When and Where They Enter: Demasculinizing Black Athlete Activism through the Lived Experiences of Black Female Athletes

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Can one be a sexist civil rights activist? The actions of Cam Newton towards Jordan Rodrigues invoked heated debate among scholars and practitioners in the field who questioned the sincerity of Newton’s support for civil rights of African Americans given his “apparent” disregard for women. Yet, a further investigation into the protest for civil rights among male athletes suggest the cause of the Blacks is too often divorced from the issues facing women and girls in this community (Bass, 1998). As Messner (1990) posits: “The modern institution of organized sport, as we now know it, emerged as a male response to social changes which undermined many of the bases of men’s traditional patriarchal power, authority, and identity” (204). Sport in this context becomes a space more readily apt to assert one’s manhood than to address the structural needs of the larger community. The critique of Newton’s actions weakened his position as champion for social justice while serving as a warning that disregard for women in sport would undermine the success of Black athletes’ activism moving forward.

Black athlete activism in the literature is often framed using the works of Harry Edwards (Agyemang, 2012; Agyemang & Singer, 2010; Cooper, Macaulay, and Rodriguez, 2017; Hartmann, 1996; Lomax, 2002). In his work, Edwards posits that Black athlete activism occurred in four waves. The first wave, from 1900-1945, is characterized by a focus on gaining legitimacy and recognition for the humanity of Black people with Jack Johnson, Jesse Owens, and Joe Louis as prominent archetypes of the activism of this time. The second wave, 1945-early 1960s, occurred post World War II and signified a move past gain legitimacy and towards acquiring political access and positional diversity (Cooper et al., 2017). During this wave, athletes including Jackie Robinson, Larry Dobbs, Kenny Washington, and Chuck Cooper were instrumental in desegregating American sports through their athletic ability and political activism (Isenberg School of Management, 2017). The third wave, mid 1960s to 1970s, is defined by a social justice orientation that consisted of “uncompromising activism” (Isenberg School of Management, 2017) and “demanding dignity and respect” (Cooper et al., 2017). Considered the pinnacle of Black athlete activism, this wave is marked by the actions of Harry Edwards, who spearheaded the Olympic Human Rights Project, Tommie Smith and John Carlos (the Black Power Salute to bring awareness to the historical and contemporary plight of African Americans), Curt Flood (establishing free agency in sport), and Muhammad Ali (protest against the war and oppression of Black people globally). Great strides were made to improve the playing field for Blacks as well as social structures surrounding the Black community, yet it often came at the detriment of these athletes’ career if not personal wellbeing.

The fourth wave came after a nadir of Black athlete activism hampered by capitalism, detrimental sanctions to athletes engaged in disruptive activism, reliance on legal victories to establish social equality, and cognitive dissonance among Black athlete towards their role in the Black community. Tiger Woods, Michael Jordan, and OJ Simpson exemplified this valley of Black athlete activism and the subsequent consequences on promoting activism among future Black athletes (e.g., Agyemang, 2010). Beginning in the mid to late 2000s, the technological advances and political climate of the new millennium created a platform for Black athletes to focus on gaining power through economic endeavors and social media. The entrepreneurial efforts and advocacy for pay equity of LeBron James, Serena Williams, Venus Williams highlight the desire of Black athletes to empower Black communities through wealth and self-expression. The employment of social media also is a hallmark of this wave of activism given its ability to empower athletes and connect them to communities around the world.

With a fifth wave emerging, the question must be raised as to what will make Black athlete activism more sustainable in this era. The backlash against various WNBA and NFL players and teams requires that new and more sustainable forms of activism (c.f., Cooper et al., 2017) be engaged to protect the livelihood of these athletes while progressing the condition of the communities they represent. The previous waves were glamourized to depict Black men versus
White men in which the success of the individual overshadowed the desired outcomes of their protest (e.g., #TakeAKnee). Moreover, Harry Edwards (2015) states the focus on interracial conflict between Black and white men “outright precludes and is dismissive of gender-based conflicts and contradictions in issues and today this limitation is a major blind spot in our overall social and political analysis and strategies in our paradigm for understanding the world that we are attempting to impact promises to be as costly it is intolerable. While I am elated that athletes are beginning to stand up and speak out, I am equally concerned that their actions do not reflect a much-needed even imperative change in our paradigmatic perceptions of the issues America today has a major human rights problem and it particularly afflicts Black America and that human rights crisis is the circumstances the outcomes the status of women and girls.”

Throughout the waves of activism is a glaring absence of Black female athletes which can be attributed to hegemonic masculinity, a positionality which individuals can embody in search of power over others (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Shuck 2016). Hegemonic masculinity is not inherent to men nor limited to them as seen by the actions of the Legends Football League asserting their respect for the American flag as a form of real athleticism (read: masculinity) (cf., Messner, 1997). Masculinity, and consequently the use of it to maintain status quo, is fluid and must be understood in cultural and structural terms. When analyzing Black athlete activism, the work of Messner and Guttman are informative in framing hegemonic masculinity as a tool which can be adopted on a representational level to assert one’s humanity in the face of personal oppression (e.g. racial discrimination) yet be rejected and fought against on the structural level (e.g., social injustice, pay inequity). Yet, the critiques of NFL players suggest that the use of this positionality can come at great cost to those who employ it and the causes for which they advocate. This position loses its power as it borne out of a system meant to sustain itself therefore its use will only serve to reify the system (c.f., Ferber, 2007; Leonard, 2004; “the master’s tools”, Lorde, 1984). Therefore, current framing of Black athlete activism must be divorced from hegemonic masculinity if future iterations of these efforts are to be effective in legitimatizing Black people and improving the social condition of the community.

The focus on patriarchal forms of activism silenced Black women and marginalized their work (Bass, 1998). Considered the “Black man’s fight for self-respect and survival” (Stevens, 1997), the role of Black women in community activism is underrepresented in the literature leading to erasure of women and their contributions to civil right movements (Poirot, 2015) and the masculinization of Black activism. While the fight is not with Black male athletes, it is with the ways their activism is positioned in hegemonic ways to limit their actions and their effectiveness. To redress this issue, the purpose of this presentation is to deconstruct hegemonic masculinity in Black athletes’ activism. Employing Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2005), an analysis of the literature will be conducted to historically situate the process of masculinizing Black athlete activism. With a focus on the centering the lived experiences of Black women, BFT allows for the exploration of Black female athlete activism in uncovering different forms of activism and deconstructing larger yet limited social constructions of Black athletes’ activism. Uncovering the lived experiences of these athletes can foster a deeper understanding of how and why Black athletes engage in activism while redressing hegemonic ideologies of gender and athleticism which preclude the full involvement of women and men in sport and limit the effectiveness for their activist efforts.