

Paying the Price for Speaking Out: Athletes, Politics and Social Change

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‘When you are an athlete you should be unafraid to exercise your voice. Today that is rarely the case.’ – Ann Peel, as quoted in Koss (2011)

Introduction

The notion that sport is exempt from social and political life is passé. Increasingly, sport organizations take an active interest in issues of social reform, conflict resolution, philanthropy and aid, and international development. Athletes are also currently active in such causes. For example, National Basketball Association (NBA) star Steve Nash oversees charitable efforts to support the health and development of children, both in the United States and internationally. Through the Steve Nash Foundation, he works to increase “access to critical needs health and education resources” in order to “ameliorate conditions for kids, families and communities” (Steve Nash Foundation, para. 1, 2012). Similarly, former NBA player John Amaechi operates the Amaechi Basketball Centre in Manchester, UK, as a venue for personal and community development that welcomes all persons “regardless of ability, ethnic background, socio-economic background, gender or age” (Amaechi Basketball Centre, para. 1, 2012).

Due in part to the efforts of athletes like Nash and Amaechi, it is now possible to identify a broader institutionalization of sport in the service of social change (see Coalter, 2007; Darnell, 2012; Wilson, 2012). In turn, few people now support the idea that athletes – particularly those who come from high profile and elite sport or might even be considered celebrities – should be restrained to their sporting roles only and eschew any broader social and political remit. Indeed, the publication of this special bulletin of ICSSPE offers some evidence of the increased acceptance of, and even desire for, athletes and sportspersons to leverage their skills, popularity, privilege and goodwill towards various ends of social change. Here, I offer a contribution to this burgeoning field by drawing attention to some specific examples of athlete-led activism, suggesting that there are different types of action under this banner and that these types are distinguishable by their political palatability, or the extent to which they challenge powerful institutions and regimes of normativity and truth. I use this analysis to draw attention to the fact that athletes must often ‘pay a price’ for engaging in activities that challenge political power, and/or the sanctity of sport itself.

Types of Athlete Activism

For the purposes of this article, the actions undertaken by athletes to contribute to social change can be understood to fit into one of two categories. In the first, athletes now regularly embody and act upon a responsibility as sportspeople to contribute to efforts at social change that are external to sport. That is, athletes mobilize their profile, wealth and authority to tackle a range of broad social and political problems. The contribution of athletes to meeting the goals of international development, or contributing to peace education fit into this category. For example, the non-governmental organization Right to Play engages a series of well known and successful sportspeople as ‘athlete ambassadors,’ who draw on their personas and images to raise funds and promote the role of sport and physical activity for local development in marginalized communities. Also in this category are the various athletes who have used the profile afforded them to speak out on political issues. Former NBA player Etan Thomas, who delivered several public statements against the US military action in Iraq (Zirin, 2008), and now regularly writes political commentary for publications such as the Huffington Post, is one such athlete. By contrast, in the second category are the actions of athletes who (continue to) call for political reform aimed at sport itself, and agitate for changes through which sport itself can become more egalitarian, inclusive, democratic, fair and equitable. Opportunities for athletes with a disability, anti-racist, anti-homophobic, anti-corruption and anti-doping reforms and policies, and inclusion for gender non-conformist athletes fit into this category. For example, in the late 1990s, Canadian Olympic

swimming champion Mark Tewksbury led an organization of athletes to protest corruption and bribery within the International Olympic Committee (Koss, 2011). The resulting group, dubbed Olympic Advocates Together Honourably (OATH), strove “to be an independent advisory and watchdog organization seeking systemic change” (P.R. Newswire, para. 2, 2012).

I suggest that both of these categories of athlete-led activity are worthy of attention, but, crucially, they call for consideration and appreciation of their position along a continuum of political palatability. Not all athlete-led activities aimed at facilitating social change necessarily fit the category of ‘political activism,’ which can be defined as communicating the need or demand for change to those in power and mobilizing new and popular support for such causes (Shaw, 2001). With this definition in mind, it is inaccurate to characterize the athlete-led activism of Right to Play as politically analogous to that of Etan Thomas because Thomas’ actions are qualitatively more radical in orientation and approach. This distinction is important because research, discussed below, shows that activist athletes who call for radical social and political reform – and particularly in ways that overtly politicize sport, or call for changes to its structure, organization and culture – must negotiate this continuum. Indeed, athletes pay a price for moving too far beyond politically palatable social and political action.

In general terms, on one end of this continuum sport is positioned as a force for good, relatively apolitical in its internal character and organization, possessive of universal values, and generally benign in its social and political impact. This understanding of sport tends to lend itself to athlete-activist projects that fall into the first of the two categories discussed above, in which sport is deemed to make a contribution to social change in areas external to sport itself, or at the least, to offer a stable and influential cultural phenomenon from which to call for change.

This end of the continuum is generally non-threatening and non-challenging to powerful groups and institutions – both within sport and without – and therefore tends to be regarded as politically palatable. For example, positioning sport as a catalyst for international development or conflict resolution rarely engenders political controversy as it tends to confirm dominant beliefs and popular desires regarding the munificence of sport culture. Due in large part to this political palatability, it is reasonable to suggest that the majority of contemporary athlete-led activism lands on this end of the spectrum and it is not difficult to understand why this would be the case. Amidst the challenge of negotiating the complex political terrain of social change, participating in activities which provoke as little resistance and controversy as possible is attractive, a phenomenon which tends to lead to the referencing of, and even trading upon, popular notions of sport as an affirmative social and cultural formation and institution.

However, even though it is dominant, athlete-led activism that is politically palatable is not the only form. On the other end of the continuum lies a general understanding that sport is inherently political and, perhaps more importantly, that it is often organized and dominated by powerful interests and underpinned by exclusionary and hierarchical norms and values. From this perspective, and depending on the extent to which a radical politics is embraced, organizations like the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) can be viewed as undemocratic and even hypocritical stewards of sport who promote its universality while maintaining their cabal-like ownership over the world’s most popular, powerful and lucrative sporting institutions (see Jennings, 1996, 2006). Similarly, the dominant culture of sport can be viewed as one which demands and privileges normativity and conformity – through interlocking structures of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability and bodily practices – rather than a site of universally recognized and celebrated values. Clearly, athlete-led activism that proceeds from this perspective tends to fit within the second category described above, in which reform is aimed at and through the organization and culture of sport itself. The history of OATH is an example of this, as is the recent legal challenges of women ski jumpers who fought for inclusion in the 2010 Olympic Programme (Travers, 2011). The key point is that despite their often marginal profile, relatively radical politics are taken up by athlete-activists on a regular basis.

Before discussing the implications of these categories and this continuum, it is necessary to recognize overlaps in the categories I have described. Clearly, examples exist of athlete-led activism that embrace resistive politics and eschew

political palatability, yet are still directed and mobilized towards social and political issues beyond sport. Indeed, Thomas' critiques of the war in Iraq are but the latest salvo in an important history of such athlete-led political activism, a history which includes iconic athletes like boxer Muhammed Ali, who denounced the war in Vietnam in the 1960s, and runners John Carlos and Tommy Smith who famously supported the American Civil Rights Movement at the 1968 Olympic Games (Zirin, 2005). Given these examples, my point is not to argue for the solidity of the trends or categories in athlete-led activism, but rather to consider the continuum of political palatability, and to illustrate the importance of understanding the features, characteristics, specificities, effects and implications of contemporary efforts at social change as led by athletes. I discuss some of these issues next.

The Costs of Resistive Politics

If athlete-led activism is situated along the continuum I have described, it is reasonable to argue that the current emergence, popularity and institutionalization of these activities is heavily weighted towards the end of the scale that is more politically palatable. Conversely, athletes who speak out about social and political issues in ways that challenge and critique powerful interests – both within sport and without – generally find themselves within the minority in relation to efforts of sport for social change, as well as the culture of sport more broadly. Recognizing this marginalizing effect is important because while the momentum and recognition of athlete-led activism suggests that more and more athletes are welcomed and encouraged to participate in efforts at social change, attention and consideration also needs to be given to the barriers or consequences athletes face if their actions slide towards the more politically radical end of the spectrum.

For example, in recent reflections on her time as an athlete-activist, Canadian Ann Peel described how the current structure and organization of sport along lines of institutional power and cultural normativity militates against athletes speaking out on issues of reform and change (Koss, 2011). Peel's thoughts align with other recorded instances, as well as emergent themes in my own recent discussions with athletes who have called for radical reform and political resistance to oppression and dominance in and through sport. The experiences these athletes have described to me illustrate there are costs to be paid by athletes for engaging in explicit political action and that these costs can take several forms. Three are worth discussing here: organizational alienation or expulsion from sport, political isolation, and personal fatigue and discouragement.

Organizational alienation speaks to the fact that athletes who participate in activism that is politically challenging and/or aimed at sport are often expelled from sporting organizations, either institutionally or informally. For example, Tewksbury became "persona non grata" in Olympic circles after organizing for reform (Starkman, 2010), and while he has subsequently been welcomed back into the Olympic community, it is not difficult to understand how athletes risk their position and acceptance within the structures of sport by calling for change. Certainly, athletes I have spoken with have described the experience of not being invited back to sports organizations after offering critical analyses of the culture and operation of sport.

Similarly, and second, athletes risk political isolation for their activism if it is anything less than politically palatable or in line with the dominant political class or preferred narrative. After Nash wore a t-shirt to the NBA all-star game in 2003 that read 'No War – Shoot for Peace,' he was roundly condemned by other players, such as former US Navy member David Robinson, and sports journalists like Skip Bayless, who criticized Nash for overstepping his boundaries of expertise. Given that political activism challenges power and normativity, and often does so from a minority position, athletes who participate in such resistive politics risk considerable isolation.

Finally, athletes pay a cost in terms of personal fatigue and resources. The athlete activists I have spoken with recount how much of their personal life has become dedicated to participating in resistive politics. There is generally little understanding or appreciation of the amount of time and resources required for sustained and dedicated political resistance, and the toll this can take on athletes who make such commitment. Of course, given the resources that some professional athletes can and do accrue, dedicating money to social reform and change may be firmly within their remit compared to average citizens (though radical political activism likely reduces the chances of, for example, future lucrative product endorsements). At any rate, the point remains that it is easier to participate in social change that mobilizes dominant forms of sport or does so in

ways that conform to political norms, because the personal costs of participating in radical politics, in terms of material resources and subjectivity, remain high for athletes and yet often go unacknowledged.

Implications of Athlete-led Activism

Several implications can be drawn from the preceding brief discussion. I have outlined, in admittedly general terms, some of the negative effects, both potential and realized, for athletes who participate in radical politics, both within sport and without, and in ways that challenge powerful groups and regimes of truth and normativity. Clearly, there remains a price to be paid to be an outspoken athlete, even in an era where the role of athletes as contributors, and even arbiters, of social change, is increasingly accepted. Put simply, the more radically and directly athletes challenge the normativity of sport and political life – and/or use sport as a platform to do so – the more barriers they face and costs they incur. These costs can be institutional, social, political and personal in nature, but should not be considered significant only to athletes themselves. Indeed, these costs suggest that scholars and activists who are interested in mobilizing and supporting athlete-led activism towards social and political reform would do well to think through the political orientation of their actions as well as the impact, and response, which they are likely to engender. This also suggests that if truly resistive politics are the most effective – and even preeminent – means by which to enact meaningful and lasting social change (see Zinn, 1980), then the courage of athletes who speak out in politically challenging ways, and the costs they incur as a result, are worthy of recognition and ongoing scholarly analysis.

In turn, the importance of radical political activism for significant and sustained social change should draw the attention of scholars to the expulsion, and subsequent rehabilitation, of many radical athlete-activists. For example, the heralding in recent years of trailblazing athletes like Ali, Smith and Carlos has potentially obscured the fact that they were initially vilified and ostracized in sport and political life for challenging authority, power, dominance and normativity (Zirin, 2008). Similarly, Tewksbury will serve as the Chef de Mission of Canada's Olympic team for London 2012 even though less than 15 years ago he faced isolation for critiquing the Olympic Movement in fundamental ways. This phenomenon of expulsion and rehabilitation has several potential implications unto itself, but at least one is that the social change that athletes seek through radical political action regularly proves to be important and sustainable, despite often being rejected initially as transgressive and destabilizing. In other words, the historical trajectory of radical athlete-led activism suggests not only that it is worthy of attention and respect in both practical and scholarly circles, but that this attention should be given in the times, spaces and contexts when the activism occurs, more so than after the fact.

Of course, many important questions still remain to be analyzed, particularly regarding whether, how and why some athletes believe the benefits of radical social activism outweigh the costs to be incurred, and/or the reasons why some athlete-led activism remains relatively unchallenging. Clearly, more research remains to be done to understand how and why athletes commit to social change efforts, and the types of politics with which they do, or do not, engage. Such issues continue to be examined and debated in political science and studies of activism more broadly (see, for example, Rutten, 2000) and there is undoubtedly much that scholars of sport can glean from this literature. For now, it is reasonable to assert that there remains a substantial price to pay to be paid by athletes who engage in activism that is radical in its approach and intended to oppose powerful institutions and call for fundamental change. As a result, only a notable minority of athletes do so.

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