

Symbolic Protest on the Rise: A Qualitative Report on How Athlete Activism Has Influenced  
Change in Sports Across America

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this research paper is to identify how athletes within team sports in the United States have brought attention to racial inequality over time. This topic is important because, in 2020, athlete activism has hit an all-time high, and issues involving racial inequality have come to the forefront of politics in the United States. After doing extensive research of prior literature written within the field, it was surprising to find that there was no analysis looking at a possible relationship between politics and the rise of athlete activism presenting a gap in the research. This study utilized a qualitative approach to examining the research question by utilizing a historical model and codebook method to help develop theory on athlete activism. The findings of the research analysis show that there is a strong relationship between politics and athlete activism lending support to the research hypothesis that due to the changing political culture, the rise of social media, and the financial success athlete activists have given professional sports leagues in the United States, they are becoming an important part of the sports world's identity.

## **Introduction**

Since the invention of the ball and competition, athletic activities have played a central role within societies across the globe. Sports have amassed astronomical fan bases and have become one of the most profitable sectors of the entertainment industry. Millions of people dream of playing for a professional team or work within the field and want to be a part of this business. Yet, the politics of sports are often overlooked by political scientists, fans, and sports organizations alike as the main goal of the industry is to entertain the masses while making a profit. Despite this oversight, athletes have slowly become politically active as they began to

realize that they have a recognizable platform to send their message out to the public. Early examples of athletes using their sport to send out political messages include Jackie Robinson, Muhammed Ali, and Fritz Pollard.

However, from the perspective of people who care deeply about the inner workings of the business of sports, they believe that “sports and politics don’t mix” (Gift & Miner, 2017). Political scientists are reluctant to study politics within sports because there is a lack of good data within the field to work with and sports are generally perceived as an unserious topic compared to other political issues such as voting or war (Gift & Miner, 2017). This study explains this gap in the research and delineates how athletes use their epistemic power to become activists for racial equality on and off the playing field.

### **History of Activism in the United States Since the 1960s**

During the 1960s, activism within the United States was at an all-time high. Civil rights groups were using both violent and non-violent protests to fight for minority rights and social change. Activists like Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, and Malcolm X were at the forefront of these movements and developed a blueprint for dissident minorities to fight for what they believed in. From these two approaches of protesting (violent and non-violent), we learn that the media sees activism from different points of view. Violent protests were seen as “disorderly riots” and “uprisings” while non-violent protests were seen as people fighting for their rights (Wasow, 2020). These two forms of protesting triggered varying results from the elite population and the masses within the United States.

Although there was backlash against both forms of protest, non-violent protests were much more effective. This is because people against this form of activism had no platform to

fight these protestors as they were not breaking the law or the Constitution in any facet. Violent protests on the other hand brought negative media attention to the minority populations of the time and were heavily exploited by the populations who wanted segregation laws to not change (Wasow, 2020). As such, non-violent protest has become the most common form of activism to fight for political change and is the protest of choice for athletes across all sports (Wasow, 2020).

After the civil rights movement peaked in the 1960s, activism for racial inequality changed. Many people involved with the civil rights movement became a part of the black nationalist movement. This group fought for limited forms of black autonomy as they still felt they were under the constructs of Jim Crow laws while other activists were still fighting for dissident minorities to be more integrated into American Society (Valls, 2010). There were impending questions from the minorities of the United States about what was next in the fight for racial equality and who was going to step up to continue this seemingly never-ending battle? According to Eisinger (1974) in a 1970 survey of Milwaukee residents eighteen and over, forty-three percent of the black population wanted to see more protests to gain attention and win their demands while fifty-two percent of the white population wanted to see less protest in Milwaukee (Eisinger, 1974). These survey results illustrate the deep-rooted issues of racial inequality within the United States. In reality, although minorities can have significant public influence by creating groups with large followings like the civil rights movements, they often are vulnerable to the majority's demands and are easily weakened by people ignoring what they have to say (Schraub, 2020). This calls into the conversation a new population that previously spoke little on the issues regarding racial inequality. Athletes at this time in American history were more concerned about building a brand and helping the sports industry grow rather than become

political activists. However, as sports leagues garnered more notoriety and athletes were starting to become celebrity-like influences on a national scale, their voices were becoming important for the minority populations' push toward racial equality in the United States.

### **The Development of Athlete Activism**

Throughout the twentieth century, athlete activism was starting to become popular for players who wanted to stand up for their rights. We do have historic examples of athlete activism occurring at this time in history such as with Kareem Abdul Jabbar boycotting the 1968 Olympics, Elgin Baylor refusing to play in an NBA game after he was told he could not stay in the team hotel in West Virginia due to Jim Crow laws 1958, and Jim Brown who founded the Black Economic Union which facilitated black athlete involvement and investment in black-run business ventures (Whitener, 2020). However, although these are famous examples of athlete activism, they are largely the exception to the rule in earlier eras. Athletes have historically shied away from activism due to gaining negative attention in the media, putting their job security into jeopardy, and losing endorsement deals.

In American sports today, athletes possess a celebrity level of influence and have a large amount of epistemic power. Epistemic power is defined as the ability to influence what others believe, think, or know (Archer et al., 2020). When it comes to activism in the past, many famous athletes did not fight for social change while playing their sport and were heavily criticized by minority populations. An example of this phenomenon taking place was with Michael Jordan who famously said that “Republicans buy sneakers too.” This type of attitude toward activism within sports started to take hold after the civil rights movements as athletes no longer felt an obligation to fight for social change or protest the issues going on in the United

States (Cassilo & Coombs, 2017). Sports during the civil rights movement did not garner the massive appeal that they did from the 1980s into modern times. Athletes were trying to be as uncontroversial as possible while trying to become more nationally recognized. As athletes started to become recognized on a national scale though, their epistemic power started to grow.

Additionally, athletes are worried about being activists because they have seen the consequences that come with fighting for the rights of others and are worried about how their actions may affect their image or their job security. Athlete activists have more opposition than other celebrities with a lot of epistemic power due to their large fanbase and the business side of sports (Kaufman, 2008). A great example of an athlete experiencing the consequences for their activist actions is Colin Kaepernick. Back in 2016, Colin Kaepernick kneeled during the national anthem before every football game. His motive for kneeling during the national anthem was to bring attention to the harsh treatment of African Americans by law enforcement and used the football field to show his symbolic protest to the world. Although his protest did garner a lot of support from Americans, he also had critics, many of which held positions of power in the sports world. Former Baltimore Ravens coach Brian Billick said that Kaepernick was not, “living up to his responsibility as a team member” and many people believed that he was putting the San Francisco 49ers in a difficult position (Gift & Miner, 2017). After the 2016 season, Colin Kaepernick was released from the San Francisco 49ers due to a “contract dispute” and has not been able to find a job in the NFL since. Many people believe that he was blackballed from the NFL due to being an athlete activist even if the NFL denies such claims.

Despite the consequences many athletes have faced for being a part of symbolic protests on and off the field, more athletes each year are starting to become comfortable with being

activists using different forms of media to send out their message. The athletes that have had the most success with inducing social change are the ones who have the most epistemic power (aka the superstars of each sport). LeBron James has been a model athlete activist since the early 2010s as he is one of the most recognizable athletes on the planet and has a lot of pull when he says something. Although he does have his critics, sports executives do not want to displease him as he is the face of the NBA and his status gives him the perfect platform to be one of the most successful athlete activists of all time. This has allowed him to bring awareness to the Black Lives Matter movement and the many social issues America currently faces (Cassilo & Coombs, 2017).

Yet, athletes of superstar status are not the only ones becoming activists in the sports world. In a study conducted by Peter Kaufman and Eli Wolff, they found that although there are not that many athlete activists as of right now, their numbers are quickly rising, and as the issues they are fighting for are becoming more solidified, they believe that sports can and should be a vehicle for progressive and social change (Kaufman & Wolff, 2010). As younger college-aged athletes start moving up to the next level, they will be able to build off of the platform other professional players had developed before them. According to a study conducted at Texas A&M University, many black male college athletes still believe that race is an important issue in American society, having knowledge about the activism of black athletes from the past is important, and that they have a responsibility to speak on social issues that affect the United States today (Agyemang, 2010). This notion of future professional players displays the influence that athlete activists have on the impressionable youth of America. Not only did they grow up seeing symbolic protest but they also believe that the activism of athletes is making a difference

in creating social change and think that continuing this legacy with the right use of the epistemic power they develop will further help sports promote activism in the future.

Although sports and politics may not always get along, the literature examining the relationship between these two entities has been able to find that political scientists should pay more attention to this relationship. Such a study would be relevant because as athlete activism becomes more prevalent in sports, more people are going to want to understand how activism, symbolic protest, and sports all got so intertwined with each other and why there is so much controversy surrounding activism in sports. Thus I hypothesize that due to the changing political culture and the rise of social media in the United States, athlete activism is becoming an important part of the sports world's identity.

### **Methodology**

In an attempt to support the hypothesis, I used the historical model as a guide in collecting my data. The historical model is based on describing past events to understand present patterns and helps with theory building. This model helped me focus on finding impactful events of athlete activism in team sports since the civil rights movement and allowed me to construct a theory on why athlete activism has exploded in our world today and what the future holds for activism in sports. After learning more about the historical model and the benefits of this research method, it became clear that both primary and secondary sources were important in answering my research question. Primary sources are first-hand accounts of an event from an eyewitness account while secondary sources are documents created by an individual who did not participate in the event being researched. The types of primary and secondary sources I was looking for included online articles, photographs, and social media posts. I wanted to use these



types of sources because they do the best job of formulating a story over time of how athlete activism has become an important part of the sports industry.

At the beginning of the research process, I looked for sources on the Eastern Connecticut State University library database because I wanted to find evidence that was credible and unbiased. However, after reading some of the articles, I began to realize that the documents on the database were not helping me answer my research question and did not align with the historical model I was following. Thus, I turned to Google which presented a wide array of documentation that was able to help me piece the puzzle together in answering my research question. I chose documentation that would receive a lot of traffic from the subscriber bases of news outlets such as *The New York Times*, *Twitter*, and *Sports Illustrated*. This is important because the subscribers would be able to see what is going on in real-time and learn more about the topic of athlete activism even if they glance at an article for a brief period of time.

Using the historical model as a guide, I searched for articles that discussed athlete activism during the civil rights movement first and then slowly moved further up in time until I reached 2020. To be more specific, I search for major events concerning athlete activism in increments of one decade. For example, I first looked for sources that were discussing the major events and people involved with athlete activism between the years 1960 - 1970. Then I would move onto the years between 1970 - 1980 and so on. Due to the limited amounts of primary data on athlete activism before the 2010s, I used secondary sources to learn about the important contributors to athlete activism during these times. Additionally, I compiled evidence from news sources that have either a sports or political focus. Since these are the two main topics within my research question, it felt appropriate to include documentation from both points of view.

On the topic of secondary sources, I made sure that none of the documentation of this type was older than five years old. This is because I was worried about some secondary sources not aging well or predicting events that never happened. As a result, all of the secondary sources I used for this study on symbolic protests were written or produced recently (fifteen of the sources were published in 2020) and show what we have learned from athlete activism in the past.

### **Data Analysis Approach**

I approached analyzing my data by reading each article used in the analysis section multiple times and found photos/social media posts that were relevant in answering my research question. For the articles, I first did an unstructured read of each piece of evidence trying to identify if it was a primary source or a secondary source. Then, on my second read, if the article was a secondary source and talking about athlete activism before 2016, I wanted to make sure that it was discussing an athlete and event that would help a reader understand the present patterns of modern athlete activism before reading it again. If the article was a primary source or a secondary source discussing modern athlete activism though, I read it to make sure that the topics they were discussing would help me with theory building with regards to what is the future of athlete activism and symbolic protests in sports. After each piece of evidence passed my test on the second read, I then created a codebook outlining the important athletes/professional leagues each piece was mentioning, the symbolic protest they started/were a part of, and what year it occurred. The codebook helped me describe past and present events of athlete activism in the analysis section of the study.

As for the social media post and photos, my main goal was to use these forms of documentation to emphasize important points and themes throughout the paper. Therefore, after I finished reading all the articles, I found social media posts or photos of athletes that had a significant impact on the development of athlete activism as we see it today. This type of evidence helps the audience put a face to the name they are reading about and see the symbolic protest they are partaking in. Additionally, the photos and social media posts show how athlete activism is affecting public perceptions on symbolic protests in sports as well as their thoughts on athletes becoming political activists on and off the field.

All of the data I collected was essential in understanding the development of athlete activism and helping me answer my research question. The analysis approach process outlined above helped me with finding themes in the field that are important to the evolving story of this topic such as how the political climate of the United States directly affected athletes activism and the effectiveness of symbolic protest as well as the importance of social media in promoting athletes as the social activist of the future. This analysis approach helped me avoid picking articles that supported my position. At the beginning stages of this research project, I believed that athlete activism was a modern phenomenon that took off in the past decade after the political controversies concerning the shootings of minorities by white police officers. However, after doing some extensive research of peer-reviewed literature and analyzing articles discussing the history of athlete activism, I learned that this is not the case. This information helped me redefine my research question and develop a new position on the history of athlete activism in the United States.

## **Athlete Activism Before 2016**

The analysis of the data suggests that there has been a dramatic shift in athlete activism over time. In the past there have been several symbolic protests that have made a difference in the way we see sports activism today. For example, athletes have handed letters to the president explaining the issues of racial inequality, knelt during the national anthem, and locked arms together on the field. Yet, the main difference between athlete activism during the civil rights era and modern times is the number of athletes focused on activism. Back in the civil rights era, athlete activism was centered around individual players where most of the time, they had no support from their teammates or other people close to them. However, in the sports world today, this dynamic has shifted as athlete activism is more team-oriented and players support each other when taking part in symbolic protests on and off the field. Despite knowing this, no individual sports player had more to do with the rise of modern athlete activism than Kareem Abdul-Jabbar.

During his time in the NBA, he was the youngest member of the Cleveland Summit which was held back in 1967, and refused an invitation to play on the 1968 Olympic men's basketball team. He decided instead to show children in New York City how to play basketball and teach them the importance of education (Abdul-Jabbar & Whitener, 2018 & 2020). His symbolic protests served as a blueprint for team athlete activists of the future to peacefully fight for racial inequality as sports were gaining more attention from the general public and becoming highly profitable. He wanted to show America that the push for racial equality cannot be fought alone but has to be fought as a group since he would never succeed without the help of his teammates and coaches supporting his cause. Being a part of the Cleveland Summit

demonstrated this initiative and by supporting the civil rights movement, he was advocating for change on a national scale.

However, for the next three decades athlete activism took a backseat in most players' minds. At the time, athletes were concerned about losing their jobs and/or their endorsement deals as this was "...the era before huge multimillion-dollar guaranteed contracts (Bembry, 2016)." As a result, athletes steered clear of politics to the best of their ability including superstars like Michael Jordan and Magic Johnson. This ideology of athletes was shown when Craig Hodges (Michael Jordan's teammate) wanted to boycott the first game of the 1991 NBA finals to bring attention to the police beating of Rodney King. Although Michael Jordan and Magic Johnson were superstars in the NBA and had more than enough money to live comfortably if they were exiled from the league, they refused to support his cause saying that he was on his own (Ryan, 2020). Since other NBA players refused to support him, he took matters into his own hands by "...[showing] up at the White House wearing a dashiki after his team won the 1992 title, and handed President George Bush a letter requesting that more be done for black communities in America (Bembry, 2016)." Unfortunately for Craig Hodges, he never played another game in the NBA after handing his letter to the president even though he was one of the best three-point shooters in the league at the time. The blackballing of Craig Hodges reaffirmed the notion that politics and sports should never be intertwined. The professional sports leagues were sending out a message to athlete activists saying that you have to make a choice: either shut up and play or never participate in professional sports ever again. This decision was too much for most athletes to bear at the time and nearly all of them kept quiet on and off the court that is until 2016.

## The Rise of Modern Athlete Activism

Amid a heated presidential election race and at a time where symbolic protests was only performed by superstar athletes who had strong job security like LeBron James, Colin Kaepernick (who was the quarterback of the 49ers at the time), decided to sit on the bench during the the national anthem in the preseason of the 2016 NFL season where he was noticed by a reporter. When he was asked about this action, Colin Kaepernick said that “I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color (Haislop, 2020).” In wake of his protest, he received backlash as at the time only 20% of sports fans supported athlete activism (Serazio, 2020). As a result, Colin Kaepernick has a conversation with a former military member named Nate Boyer where they both agreed that Colin Kaepernick should kneel if he wanted to protest the national anthem as this is what military members do in front of deceased soldiers graves (Haislop, 2020). After this conversation, Colin Kaepernick takes a knee before each game the rest of the season as illustrated by the image below,



Colin Kaepernick and his teammates Eli Harold (Left) and Eric Reid (Right) kneeling during the national anthem (Michael Zagaris/Getty Images)

After looking at the image, it becomes clear that he is not the only person who wanted to symbolically protest or bring attention to the issues of racial inequality. His teammate Eric Reid

was the first person other than Colin Kaepernick to kneel for the national anthem in the NFL and after Barack Obama defended his protest, many other NFL players followed his lead by not only kneeling during the national anthem but also pointing their fist up in the air to further demonstrate their displeasure with the issues of racial inequality in the United States (Haislop, 2020). Although players were symbolically protesting at the time, this phenomenon was not widespread across all professional sports leagues and a lot of athletes were still reluctant to protest off the field that is until Donald Trump entered the fold.

When Donald Trump was elected president, a lot of athletes were displeased with his comments regarding his stance on athlete activism. When he was running for president in 2016 he posted on Twitter that Colin Kaepernick and other players protesting during the national anthem should leave the country (Haislop, 2016). A year later though, Trump's comments on athlete activism started to become more public and offensive. At a campaign rally for Senator Luther Strange in Alabama, Trump said in front of the crowd, "wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects the flag, to say 'get that son of a bitch off the field right now' (Romo, 2017)?" He then went on a Twitter rant a couple of days after his rally remark saying that professional athletes should not be allowed to disrespect the American flag or should be fired and find something else to do (Romo, 2017). These comments angered many athlete activists and caused them to take to social media to voice their frustrations. For example, Stephen Curry refused to go to the White House after winning a championship with the Golden State Warriors (it is a tradition for a championship team to visit the president at the White House) and LeBron James called Trump a "bum" on Twitter and said that "going to [the] White House was a great honor until you showed up (Romo, 2017)!" The comments of Trump shows

how intertwined sports and politics have become with each other since Colin Kaepernick's decision to symbolically protest the national anthem. Trump's outcry has encouraged more athlete activists than ever before to bring attention to the issues of racial inequality in the United States.

### **Athlete Activism in the United States Today**

Since Trump's remarks in 2017, athlete activists from all professional team sports in the United States started to symbolically protest no matter how well known they were within their respective sport. A good example of this phenomenon occurring was in the MLB where Bruce Maxwell, a catcher for the Oakland Athletics, became the first player to take a knee in this league (Romo & Bembry 2017). What is interesting about Maxwell's case is that he had made his MLB debut only two months before symbolically protesting in September which means he was taking a huge risk by kneeling for the national anthem despite not being an established player in the MLB. A month later, Tampa Bay Lightning forward J.T. Brown became the first person in the NHL to symbolically protest before a game as he raised his fist in the air. Athlete activists were becoming more comfortable with symbolically protesting both within and outside of their prospective sports and since 2017, the political terrain has started to shift against Donald Trump's outcries for athlete activism to stop.

This shift in beliefs within most people began to take shape on September 3, 2018, after Colin Kaepernick appeared as the face of Nike's 30th-anniversary ad campaign. Although there was some initial backlash to the ad campaign (including President Trump) all over social media saying that people should boycott the company and burn their Nike products, "the Apex Marketing Group has estimated that Nike has gained over \$163,000,000 in publicity value since



announcing Kaepernick would be the face of the ‘Just Do It’ campaign, with \$49 million of that being negative publicity (Dator, 2018).” Therefore, Nike has gained a lot more positive publicity value than they lost and this was seen as a huge win for athlete activists across America. Never before has a large sports-oriented corporation used an athlete activist as the face of its campaign. Even a few years prior, many people thought this would be impossible. Yet, this type of publicity is succeeding showing athletes that the messages they are spreading through their symbolic protest and social media posts are being heard and are making a difference on a macro as well as micro-level. Professional Sports leagues also saw the financial success of Nike's ad campaign and started to learn that athlete activism can be profitable if marketed correctly.

This ad campaign started a new age for athlete activism in the United States. Remember back in 2016 how only 20% of fans supported athlete activism? Well in 2020, “Nielsen found that 70% of American sports fans want teams and [professional sports] leagues to support athlete activism. A similar majority expect athletes to be involved with the movement for racial justice, believing that athletes possess ‘important influence’ over social change (Serazio, 2020).”

Although Colin Kaepernick ended up being blackballed from the NFL for his actions, he walked so other athlete activists could soar. Since the 2018 Nike ad campaign, athletes activists have become a staple of all professional sports leagues across the United States and they are on board with supporting their players. In the NHL during the national anthem, they played slogans like “End Racism” and “#WeSkateForBLACKLIVES” on large video screens for fans to see (Campbell, 2020). In the NBA bubble, players wore black lives matter shirts and had activists slogans on their jerseys, and even refused to play games after the shooting of Jacob Blake

(Rosenburg, 2020). The NFL has committed to writing “End Racism” and “It Takes All of Us” on the endzones during each game of the 2020 season (Just, 2020).

These types of actions from professional sports leagues have helped athlete activists become bolder in their ambitions to bring attention to the issues of racial inequality. Amid the Black Lives Matter movement protests, athletes such as Kenny Stills have been a part of nationwide protests for the Jacob Blake and Breonna Taylor shootings. Kenny Stills was arrested for his participation in a Breonna Taylor protest in Louisville, Kentucky and spent a night in jail with eighty-six other protestors (Wolfe, 2020). A couple of years ago, most athletes would have refused to participate in nationwide protests let alone be willing to be arrested in the fight for social change like Kenny Stills. It would have been too risky for players to be a part of these protests as they could lose their job/sponsors or worse be blackballed from playing the sports they love. Yet in the year 2020, a professional athlete activist was arrested and put in jail for his participation in a peaceful protest and he still has a job and can hold his head high. Athlete activism and symbolic protest have become a staple of professional sports on and off the field and they are not going away anytime soon.

Despite the strides athlete activists have made both through symbolic protest and social media posts, there is still a lot of backlash with the rise of athlete activism in sports. For instance, when the players of the Houston Texans and Kansas City Chiefs locked arms on the opening night of the NFL season in 2020, the fans booed the demonstration (Pheiffer, 2020). TV ratings of professional sports leagues have also been down within recent years. During the 2019 season, the NFL’s television ratings were down ten percent from the previous year and “at least one study has found that nearly one-third of 1,000 random respondents were less likely to watch a

game because of players protesting during the national anthem (Platt, 2018).” Millions of sports fans are outraged about the rise in athlete activism within professional sports as many fans voice their displeasure at games throughout the season by bringing signs and booing acts of athlete activism such as in the image shown below,



A fan holds a sign protesting the kneeling by players during the national anthem before the game between the Buffalo Bills and the Arizona Cardinals in 2016. (Photo by Brett Carlsen/Getty Images)

This type of outrage from fans of sports has been partially egged on by President Donald Trump. Throughout his presidency, he has spoken against athletes being activists wanting them to shut up and play sports and he has become more ingrained in his stance since his comments on athlete activism back in 2017. When Trump was asked about the protest within the NBA in 2020 he responded by saying that, “unfortunately, they’ve become like a political organization, and that’s not a good thing for sports or this country (Mccaskill & McGraw 2020).” The views of the president have amassed a huge following as he continues to call out players such as LeBron James and Colin Kaepernick for their activist actions. Donald Trump has had more of an influence on athlete activism than any other political figure in the past. No matter the outcome of

the 2020 presidential election, his past actions will continue to be a part of the equation when it comes to how athletes activists spread their messages on racial inequality in the United States.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study help develop a relationship between politics and sports that was previously ignored by the political science community. This is explained in Thomas Gift and Andrew Miner's work "Dropping the Ball" where they write about how the lack of attention on sports by political scientists is a missed opportunity and creates a void within the political science and sports field alike (Gift and Miner, 2017). Throughout my research, the most notable evidence that helps me answer my research question has to do with social media. In the modern world, social media has become an integral part of our society and the easiest method for most people to communicate to a wide audience. This is a fundamental way professional sports organizations and athletes alike can spread their messages to a large audience across the United States. Since Colin Kaepernick started to kneel during the national anthem, people have been able to learn about his symbolic protest because his actions were not only broadcasted before the games but they were also posted on Twitter, Instagram, and other forms of social media including a Nike ad that was widely publicized in 2018. Additionally, a lot of athlete activists have a sizable amount of epistemic power in addition to large social media followings which means that they are bringing a lot of attention to their messages regardless of whether the attention is positive or negative.

The rise of social media also tells a story as to why there are more athlete activists in sports willing to fight against racial injustice than in the past. To put it simply, the world has

changed and social activism in sports is no longer controlled by athletes with a radical voice that are not being heard. Throughout the civil rights era up until the 2010s, athlete activists such as Kareem Abdul-Jabaar and Craig Hodges that were willing to speak their minds were few and far between (Ryan, 2020). Many athletes were worried about losing their jobs and endorsement deals for bringing politics into sports. However, in today's world, the number of athlete activists willing to bring attention to racial inequality has significantly grown throughout the 2010s. As a result, it has become more accepted by both professional sports leagues and fans alike (critics aside) to support athlete activists in their endeavors even going as far as letting athletes do their own demonstrations on the field during the national anthem and have slogans on their jerseys or helmets that bring attention to the issues of racial inequality in the United States. The rise of the Black Lives Matter movement and the shootings of African Americans such as Tamir Rice have also helped athlete activists further justify their reasons for continuing to bring attention to the issue of racial inequality than in the past.

The political climate has also become an important part of the conversation when discussing the rise of athlete activism throughout professional sports. Back before the modern era, sports and politics were largely separate entities and everyone was reluctant to intertwine them due to the reasons mentioned previously. However, through President Trump's actions of calling out players on Twitter and at his rallies, many athlete activists were upset and felt personally attacked. This created a domino effect causing many athletes to be even louder when bringing attention to racial inequality by creating and participating in more symbolic protests such as continuing to kneel for the national anthem, attending protests of the Black Lives Matter movement, and even refusing to play scheduled matches forcing them to be postponed. The

political climate has also forced the professional sports leagues to choose sides in either supporting the political messages of powerful political figures or the athletes. In the past, professional sports leagues were worried about the negative opinions of fans and politicians alike so if there was an athlete activist who was not a star player within a league, they would have no problem with letting them go. However, the professional sports leagues' tune has changed on the matter. Sports are generating more revenue and have a bigger fanbase than in the past developed by the rising popularity of athletes in sports. Additionally, athlete activism has produced good publicity and has brought in new fans who previously refused to watch games because the sports leagues did not support their players. These new fans have helped professional sports become more financially successful than ever before. Knowing this, professional sports leagues have started to back the athlete activists they employ, proven by their willingness to let them perform their symbolic protest without challenge and even putting messages to denounce racial inequality on the field and on their social media accounts. Professional sports leagues have also denounced Trump's remarks regarding athlete activists and did not punish their players for calling out Donald Trump on social media. Through this research, I was able to provide support to my hypothesis that due to the changing political culture, the rise of social media, and the financial success athlete activists have given professional sports leagues in the United States, they are becoming an important part of the sports world's identity.

## **Conclusion**

Since the end of the civil rights era, athletes activists have come a long way on their journey to being heard by the greater population of America. From refusing to intertwine politics with sports to being worried about losing their jobs and endorsement deals, athletes activists

have become an integral part of modern professional sports and are no longer just individuals with a radical voice. Through the growing popularity of social media, athlete activists have developed a platform in which people can see their symbolic protests, and with the ever-growing epistemic power off the field, they have become icons to individuals across the United States and the world. Despite the critics, the success athlete activists have experienced by using symbolic protest on and off the field shows that they are becoming more widely accepted and people are willing to hear what they have to say. The accomplishments athlete activists have been able to achieve are going to resonate with future professionals in the field by creating bolder ways in which players will bring attention to racial inequality and continuing to push for their full acceptance into the professional sports leagues in the future (which has already started). In the end, although my research question will never have a complete answer, athlete activism is at an all-time high and how they are bringing attention to racial inequality is more than I can count on two hands. As the next decade starts to take shape, the future of athlete activism is bright and their influence on the sports world will be felt for years to come.

### **Limitations**

Throughout the process of analyzing the data I have collected, some limitations presented themselves when answering my research question. To start, in some of the documentation, I did find some critiques of the protest such as in the article “Boycotting Themselves Out of Business.” Here, the author describes how the athlete activists motives for protesting can be seen as a selfish act for their gain and could unintentionally cause employees to lose their jobs because teams would longer be able to pay them due to a loss in revenue. This is caused by some fans refusing to support the symbolic protest athlete activists are using on and off the field which

leads to television ratings being down and could cause a professional sports league to lose money (Malanga, 2020).

The other main limitation of the data I analyzed is that it does not fully answer the research question in its entirety. This is because there have been countless ways athletes have brought attention to racial inequality and it is impossible for the documents that were used in this study to go over all of them. Additionally, this question will never be fully answered because, in the future, athletes are going to find new methods to symbolically protest and send their messages out to the world about racial inequality. The data can imply that there will be an increase in athlete activism in the future but nothing is certain when discussing what will happen next in the sports world.

Additionally, throughout the process of conducting this research project, since this study was created during a worldwide pandemic, I was not able to conduct any in-person interviews that may have added to the depth of my research and the events that have happened within the sports world throughout 2020 have been far from normal. During the pandemic, most professional sports leagues have limited the capacity of their stadiums to ensure social distancing and many teams are playing games without any fans in the stadiums. Additionally, social activism in sports is evolving as new athlete activists enter each professional sports league every year. This phenomenon will continue to occur in the future as times change. It should also be noted that since this research was conducted and analyzed during a pandemic, athlete activism could drastically change when stadiums are allowed to have fans again and professional sports leagues are back to normal.

### **Scope for Further Research**



As a result of the research I have conducted, I am interested in seeing how my research question could be answered using statistics, graphs, and data (a quantitative perspective). Additionally, some questions have arisen from the wake of trying to answer my research question being, how important of a role have political parties played in the rise of athlete activism? How have athletes outside of the United States brought attention to racial inequality? Why has social media made symbolic protest easier to see and hear about? As time goes on, the answers to these questions will grow to define the changing culture of athlete activism and with it, the world's outlook of sports in the future.

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