

The Revolt of the Black Athlete

Harry Edwards

The conspicuous position of black athletes in American culture contrasted sharply with the inferior place of African Americans as a people. Seizing upon this disparity, black activists sought to illustrate the issue through a number of confrontations around athletic event: Heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali, who had announced his conversion to the Nation of Islam and changed his name from Cassius Clay, refused induction into the armed forces on religious grounds in 1967. He was stripped of his title. Ali's case ended in a 1971 Supreme Court decision upholding his constitutional guarantees. He did not regain the championship until 1974, however.

Not only was 1968 a presidential election year, but it was an Olympic year as well. The Olympic Project for Human Rights was organized to use the international spotlight of the Olympics to highlight race problems. A number of American basketball players joined in a boycott of the Olympics, while track and field athletes staged personal demonstrations on the victory stand. Harry Edwards, black sociologist and former athlete, recounts the issues and ramifications of these activities.

Since the time of Jesse Owens it has been presumed that any poor but rugged youngster who was able to jump racial fences into a college haven was happy all day long. He—the All-American, the subsidized, semiprofessional racer—was fortunate. Mostly, this is a myth. In 1960, for example, I was recruited by San Jose State College, a prominent "track school." Fine things were promised. "You'll be accepted here," the head coach and deans assured me. It developed that of 16 campus fraternities (as Greek in name as Plato, who revered the democracy of the Olympic Games) not one would pledge Harry Edwards (or anyone of color). The better restaurants were out of bounds and social activity was nil—I was invited nowhere outside "blood" circles. Leaving California, I spent two years acquiring a Master's degree at Cornell University. Returning to San Jose State as a teacher, I knocked on door after door bearing "vacancy" signs, but Mr. Charley was so sorry—the rental room suddenly wasn't available. The end-up: a cold cement-floor garage, costing \$75 a month. Not long after I came to know Tommie Smith, whose 0: 19.5 is the world 220-yard record and whom this same state college uses to impress and procure other speedsters and footballers of his race. "I have you beat," he said. "My wife's pregnant. We have no decent house. So far 13 lovely people have turned me down." ...

During the spring months of 1968, the Olympic Committee for Human Rights, in addition to mobilizing and counseling black athletes and students on various campuses, had continued its drive to keep the Olympic Project for Human Rights in the forefront of public concern

Some athletes had to be convinced to compete. Typical of these were Tommie Smith and John Carlos. They had to be convinced that for them to boycott under the

existing circumstances would be in a vain sacrifice. For unlike Lew Alcindor, the great black basketball star, they could easily have been replaced by Negroes more than willing to compete for the United States

Undoubtedly, there would be some defections in Mexico City. But if only one single black athlete staged a gesture of protest during the course of victory ceremonies in Mexico City, the millions of oppressed black people in America would have been remembered

Because of the overawing of some black athletes by the Olympic men's track and field coaching staff and by Avery Brundage, it became necessary to make certain changes with regard to the forms of protest outlined in the Statement to the Black Power Conference. The center of the protest did not, however, move from the victory stand. It was decided that each athlete would determine and carry out his own "thing," preferably focusing around the victory stand ceremonies. In this way, potential repercussions from a so-called "Black Power" conspiracy could be avoided and, also, each athlete would be free to determine his own course of protest. The results of this new strategy, devised for the most part by the athletes themselves, were no less than revolutionary in impact

The first test of support for the Olympic Project for Human Rights came when Jim Hines and Charles Greene took the victory stand after finishing a close 1-2 in the 100-meter dash. The two took the stand and stood stolidly, facing the flag. Neither made so much as an utterance in protest of black degradation in America

Then came the victory ceremonies for the 200-meter dash. Tommie Smith the gold medalist, and John Carlos, the bronze medalist, had made it crystal clear that they intended to go through with their planned protest at the victory stand. Subtle attempts at intimidating the two had been made by members of both the U.S. Olympic Committee and the U.S. track and field coaching staff. But Carlos and Smith would not bend. They climbed the victory stand shoeless, each wearing a black glove. Smith had a black scarf tied around his neck. They were joined on the victory stand by Peter Norman, the silver medalist from Australia, who wore the official badge of the Olympic Project for Human Rights to underscore his support of the black liberation struggle. The men were presented with their medals and then each turned toward the flag of the country represented by the gold medal winner. The U.S. National Anthem was played. Smith and Carlos immediately raised their gloved fists and bowed their heads. In a taped interview with Howard Cosell, Smith explained the pair's protest gestures. He stated, "I wore a black right-hand glove and Carlos wore the left-hand glove of the same pair. My raised right hand stood for the power in black America. Carlos' raised left hand stood for the unity of black America. Together they formed an arch of unity and power. The black scarf around my neck stood for black pride. The black socks with no shoes stood for black poverty in racist America. The totality of our effort was the regaining of black dignity." Smith later confided to me that the gesture of the bowed head was in remembrance of the fallen warriors in the black liberation struggle in America—Malcolm X, Martin Luther King,

Jr., and others.

The impact of the protest was immediate. The U.S. Olympic Committee, acting hastily and rashly, warned all other U.S. athletes, black and white, that "severe" penalties would follow any further protests. Smith and Carlos were given 48 hours to get out of Mexico and were suspended from the Olympic team.