

Should athletes at the 2020 Olympics take political stances?



What love-it-or-leave-it ‘patriots’ angry with athletes who protest don’t understand is we aren’t insulting the country, but focusing attention on those who don’t live up to its promises

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar

Tue 3 Sep 2019 04.00 EDT

Last modified on Tue 3 Sep 2019 04.20 EDT



IMAGE: American fencer Race Imboden was reprimanded for kneeling on the medal podium during the Pan American Games last month. Photograph: JOSE SOTOMAYOR - LIMA 2019/AFP/Getty Images

Teddy Roosevelt referred to the office of presidency as a “bully pulpit”, a perfect platform to preach opinions to sway the public. At that time, “bully” meant “wonderful”, though today’s popular meaning of the word (to intimidate and coerce) applies even more. The president

can use his office to say whatever he wants, whether truthful or not, and suddenly manipulate the opinions of millions of uncritical people. In doing so, he can encourage and even mobilize hatred and violence, discrimination, and policies directly contrary to the US Constitution. Those who disagree with the president don’t have the same powerful platform. They can’t gather all the world’s news organizations in a moment’s notice to deliver another opinion that is instantly broadcast to billions. Instead, they must find their “bully pulpits” where they can, for however fleeting that moment is, and hope that their truth gets out to as many people as possible, even though it can feel as ineffective as putting a message in a bottle and tossing it in the ocean.

Athletes have their fleeting moments to proclaim their opinions and have famously and powerfully done so in the past. In 2020, the Summer Olympics will be held in Tokyo and athletes will command the world stage. It is an opportunity to do more than promote themselves for endorsement deals for clothing and their face on a box of Wheaties. It is a chance to let the world hear the rational voices that demand social justice, inclusion and protection of the marginalized and productive diplomacy.

In 1968, I boycotted playing on the men’s Olympic basketball team as a protest to the overt racism and police aggression that was resulting in deadly riots across the country. Instead, I worked with underprivileged youth in New York City, teaching them basketball and trying to keep them safe. It felt wrong to be a smiling, thumbs-up representative of politicians who refused to acknowledge the race problems so they didn’t have to do anything about. That’s what those love-it-or-leave-it “patriots” furious about athletes who protest don’t understand: we aren’t insulting the country or what its professed values, we’re focusing attention on those who don’t live up to the promises of what the

country stands for. Those protesting priests who molest aren't condemning Catholicism, they're condemning those who don't abide by their vows or teachings. The whistleblower who reveals drug companies conspired to deliberately harm consumers in order to reap greater profits is not promoting the elimination of medicine, just that the companies act according to the law and ethical standards. To many, the Constitution is like wedding vows in which the country promises to love and cherish and be faithful to all its people, only to find out it's been cheating on us with only the white, straight, male, and wealthy.

I took my inspiration from Louis Armstrong, who in 1957 [cancelled a government-sponsored goodwill tour of the Soviet Union](#) because President Eisenhower refused to send in troops to protect the black students in Little Rock, Arkansas, who were integrating Central High School, despite the state's governor using the National Guard to block the students from entering the school. Armstrong called Eisenhower "two-faced" and gutless, adding: "It's getting almost so bad a colored man hasn't got any country." Several weeks later, in part thanks to Armstrong's bully pulpit, President Eisenhower nationalized the Arkansas National Guard and ordered them to protect the black students while facilitating their integration. A jazz musician had spoken out and because of that, America was a little more American.

Free speech is not free when it comes to the Olympics because it is first and foremost a business. As with professional sports, anything that threatens the money must be eliminated. So the very freedoms that we hope to brag about to the rest of the world during the games, we willingly give up in order to compete. The International Olympic Committee has rules not allowing political demonstrations and they have announced their intentions of rigorously enforcing these rules in Tokyo in 2020. This renewed vigor in curbing the athletes' free speech is the result of two brave athletes in the recent Pan-Am Games. Race Imboden [took a knee](#) after his foil team won the gold medal for the US and, after her win, hammer thrower Gwen Berry raised a fist and bowed her head a la Tommie Smith and John Carlos, who did that in the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City. What were they trying to say? Imboden explained: "[A]t the podium, my palms wet from nerves, when the 'Star-Spangled Banner' began to play, I took a knee – following in the footsteps of Colin Kaepernick, Megan Rapinoe, Muhammad Ali, John Carlos and Tommie Smith: black, LGBT, female and Muslim athletes who chose to take a stand. I'm not a household name like those heroes, but as an athlete representing my country and, yes, as a privileged white man, I believe it is time to speak up for American values that my country seems to be losing sight of." [Berry said](#), "A lot of things need to be done and said and changed. I'm not trying to start a political war, or act like I'm Miss Know-it-all or anything like that. I just know America can do better."

America can do better. The two athletes were given 12 months' probation for expressing that sentiment with the International Olympic Committee promising even harsher punishment. They are admirable for their athletic achievements that day, but they are heroic for taking a stand when they knew it would cost them. That's what every athlete thinking of making a political statement during the Olympics must consider: Am I committed enough to my outrage to risk my career? If not, just accept your medals, thank your family, and celebrate. But if you need to use your moment of glory to encourage Americans to honor their commitments, then bully for you.

Time and place are for those who already live in a time and place of privilege.