Amid Gold Medals, Raised Black Fists
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When you stop to think about it, the small group of black track stars who organized the “Olympic Project for Human Rights” have got quite a lot done in less than a year. Led by Harry Edwards, a professor at San Jose State, they helped keep South Africa out of the Games. They humbled the prestigious New York Athletic club by publicizing its discriminatory membership policies and persuading an impressive number of top athletes to bypass the club’s famed annual meet. And they’ve ignited a lasting racial consciousness among the previously uncommitted black American college athletes.

The most prominent spokesmen of the original group were Tommie Smith, Lee Evans and John Carlos, all of San Jose State. They are not separatists. They do not believe in violence. They are dedicated to ending what they see as exploitation of black athletes and, in the process, gaining dignity and equality for all black people.

By the time this summer’s Olympic trials came around, the goals of the “Olympic Project” had engaged the sympathies of most of the black track men who made the Olympic squad. A clear majority wanted to express their feelings in some way at Mexico City. But they disagreed on methods of protest.

All of them—even Smith, Evans and Carlos—are competitors and individualists by nature and political activists only sporadically. They never did get together on a unified course of action for the Games. They didn’t even test the support among their white teammates. Before they came to Mexico, their understanding was simply that each of them could plan and “do his own thing.”

Now, on the second day of competition, the first protest occurs. After the 100-meter final, the three black medalists—Lennox Miller of Jamaica, Jim Hines and Charlie Greene of the U.S.—let it be known they would refuse to have their medals presented by Avery Brundage. The 81-year-old president of the International Olympic Committee led the fight to get South Africa into the Games and they consider him completely indifferent to the grievances of the black athletes.

The next day Mrs. Tommie Smith and Mrs. Lee Evans go shopping. They buy black gloves that their husbands can slip on if they are forced to shake hands with Brundage on the victory stand. After Smith overcomes a badly pulled muscle to set a world record and win the gold medal in the 200 meters, he and bronze medalist John Carlos hurriedly assemble the symbols of a protest. They borrow a black scarf for Smith and a black shirt and African beads for Carlos. They pull up their sweatpants and take off their shoes to show their black knee socks. Sharing Smith’s pair of gloves, Tommie raises his right fist and John his left and both bow their heads as the band plays The Star-Spangled Banner. In the grandstand, Lee Evans puts on the other pair of gloves, raises his right fist and stands in the same pose—but
no one sees him. Later, on TV, Smith solemnly explains that the shoes off symbolized black poverty and the raised fists black unity.

Carlos, walking down the Avenida Revolucion that afternoon, says, “We wanted all the black people in the world—the little grocer, the man with the shoe repair store—to know that when that medal hangs on my chest or Tommie’s, it hangs on his also.”

John’s own father, it is learned, ran a repair shop in Harlem, where John as a 10-year-old shined the shoes of white bill collectors. In his earliest contact with white men John Carlos bowed his head. Smith and Evans, the teen-age sons of migrant laborers, bowed their heads picking grapes and cotton in the San Joaquin Valley.

The next night in the Americans’ dormitory a remarkable confrontation takes place between Jesse Owens, in behalf of the U.S. Olympic Committee, and a group of about 25 track men, mostly black. Owens informs them that Brundage and the International Committee accuse Smith and Carlos not only of violating Olympic principles but taking political action against the U.S. The I.O.C. is pressuring the U.S.O.C. to send Smith and Carlos home—or risk expulsion of the entire American athletic delegation. Owens proposes that hereafter the black athletes agree on some clear form of “humanitarian” protest (minus black gloves) and thus take the U.S.O.C. off the hook.

The black athletes, however, insist that they must be free to act as individuals. Some of them reject the style of Smith and Carlos, but everyone present backs them in principle. They contend that the protest was pro-black but not anti-American. “What about the bowed heads?” says Owens. “They didn’t look up at the flag!”

“Maybe they were crying,” snaps a black nonmilitant.

At this point one of the white athletes, 1956 gold medal hammerthrower Hal Connolly, asks Owens: “Why isn’t the Mexican government insulted by the fact that the U.S. team never dips the flag in respect when it passes the host country in the opening-day ceremony? We’re the only nation in the Games that doesn’t. Supposedly, it’s been that way since 1908, when we refused to dip the flag to royalty while passing the box of the King of England.”

Connolly goes on to say that he himself refused when asked to carry the flag on opening day, because the U.S.O.C. would not let him politely dip it.

Jesse Owens is outraged. Lee Evans hears him say to Connolly: “As far as I’m concerned, you don’t even need to be here. I’m talking to my black brothers.”

“All us Bloods just lowered our heads,” Evans says later. “We couldn’t believe it. Vince Matthews and I jumped up. I said, ‘Jesse, you don’t even understand what he means. He’s sayin’ both things are political, so why does the Olympic Committee just come down on the Bloods? And look, we invited Hal in here.’”
The next morning, the Olympic Village is full of tension. A U.S.O.C. member arrives and reads Carlos and Smith a statement suspending them from the team and expelling them from the village.

“We were disappointed,” says Connolly, “when Carlos and Smith were censured without ever having the opportunity to speak to the people who censured them and without any recourse to appeal.”

Up in his room, Lee Evans, who is scheduled to run in the 400-meter finals that afternoon, is in a trembling rage.

“I was too shook to eat breakfast,” says Evans. “I saw an Olympic Committee cat who said ‘Hi’ to me real friendly and I grabbed him and shoved him so he almost fell down. ‘Mother, don’t even speak to me after what you done to my partners!’ . . . The cat cut out and run into his room and slammed the door. I was cryin’. I went to the elevator and started beatin’ on it with my fist. And another committee dude says ‘Hi’ and I went for him too.”

Soon after, Carlos arrives and knowing how badly Lee Evans wants his medal, tells him, “Get all the gold you can, and then do your thing.”

“I wasn’t gonna run,” says Lee, “unless I heard it from these guys’ mouths. After that I was never more determined to win a race. But there was so much pressure. I was dizzy all over.”

But once in the stadium, he stomps all his anger into the track, winning the 400 meters in world record time, with black teammates Larry James and Ron Freeman right behind him.

On the victory stand Evans, Freeman and the more moderate James give the clenched-fist salute and wear Black Panther-type berets, which they had bought in the States. There is no official complaint, however, since the fists are gloveless and the berets are removed for the National Anthem.

During the final days of the track competition, the pressure on the athletes—sometimes subtle and sometimes overt—intensifies and focuses on individuals, both black and white. Two team members on Army leave receive calls from their commanding officers. A number of others hear from R.O.T.C. units, athletic departments and employers. However, what scares the athletes most is the widespread rumor that the I.A.A.F.—which governs international amateur athletics and may be above national law—is ready to bar from all amateur competition anyone who violates its regulations and traditions.

But perhaps the most naked use of force concerns the Harvard crew, which had come out in support of the goals of Harry Edwards (though not the threatened Olympic boycott) back in July. The night before the eight-oar final, Coxswain Paul Hoffman is ordered to appear before the U.S.O.C., which is meeting in a penthouse on top of the Reforma Hotel. He is accused of conspiring to violate the Olympic spirit—because he gave Tommie Smith an “Olympic Project” protest button when Smith asked for one to give to a sympathizer in the
200-meter medal ceremony. But Hoffman plays it cool with “my best prep school manner,” and it is eventually decided he has not “conspired.”

The committee hasn’t, however, finished with Hoffman. It still threatens to send him home. “They asked me to pledge that even if I don’t win a medal, I not demonstrate and the whole crew not demonstrate. I gave them my word. I had to get the boat to row.

“What the Olympic Committee has done here,” says Hoffman, “is to enforce its own opinions as to what is and is not proper behavior. And by law and by their own congressional charter they cannot do this. Our lawyers tell us what they did to Smith and Carlos violates the First Amendment.” (Later, when the track competitions are over, an I.O.C. official lets out a story that unnamed “Black Militants” have accepted money from equipment manufacturers and will lose their medals if found guilty of professionalism.)

Under these circumstances, few athletes choose to act out their feelings. Says one star black runner, privately and with self-disgust, “The reason I’m okay is that I acted like a Tom in the first place. That’s the only name for it. And I got the word I better Tom it on the stand tomorrow.”

Nonetheless, there are a few last gestures. The world-record-breaking 1,600-meter relay team of Matthews-Freeman-James-Evans wear their black berets and clench their fists once more, and Evans refuses to shake hands with Douglas Roby, president of the U.S.O.C. Two-time 100-meter champ Wyomia Tyus, in accepting her gold medal for anchoring the women’s 400-meter relay team, announces that “We dedicate our relay win to John Carlos and Tommie Smith.”

White runners Peter Norman of Australia, second in the 200 meters, and Martin Jellingshaus, who anchored West Germany to a bronze medal in the 1,600-meter relay, wear “Olympic Project” buttons on the victory stand.

According to Hal Connolly, if the black athletes had walked out after Smith and Carlos, “quite a few white athletes would have left also”—including himself and his Czech wife Olga. But there are also whites like pole-vault champ Bob Seagren, who says, “I didn’t think it was proper. If it were not for the United States, they wouldn’t be here. If they don’t like the United States, they can always leave.”

Connolly admits that we will never know how many white athletes were with him. No doubt most of the white athletes remain either uninformed or in outright opposition. For the black athletes, finally, do not press to a decision. Despite their commitment, they are intimidated, disorganized and unwilling to seek white support. They are not even interested in the fact that the scholarly Harvard crew checked out a court procedure which would guarantee their right to “symbolic freedom of speech.”

“Some of the white athletes were disappointed,” says Connolly, “but at no time did we interfere or take the lead.” “They’re the ones who are going to suffer more,” says Hoffman, “because, let’s face it, I’m not black.”
“I went to Carlos,” says Connolly “and told him, ‘You’re the boss, tell me what to do!’ He laughed like crazy. He never heard things like that before. But he didn’t have anything to tell me.”