

THE POWER TO CHANGE THE WORLD

The United States has seen a transformation in the past 12 months, possibly the beginning of a sea change around race and culture. The very visible and tragic death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police shook the nation to its core, and prompted an unprecedented national outcry. In the months that followed, amidst the social vacuum created by the pandemic, sport emerged as a present and prominent voice for change. In many ways, we have always known that sport has an inherent power to bring people together, and that athletes, because of their celebrity status, have a platform from which to influence others. What we saw last summer was a collective and unified movement by a large sector of the entire sports enterprise that placed issues of racial oppression and inequality in the center of American consciousness. Systemic change begins with awareness, and sport is shining a bright light on this racial reckoning.

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Sport plays a significant role in American culture, and continues to have broad appeal at all levels of society. We all have some connection to sport, whether it's recreational activity with family and friends, elite sport participation, or even just fandom. Sport creates an environment where people engage with others despite perceived differences. We collectively share the joy of victory and we all understand the pain of defeat. This unity and common purpose opens the door for greater understanding and appreciation of the challenges others may face and unites us in our approach to positive solutions. Of course even as we extol these virtues of sport, we must acknowledge that discrimination still exists. In sports we find some of the harshest gender-shaming language, and sports at the leadership level remains mostly homogenous. But even still, we believe that sport has the power to change the world. Sport is a language that everyone understands. The key is to extrapolate the positive aspects of sport like teamwork, unity, mutual aspiration, and respect, and through these common themes, begin to have the meaningful conversations that advance positive systemic change.

Sport and Social Justice

The power of sport is also seen through the impact and influence of athletes at all levels of the game. In iconic moments in history, athletes have stood in support of a cause, or in opposition to injustice and oppression. In 1968, when John Carlos and Tommie Smith raised their fists on the Olympic medal podium in Mexico City, it shocked the world, a world that largely was ignorant of the struggles that faced African Americans and other minority groups in the United States. This action created an international furor and damaged their post-Games professional careers.¹ Questions were asked. How dare they use this moment to advance their personal agendas, how ungrateful to the opportunities given to them to train and excel in their sport? Almost 50 years later when former NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick took a knee to protest racial injustice, some of these same sentiments were repeated.

Kaepernick began his peaceful protest in 2016 by remaining seated during the playing of the national anthem at a pre-season game. A photo tweeted by a fan magazine gained national attention and Kaepernick explained that he was protesting racial injustice and police violence against people of color. In his own words: "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color." "[T]his is bigger than football, and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder."²

¹ Erin Blakemore, "How the Black Power Protest at the 1968 Olympics Killed Careers," *History.com*, 22 February 2018, <https://www.history.com/news/1968-mexico-city-olympics-black-power-protest-backlash>

² Steve Wyche, "Colin Kaepernick explains why he sat during national anthem," *NFL*, 27 August 2016, <https://www.nfl.com/news/colin-kaepernick-explains-why-he-sat-during-national-anthem-0ap3000000691077>

Kaepernick's protest inspired other athletes to make similar gestures during pre-game anthems throughout the rest of the season, including kneeling, linking arms, raising a fist, or in some cases returning to the locker room while the anthem was being played. These peaceful protests continued into the 2017 NFL season, and gained the attention of the nation's highest office. Former US President Trump took aim at these athletes calling for them to be fired. In the ensuing years, Kaepernick remained unemployed and has been subjected to racial slurs and death threats.

In early 2018, NBA Superstar LeBron James was publicly reprimanded by a television journalist who suggested that he should keep his political commentary to himself, and "shut up and dribble." James had 41 million Twitter followers and 36 million Instagram followers at the time, and responded with an Instagram post entitled "I am more than an athlete," and a statement that generated the hashtag #wewillnotshutupanddribble. The reaction to this exchange was swift and massive with basketball heavyweights like NBA Commissioner Adam Silver and legendary player Bill Russell commending James on his leadership and positive activism. On the other side of the dialogue were those claiming that James had overstepped, and that his sole and singular purpose should be to entertain.

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Basketball legend Kareem Abdul Jabbar in his 2016 book *Writings on the Wall* attempted to explain these negative reactions, noting that America has always had a complicated relationship with its athletes. Jabbar, an athlete activist since the 1960s, goes on to say that:

[W]hen it comes to Game Day, athletes are warriors whose acrobatic actions on the court or field are revered by millions, emulated by children, lionized in living rooms and bars. Their faces are on clothing, their likenesses on video games. But when it comes to Election Day, or any other day that involves expressing personal opinions about social or political issues, athletes are relegated to a locker room ghetto and told to keep their politics private. Financially, mixing sports and politics is bad for business. Fans want to indulge in the escapism of the sport without the heavy baggage of real life interfering...³

³ Kareem Abdul Jabbar, *Writings on the Wall: Searching for a New Equality Beyond Black and White* (New York: Liberty Street, 2016) p. 115.

Today we are seeing a significant increase in the impact and influence of athletes at all levels of the game. Much of this is due to the high level of engagement and immediacy of social media. The byproduct of this engagement is that athletes, especially at the elite levels, have the ability to influence the business community which then strikes at the funding source. There is a growing recognition of the power of their voices, and their ability to have a positive impact on society. A recent Nielsen study showed that more than 70 percent of sports fans supported athlete activism and believed that teams and league should actively support athlete protests and initiatives on race-related matters. 70 percent of sports fans believe the teams should develop marketing campaigns supporting diversity; and 77 percent believe brands are more powerful when they partner with sports organizations to drive social change.⁴

Today's Movement

The year 2020 brought with it stirrings of hope for a new decade, despite an election year in the United States that was already proving to be highly emotional and contentious. Unknown to most, the virus with which we were all soon to be well acquainted had started its insidious spread across the world. As the pandemic exploded in every corner of the globe, the world as we knew it came to a standstill. Sports became an afterthought as we tried to make sense of this new norm. In the months that followed the lockdown, political unrest dominated our social commentary, and while those tensions simmered, racial injustice erupted once again in the United States.

For more than nine minutes the visible suffering and eventual death of George Floyd on the corner of Chicago Avenue and 38th Street in South Minneapolis streamed around the globe, and brought the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement into the center of the world's consciousness. #BlackLivesMatter was founded in 2013 by three African American women, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin. Today, BLM is a member-led global network of more than 40 chapters.⁵

For many, the phrase "Black Lives Matter" reflects a call for acknowledgement and relevance echoing over centuries of oppression and injustice. At its most basic level, it is a call to recognize that the lives of people of color not only in the United States, but around the world, should be valued. However, in the current polarized political climate, the meaning of the phrase has been warped, and the retort "All Lives Matter" has become a verbal weapon to diminish and silence those voices calling for

⁴ The Nielsen Company (US), "Promoting Racial Equality in Sports Study," <https://www.nielsen.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2020/07/nielsen-sports-blm-Infographic.pdf>

⁵ Black Lives Matter, "Black Lives Matter: About," <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>

equity. It is within this social context that actions taken by the NBA, the WNBA, and other players, teams, and leagues over the past summer were so remarkable. When the NBA resumed its 2020 season in a bubble, the world was watching and they saw clearly outlined on the court, the mutual conviction that yes... Black Lives Matter. Athletes also used this platform to share powerful messages on their jerseys and to promote meaningful social justice work. Michelle Roberts, Executive Director of the NBA Players Association, commented on the impact of this collective movement. “This just reminds me that sports in general and basketball in particular, we are an example for the rest of the country to emulate, because in that locker room, there are friendships and bonds that form, notwithstanding race,” Roberts said. “They’ve learned to respect each other as men, and therefore can empathize with each other as men. So, watching white players say Black Lives Matter on the back of their jerseys, it was just amazing.”⁶

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In August 2020, following another race-related police shooting, this time in Kenosha, Wisconsin, the Milwaukee Bucks made the decision not to play their scheduled playoff game against the Orlando Magic. This action reverberated throughout the sport world and picked up momentum when the rest of the NBA, the WNBA, Major League Baseball, and others canceled events as well, and stood in solidarity with the African American community that was facing yet another tragedy. Rather than issue a mandate that the games must continue, the leadership of the NBA, the teams, players, and coaches all came together to discuss and determine the best next steps. Out of these conversations came the establishment of a coalition on social justice; repurposing of arenas owned by teams as a safe voting location for those especially vulnerable to COVID-19; advertising sports to promote greater civic engagement; and an NBA Foundation that would focus on economic empowerment in the Black community.

The NBA and WNBA certainly are case studies for the positive role of sport in shaping culture and society. The NFL also has been extremely active in recent months, with a markedly different approach than was seen during Kaepernick protests. When

⁶ Marc J. Spears, “‘Black Lives Matter people’: How the NBA’s social justice efforts dominated the season,” *The Unde-
feated*, 12 October 2020, <https://theundefeated.com/features/how-the-nba-social-justice-efforts-dominated-the-season/>

the NFL resumed its season last August, players and teams protested in various ways, including kneeling during the national anthem, words of power written on cleats, and the phrase “End Racism” stenciled on the field. We also saw individual sport athletes like Japanese tennis star Naomi Osaka take a very personal stand on the issues, wearing seven different face masks for the duration of her 2020 US Open Tennis Championship run to ensure that the nation does not forget the names of people killed by police brutality.

At the university level, young people throughout history, have been strong and prominent as activists and catalysts for social change. From the Freedom Riders and lunch counter sit-ins during the Civil Rights movement to more recent activism, many students have taken a stand against discrimination, inequity, and injustice. According to data gathered in 2020 by the Ross Initiative in Sports for Equality (RISE), US college and university athletes, as well as coaches overwhelmingly believe racism is a concerning issue in the country and a large majority are willing to be active as sport leaders in order to address it.⁷

Recently the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport in partnership with MarketCast Research, Analytics and Data Science, conducted a survey to determine the current impact of athlete activism. Questions focused on how fans react to athlete activism, what forms of activism are fans most receptive to, and supportive of, and what is the business case for sport properties and brands to support athlete activism. These data show growing support for social justice activism by players as well as sport leagues, with a majority of fans across multiple leagues supporting athlete activism and the role of teams and leagues in social responsibility.⁸

How Sports Teams and Leagues Can Use Their Platforms

Social justice activism at the organizational level requires leadership that includes moral courage. Moral courage allows the team or league to stand behind actions for moral reasons even when the outcome is unknown or appears to be negative. It is the strength to stand on the right side of an issue despite negative ramifications. In 2005, the NCAA took a stand on the use of stereotypical sports mascots and images of indigenous people at NCAA championship events. At the time, the decision was derided by some as “political correctness” and an overreach on the part of the governing body. However, the NCAA stayed the course and now almost 20 years later, we have begun to see substantive change in the professional sport world with the Washington football team and the Cleveland baseball team making a change.

⁷ Ross Initiative in Sports for Equality, “RISE College Athletics Survey on Racism and Athlete Activism,” <https://rise-towin.org/college-survey/index.html>

⁸ MarketCast, “Athlete Activism Study,” <https://marketcast.com/athlete-activism-study-download/>

An organization finds the moral courage to tackle these issues through its culture and values. Most organizations, and certainly sport organizations tout diversity, inclusiveness, equity, sportsmanship, and other ideals as core to their collective belief systems. These values form the basis for corporate social responsibility and social activism.

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Nelson Mandela once said, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” Education is key to the goal of developing a consistent baseline knowledge and understanding, with all operating from the same prism. We all have a responsibility to increase our knowledge exponentially, to understand history and how it contributes to current social dynamics. A commitment to broad-based, ongoing education around these topics will clear the path for greater understanding and support of these issues that, for some, may not have a personal impact. Looking again at the NBA as an example, the league has more than 70 percent African American players, however NBA team ownership is not diverse with only four non-white majority owners of 30 teams. For most of these owners, the issue of race-related police brutality is something they are not likely to face. How then do they relate to the realities faced by so many athletes on their teams? How then can they empathize, and support actions intended to address these issues? Education helps to bridge this gap and creates a level of trust and community from which an organization can then leverage its resources to support athletes in these social causes.

The Institute for Sport and Social Justice

The Institute for Sport and Social Justice has a long history of social justice work in the world of sport, dating back to the late 1980’s. We work in three key areas. We are educators, advocates, and researchers and, over the years, we have developed award-winning programs that focus on diversity, inclusion, equity and belonging, as well as gender-based violence and leadership development.

In sport, the huddle is a powerful symbol of togetherness, a place where teammates convene to reinforce their union, to challenge and support each other, and to communicate strategy. Based on this theme, our educational programming is called “Huddle

Up,” which for us is a call to come together and a call to action. Our “Huddle Up for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging” program focuses on building community and trust while embracing vulnerability as a leadership skill. We introduce the topic of privilege in a manner that invites participants to step into the conversation rather than retreat to a defensive posture. We discuss the power of language, the power of symbolism, unconscious bias and allyship, equality vs. equity, and empower participants to understand how privilege, bias, discrimination, and stereotypes can create an unwelcome environment. Our “Huddle Up to End Gender Violence” program addresses the full continuum of abusive behaviors and empowers participants to understand how misogynistic language, sexual harassment, gendered bullying, sexual assault, rape, and domestic violence are linked together.

As advocates, we are a voice for positive change through the power of sport. Our “Shut-Out Trafficking” program raises awareness on university campuses and communities across the nation about human trafficking in all its forms. Our “Invisible Women in Sport” podcast highlights the journeys of women of color in sport and amplifies their voices. We recognize that we are at an inflection point, a place in history where what we do now can determine whether we actually see systemic change in our nation. This moment demands that we act. It demands that we work together to build community and trust, that we have the strength and the courage to be vulnerable around these issues, to show up and be seen. To understand how privilege, whether its race, gender, heterosexual, religion, cis privilege, can sometimes blind those who have it, and destroy those who do not.

Finally, we are researchers. Along with our sister organization, the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sports, we conduct quantitative research that provides annual comparison data around race and gender in sport, as well as graduation data in the university sport space. We also do qualitative work in the organizational culture space, specifically programming that combines qualitative research, strategic planning, and education relative to “Diversity Equity Inclusion and Belonging,” and that provides the benchmarking as well as goal setting and training needed to move the needle. One of the outcroppings of the tragedies of summer 2020 has been an increase in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion positions in universities and professional sports across the country. While this is very positive, many are starting from scratch to build the framework for sustainable change. This is our work.

Over the past several years we have impacted all the major US professional sport leagues, the NCAA, over 300 universities, including conference-wide partnerships; over 200 high schools; all branches of the US military; and the Australian Army. We also develop programming for youth, and through a partnership with the US

Department of State, we have worked with coaches and youth from more than 15 countries. For us, this is not a short-term mission, we are in it for the long haul, and we show up every day, trying to make a difference, one organization at a time, one person at a time, one conversation at a time.

Concluding Remarks

In the words of Cesar Chavez, “Once social change begins, it cannot be reversed. You cannot un-educate the person who has learned to read. You cannot humiliate the person who feels pride. You cannot oppress the people who are not afraid anymore.” Racism and social injustice in all its forms must be eradicated from our society. Sport as a social institution, one that is uniquely positioned and universally embraced, can help to change the world. The power of sport is seen not only in its ability to bring people from varying backgrounds together, but in its inherent significance and influence in our culture and society.