

## If you thought sports were ever separate from politics, think again

By Kavitha A. Davidson | Feb 15, 2017  
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Sports are, at a baseline, the ultimate meritocracy. There's a winner and a loser, and the outcome is seldom in question -- a rarity in a world that's mostly gray. And yet, sports have never been wholly separated from politics, from race, from gender, from business, from society. Sports are, and always have been, a microcosm of where we find ourselves as a country -- perhaps as a world.



As with any other form of entertainment, the ability to think of sports outside of our society has been a privilege of those who, until now, haven't been affected by their consequences.

Tell Jesse Owens he should've "stuck to sports" when his four gold medals and record-setting performance in the 1936 Berlin Olympics directly flew in the face of Adolf Hitler's plan to use the Games as a showcase for supposed Aryan superiority.

Tell it to Babe Didrikson Zaharias, a multisport Olympian who, in 1938, became the first woman to play in a men's PGA tournament and often dealt with misogynistic criticism of femininity versus her athleticism. So much so that, when she took up golf, the then-Olympic gold medalist changed her wardrobe and wore lipstick to fit the expectation of how a woman should look. "I know I'm not pretty, but I try to be graceful," she said at the time.

Tell that to Jackie Robinson or Muhammad Ali or Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, or to Billie Jean King or Venus Williams, who, in different eras, fought for the same level of pay equality for men and women.

Tell that to black players, Irish players, Italian players, female players, all of whom have fought over decades and centuries for the right to merely exist as athletes, to contribute highly sought-after skills that have long transcended artificial barriers.

Irish athletes made it on the baseball field and in the boxing ring in the 19th century, when stores hung "no Irish need apply" signs and newspapers portrayed Irish immigrants as terrorists.

Female students parlayed Title IX, the 1972 law prohibiting discrimination at educational institutions, into a silver medal in women's basketball at the 1976 Olympics.

Condoleezza Rice, the former secretary of state and a black woman, was barred from membership at Augusta National Golf Club because of her gender until four-and-a-half years ago. She joined in 2012, when the club began admitting women.

The historical assimilation of immigrants, the "mainstreaming" of black talent, the elevation of women outside of "female" roles, the value of unions, the questioning of government subsidies for corporations in the form of bond abatements for stadiums or league-wide tax breaks -- these are all ways sports have *never* just been about sports, ways in which some of us haven't been able to just "stick to sports." These are all ways sports, and sports coverage, can help us understand our world just a little bit better, as long as we continue to elevate those voices that aren't always heard.

When you really think about it, the division between sports and politics has long been eroded. The *separation* is what takes effort to uphold -- and it's mostly done by people whose right to exist in this space isn't questioned.

Some of us have been outsiders for a while, constantly proving that we belong in the sports world. Many of us have loved sports even when the feeling wasn't mutual. Even when the communities surrounding these beautiful games were decidedly exclusionary, even when they told us we didn't belong.

The ability of sports to unite along political lines, racial lines, gender lines, religious lines, class lines -- that has always been there. We were all Yankees after 9/11, and we were all #BostonStrong after the marathon bombing.

Sports' potential to unite has always been there, and so has the ability to recognize when all of these seemingly disparate worlds intersect.

Watching sports with no eye toward the political, or the racial, or the gendered, or what have you, is a privilege many of us have never been afforded, simply because we were perceived as outsiders to mainstream institutions.

Recognizing the importance of sports beyond simple escapism serves to elevate this thing that we love and feel, at times beyond the point of rationality.

The plain fact is that many people are now coming around to the realization that sports can't just be taken at face value. And that's OK. Sports don't just exist for sports' sake -- sports can be art. You can always find great sports stories that speak to who we were at any point in history.

That's what has always made sports compelling -- as art, as spectacle and, yes, as politics. Sports can reflect the best, and at times the worst, of our collective humanity, and it allows us to experience both ends of that spectrum while studying the fine line that separates the two.

Source: <http://www.espn.com/espnw/voices/article/18614895/if-thought-sports-were-ever-separate-politics-think-again>

## Politics at the Olympics Notes

### I. John Carlos & Tommie Smith's Olympic protest (VIDEO)

1. What were some of the issues the Olympic Project for Human Rights was responding to?
2. What did Jackie Robinson and Kenny Washington's work to integrate sports in the 1940s have to do with the decision by black athletes to protest in the 1960s?
3. What was the symbolism of the various elements of Carlos and Smith's protest on the medal stand?
  - a) Socks (without shoes)
  - b) Pin
  - c) One gloved hand
  - d) Scarf
  - e) Beads
  - f) Unzipped jacket
4. What repercussions did Smith & Carlos face after their protest?

## II. Olympic goals & mission

- A. What is the goal/purpose of the Olympics? (IN YOUR OWN WORDS)
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- B. How do the Olympics try to promote a message/atmosphere of cooperation and harmony between athletes and countries?

## III. Case study: Are the Olympics ever fully devoid of politics?

- A. 1980 Olympics
  1. Winter Olympics were held at \_\_\_\_\_
  2. Summer Olympics were held at \_\_\_\_\_
  
- B. 1980 Winter Games:
  1. What was happening for the US in the 1970s AND given that, why were the Winter Games important to Americans?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  2. The Soviets hoped to use the Games as a way to demonstrate what?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  3. Why is the hockey game between the US and Soviets considered by some to be one of the greatest moments in the history of American sports?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- C. 1980 Summer Games:
  1. First Olympics held by a communist country - What general objection did the US and its allies have to the Soviets hosting the Games?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  2. How did the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan impact the Games and the US' attendance?

## “Shut Up & Dribble” Movie Notes

*In spite of the claim that sports should be a politics-free zone, the history of the NBA shows that both the league and many of its players have long been activist minded.*

### **Part I**

1. **Bill Russell**

- a. What made Russell different from most (white) players in his time?

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- b. What challenges did he face as a black player first with USF and later with the Celtics?

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- c. How did he deal with these challenges?

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2. **Lew Alcindor (Kareem Abdul-Jabbar):**

- a. After his first season at UCLA, the NCAA passed the “Lew Alcindor Rule” which did what?

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- b. Kareem later became known as a sports activist. Give 2 examples of events early in his career that helped shape him as an athlete activist.

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**Context:** The NBA was struggling in the 1970s. To increase attendance, interest and make the league more profitable, the NBA merged with a small competing basketball league, the ABA. (It wasn't until the 1980s though that the NBA really took off.)

3. What was different about the two leagues?

NBA	ABA

4. **Larry Bird** and **Magic Johnson:** In the 1980s-1990s, the NBA was more focused on making \$ and filling seats than it had been in the '50s-'70s. How did Bird & Johnson help?

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**Part II**

5. **Michael Jordan** made the choice NOT to get involved in politics and instead focused on his brand. Support this with 2 examples from the documentary.

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**CONTEXT:** Black celebrities and athletes were profitable, idolized and glamorized. Yet this was not the reality for black Americans living in the cities. Many were struggling as the nation's cities crumbled under neglect, murder rates soared, the crack cocaine epidemic raged.

6. **Craig Hodges:** Hodges talks about the importance of being a conscious athlete and standing up for what you believe in.
- a. What did he do?

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- b. What happened to him because of it?

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**NOTE: Hodges became a cautionary tale for athletes in the '80s and early '90s NOT to be outspoken about their political views.**

7. Support the following statement with ONE specific example: “By the early '90s, open representation of one’s politics had taken a back seat to promoting one’s brand.”

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8. **Mahmud Abdul-Rauf**

- a. What made Abdul-Rauf like Kaepernick before there was a Kaepernick?

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- b. What happened to his career in the NBA after his protest?

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**Part IV**

**CONTEXT: The killing of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner and others inspired renewed activism on the part of contemporary NBA (and WNBA) players.**

9. How did NBA players respond to the killing of Trayvon Martin?

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10. What are 2 examples of protest in the NBA in the months and years since Trayvon's death?

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11. Why has Lebron taken a different, more activist approach than players like Michael Jordan?

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**REFLECTION QUESTION**

This documentary is called "Shut Up and Dribble," which is exactly what FOX News host Laura Ingraham told Lebron and other outspoken players to do in 2018. The film is Lebron James' way of responding to Ingraham's claim that players are paid to play ball, not run off at the mouth.

Taking Lebron's position for a minute, how could you make the case that for much of the NBA's history, players have always done more than just dribble a basketball?

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