



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

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Theoretical Importance

- Sports are overlooked by political scientist
- Sports and politics are starting to mix on and off the field



Research Question:

How have athletes within team sports in the United States brought attention to racial inequality over time?



Practical Importance

- Sports are more popular than ever before
- Dramatic increase in organized athlete activism
- Athletes are gaining more social influence
 - Increased exposure to the masses

Literature

Thomas Gift & Andrew Miner

- Found that political scientists are reluctant to study politics within sports due to
 - a lack of good data within the field for them to work off of
 - sports are generally perceived as an unserious topic compared to other political issues such as voting or war
- Delineates a gap in the research

Peter Kaufman & Eli Wolff

- Found that athlete activism is on the rise
- Athletes are seeing the effects of activism



A stylized illustration of a person with short black hair and glasses, wearing a black long-sleeved shirt. They are shown in profile, facing right, and are holding a black marker, appearing to be writing on a whiteboard. The background is a solid teal color.

Methodology

- Historical Model
 - Describes past events in order to understand present patterns and helps with theory building
- Searched for sources that people subscribe to and would see in their feed
 - Google
- The symbolic protest that were chosen had a direct impact on the results I found

Codebook



Athlete	Symbolic Protest	Year
Kareem Abdul-Jabbar	Refused an invitation to play on the 1968 olympic men's basketball team	1968
Craig Hodges	Wore a dashiki to the Whitehouse and handed a letter to president George Bush requesting that more be done to the black communities in America	1992
Lebron James/Miami Heat	Wore the same hoodie Tamir Martin wore when he was killed by police	2012
Colin Kaepernick/Eric Reid	Kneeled during the national anthem	2016
Stephen Curry	Refused to go to the Whitehouse after winning a champisonhip	2017
Bruce Maxwell	First player in the MLB to take a knee during the national athem	2017
J.T. Brown	Raised his fist in the air	2017
Colin Kaepernick	Appearend in a Nike ad campaign	2018
NBA	Playes were allowed to wear activist slogans on their Jerseys	2020
KC Chiefs/Hou Texans	Playes locked arms during the national anthem	2020
Kenny Stills	Arrested at a Breonna Taylor movement in Louisville, Kentucky	2020

Results

- Many athletes were afraid to become activist because they were worried about losing their jobs and endorsement deals
- Social media has become an integral part of athlete activism
- The changing political climate and the rising popularity of sports has allowed athletes to become bolder in the symbolic protest they pursue
- Athlete activists have learned how to fight together which has helped them spread their message faster

Limitations & Implications

Limitations

- Did not use the ECSU library database
- The paper only has snapshots of how athletes have brought attention to racial inequality
- There was bias in some of the evidence
- The results are only a part of the story

If I had more time and resources I would have...

- Interviewed professional athletes & sports fans
- Looked at athlete activism activism across the world
- Gone further back in history to see what athlete activism was like before the civil rights era



Conclusions

- Sports and politics intertwine with each other
- Technology plays an important role in athlete activism
- America's political climate has changed a lot since the civil rights era
- Athlete activists are starting to be accepted by professional sports leagues
- Athlete activists are no longer working alone

Next Steps

- Quantitative Analysis
- Make this project broader
 - Look at the world

