

United States: Athletes Making Sports Matter - “hopeful sign at a time of calamity in a deeply sick society”

Saturday 29 August 2020, by [FINKEL David](#) (Date first published: 28 August 2020).

APRIL 5, 1968 — the night after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. — was the opening of a crucial playoff series between the Boston Celtics and Philadelphia 76ers. Reluctantly, the players from both teams went ahead with the game, although their hearts weren't in it in an atmosphere that sportswriter Leonard Koppett called “subdued.” It's never been clear to me how much pressure they may have been under, but evidently those players, some of whom were civil rights fighters, felt they couldn't refuse to take the floor.

Later that same year, U.S. track athletes John Carlos and Tommy Smith were infamously vilified for their fistful salute on the Mexico City Olympic victory podium, then were peremptorily recalled home and had their careers trashed. On the culture wars front, guitar superstar Jose Feliciano and Detroit Tigers broadcaster Ernie Harwell came in for heavy criticism after Feliciano, at Harwell's invitation, performed at a Tiger Stadium World Series game a gently swinging rendition of the national anthem that wouldn't raise an eyebrow today.

Times have changed. The 2020 National Basketball Association playoffs inside the Orlando COVID-free bubble were abruptly suspended on Wednesday, August 26 when the players of the Milwaukee Bucks, rapidly followed by other teams, voted unanimously not to play their scheduled game in the wake of the police shooting of Jacob Blake in Kenosha. The Bucks read a statement demanding that the Wisconsin state legislature take immediate action for police reform and accountability.

TNT commentator and former NBA player Kenny Smith announced on the air that in solidarity he didn't feel he should be working the broadcast, and left the studio as Shaquille O'Neal remarked, “I respect that.” This kind of action is unheard of in the tightly corporate world of sports entertainment.

It didn't stop there. The Milwaukee Brewers baseball team also called off their game, while the WNBA didn't play after the Washington Mystics players showed up with letters on their uniform fronts spelling Jacob Blake's name, and each with seven bullet holes drawn on the back. The WNBA players have already dedicated the league's 2020 season to the memory and demand for justice for Breonna Taylor. As one Mystics player put it, “We're not just basketball players. When we go home, most of us are still Black.”

Major League Soccer followed the others' example. This was all on the night when Mike Pence told the Republican Convention that under his and Donald Trump's rule, “we will never defund the police — never,” while a far-right youthful militia admirer gunned down protesters in Kenosha.

It was four years ago that Trump bellowed that any “son of a bitch” football player who followed Colin Kaepernick's example of taking a knee during the anthem should be “FIRED — FIRED!” Today, with the beginning of the National Football League season a couple weeks away, some teams beginning with the Detroit Lions have cancelled practice sessions.

The contrast between the white-nationalist-promoting, virus-super-spreading president and the dignified militant stance of today's generation of professional athletes could hardly be greater. At this writing on Thursday, August 27 the situation is fluid. Tonight's NBA playoff games are also postponed, while players are meeting to determine their demands and course of action.

According to some accounts, LeBron James has called for cancelling the entire multi-billion dollar NBA playoffs, while other reports indicate that the schedule will resume this weekend. Many developments are likely to have happened by the time you're reading this article. As I'm finishing it, it turns out that in response to players' demands, the majority-Canadian and mostly-white National Hockey League has suspended its playoff games for tonight and tomorrow August 27-28.

What happens next remains to be seen, but certainly this "wildcat athletes' strike" is not over, and it's a powerful and hopeful sign at a time of calamity in a deeply sick society.

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P.S.

- Solidarity, August 28, 2020: <https://solidarity-us.org/athletes-making-sports-matter/>