

A Contemporary Look at How Athletes' Voices Lead to Political Change

By Marcus Smith

In August of 2016 following the San Francisco 49ers pre-season game against the Green Bay Packers, Colin Kaepernick addressed the media from his team's locker room. He was asked, "What are you trying to accomplish with this protest of the national anthem?" He responded by saying, "Ultimately it's to bring awareness... This country stands for freedom, liberty, and justice for all. And it's not happening for all right now... These aren't new situations, this isn't new ground, these are things that have gone on in this country for years and years and they need to be addressed... I'm going to continue to stand with the people that are being oppressed, this is something that has to change."¹ After listening to Colin, what I really wanted to know is, how could this protest bring actual change for racial minoritized individuals in America? How do these words create action? Better yet, what other athletes are actually going to put their own money, time, and brand on the line to effectuate needed political change? In the upcoming paragraphs I will shine a light on some of the athletes that are taking steps beyond their words and making real concrete efforts to create political and legal change in the world.

According to Adam Jude of the Seattle Times, "a study of political behavior among Black Americans, Kaepernick was "a powerful mobilizing force" who directly inspired nearly one-third of Black people polled to donate to a political cause, attend a protest or boycott the NFL. More than half of respondents said Kaepernick inspired them to vote in a local or national election."² Two female athletes that have taken action to create legal change are Maya Moore and Megan Rapinoe. Maya Moore stepped away from the Minnesota Lynx and the WNBA for over two years now, to pursue ministry and social justice reform. In particular, she provided money for legal expenses toward freeing wrongly convicted Jonathan Irons. Mr. Irons, a sixteen-year-old, Black male, was sentenced as an adult to a 50-year prison sentence. He spent over 22 years behind bars before Moore helped him claim his freedom.³ In 2016 professional soccer player Megan Rapinoe joined Colin Kaepernick's action of taking a knee during the national anthem, but she did not stop there. Later that year she and four teammates filed a federal complaint against the United States Soccer Federation for gender wage discrimination. The suit claims that by paying the Women's team less than its male counterparts, US soccer's payment practices amount to federal discrimination. It's notable to mention that the women's team has had considerably more success while making 33% less than the men's team.⁴

Former NFL star Anquan Boldin and current NFL defensive back Malcom Jenkins have joined together to form a non-profit named the Players Coalition.⁵ Following Kaepernick's protest the group completed an agreement with the NFL that will provide nearly \$90 million to support causes deemed important by the players, with a particular focus on issues facing the African-American community. In addition, this group has attended bail hearings, met with legislators, supported voter information initiatives for district attorney races, and advocated for the shutdown of Rikers

Island in New York and has supported juvenile-sentencing reform in Pennsylvania and Massachusetts.⁶ In 2018, the Players Coalition successfully lobbied lawmakers to restore voting rights to 1.4 million disenfranchised Florida citizens and they also contributed to a similar effort in the state of Louisiana.⁷

Continuing the theme of voting rights advocacy, at the conclusion to the 2020 NBA Finals the league and the media welcomed LeBron James' voice on social injustice reform. During the post-game celebration reporter Rachel Nichols asked LeBron, "You were very vocal, that you weren't just trying to win a title in this bubble. But you wanted to be a real voice for social change...?" LeBron responded, "...We all want to see better days. When we leave here, we have to continue to push that. We have to continue to push for social injustice, continue to push for voter suppression, continue to push police brutality, continue to push for everything that is the opposite of love. And if we can continue to do that... America would be a much better place, which we all love this country."⁸ In a powerful gesture LeBron used the championship platform of the NBA to raise awareness about the need for social change and reform, but he didn't stop there.

LeBron and other prominent Black celebrities such as Patrick Mahomes, Kendrick Lamar and Lisa Leslie to name a few, put purpose behind their words by creating More Than a Vote.⁹ The organization has made efforts to increase voting with young people of color and individuals who were previously incarcerated. They partnered with NBA2K21 video game, reaching young Black voters in their own time and space, through a two-part series aimed at directing young voters to voting resources.¹⁰ In addition More Than A Vote recruited over 10,000 poll workers for the 2020 election and donated \$100,000 to the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition (FRRRC)¹¹, an organization working to help individuals who were incarcerated (many of them Black and Brown) in the state of Florida with paying off outstanding debts associated with their convictions and educating the group on disenfranchisement tactics. The FRRRC fought for the passing of Amendment 4,¹² which removed a lifetime voting ban for ex-felons in the state of Florida. Estimates have this effort adding around 85,000 voters in the battle ground state with more to come. These efforts inspired other organizations such as Michael Jordan's Jordan Brand to donate \$500,000 to the FRRRC as well. Jordan has been criticized in the past for his lack of involvement on social justice issues.

During Michael Jordan's playing career there was less tolerance from the media, team ownership and endorsers for social justice protest from athletes. As athlete's salaries and endorsement values increased during the Jordan era the power that owners and endorsers held over players increased. Black and female star athletes were much more quiet and afraid of backlash from the White male dominated media, team ownership, and endorsers. In 1996 Chris Webber was dumped by Nike for asking them to lower the price of his shoes, "One problem I had was that they were selling shoes to kids for \$130 and [kids] in the neighborhood were robbing each other and stealing shoes... So I had a problem with that, and I had to voice it."¹³ Craig Hodges found himself blackballed from the NBA following the 1992 NBA

season, "because of his outspoken political nature as an African-American man" his lawsuit alleged.¹⁴ The accounts of contemporary activism listed earlier point to a shifting dynamic between political activism by athletes and a more receptive media, ownership, and endorsers.

While Kaepernick remains blackballed from the NFL for his protest, Nike championed his cause through a worldwide promotional campaign,¹⁵ it is possible that the US is shifting into a new paradigm, where athletes can effectuate political change without it affecting their brand and endorsement deals. If this trend continues then it bodes well for increased future developments between athletics and political activism. If you are reading this, I ask that you don't miss your obligation to take part in this social justice movement by voting in your local elections, donating to a political cause, attending protests or boycotting an institution that you feel is not acting in good faith. While athletes taking stands is important and powerful, the real change must occur on the ground with everyday Americans like you.

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Endnotes

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⁵ "Players Coalition - Home." Players-Coalition.org, players-coalition.org/. Accessed 15 Feb. 2021.

⁶ Walsh, Colleen. "NFL Players Talk Criminal Justice Reform at Harvard." Harvard Gazette, 29 Mar. 2018, news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2018/03/nfl-players-talk-criminal-justice-reform-at-harvard/. Accessed 15 Feb. 2021.

⁷ Jones, Mike. "Despite Helping Restore Voting Rights for Millions, Players Coalition's Work far from Over." USA TODAY, www.usatoday.com/story/sports/nfl/2020/11/06/players-coalition-anquan-boldin-nfl-players/6189597002/.

⁸ DHClips HD. "LeBron James Wins His 4th NBA Finals MVP - Full Acceptance Speech." YouTube, 11 Oct. 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=kGwG49pR3tk. Accessed 15 Feb. 2021.

⁹ "More than a Vote." www.morethanavote.org/.

¹⁰ Finley, Kevin. "More than a Vote Uses NBA 2K21 to Reach out to Young Voters." Sports Gamers Online, 16 Oct. 2020, www.sportsgamersonline.com/games/basketball/more-than-a-vote-uses-nba-2k21-to-reach-out-to-young-voters/. Accessed 1 Mar. 2021.

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- ¹² De La Garza, Alejandro. "'Our Voice Will Count.' Former Felon Praises Florida Passing Amendment 4, Which Will Restore Voting Rights to 1.4 Million People." *Time*, 7 Nov. 2018, time.com/5447051/florida-amendment-4-felon-voting/.
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