

From raised fists at the 1968 Olympics to taking the knee: A history of racial justice protests in sport

Jul 23, 2021

 Black Power salute: 50 years on how much has changed?

- Athletes have been given more freedom to express themselves at this year's Tokyo Olympics.
- Two Black athletes were expelled from the 1968 Games after protesting against racial and social injustice on the medal podium.
- Professor of Sociology Lori Latrice Martin explains the history of racial justice protests in sport – and how far we have come since the 1968 Olympics.

In 1968, six months after Martin Luther King Jr was assassinated, Tommie Smith and John Carlos stepped up to the podium to receive their Olympic medals in Mexico City.

They had won gold and bronze in the 200m, but now neither men were wearing shoes

As the US national anthem played, [they bowed their heads and raised gloved fists](#) in what has now become an iconic image of protest against social injustice.

The black socks and no shoes represented Black-American poverty, while the gloves symbolized Black-American strength and unity.

Afterwards they were expelled from the Games and both received death threats.

“I went up there as a dignified Black man and said: ‘What’s going on is wrong’,” [Carlos said in a 2008 interview](#).



John Carlos, participant of the 1968 Olympics. Image: REUTERS/Alex Gallardo

Tokyo 2020: Unity in diversity

More than half a century on, one of the guiding principles of the postponed 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games, getting under way in Japan, is [‘unity in diversity’](#).

Podium protests are still banned under [Rule 50 of the International Olympic Committee's \(IOC\) Olympic Charter](#), but opportunities for [athletes to express their views](#) have been extended, following recommendations from human rights experts.

This meant that before their opening match with Chile, [Great Britain's women's football team were allowed to take the knee](#) to highlight racial inequality and discrimination.

During Olympics trials in June, however, US hammer thrower [Gwen Berry was criticized for turning away from the flag while on the podium](#) during the national anthem.

On Radio Davos

[Lori Latrice Martin](#) is Associate Professor of Sociology at Louisiana State University and the author of [White Sports/Black Sports](#). Here she explains the history of social justice protests in sport and whether the Olympics has really moved on since 1968.

**We now see sports players regularly taking the knee.
Where does that come from?**

There has been a long-standing tradition of Black athletes in particular using their positions to draw attention to social justice issues. We can go back to the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, where Tommie Smith and John Carlos decided that they were going to raise their fists in the air on the podium in a protest to racial and social injustices. Across time, there have been athletes who have used their platform, most famously, boxer Muhammad Ali, and his contemporaries including American footballer Jim Brown and basketball player Kareem Abdul-Jabbar.

More recently, in 2016, it was American footballer [Colin Kaepernick](#) who decided he was going to take a knee and protest during the national anthem. Many people connect the national anthem with the military and patriotism, but it is a moment when people are all engaged in the same activity, focused on the flag.

The purpose of any protest, as Martin Luther King famously said, is to disrupt business as usual, to force people to be uncomfortable and to create a sense of crisis. So that's what many of these athletes are doing when they decide to take a knee. It's happening across the globe – people are recognizing that issues related to race and to social inequalities in general is not just an American thing, but it's a part of a global problem.

Are we going to see more of this kind of protest at the Olympics this year?

It's going to be interesting. I think that will depend upon how one person decides to do it and then how the Olympic Committee responds. We already saw the experiences of people like [Gwen Berry](#) and how she has been harmed because of her efforts to shed light on social justice issues during the playing of the anthem, so it's hard to predict.

We have to remember that protests are not meant to be convenient and we can't schedule them. So we may find that people find ways to highlight racial injustices and inequities in sports and beyond in ways that we never thought they would. It may not be during the anthem. It may be as they are lining up for a race or by something they decide to wear.

Is sport a unifying force to bring countries and ethnicities together?

Sport can have the power to unify a community, a nation and even the world. But it also can be a very dividing force. We've seen that time and time again, such as where it's used to perpetuate myths about certain populations, including Black men, women and athletes.

Sport may be used in a variety of ways that seeks to privilege some groups over and above others. Even ticket prices, for example. Back in the day, working-class people

and people from lower-class backgrounds could enjoy professional sports. Now, it's very hard to afford a seat even in the so-called 'nosebleed' section. Sport can actually reinforce a lot of the inequalities that exist in society.

Racism in US sport has grown in recent years. Image: High Country News/ The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport

Why does racism endure in sport?

As soon as we have structures and systems in place that are race-based, we can see how sport can become institutionalized and how it can perpetuate racism. For example, there's been a lot of attention on some of the [rules surrounding swim caps at the Olympics](#). It may appear that rules about the types of swim caps that are acceptable are race-neutral, as are various dress codes. But they will often have a negative impact on one particular group relative to another, in part because there may have been changes in participation in the sport. There may be changes in technology – and those things don't necessarily keep up with the rules and the structures.

If you have more Black women or Black people in general doing well in swimming, for example, and they can be more successful or compete more equally if they have a particular type of swim cap, but then it's banned because it's not part of what's

accepted... that has a negative impact on Black people and brings up all kinds of issues about what we consider beautiful and desirable and about stereotypes and ways to denigrate Black people based upon their hair and hairstyles. These things don't occur in a vacuum – it's important to know all the ways the various 'isms' that affect society also affect sport.

What makes some sports 'white' and some 'Black'?

Part of it is the stereotypes that people have about certain groups. In the American context, you tend to assume that Black boys and men excel in sports like basketball that require more speed and physical agility. Some people still believe that's rooted in biological differences and that somehow Black men might have a greater propensity to be successful in sports like basketball and football. And that perhaps Black women are better suited for sports like track and field than they are for field hockey and lacrosse. But we have to look historically at policies and procedures. There were times when Black men couldn't play professional basketball with white men, for example, or where Black women were excluded from playing professional tennis with white women. Those things have an effect on the kinds of sports that people play.

In many economically disadvantaged communities, they don't have a lot of sports programmes, so you don't find hockey and swimming often in their public schools. Children aren't even being introduced to those kinds of sports in their physical education classes. Many baseball fields that used to populate the American South have

disappeared. So it's not a coincidence that there's been a disappearance amongst Black people in baseball, for example.

All these things are interconnected and it's not just a matter of people having a biological propensity to be successful in one sport or another. It's far more complicated – it's about the opportunity structure and having access to different facilities. With anything, it's about who you know. Someone may be very talented, but if no one ever discovers that talent because they're not playing in an amateur athletic league, for example, then no one's ever going to know about their talent.

Have we moved on since the 1968 Olympics in terms of diversity in sport?

I'm cautiously optimistic. I'm a big fan of a former legal scholar, [Derrick Bell](#), and his work on racial realism. He basically talks about the permanent subordination of Black people in America and calls into question efforts to use the courts, for example, to bring about racial equality, because historically race has always mattered in American society. He also talks about what he calls 'peaks of progress', moments in American history where there is a tension on social justice issues, on racial inequities. In these moments, people show a willingness to create a more equitable society, such as at the end of the Civil War, during the civil rights movement and after the killing of George Floyd.

But sadly, some time may pass and then some folks forget about their commitments to social justice issues, even though Black people and other people of colour continue to suffer. If history has taught us anything, it's that there are some people who were actively engaged in social justice issues who turn their attention to something else. It's not until we have another incident like the killing of George Floyd, or some other overt manifestation of racism, that the nation and the world decides to draw attention to racial inequities again. So I think it remains to be seen, but I think many people, including myself, are cautiously optimistic that the number of voices has increased, especially following the killing of George Floyd, both in the sports world and beyond it.