

**Mid Term**

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### **Athletes are Inherently Political**

From the establishment of the Olympics to protests for social rights and expressions of nationalism, sports have consistently served as a platform for political expression. The relationship between sports and politics is evident through the lens of athlete activism, with athletes using their platform to protest social injustices, challenge political systems, and cultivate meaningful discussions. Athlete activism has consistently mirrored the political issues of its time, and athletes have used sports as their platform for protests and to challenge nationalism. I argue that athletes are central to understanding the relationship between sports and politics, whether it be through their activism or how their triumphs can become political statements in themselves, embodying this intersection through their actions and individual identities. I will discuss examples of how athletes themselves have coincided with political moments throughout history.

### **Olympic Athletes**

The modern Olympics were founded in 1896 by Pierre de Coubertin, starting a notion of Olympism and individual athlete nationalism (Boykoff, 2017). Even in the early years of the modern Olympics, Coubertin pointed out how sports and politics coincided, stating ‘athleticism has a major role to play in the bringing about of social reforms ... [T]he athletic group is, in a way, the basic cell of democracy’” (Boykoff, 2017). The Olympics’ ability to bring together athletes on an international scale allows for the opportunity to address social issues in individual nations. Athletes' use of the Olympics for protest has been seen throughout history. For example, in 1936, the Olympics were held in Berlin, Germany during Hitler’s regime. Hitler’s ideas of Aryan racial superiority raised concerns about holding the Games in a country enacting policies of genocide against Jewish people and their discrimination against other minority groups. These

games fueled many boycotts and America almost withdrew, where anti-semitism was widely discussed (Boykoff, 2017). In Grix and James' article, it is explained how the games in Germany were a way to burnish the image of the country, using the Olympics as a means of 'sportwashing' (2024). As I stated, athletes themselves can become political moments, with track runner Jesse Owens being no exception. Owens, a Black American on Team USA, really stood out as a political entity in his triumphs, becoming the first American to win four gold medals in track and field (Ott, 2024). Owens' wins took the light away from Hitler's discriminatory ideologies, showcasing to the world that his identity as a black man was able to thrive in an unequal society, thus being a key moment for progression in equality to come, leading up to Jackie Robinson's career and the Civil Rights Movement (Ott, 2024). While Jesse Owens wasn't necessarily an activist, he stood as a political landmark in the 'Nazi Games' as a symbol of a win in equality.

While Jesse Owens' success in 1936 was a symbol of victory, athlete protests also showcased social issues more explicitly at the Olympics. In 1968, the Vietnam War, landmarks of the Civil Rights Act, and the assassination of MLK and Robert F. Kennedy all took place. At the Mexico City 1968 Olympics, sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos used the winner's podium as a stage to shine light on Black Americans' struggles with inequality (Boykoff, 2017). This was the first time that an American network was broadcasting the Games, furthering the amplification of their protest (Nittle, 2018). They were suspended for their protest, with many seeing their act of protest as unpatriotic, with many defining their act as political and not fit for sports. Hartmann says "the difference was what was defined as political (and thus inappropriate) and what wasn't (and thus supported or even celebrated)" (2024). This brings back the idea that sport and politics are inherently intertwined, with athletes being the strongest spark in that discussion.

## **Nationalism & Identity**

The national anthem being played at sporting events has become a common US ritual, dating back to 1918 during the first game of the World Series, between the Boston Red Sox and Chicago Cubs (Cyphers & Trex, 2020). After the terrorist attacks on 9/11, there was an emphasis on American patriotism and national unity widespread throughout the country. Athletes' support and wins shortly after the attacks took place were seen as wins for America. The national anthem and songs played like "God Bless America" were, and still are, to be stood with one hand over your heart as the flag waves. Athletes who choose to not participate or protest such ritualistic songs are seen as being 'political,' stirring up the attention of those who are in support of their cause, or see it as a threat to nationalism.

As Hartmann's article describes, in recent years athlete activism has flourished, especially "race-based social justice activism associated with the Black Lives Matter movement and struggles against police violence, anti-Blackness, and white supremacy" being "at the leading edge of these movements" (2024). One of the most recent and notable athlete protests is Colin Kaepernick. Kaepernick took a kneel during the national anthem at an NFL game in 2016 with teammate Eric Reid, protesting police brutality (Haislop, 2020). While he had support, many took offense to the concept of kneeling during the anthem. As Hartmann explains, there has been a recent shift in media norms due to social media, and how journalists must "report on the views athletes have about various social issues and causes" (2024). Prior to social media's surge and the well-known Kaepernick protest, NBA player Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf protested the national anthem by praying, stating that the flag represented tyranny and oppression, going against his religion (Gregory, 2022). He received a similar backlash to Kaepernick, facing rejection from the American public because of his protest (Gregory, 2022). Both athletes along

with many others have used protesting the national anthem as a way to amplify their voice usually regarding Black Americans' inequalities.

This raises the issue of how athletes themselves become central points for political discourse, particularly regarding nationalism, with their identities often politicized when they are successful. Naomi Osaka exemplifies how an athlete's identity can become politicized, as debates about her Japanese-American background demonstrate the wider issues of race and national identity in sports. Osaka won the tennis Grand Slam against Serena Williams at the US Open, becoming the first Japanese-born player to win a tennis Grand Slam (Kim, 2018). As discussed in class, questioning an athlete's identity is usually only discussed when they win, because they are seen as a then perceived threat or questionable American. She experienced racial inequality, just because of her looks and where she was born, despite being raised in America since she was three (Kim, 2018). Osaka is also one of the five Forbes 2020 Athlete Activists, because she is not afraid to speak out on racial inequality, and was one of the first athletes active on social media after the tragedy of George Floyd's murder (Ennis, 2020). She is just one of many athletes whose individual identities are questioned in America specifically because being American doesn't have a tie to ethnicity or race, however, it becomes a political discussion among spectators of sport.

Athletes are at the core intersection of sports and politics, whether through their activism or the politicization of their identities. Sports wouldn't be possible without the athletes who comprise it, and political discussions wouldn't take place without their involvement.

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