

Football, Culture and Power

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Chapter 14

The NFL, activism, and #BlackLivesMatter

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“Look what we did!”

These were the words of Ferguson activist Dasha Jones as she viewed the now iconic picture of five Rams players in the “Hands Up or Don’t Shoot” pose entering the field on November 30, 2014. Players Kenny Britt, Tavon Austin Stedman Bailey, Jared Cook, and Chris Givens were paying homage to Michael Brown, the African-American 18-year-old who was shot and killed by Police Officer Darren Wilson. The pose had been used by thousands of protesters in Ferguson and around the United States to symbolize systemic police terror and a broader human rights demand that “Black Lives Matter.”

Jones, 19 years old at the time, was a member of *Lost Voices*, one of many local Ferguson activist groups that organically sprang up just days after Michael Brown had been killed. Since August 9, 2014, she had been arrested multiple times, as she, along with members of Lost Voices, slept out in tents for months protesting against the non-arrest of Darren Wilson (Samuels, 2014). While the silent pose marked the first stadium protest for St. Louis Rams players, it was not the first time Jones and fellow Ferguson activists had targeted Rams games. The November 30 game was the first following news that Wilson would not be indicted. Since the night of the announcement, Dasha had participated in “shut-downs” of multiple Wal-Mart stores, department stores, and five malls in the St. Louis area on “Black Friday” and Saturday before the Rams game (Buchanan, 2014).

Given the widespread communal protests, it was clear that when Dasha said, “Look what we did,” she was crediting Ferguson protesters for that spark. Members of the Rams felt similarly. After the game, Britt stated: “I don’t want the people in the community to feel like we turned a blind eye to it” (Falstrom, 2014). Jared Cook added: “It’s kind of dangerous down there, and none of us want to get caught up in anything. . . . It takes some guts, it takes some heart, so I admire the people around the world that have been doing it” (Zirin, 2014D). After the game Britt tweeted #MikeBrown and #MyKidsMatter, hashtags that also adorned his wristbands.

For many, the statement from Rams players evoked past sports activism, notably the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. *USA Today's* Nancy Armour (2014) wrote:

As [Carlos] and Olympic champion Tommy Smith heard the strains of the Star-Spangled Banner they bow their heads and raise their black gloved fist in protest against racism and discrimination.... Nearly 50 years later, five St. Louis Rams players walked out ... with their arms raised in the “Hands Up Don’t Shoot” gesture.

John Carlos himself saw the connection:

How about those Rams? They may be under contract to play football, but greater than that, they have a right to care about humanity.... They are entitled to their opinions, most centrally that Michael Brown’s life should not have been taken ... I remember saying in 1968, you think I’m bad, just wait until this new generation comes out. I feel like that new generation is here at last.

For NFL legend Jim Brown, a new generation of protesters set the stage. In an interview two weeks *before* the Rams protest, Brown captured the “spirit” created by Ferguson protesters:

I think it has brought the country back to yesterday because it looks like yesterday and it feels like yesterday.... The essence of Ferguson is the spirit of the people, and I’m so happy to see the spirit because I haven’t seen it like that since the Civil Rights Movement.

(Carlson, 2014)

With an eye to these connections between the historical and the contemporary, this chapter explores key moments in today’s sports activism.

“The revolt of the Black athlete”

The prevailing narrative has often been that today’s athletes have not continued the activism of the Civil Rights Movement. For instance, Jim Brown has previously loudly critiqued contemporary athletes for failing to follow in the footsteps of Billie Jean King, Muhammad Ali, Arthur Ashe, and others who embraced their role as athlete-activists (Leonard, 2000). Many critics highlight the fear of financial implications as reason for widespread political apathy (Cunningham and Regan, 2012). This apolitical dynamic is often crystallized by Michael Jordan’s famous quote that “Republicans buy sneakers too” (NPR).¹

Important to remember, the 1968 protests did not happen in a vacuum but instead were an outgrowth of the broader Black Freedom Struggle and three specific events within the sport's world:

- 1 Muhammad Ali's official refusal of induction into the Vietnam War on April 28.
- 2 The "Ali Summit" in Cleveland on June 4 where Jim Brown organized star athletes who supported Ali in a publically unified fashion (Wright, 2012), and most directly:
- 3 The creation of the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR) organized by Dr. Harry Edwards in October, which originated as a boycott of the 1968 Olympics.

Publically supporting Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the OPHR demanded the removal of South Africa and Rhodesia from the Olympic Movement; the ousting of the notoriously "anti-Semitic and anti-black" Olympic head Avery Brundage; and the restoration of Muhammad Ali's boxing title (Edwards, 1969).

Ali was called "the saint of this revolution" because "he rebelled at a time when he stood alone" (Edwards, 1969: 89). While Ali and the 1968 Olympics protest are now indelibly etched in sports activist memory, the role of NFL players within the "revolt of the black athlete" is often overlooked. Along with Jim Brown, Hall-of-Famers Willie Davis and Bobby Mitchell, as well as All-Pros John Wooten and Curtis McClinton, were heavily engaged with these struggles. Some scholars have argued, "there would have been no [Olympic] movement without Harry Edwards" (Hartman, 1997), and the same could be said of Jim Brown and others who participated in a gathering that would come to be known as the "Ali Summit." Edwards organized with amateur athletes, while Brown was the key 1960s figure in organizing professional ones.² Their organizing is a notable distinction from the Rams player protests. To Edwards in December 2014, that is okay:

I never lost faith that this generation would take its place as well. They wouldn't do it the way that we did it, but we didn't do it the way Jackie Robinson, Larry Doby, and Jesse Owens did it. We did it within the context of the challenges of our generation."³

While best known as the architect for OPHR, Dr. Edwards has also been a pioneer in sports sociology and coach/consultant with the NFL's San Francisco 49ers. In an interview I had with him just two weeks after Mike Brown was killed, he put the rest of his extensive resume in perspective (Modiano, 2014):

I have a Ph.D., four Super Bowl rings, 32 years on the faculty of the University of California in Berkeley ... and all of the rest. The only reason that I was not lying on the street where Mr. Brown was lying was because I was not there in that situation.

For Edwards, who grew up in East St. Louis, the “situation” hit home: “I had several friends who were shot and killed by police in St. Louis... They were just young dead black men. I mean that was simply the way that the situation was handled. So, there is not a lot that has really changed.”

Exclusion of women

In his 1968 dissertation, Edwards wrote the first principle of sociology in sport is “sport inevitably recapitulates the narrative, structure, and dynamics of human and institutional relationships within society.” For 1960s sports activism and still today, those societal structures largely overlooks the labor of women. For instance, there was a famous photograph of 20-year-old Katherine Switzer at the 1967 Boston Marathon where an official attempted to physically remove her from the race. Switzer’s forced action has been largely lost in popular sports activist history despite coming one week before Ali’s announcement and a year before the Olympic protest. As another example, at the 1968 games, Wyomia Tyus became the first *person* in history to win the 100-meter gold medal in consecutive Olympics. Tyus publically supported the protest of Smith and Carlos but commented years later: “It appalled me that the men simply took us for granted. They assumed we had no minds of our own and that we’d do whatever we were told” (Zirin, 2014F).

Edwards reflected on some of OPHR’s failures in a *Colorlines* interview (Leonard 1998): “We didn’t do the job we should’ve done in terms of women. Even with all of those Black women athletes in the Olympics we never really approached them. In today’s language that means we were sexist, an indictment that could be extended to the whole civil rights movement.”

This point may be best underscored by courageous display of sports solidarity that came from Knox College’s Ariyana Smith on November 29, 2014 against Fontbonne University, just 12 miles from Ferguson. Smith made the “hands up, don’t shoot” gesture during the national anthem before walking toward the American flag and falling to the ground for 4.5 minutes—each minute to symbolize the 4.5 hours Michael Brown’s body was left on the ground after being killed. Smith’s pioneering action came a day *before* the Rams’ protest and contrasted on many levels: (1) She acted alone without any teammate support. (2) It was more than a tribute; it was a *disruption* that delayed the scheduled game. (3) It was widely ignored by the media as ESPN made no mention of her. (4) Unlike the Rams Players, she was not supported and even initially suspended by her university. In so many ways, Smith is the closest embodiment of the nameless, faceless [and

mostly African-American women] protesters like Dasha protesting outside the stadium. Sportswriter Dave Zirin (2014H) called her: “The First Athlete Activist of #BlackLivesMatter.”

Importantly, the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag/words itself not only signifies a new media and new mantra for an old movement, but is also a national network founded by three women of color. Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi started BlackLivesMatter (BLM) “as a call to action for Black people” after George Zimmerman was acquitted in the death of Trayvon Martin. In honoring the critical role of Ferguson protestors, Cullors (2016) clarifies BLM’s complementary role: “We didn’t start a movement. We started a network.” It is also relevant that two of the three BlackLivesMatter founders also identify as queer whose activism is rooted in a long tradition of feminism by women of color. The founders espouse an intersectional approach to justice that is inclusive and responsive to the lived realities of Dasha Jones, Ariyana Smith, and themselves. Activist Rahiel Tesfamariam (2015) describes this shift in *Washington Post*:

In the streets of Ferguson and Baltimore, the new movement for black lives was radicalized by legions of poor and working-class youth who forced the nation to grapple with black rage. They fearlessly confronted a militarized police force, tear gas, snipers and tanks designed for warfare. These young people, including countless women and LGBTQ people who have organized many of the movement’s most powerful acts of resistance, have changed the predominant image of black activism in America.

Edwards own work in the last 15 years has advocated this more inclusive approach to sports activism (Leonard, 2000):

Just as I believe emphatically that the challenge of the 21st century will be diversity in all of its guises, the challenge in sports in the 21st century is going to be diversity. You’re going to be looking at circumstances where you cannot separate out race, class, gender, sexuality, techno-class status or age.

The women activists at the forefront of the struggle for BlackLivesMatter have been providing this kind of needed intersectional leadership for the country.

Sport protests gain momentum

On November 30, 2014, the Rams player protest was punctuated with a 52–0 win as protesters outside the stadium continued to chant, “Hands up, Don’t shoot!” “We’re Are Mike Brown,” and “This is what Democracy

Looks Like” (CBS News, 2014). It was the fourth Rams protest since September 21, where local activist Umar Lee and a small group of protesters inspired the hashtag #NoJusticeNoFootball (Toler, 2014).⁴ While few knew what transpired outside, the Rams players garnered national headlines, and were followed by more sports activism in the coming weeks.

Three days after the Rams’ protest, a grand jury decided not to indict Daniel Pantaleo, the NYPD officer who killed Eric Garner in August 2014 after using an illegal chokehold. Garner’s death, caught on videotape, sparked another wave of protests in New York City and around the country signified by Garner last words “I Can’t Breathe” (11 times). The Ram’s protest and non-indictments of Pantaleo and Wilson sparked a wave of sports protests in December 2014. In the NBA, Chicago Bulls star Derrick Rose took the lead in wearing an “I Can’t Breathe” T-shirt during warm-ups. His display was loudly echoed at a Cavaliers-Nets game in New York where six players, including LeBron James and Kevin Garnett donned “I Can’t Breathe” T-Shirts (Lutz, 2014). In an effort organized by Lakers’ star Kobe Bryant, the Lakers followed suit, with the entire team wearing the shirts.⁵

The NFL Players echoing “I Can’t Breathe” clothing tributes (Waldron, 2014b) were Lions Reggie Bush, Browns Johnson Bademosi, and Rams David Joseph (on his cleats). Washington’s Chris Baker honored both Brown and Garner with a St. Louis “hands up, don’t shoot” display during the game and a string of Instagram hashtags including Brown, Garner, and #BLACKLIVESMATTER.

In terms of the NFL, the Rams’ players were not the first to protest against the killing of Brown. In preseason shortly after Brown was killed, four Washington players (*ibid.*) and the Raiders Maurice Jones-Drew all utilized the “Hands Up Don’t Shoot” pose. Jones-Drew did so during the game after he scored a touchdown—the same space where African-American athletes are often criticized by the media for selfish celebrations. Jones-Drew explained after the game (Tafur, 2014):

I am raising three African American boys. Those things touch home. I definitely wanted to show the people out in Ferguson and around the world that as athletes, we understand and we try to do whatever we can to make a statement.

By December 15, 2014 another NFL protest came from Andrew Hawkins of the Cleveland Browns. The front of Hawkins shirt read: “Justice for Tamir Rice and John Crawford” on the back read: “The Real Battle for Ohio” (Zirin 2014G). In previous months both Rice, 12, and Crawford, 22, were captured on video being fatally shot by police officers just seconds upon arriving on the scene. Both were holding toy guns. Speaking of his own two-year-old son while choking up, Hawkins echoed

Jones-Drew: “That little boy is my world. My number one reason for wearing the T-shirt was the thought of what happened to Tamir Rice happening to my little Austin. And that scares the living hell out of me.”

Members of the police force, who demanded disciplinary action from the NFL, criticized both Hawkins and the Rams players, demanding apologies. Cleveland Police Union President called Hawkins “pathetic” and should “stick to playing football,” and the St. Louis Police Officer’s Association called the Ram’s players display “tasteless, offensive and inflammatory” (Bernhard, 2014). Union head Jeff Roorda called their actions “*unthinkable*”:

As the players and their fans sit safely in their dome under the watchful protection of hundreds of St. Louis’s finest, they take to the turf to call a now-exonerated officer a murderer ... I’d remind the NFL and their players that it is not the violent thugs burning down buildings that buy their advertiser’s products. It’s cops and the good people of St. Louis and other NFL towns that do.

(Lemieux, 2014)

Roorda’s unsolicited reaction mirrors the type of police monitoring and aggression that led to the rampant racism detailed in the DOJ Ferguson Report, and quite possibly, Mike Brown’s death. Jamilah Lemieux, *Ebony.com* Senior Editor, who also participated in the Rams’ Game protest, offered a powerful rhetorical challenge (2014):

Roorda’s tone, and his suggestion that it is “good” people like himself and other members of the force to whom the Rams should be loyal, as opposed to young Black men who look like them, sounds like that of a disgruntled slave owner calling Massa from down the street and telling him to get his chattel in check.

Hawkins did not back down: “A call for justice shouldn’t offend or disrespect anybody. A call for justice shouldn’t warrant an apology” (Zirin, 2014G). Neither Hawkins nor any of the Rams’ players were high-profile stars. The reactions from police, even unmatched by those from the NBA protests, illustrated the social power of the NFL. Even various protests from the greatest of NBA players did not garner such aggressive police responses.

The role of social media and sport protest

After the Rams game, Britt’s full tweet connected all the solidarity dots: “This game was dedicated to #MikeBrown, his family and the Community of #Ferguson. #WeStandWithYou #MikeBrown #MyKidsMatter.” The

statement also reflected the emerging role of social media—seeds that were planted after the 2012 death of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida, and 2013 acquittal of his killer George Zimmerman. Outrage following Trayvon's death mounted as the Sanford Police Department's refused to even *arrest* Zimmerman—which led to 45 days of protest. Zimmerman's non-arrest, like that of Darren Wilson, was the consistent factor in producing mass galvanized responses. Given the absurdly low existing bar to produce an arrest of an African-American civilian, the non-arrest of Zimmerman—and later Wilson, Panteleo, and other officers—was a clear indictment of how police departments value Black lives.

The glaring contradiction spurred sports stars to join the outrage of protesters, and social media was their tool of choice. It was largely NBA players (Modiano, 2012) and not NFL players who took the lead. Most famously, LeBron James tweeted a Miami Heat team picture stating #WeAreTrayvonMartin with all the players wearing hoodies. It spurred a domino effect of NBA stars, including Carmelo Anthony, Amare Stoudemire, Dwayne Wade, Steve Nash, and Kevin Durant, tweeting personal hoodie pictures.

The NBA-led response to Martin was called: "Sports Activism's Welcome Rebirth." For NBA players, that rebirth happened through Twitter—an increasing platform choice for athletes (Browning and Sanderson, 2012). Unlike NBA players, it was largely *after* the Zimmerman verdict that NFL players expressed their disapproval through Twitter.

In "Talking about Trayvon in 140 characters" (2014), Annelie Schmitel and Jimmy Sanderson analyzed 465 tweets from 125 NFL Players after the Zimmerman verdict and concluded Twitter was a "viable mechanism for African American and other minority athletes to engage in activism and initiate important conversations about social justice issues." Perhaps the most visceral reaction came from Atlanta Falcon's Roddy White: "F-king Zimmerman got away with murder today.... All them jurors should go home tonight and kill themselves for letting a grown man get away with killing a kid." White would later apologize for being "extreme."

The Bills' Stevie Johnston also lamented America's racial double-standards, tweeting: "Living in a world where you fight dogs; you could lose everything (Mike Vick) ... if you kill a black man you're not guilty! #INjusticeSystem;" and "Damn, Plaxico Burress shot HIMSELF and got 2 yrs! This dude shot and killed another. Yet, he's going home to his sleep number mattress." Several others players echoed these comparisons to Vick and Burress,⁶ highlighting the lack of value afforded to Black life.

Vikings Punter Chris Kluwe tweeted, "So my phone dies and I come back to learn that our legal system isn't the same as justice. Color me shocked. #waitdontcolormeillgetshot." The tweets from Kluwe and the Ravens Brendan Ayanbadejo ("I guess murder is OK") are also notable in that they were the two most vocal NFL advocates for LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) rights. Both players were resigned following the

2012 season. Each felt their activism played a role (Kluwe, 2014). While it's possible the aging veterans were cut for football reasons, their examples could send messages on the cost of social advocacy for players not deemed indispensable (Carpenter, 2013).

Such NFL fear is not new. In 1999, William C. Rhoden (1999) interviewed several African-American players on the paucity of lack of Black NFL coaches. Alfred Williams explained a reason for player silence about the issue as one of fear and the lack of security: "In this league you can't just speak your mind and feel like it's going to go unnoticed. We play in a league with no guaranteed contracts." Unlike NBA or MLB, NFL players can be cut at any time, and this context might explain why NBA players felt more emboldened to tweet about Trayvon first. Rhoden called Black NFL players the "'Silent Majority' Afraid to Force Change". Then there is the league's silent minority.

White silence and resistance

Kluwe's reference to his white skin privilege was the only tweet from a white NFL player in Schmittel's study (2014) that challenged the Zimmerman verdict. Also, no white NFL player challenged the non-indictment of Darren Wilson. In the NBA, only Steve Nash weighed in ("Disgusted by decision"). With Nash and Kluwe retired, the NFL and NBA white silence has been noticeably deafening. The Nation's Dave Zirin (2014C) had enough:

Everyone in sports should be asked if they have any solidarity—verbal or financial—to offer to the family of Michael Brown as well as those in Ferguson fighting for justice. "Everyone" means not just Black athletes. Peyton Manning, Kevin Love, Tom Brady, Mike Trout, Aaron Rodgers: this is the culture that has made you famous.... Either Black lives matter or they don't. In other words, either the lives of your teammates matter or they don't. It's time, white athletes: take some of the damn weight.

Zirin noted that silence from white professional football players was not reflective of actual street protests or history:

Given how multi-racial the demonstrations have been around the country, it is past time to see them act in the tradition of 1968 Olympian Peter Norman, who stood at attention wearing a solidarity button while Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their fists in Mexico City.

Norman's act of solidarity has always been deeply meaningful to Carlos and Smith. According to Carlos, Norman's decision "to wear the [OPHR] badge

as a white individual, it made the statement even more powerful ... Peter became my brother at that moment.” White solidarity extended beyond Norman in the 1968 Olympics. Harry Edwards stated (Leonard, 1998):

Some of our greatest supporters—the Harvard University Crew Team, Hal and Olga Connolly, Bill Toomey—were white ... I should have made a greater effort to publicly enunciate and embrace that interracial relationship. Even though the media didn’t want hear it.

Edwards cited the failure to place “greater emphasis on interracial dimensions” as a “primary failure” of OPHR. The erasure of white athlete-activists throughout history fit the media’s focus on the selfish and entitled black baller.⁷ Media lamentations of the demise of the “activist athlete” continue to be framed around the failures of today’s black athletes, letting today’s white athletes off the hook for their own participation in structures of racial privilege.

White backlash, white consumers (October 13)

Tonight was a major success. Our message was clear—Black lives matter and that means police violence is an issue no one can ignore, even during Monday Night Football. Our movement is growing every day and while ESPN chose not to air our major action, we know that many in our country stand with us. We are waiting for our leaders to act.

(Zirin, 2014B)

This call for action came from one of the nearly 50 protesters inside the Rams’ stadium who ultimately joined 50 more protesters outside after being kicked out of the stadium by police. Tory Russell,⁸ a prominent local Ferguson activist, said, “You can’t go on with life as usual until justice is served. We are fighting all across St. Louis and this is not a game to us.”

While ESPN remained silent about the protest, other media outlets and social media picked up the slack. *Washington Post* (McDonald, 2014) began their article: “They’re Everywhere” as the Rams’ protest was one of many on that same day as thousands were protesting at St. Louis University, Wal-Mart, at the Ferguson police Department, and other places. All in one day.

Protesters presented multiple banners stating “Rams Fans Know Black Lives Matter On and Off the Field.” In a sport where 68.7 percent of the players are African-American (The 2015 Race and Gender Report, 2015) and 78 percent of fan viewership is white, the banners acted as an appeal to white fans for racial consistency. Another protester, Shannon Wilson, described some of the racist taunting from some nearby fans:

We chanted in protest to tell the world that Rams fans know that Black lives matter. Some Rams fans who sat in front of us ignored us at first. When our cries for our lives grew louder, some men began to dance as if to imitate monkeys, and shouted, verbatim, “Shut the f*** up you monkeys.” I guess some Rams fans don’t know that Black lives matter.

(Zirin, 2014B)

The racist taunting received by Shannon and others underscored the very dynamic the protesters wished to challenge. How could fans enthusiastically cheer on African-American players, but not less athletically gifted African-Americans, let alone the life of Mike Brown? What did fan cheering signify? Todd Boyd describes the dynamic between African-American athletes and entertainment:

Black men, especially young black men, are held in the highest contempt by a large segment of society. This has always been the case, and this contempt has always been exposed through sport. Yet in modern history, the same Black men are often entertainment for the masses. Though it is acceptable for these men to entertain, they are held in contempt for the money they make because of their entertainment.

(Boyd, 2000, cited in Collins, 2005)

For Patricia Hill Collins, fan cheering has less to do with athletic exploits on the field than the compliance to white male authority. In *Black Sexual Politics* (2005) Collins further explains:

Intense scrutiny paid to sports ... operates as a morality play about American masculinity and race relations. Black athletes ... become important visual status for playing out the new racism. In essence, the myth of upward social mobility through sports represents, for poor and working-class Black, gender specific social scripts for an honest way out of poverty. Its rules are clear—submit to white male authority in order to learn how to become a man.

For outspoken NFL players who saw their own children in Trayvon, Mike Brown, or Tamir Rice, the “myth of social mobility” via submission to white authority is contradicted with deadly results (see Brown, this volume). Polls also support Collins and Boyd in showing that on-field performance is not enough for to be accepted by (mostly white) fans.

In a five-year review⁹ of Forbes-E-Nielson of “most disliked” athletes or people in sports, African-American athletes consistently populate the majority of top ten lists. The Nielson-based Forbes poll of 2012 “Most Disliked Athletes” (Van Riper, 2012) is most glaring as nine of the top ten

are athletes of color including Michael Vick, Tiger Woods, and LeBron James. For the fourth straight year, Vick was the most disliked athlete. If Vick's dogfighting crimes are the reason, it does not explain Woods a close number two. While his extra-marital affairs (with predominantly white women) were highly-publicized, infidelity is not highly unusual for public figures. Despite never committing any legal crimes, Woods, Terrell Owens, and Alex Rodriguez all made the most disliked list at least three times in five years while misbehaving white players such as Ben Roethlisberger (twice accused of rape), Brett Favre (accused of sexual harassment; sending naked pictures to a woman reporter), Lance Armstrong, and Josh Hamilton made one-year cameos or missed the list altogether.¹⁰

The symbolic disproportionate "dislike" of athletes of color cannot be separated from the very real disproportionate police shooting or mass incarceration. The "thugification" of Black athletes is constant. In December 2014, Deon Long, a student-athlete at University of Maryland, made this clear, holding up sign that read: "Are we still thugs when you pay to watch us play sports?" The answer is "yes" according to All-Pro cornerback Richard Sherman (see Cunningham, this volume).

Perhaps, no NFL event illustrated such fan and media contempt than the January 2014 NFC Championship when Sherman followed up a stunning game-saving play with an infamous post-game interview when he shouted into the microphone: "I'm the best corner in the game. When you try me with a sorry receiver like Crabtree that is the result you are going to get. Don't you ever talk about me" (Eagle, 2014).

Social media backlash was immediate. In "Dumb People Say Stupid Racist Shit About Richard Sherman" (Kalaf, 2014), sports website Deadspin catalogued many tweets referring to Sherman as a "monkey," gorilla," "ape." Liberal use of the word "ni—er" was preceded by a myriad of adjectives including "dumb," "ignorant," "cocky," "disrespectful," and "no class." Beyond Twitter, Deadspin reported (Wagner, 2015) that, "The Word Thug was Uttered 625 times on TV Monday. That's a Lot." This far surpassed any other day going back to August 29, 2013 where John Kerry called Bashar al-Assad a "thug."

The racist onslaught quickly produced a backlash to the backlash (Modiano, 2013). *The Atlantic's* Ta-Nehisi Coates (2014) wrote:

I don't know what it means to be "classless" in an organization like the NFL. And then there is the racism from onlookers, who are incapable of perceiving in Sherman an individual, and instead see the sum of all American fears—monkey, thug, terrorist, ni—er.

Deadspin's Greg Howard (2014) pointed out similar acts of bravado by white players like "Brett Favre, Johnny Manziel and Bryce Harper" are perceived positively as "hyper-American":

All this is based on the common, very American belief that black males must know their place, and more tellingly, that their place is somewhere different than that of whites. It's been etched into our cultural fabric that to act as anything but a loud, yet harmless buffoon or an immensely powerful, yet humble servant is overstepping. It's uppity.

David J. Leonard (2014), author of *After Arrest: The NBA and The Assault on Blackness*, saw response to Sherman as "central to the narratives and media coverage of the NBA for thirty years," and added:

Evident from Richard Sherman to Barack Obama, from Trayvon Martin and Serena Williams to countless nameless and faceless youth, the "thug" label embodies anti-Black racism that consistently images Black bodies as dangerous criminal threats deserving discipline and punishment. It's the language of white supremacy.... This is nothing new.

For Zirin (2014A), "nothing new" "goes back to first African-American heavyweight boxing champion Jack Johnson."

In "Richard Sherman, Thugs, and Black Humanity," Olyvia A Cole (2014) addressed how the "thug" image aided Zimmerman's acquittal:

"Thug" is a word used when we want to revoke humanity. Trayvon Martin, murdered only a few blocks from his home, was called a thug during his murderer's trial. The jury needed to be convinced that this boy's humanity could not possibly exist if he was "a thug".... And now Richard Sherman, an athlete wealthier than most of us can possibly imagine, dares to step outside the box that a racist culture demands he live inside ... and he's a thug too.

Sherman apologized for how his post-game remarks detracted from his teammates, but saw little distinction between social media's blatant bigotry and the coded kind in mainstream media (Klausner and Collman, 2014):

It seems like ["thug" is] an accepted way of calling somebody the N-word now. It's like everybody else said the N-word and then they say "thug" and that's fine.... What's the definition of a thug? Really? Can a guy on a football field just talking to people [be a thug?].... There was a hockey game where they didn't even play hockey! (media laughter) They just threw the puck aside and started fighting. I saw that and said, "Ah, man, I'm the thug? What's going on here?" (More media laughter).

Sherman's media tutorial would be the first of many. In months ahead, he would challenge the NFL's lack of punishment dispensed to white players such as Eagles' wide receiver Riley Cooper, and even NFL owners:

Commit certain crimes in this league and be a certain color, and you get help, not scorn. Look at the way many in the media wrote about Jim Irsay after his DUI arrest. Nobody suggested the Colts owner had “ties” to drug trafficking [referencing Eagles Desean Jackson], even though he was caught driving with controlled substances (prescription pills) and \$29,000 in cash to do who-knows-what with. Instead, poor millionaire Mr. Irsay needs help, some wrote.

(Sherman, 2014c)

When asked if Roger Goodell would ever ban an owner for life (as the NBA did with Donald Sterling) Sherman replied (Gregory, 2014): “No I don’t. Because we have an NFL team called the R*dskins.”

Despite challenging institutional racism at the highest NFL levels, Sherman was still largely embraced by mainstream media and voted winner of the 2015 Good Guy Award by the Professional Football Writers of America (Blount, 2015). Beyond his elite on-field performance, many writers were attracted to his “truly American Story”.

Paul Thomas notes that Sherman’s Stanford education and 4.2 high school GPA have “become a reflexive association, especially among mainstream, white, middle-class media.” He writes:

Each time these justifications are used, I recognize a level of racism and condescension not unlike the use of “thug”—not toward Sherman, but toward a hushed suggestion of those real thugs (he grew up in Compton) with whom Sherman is being unfairly confused. You know, those others who do poorly in school. His GPA becomes a tool in wink-wink-nod-nod public discourse that is just as poisonous as the use of “thug.”

(Thomas, 2014)

Thomas’s analysis of “codes used to justify Sherman” actually helped to position Michael Brown as a real “thug”—a word often used help justify or minimize his death. Beyond countless twitter bigots, right-wing politicians like Mike Huckabee and left-wing comedians such as Bill Maher continue to use it, further reducing blackness to criminality.

Both the denigration of Sherman by bigots and the elitist elevation of him by some supporters operated in a way that converged race and class to devalue the life of Mike Brown. Darnell Moore (2015), one of the Monday night Rams game protesters, reflected on the anniversary of Brown’s death to those critics:

[Those] who argue Brown should not be the cause célèbre for a local-turned-international movement against blue-on-black violence, missed a significant point central to Ferguson protests: No matter how Wilson

and Brown confronted each other, Brown was shot several times, including in the head. He was not wrestled to the ground or Tasered. In a matter of seconds, Brown was viewed expendable enough to shoot and kill . . . whether our hands are up or our fists clinched, when in the presence of police, officers are still likely to respond to black people differently than white people, too often with deadly force. And black people from Ferguson to Texas' Waller County are aware of this anomalous treatment.

Like Cole, the stadium banners, and the "Black Lives Matter" mantra of the movement, Moore centers his argument on Black humanity as measured directly against the sanctity of white life.

Younger and older black people, with street and book smarts, donning sagging pants and pant suits, singing movement songs and rapping fiery political lyrics, marched on the streets of Ferguson last summer—literally "shut[ting] shit down" as echoed in their chants—because they had reached a collective breaking point. It didn't matter whether Brown had been guilty of theft or assault. Ferguson protesters knew Brown should not have been killed. . . . "The Ferguson uprising was a significant departure from the sit-ins, marches and direct actions typically associated with the black liberation movement. Protesters did not need a perfect symbol, an innocent victim or an ostensibly respectable face upon which to base their calls for justice—They only needed a spark of injustice.

#SAYHERNAME—misogynist violence and more backlash (October 19)

Hog-spitting—not just spitting. He just hog-spit at my baby. He took everything out of him and spit in my daughter's face. She is a minor. That's the absolute worst thing you can do, when you spit on another human being. She was just saying "No justice, no peace" and he hog-spit (at) and then smacked my baby. At that time—there was no more being peaceful.

These were the words of protester Tonja Bulley, who was arrested, along with her 17-year-old daughter, following a violent clash with Rams football fans outside the stadium (Modiano, 2014). Led by young Ferguson activists known as Lost Voices, these protestors were no strangers to confrontations with verbal sports fans.

Weeks earlier their protest at a St. Louis Cardinals playoff baseball game was met with group chants (Ley, 2014) of "Let's Go Cardinals" that evolved to "Let's Go Dar-ren" [as in Wilson] and soon-after "USA! USA!"

USA!” Individual Cardinal’s fan reactions included standard calls to “get a job” (note: it was a night game) while other fans could be heard yelling: “Africa! Africa! Africa!” and “We’re the ones who gave all y’all the freedoms that you have!”

Reaction to protestors at the Rams game was similarly vitriolic. Bulley explains:

We were peacefully protesting. We were saying something that this big, tall White man did not like. He should’ve been locked up, and they did not lock him up. One [man] slapped my daughter and another hit her with his fist. Another woman threw her drink on me—and I retaliated.

(Modiano, 2014b)

Bulley would get arrested, and charged with two felonies (since-dropped) and her daughter continues to fight in court over a year later.

Another Rams fan stole an upside-down American flag from protestors that led to a chase to get it back. In a photograph that would win a 2015 Pulitzer Prize award (Beaumont Enterprise, 2015) the flag thief and protester, Cheyenne Green would wrestle for control of the flag, and symbolically, the future of America. In other pictures, Dasha Jones joins Cheyenne to pull back the stolen flag. At the conclusion of the protest, Dasha can be seen on videotape with misty eyes:

I saw the true colors of our country today. There’s still so much racism. And it’s going to take a minute, but me, I know I’m going to get it done. My [one-year old] daughter is not going to grow up in this world at all whatsoever. I’m giving my all, my life for it.

(Modiano, 2014b)

Tonja, 49, and Dasha, 19, made it clear that they were fighting for their daughters. This mother-daughter fight contradicted a popular narrative and movement discourse that often excludes women of color. It was African-American women who led the Rams game protest; who were arrested; who went to jail; who brought the flag; and who fought to wrestle back that flag—literally and symbolically. This women-led activism was consistent with many protests in and beyond Ferguson.

National media largely ignored this Rams game protest, while local media used the opportunity to criminalize and demonize protestors (Rivas, 2014). *The St. Louis Dispatch* reported, “The mother and daughter who were arrested are black. All of the victims are white, *police say*” (Liss, 2014). While none of the white male instigators were arrested, local reporting reproduced a racial narrative that not only painted Black protestors as criminals but seemingly erased the gender violence. This prompted one

Twitter user to respond: “Where are all the white people who were mad at Ray Rice?”

The protest came precisely at a time when the NFL had ignited a national discourse on violence against women jumpstarted by the graphic video of NFL Player Ray Rice striking his then-girlfriend Janay Palmer. Rice was suspended for the season and NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell was roundly criticized for lack of action on player violence against women. While many, including this author, welcomed national attention to violence against women, the near exclusive media attention on African-American NFL athletes also seemed to undermine that cause. Writing about the Rams’ protest, I questioned the authenticity of the Rice coverage:

The lack of police will to arrest any violent White male fans mirrors the recent muted coverage of Oscar Pistorius’s murder conviction, ESPN’s famous two-day omission of Ben Roethlisberger’s initial sexual assault charge, and a still barely-known story of baseball player Brian Giles, who smacked his fiancée on video years before Ray Rice. Less symbolically, the selective arrests of Tonja and Brandy mirror the same kind of racial profiling that led to Mike Brown’s death in the first place.

David J. Leonard (2015) addressed the NFL and media hypocrisies head on:

The moral panic feels less and less about intimate partner violence (IPV), hyper masculinity, a culture of violence, misogyny, or patriarchy, but instead yet another moment to locate social ills within the bodies of black men.... In a nation where 1 in 3 women report having experienced IPV, 1 in 5 men admit to having committed violence against a partner, one has to wonder why now, why did Ray Rice prompt a national soul-searching regarding the problem of IPV?... In a nation where judges and police officers engage brutal acts of violence against women with impunity, where ESPN and other sports media routinely mock and reduce women to dehumanized objects of consumption and ridicule, it is hard to believe that this feigned and surely short-lived outrage is about domestic violence (DV).

The purported outrage against domestic violence proved to be short-lived. Despite a handful of PSAs (public service announcements) on domestic violence, the NFL has failed to embrace structural changes. Notably, when NFL player Johnny Manziel was alleged to have ruptured his girlfriend’s eardrum, NFL concern for Manziel’s well-being trumped that of victim (Modiano, 2016). This reaction is nothing new, and can’t be credited solely to Johnny’s white male privilege. In 2012, Kansas City Chiefs player Jovan Belcher (African American) killed his girlfriend shortly before committing suicide, and sports media concern poured in for Belcher’s potential mental illness. In

refocusing the discussion, The Crunk Feminist Collective (2012) reminded readers: “Her Name is Kasandra Michelle Perkins,” and Leonard (2012) stated in his title: “We Must Say Her Name.”

After Rice, Leonard (2014) noted that family violence of police officers is two to four times higher than in the general population. With over one million officers in America, the attention given to Rice did not spill over to police violence against women—whether on duty or at home.

Police shooting/tasing deaths of Rekia Boyd, Aiyana Jones, Tanisha Anderson, Mya Hall, Natasha McKenna, or even Sandra Bland (who did receive some national media attention) failed to garner similar outrage as Brown, Garner, or Rice.

In her article, “*Ain’t I Black? On The Historical Erasure of Black Female Leaders*” (2015) Janessa Robinson writes:

Centering the narrative of state sanctioned violence on Black, cis, hetero males erases the fact that Black women risk the same brutality. It also disregards the particular vulnerability for state sanctioned sexual violence Black women face (such as Daniel Holtzclaw, Oklahoma City Police officer). The ills of white supremacy and patriarchy so often intersect against Black women. We are systematically targeted by sexual abusers as they are more-than-aware that communities infamously, again and again, do not and will not go to bat for us. And yet we bare the risk of being assaulted again at the hands of those designated to help us when reporting the incident.

This vulnerability was never more apparent than the case Robinson references. Holtzclaw—a former standout college football player who received an NFL tryout with the Detroit Lions—specifically utilized his police power to target poor Black women (Johnson, 2015). Similarly, the Ohio State University professor Treva Lindsay (2015) wrote:

In a historical moment in which campaigns to end sexual violence and to address racism at all levels of the criminal justice system thrive, a case involving an alleged serial rapist of black women has garnered far too little national outrage.

Lindsay states that the Holtzclaw coverage was “led almost exclusively by black women on social media.” As the all-white jury was deliberating inside the courtroom on December 8, 2015, Columbia Law Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw (2015) was outside the courthouse speaking to protesters:

We’ve been in the movement for the last 18 months. We know what happened to Mike Brown. We know what happened to Eric Garner. But what we don’t know is what happens to Black Women. We don’t

know that Black Women are also killed by the police and we don't know that the second most common complaint by the police is "what"—sexual violence.

In a yearlong 2015 investigation, The Associated Press uncovered about 1,000 officers ("unquestionably an undercount") who lost their badges in a six-year period for rape, sodomy and other sexual assault (Sedensky and Merchant, 2015).

In December 10, 2014, Holtzclaw was convicted on 18 of 36 criminal counts. In "Justice Finally Not Denied," Deborah Douglass (2015) wrote:

Beyond serving as an indictment of one cop gone rogue, this case served as a referendum on issues raised by #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName, a Twitter hashtag that arose when Black female victims of police abuse were seemingly drowned out in the cacophony to seek justice for Black men also abused or killed by police in cities across the country.

That movement changed its own discourse. Co-Founder Alicia Garza (2015) explains the need to "broaden the conversation":

Black Lives Matter is a unique contribution that goes beyond extrajudicial killings of Black people by police and vigilantes. It goes beyond the narrow nationalism that can be prevalent within some Black communities, which merely call on Black people to love Black, live Black and buy Black, keeping straight cis Black men in the front of the movement while our sisters, queer and trans and disabled folk take up roles in the background or not at all. Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. It centers those that have been marginalized within Black liberation movements. It is a tactic to (re)build the Black liberation movement.

An intellectual feminist framework rooted in the work of Barbara Smith, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, Audre Lorde, and others influences the philosophy and tactics Garza addresses.

As noted in The Combahee River Statement (1977), "If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression." Their influence is not only evidenced in the Black Lives Matter movement and #SayHerName campaigns, but in the ongoing analysis of sports activist and sociologist Harry Edwards himself.

In an interview two days after the Rams Player "Hands Up protest," Edwards was asked what he was "advocating these days":

I'm looking at three basic things in the interface of sport, race and society. One of them is the whole issue of domestic violence, which really opens the door to a national discussion on what I consider the No. 1 human rights issue in American society today—the status, circumstances and outcomes of women and girls. You're not going to be able to deal with issues in the African-American community unless you deal with issues of women and girls in that situation.

(PostGame Staff, 2014)

Given the discussion context, Edwards was alluding to *Black* women and girls ahead of his number two issue, “the status of Black men and boys ... in confrontation with the judicial system”, and then his number three issue “demonstrations by athletes around the Ferguson issue.”

Conclusion

The gendered evolution of Edwards' analysis as sports sociologist is worth reviewing. His 1960s activism and landmark “The Revolt of the Black Athlete” (1969) was centered almost exclusively around *Black masculinity*. By the end of the 1990s, his language promoted *diversity* with an intersectional lens “where you cannot separate out race, class, gender, sexuality, techno-class status or age” (Leonard, 2000). By 2014, Edwards was *prioritizing* the outcomes of women and girls as “the No. 1 human rights issue.”

The NFL, which is 100 percent male and covered by a sports media which is 90 percent male and 90 percent white (Lapchick, 2014), has serious deficits as a reliable activist model for change. Consider that by early 2016, no NFL player has ever explicitly or symbolically referenced the police deaths of any women. Nor has any outspoken white NFL star reflected white solidarity seen at Ferguson and other protests. Thus with the benefit of another year of hindsight, some of the late 2014 optimism expressed by Edwards and John Carlos may now feel overstated. The NFL's burst of protest in December 2014 was followed by a year of relative silence in the NFL and professional sports amidst a growing movement for Black lives that has even significantly altered the discourse of presidential candidates.

The most significant case of sports activism in 2015 came from the University of Missouri Football team who threatened to boycott a game. The potential one million cost to the University of sitting out the game ultimately forced the resignation of University President, Tim Wolfe. While led by Black players, the white players and white coach notably joined the strike in solidarity. The roots of the player strike began in order to support Jonathan Butler, a student who went on a hunger-strike to protest against campus racism. Butler himself admitted his own courage was inspired by his time protesting in Ferguson after Mike Brown's death. On the same

day Wolfe resigned and his hunger strike ended, Butler tweeted: “FergusonTaughtMe Resistance.” Butler’s act of resistance was not inspired by NFL player symbolism, but patterned after actual actions and economic disruptions from Ferguson citizens like Dasha Jones and other protesters outside the Rams stadium.

One year later after the Rams protest, I asked Jones how she felt about the NFL protests from the previous year. Jones, now 20 years old, attending college and still regularly protesting in Ferguson, thought “more could be done.” She then added:

I’m not worried about NFL players. Look at the [anti-police brutality] protests happening right now in Minneapolis [for Jamar Clark] and Chicago [for Laquan McDonald]. Look at what happened in Baltimore [for Freddie Gray]. That’s not players, that’s people demanding justice. Ferguson helped to do that. If athletes want to join the movement, that’s a bonus. But we don’t have time to wait for them...

We’re the ones we’ve been waiting for.

(Jones, 2015)

Notes

- 1 In opting not to endorse African-American candidate Harvey Gantt in his close North Carolina Senate race against the racist Jesse Helms, Jordan chose “commerce over conscience” according to NBA legend Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. NPR. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar: “If It’s Time to Speak Up, You Have To Speak Up,” November 2, 2015, www.npr.org/2015/11/01/453739566/kareem-abdul-jabbar-if-its-time-to-speak-up-you-have-to-speak-up.
- 2 All but one of the NFL players at Ali Summit had been former teammates with Brown, many were involved in the Negro Industrial Union (later called Black Economic Union) Brown founded in 1966 upon his retirement.
- 3 Arangure, Jr., Jorge, Vice Sports: “2014: The Year of the Activist Athlete,” December 19, 2014, https://sports.vice.com/en_us/article/2014-the-year-of-the-activist-athlete.
- 4 Lee (2014) explains the hashtag: “There is no business as usual until we get some positive change and some positive movement. You can’t just drive in from the suburbs and the exurbs and drink your beer and leave drunk after watching football and think it’s business as usual going on in St. Louis. It’s not that kind of party.”
- 5 Kobe Bryant said:

You’re kind of seeing a tipping point right now, in terms of social issues. It’s become now at the forefront right now as opposed to being a local issue. It’s really been something that has carried over and spilled into the mainstream, so when you turn on the TV and you watch the news or you follow things on social media, you don’t just see African-Americans out there protesting.

(Lutz, 2014)
- 6 Vick served prison time for his role in an illegal dog-fighting scheme and Plaxico Burress served prison time for possessing a concealed weapon that dislodged in his pants.

- 7 One wonders if such hidden history—inclusive of outspoken players such as Dave Meggyesy (NFL), Bill Bradley (NBA), and Jim Bouton (MLB)—have contributed to the relative silence of today’s white athletes.
- 8 Russell and his organization Hands Up United helped organize and share costs of the October 13 protest along with this author who initially purchased Rams tickets after being inspired by Umar Lee’s previous smaller Ram’s “No Justice, No Football” action.
- 9 Review by author looked at Forbes “Most Disliked People in Sports” from 2009, 2010 and 2011; and “Most Disliked Athletes” in 2012 and 2013 (see works cited).
- 10 Amongst white players, only Mark McGwire made the list twice displaying a lack of “staying power” of white dislike.

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