A Focus Group Study of High School Athletes’ Perceptions of Athlete Activism

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2018 marked the 50th anniversary of the silent Olympic medal stand protest of John Carlos and Tommie Smith (Edwards, 1969). At the time, and in the aftermath of the protest, the actions of the American Olympians were negatively received, effectively ending the athletes’ competitive careers (Hartmann, 2003). Over time, the protest has come to be viewed as a monumental moment in American and World history including many celebrations and commemorations in October of 2018.

Though it was not uncommon for athletes to have a social voice prior to the 1968 Mexico City Games, nor in the years after (Coakley, 2017), 2017 was particularly notable as the President of the United States opined on the activist actions of players from the National Football League (NFL) (Axson, 2017). Indeed, the NFL protests were named by USA Today’s Joe Schad as the top sports news story of 2017 (Schad, 2017). Receiving less attention has been the demonstrations conducted by amateur athletes, for which the consequences were at times more detrimental. Responsive actions were taken by high school administrators in Texas (Fortin, 2017) and outright bans on protest were enacted in Louisiana (Rapaport, 2017).

In response to the modern generation of athletes acting as activists, sport-focused scholars have developed lines of inquiry into the phenomenon. Scholars have investigated athlete activism in collegiate sport (Melton, 2015; Welty-Peachy, 2015), on collegiate campuses (Yan, Pegoraro, & Wattanabe, 2018), from an institutional theory perspective (Agyemang, Berg, & Fuller, 2018), on social media (Frederick, Sanderson, & Schlereth, 2017), and from the perspective of black male collegiate athletes (Agyemang, Singer, & Delorme, 2010), amongst others. However, scholars and media professionals have paid less attention to the perspectives of high school athletes. Guided by theories of identity (Lock & Heere, 2017) identification (Delia & James, 2018), and stakeholder theory (Friedman, Parent & Mason, 2004) we developed the following research question:

RQ1: How do high school athletes in the San Francisco Bay Area perceive, understand, and interact with athlete activism?

Method

To investigate the research question, an inductive qualitative methodology was deployed to develop a rich description of the evolving phenomena. Specifically, data was, and will be, collected through focus groups with high school athletes (Lally & Kerr, 2005). To this point, six focus groups have been conducted with an ultimate goal of eight.

Results

Results of the six focus groups led to the development of three interconnected themes. The first theme is the inspiration the participants received from elite athletes to develop their unique social voice and to speak out on injustices. Though inspiration was present, the participants did not simply echo the perspectives of others, instead they formed their own opinions and messages. Secondly, the students had a nuanced view of athlete activism and the association with other societal issues (e.g., gender equity, gun violence, etc). Thirdly, the participants were hopeful for change and felt as if they needed to be an influential part of positive social change through their actions and interactions with peers.