus, holding up a hand-written sign - widely spread on social media -- that said, "Are we still 'thugs' when you pay to watch us play sports?" The sign had the popular hashtag "#blacklivesmatter."



Washington Redskins safety Ryan Clark said, "It's extremely tough to take a stand one way or another [as an athlete]. In our position, it's very easy to not have an opinion on anything -- because if you don't have an opinion on anything, you draw no scrutiny to yourself." Speaking of the Rams players, Clark said, "I think it was really cool that those guys felt strongly enough, and felt the solidarity among one another - whether you agree with their stance or not - to go out and actually try to say, 'Okay, this is how we feel.'"

The days when athletes were expected to "shut up and play" appear to be over...

One man who understands the connection between sports and activism has been watching the current events, and smiling. "I'm delighted," John Carlos said. "I always knew it was going to come." Carlos, now 69, is

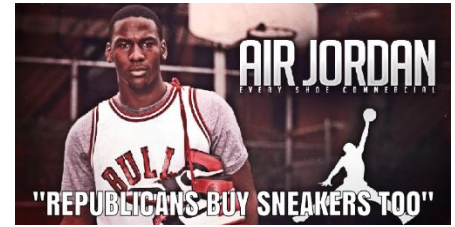
considered the godfather of modern-day athlete activism. The gesture he and U.S. teammate Tommie Smith made on the medal stand at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics - a single, black-gloved fist raised in the air, meant to signal "Black Power" - became one of the decade's iconic images.



Carlos and Smith, who were kicked out of the Olympics for their gesture, were hardly alone in using the platform of sports stardom to advocate for social change during those decades of upheaval. There was Muhammad Ali in boxing, protesting against the Vietnam War. There was Bill Russell in basketball, speaking out against racism. There were Arthur Ashe and Billie Jean King in tennis, advocating for equality for blacks and women.

By the 1990s, generally speaking, that sense of activism among athletes was all but gone, replaced by a sense of the athlete as a marketing machine.

This stance was most clearly seen when NBA mega-star Michael Jordan reportedly explained his refusal to endorse a Democratic Senate candidate in his home state of North Carolina by saying, "Republicans buy shoes, too." Jordan "was the alpha model for the new kind of athlete who never took controversial stands," Starn said, "and Tiger Woods followed in his footsteps."



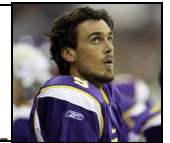
If there was one turning point in returning social activism to big-time sports, it may have come in 2012, when LeBron James and his Miami Heat teammates donned black "hoodies" and posed together for a team picture with their heads bowed and their hands in their pockets. The gesture, which James tweeted along with the hashtag #WeWantJustice, was meant to show solidarity with Trayvon Martin, the black teenager shot and killed by a white/Hispanic man in Florida while wearing a similar hooded sweatshirt.

"When the Heat stood up and made that statement, it was saying to everybody, 'Enough is enough,'" Carlos said. "Young people are losing their lives and feeling like there's no justice, and this [gesture] was meant to say, 'We're tired of it.'"

A year later, punter Chris Kluwe was released by the Minnesota Vikings, allegedly because of his outspoken support for same-sex marriage. Although the team denied that allegation, as well as Kluwe's claims he was subjected to homophobic behavior by team officials and coaches, in August 2013, the team reached a settlement with Kluwe that included a donation to charities that support lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender causes.

#### Minnesota Vikings' Chris Kluwe takes on anti-gay marriage politician

NFL player Chris Kluwe attacks Maryland politician Emmett C. Burns Jr in row over same-sex marriage and first amendment rights



Also in 2013, after Los Angeles Clippers owner Donald Sterling was secretly recorded making racist comments about African-Americans, the NBA forced him to sell the team, largely due to the outpouring of criticism and the demands of prominent players as well as the team's head coach, Doc Rivers.

But the spate of recent high-profile and polarizing police killings appears to have pushed the notion of athletes-as-activists to a new threshold.

In part, this is because social media has made it easier than ever for athletes to voice their opinions. In the wake of the Ferguson grand jury's decision not to indict officer Darren Wilson for the killing of Brown, many high-profile athletes took to Twitter and Instagram to speak out. They included James, former Los Angeles Lakers star Magic Johnson, Redskins wide receiver DeSean Jackson and tennis superstar Serena Williams. Perhaps the most pointed statement was made by Kobe Bryant of the Los Angeles Lakers, who tweeted, "The system enables young black men to be killed behind the mask of law."

Source: Sheinin, Dave. "After Ferguson, Staten Island, Cleveland, athletes are becoming activists again." Washington Post, 5 Dec. 2014. World History in Context, [http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A392531895/UHIC?u=mmlin\\_m\\_sudbury&sid=UHIC&xid=60687569](http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A392531895/UHIC?u=mmlin_m_sudbury&sid=UHIC&xid=60687569). Accessed 5 Feb. 2019.

REFLECTION: What are 2 examples of athlete activism that you learned about in this reading that you had not heard of before?

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