

Opinion: The athlete as agent of change

By Lonnie Bunch and David Skorton, Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 10.04.17

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San Francisco 49ers outside linebacker Eli Harold (left) quarterback Colin Kaepernick (center) and safety Eric Reid kneel during the national anthem before an NFL football game against the Dallas Cowboys in Santa Clara, California, on October 2, 2016. Photo from AP

An athlete silently protests during the national anthem. People respond with angry taunts of "traitor," "you're a disgrace" and "leave our country!"

Are these angry tweets aimed at National Football League players kneeling during the national anthem? Or heated statements about National Basketball Association players not visiting the White House? No. These insults were thrown at Toni Smith, the then- 21-year-old senior guard on the Manhattanville College women's basketball team, who expressed her opposition to the Iraq War in 2003 by turning her back on the flag.

The history of protest in sports, much like that across society, holds many lessons for us that we can apply to the nation's current anger. Sport has always been a way used to challenge convention. The institution has also been used to prove the worthiness of a marginalized group and prod the nation to live up to its stated ideals.

Athletes Use Platform To Address Injustice

Even before Colin Kaepernick took a knee to highlight police brutality, disagreement had been a part of sports. For decades, athletes have used their fame as a platform to address injustice. Tommie Smith and John Carlos, for instance, raised their fists during 1968 Summer Olympics to protest the unfair treatment of African-Americans. Tennis champion Billie Jean King advocated for Title IX to bring about more gender equality in college athletics. The Phoenix Suns wore Spanish-language versions of their jerseys to protest racial-profiling laws.

If we are to move past reactionary anger, we must acknowledge the fact that the American experience differs among people and groups. Nothing brings that home quite like Jackie Robinson, a hero for breaking the Major League Baseball color barrier. He, too, saw the flag in a different light due to the racism he faced every day. As he wrote in his 1972 autobiography, "I cannot stand and sing the anthem. I cannot salute the flag; I know that I am a black man in a white world."

Robinson and many other athletes have played critical roles in enabling the social change that has created a more inclusive society, often at great risk to their careers. Any suggestion that athletes should "stick to sports" diminishes their courage. The argument also ignores the deeply held tradition of disagreement and debate that makes democratic countries, like the United States, different from dictatorships.

United States Not Living Up To Its Principles

Our nation has always struggled to equally apply the ideals embodied in our Constitution and the Bill of Rights. The United States was founded on the principles of individual liberty, freedom of expression and democracy. Still, people of color, immigrants and women have struggled to receive the full benefits of citizenship. The struggle to perfect our union continues on. Admitting our flaws is not a weakness, nor is it unpatriotic.

As Toni Smith said in a statement following the uproar over her protest, "It is my right as an American to stand for my beliefs the way others have done against me. Being patriotic cannot simply be an empty slogan. Patriotism can be shown in many ways, but those who choose to do so by saluting the flag should recognize that the American flag stands for individuality and freedom."

To many who profoundly love the United States, protest is one of the highest forms of patriotism. The need to "form a more perfect Union" is enshrined in the preamble to the Constitution. The framers knew that the only way to improve our democratic republic is to continuously assess it and work to make it better through principled disagreement and vigorous debate. Such improvement happens regardless of whether the debate comes from the halls of Congress or a football stadium. Increasingly, though, many of us seem to be ignoring the lessons that history has to offer.

Learning From Lessons Of The Past

Museums and other cultural institutions are a potential solution for this. Sport is a powerful way to do so because it resonates with people and passes through the generations. We can display Tommie Smith's warm-up suit and explain why he and Carlos raised their fists at the Olympics. We can also explain the costs they incurred by doing so. Then, generations of people who were not yet born can see both the progress made and the unfinished work ahead of us.

In some ways, sports are conducted on the ultimate level playing field, a fair place where ability outweighs backgrounds, beliefs, race and religion. Athletes have unique insight into working toward a goal and looking past individual glory for the greater good. As such, they have something profound to say about our nation, our freedoms and who we aspire to be. We should listen.