The 1968 Olympic Protest:
The Fight for Black Rights

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During the 1968 Olympic Games on Mexico City, several of the U.S. athletes silently protested the continued lack of civil rights for African Americans in America. While their protest caused a strong social and cultural backlash, it brought further awareness to the civil injustices black people were facing in America. In order to better understand the importance of the 1968 Olympic protest, one needs to know about the background of the racial climate in America, the protest itself and the impact that it had.

Following the Emancipation Proclamation Act, a Union victory in the war, and the adoption of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, African Americans were still treated as second class citizens. After Reconstruction essentially ended in the late 1870’s, Jim Crow Laws would re-establish the racial inferiority of southern blacks by the hand of the white south. White people kept trying to bring African Americans down. They made up so-called Jim Crow laws. These laws were designed to keep African Americans from competing for jobs exercising their newly-found rights in southern society. This would remain this way for another half century.

On the eve of the modern day civil rights movement of the 1950’s, a young boy from Chicago went down to Mississippi to stay with some relatives, his name was Emmit Till. He was brutally murdered for allegedly whistling at a white woman. Governor George Wallace, was so racist that even though Alabama was to desegregate their schools, he said he would stand by the doors and not let black kids in. He won re-election as governor of Alabama. White southern confederates created the KKK, which was was a secret organization that used fear and intimidation to keep blacks inferior in southern societies. Another case involving three young civil workers, Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodwin, and James Chaney, who were a part of Freedom Summer, mysteriously disappeared after arriving in Mississippi. They were traveling together investigating burnings of black churches and six months later their bodies were found.

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buried in an earthen dam. They had been murdered by KKK clan members that were in the local police force. The South wasn’t the only place that had racial injustices, other parts and cities of the U.S. now called “The Hood” or inner-city were commonly populated with African Americans because of the social, political and economic disparities and separation there was in places all over America in the 1950’s-1960’s. For John Carlos, one of the 1968 Olympic protesters, times got so bad that he stole food from train cars. He would run with 50 pounds of food just to feed him and his neighborhood². He had to do this because some families in his community just couldn’t make enough money to provide the basic necessities to live. Because some people couldn’t afford the basic necessities, they sometimes lost their will. The drug epidemic was just starting to burn in Harlem. Amongst too many members in John Carlos’s community, it hung around their necks like noose in fire. The drugs always had an easier path into single parent homes. A growing number of people lived their lives around drugs and alcohol until it killed them. Fortunately, John had a father, mother, two brothers and a sister who all stayed clear of those destructive ways³. Tommie Smith, another 1968 Olympic Protester, also had it very rough. He lived in a town with 20 people in it. His family was poor just like most other African American families in the 1940’s. He had a mom, dad, and 11 siblings. They sharecropped land with white people. They picked cotton, sugarcane, and corn. On a daily basis his family’s lunch consisted of a pail with biscuits on the top, syrup on the bottom, and sometimes there was mashed potatoes and beans⁴. The living conditions were horrible. They had a roof (sometimes leaky), the house was not insulated and it was mostly made of wood or anything they could find to build it. Their home was the crudest of shelters that provided the most basic level of need. If they were not working in the fields, Tommie and his siblings were doing

things around the house. This way they all learned the necessary skills to survive. They never got bored because there was always something to do. This is what life was for many African Americans at this time.

In the fall of 1967, Dr. Harry Edwards organized a group known as the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR). Dr Edwards project’s mission was to bring awareness to the racial inequalities that minorities were experiencing in the United States and places like South Africa. Many athletes such as Tommie Smith, John Carlos, and Lee Evans were black student athletes that were supporters of the project and of Dr. Edwards. The OPHR wrote a list of demands prior to the Olympics in Mexico City calling for, among other things, the removal of the white supremacist and head of the IOC Avery Brundage. The athletes in OPHR were disgusted by the fact that athletes in South Africa spent their entire lives preparing for their Olympic moment and then could not compete because of the color of their skin. Over the span of one year, the plan was for OPHR members to boycott the Mexico City Olympic Games but this plan deteriorated by the time they entered the Olympic Trials. All of the black athletes that went to the trials and were part of OPHR, ended up making the Olympics. Once the athletes decided that they were going to the Olympic Trials and the Olympic Games, Dr. Harry Edwards drifted apart from the black sprinters. His original idea of completely boycotting the Olympic games had not worked, so he decided to not be a part of the sprinters. Now they had to think of what they wanted to do. The black athletes decided that each person would think of what they wanted to do. One major influence that inspired the black athletes to do what they did was the Tlatelolco Massacre. This took place in Mexico roughly 10 days prior to the Olympic games being held in Mexico City. An estimated 150 people were killed protesting for the desire for democracy. Their bodies were thrown in furnaces, where people would burn their trash. And for the people that could not be put in the furnaces, they were taken out to the ocean and their bodies dumped into the water. Other protesters that survived, scattered to the hills and were told

to stay there until the Olympic games were done. Avery Brundage had forewarned these athletes that the Olympics were for sports, not politics. He did not want something “political” in the games and if it did happen, consequences were to come. It was during the plane ride to Mexico City that Tommie Smith and John Carlos planned what they were going to do as a way to silently protest if they were to get the opportunity. Both John and Tommie made it to the Men’s 200 Meter Final. Tommie Smith ended up finishing first, Peter Norman from Australia came in second and John Carlos came in third. Before they went to the victory podium, Peter stopped both and said that he supported what they were fighting for and asked if he could do something. One of the American athletes gave him an OPHR badge to wear. Once they walked out, received their medals and the National Anthem started playing, Smith and Carlos raised their fists with black gloves on. This was to represent and show black unity. They also wore no shoes and black socks to represent black poverty in America. Carlos wore a black scarf to represent black pride. The beads they were wearing represented the lynchings of black people in the deep south. All of these symbols stood for the racial injustices that black people faced every day in America. It was important that Tommie Smith and John Carlos did their protest on an international scale because otherwise they would not have been heard. Black people were racially inferior in this time so it would have to take something very extreme for everyone to take them seriously. Although Tommie Smith and John Carlos’s received most of the publicity, several other protests on the medal podiums were made by black athletes on the U.S. team. Lee Evans, Larry James, and Ron Freeman each medaled in the 400m, wore black berets to their medal ceremony, where they also raised their fists. These three were not disciplined, the IOC said, because the National Anthem wasn’t playing at the time and they had removed their hats while it did play. They wore the berets to imitate the Black Panther Party. Bob Beamon was another athlete

who protested in the 1968 Olympics. Bob Beamon’s event was the long jump. He won the gold medal and following his jump, Beamon received his gold medal while wearing sweatpants that were rolled up showing that he too was wearing black socks like Smith and Carlos. Ralph Boston, another black Olympic long-jumper, won bronze in the long-jump final and received his medal shoeless, also like John Carlos and Tommie Smith. Many of their Olympic teammates supported what the athletes were doing; one such group was the Harvard rowing team. They said, “We as individuals have been concerned about the place of black men in American society in their struggle for equal rights. As members of the U.S. Olympic team, each of us has come to feel a moral commitment to support our black teammates in their efforts to dramatize the injustices and inequalities which permeate our society.” The women’s 4x100 team also supported their black teammates. After they won 1st place in the 4x100 relay, they dedicated their victory to the exiled sprinters.

Their silent, symbolic protesting was met with hatred and disdain by many in America and around the world. Not long after the Black Power Salute, the IOC and the American Olympic Committee nearly banned the whole U.S. Olympic track and field team until there was a compromise was reached and Smith and Carlos were kicked out of the the Olympic Village and were banned for life from the Olympics. Both Carlos and Smith knew what was to come. They returned home and there was an immediate backlash. One newspaper reporter said that they were black-skinned storm troopers. Both athletes received death threats. One brutal and scary incident, Smith came home to find both of his dogs were chopped up and put on his front porch. John Carlos too was living in his own hell. The death threats and constant harassment put a lot of stress on Carlos’s family. Eventually, Kim (John Carlos’s wife) would eventually take her own life. Through personal toil and torment of their fateful decision to

act on behalf of millions of minorities in the United States and around the world, both Carlos and Smith believed that doing right was never wrong. Both have found peace and solace with their lives.

The Olympic athletes of 1968 were not the first nor the last to use the athletic podium or stage to voice their views or positions on political, social, or economic issues pressing at the time. During the 2016 preseason for the National Football League, one player from the San Francisco 49er’s took his own stand. During the National Anthem, Colin Kaepernick knelt in silent protest in support for people of color who were being oppressed in the United States. He also knelt to protest against police brutality in the African American community. Kaepernick’s protest was also received with mixed emotions by people around the country. Many immediately vilified him while others understand and supported his actions and the reasons behind it. Two of these such supporters were John Carlos, and Tommie Smith. Carlos said, “He’s pushing for the same thing we pushed for 48 years ago”11. Smith added, “He’s taken a stand. I support the idea of what he is doing- You better believe it. But now he’s got to stand up to the forces which are out front to destroy his reputation”12. Kaepernick was publicly crucified after he refused to rise during the National Anthem. Colin said he would remain seated in silent protest against “A flag for a country that oppresses people of color. When there's significant change, and I feel like that flag represents what it’s supposed to represent, and this country is representing people the way it's supposed to, I'll stand,”13. Kaepernick like Smith and Carlos was not acting out for personal gain, recognition, or fame. Like many before them and many after them, people living in the United States have the right to protest under the security, freedom and right that our constitution provides us. There are many examples throughout our history where people have come together to protest social injustices in the world they live

in. Martin Luther King did it, Susan B Anthony did it, as well as Rosa Parks, Betty Friedan, Mahatma Ghandi and Nelson Mandela. People help shape and change the world they live in and a large part of bringing awareness to society comes from selfless acts by the heroes aforementioned.

While their protest caused a strong social and cultural backlash, it brought further awareness to the civil injustices black people were facing in America. By understanding the racial climate in America, the protest itself and the impact that it had, one can also start to realize the parallels between American society of the late sixties and the current climate in America today. The protest by Carlos and Smith personally and professionally destroyed their lives forever. If you asked both of them today if they ever regretted what they did, they will tell you an emphatic no. Carlos said, “I’ve never been sorry for what I did. I would do it again … I have no regrets”14.

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gave great background about Tommie Smith and what Tommie thought of the stand. It also
talked about what immediately happened to him.
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"John Carlos, 1968 Olympic U.S. Medalist, on the Revolutionary Sports Moment That Changed
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