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Should Professional Athletes Voice Their Opinions?

By Cedric Arline II

Earlier this year, I was watching the NBA with a good friend of mine. The NBA had an African-American singer come out on the court, and sing the Black National Anthem. The reasoning behind this was to make everyone feel welcome and to take notice of the awful actions happening around the United States. The events before the game had included news of recent acts of police brutality and the Black Lives Matter movements. As I was sitting there, my friend's mother walks into the room and sits down to watch. She realizes what was going on and states, "Why are they doing this? This is stupid." My friend and his family are white Americans and they tend to pay little attention to what is going on outside of their life. So, as I am sitting there thinking about what she said, I question myself. I ask myself, "Do people disagree with social movements in sports, and one step further, do people disagree with athletes speaking out on politics and social movements?"

In recent years, many professional athletes have begun to voice their opinions on politics and events happening around the world. Many fans are either against this or all for it. Athletes speaking out on specific subjects outside their sport can affect the way people think or act. Professional athletes should continue to use their platform to speak up for social movements and their opinions. Athletes are given a large platform to use to affect fans/viewers, so why not use it? Speaking up can not only make a difference, but it is also a peaceful way to create change. Overall, athletes should continue to use their platform to make change peacefully and influence others to do the same.

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Some sports fans may think that athletes should just play their respective sport without talking about subjects that force them to think about social movements and politics. However, athletes have social media and large platforms that allow them to influence others. If a player feels like talking about a subject that needs light brought upon it, why should he or she not? On an ESPN sit-down talk, LeBron James once spoke out against former President Donald J. Trump. He stated, “The No. 1 job in America, the appointed person is someone who doesn’t understand the people.” He also stated that some of the former President’s comments are “laughable and scary.” Many people agreed with the 4-time NBA champion. Others such as Journalist Laura Ingraham disagreed. She responded to LeBron’s statement calling his comments “barely intelligible” and “ungrammatical.” Furthermore, she goes on to say, “It’s always unwise to seek political advice from someone who gets paid \$100 million a year to bounce the ball.” She ends off her statements by telling LeBron to “Keep the political comments to yourself...Shut up and dribble.” This sparked a debate on whether athletes should shut up and play their respective sport and make their large amounts of money, or continue to speak out against things that they feel should be addressed. Who’s to tell an American citizen to not voice their opinion on matters they feel to be important? On the other hand, some athletes have spoken out without proper knowledge of what is happening or they have spoken out in a non-respectful manner. For example, LeBron James recently tweeted about the Kyle Rittenhouse case. LeBron’s tweet read, “What tears??? I didn’t see one. Man knock it off! That boy ate some lemon heads before walking into court. 🤔🤔🤔.” The tweet came in response to the 18-year-old crying in court. LeBron’s insensitivity brought hate to himself and made him look like a fool. Although LeBron’s

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comments were not accurate and thought out, professional athletes should continue to speak out with regard to others and adequate information on the subject.

To begin with, athletes around the world have millions of fans and admirers. This is partly thanks to social media. Athletes have some of the largest followings on Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. For example, LeBron James, Virat Kohli, Neymar, Lionel Messi, and Cristiano Ronaldo all have a combined 1.45 billion social media followers. With a large fanbase and social media following, comes great responsibility. Athletes have a choice to post whatever they want on social media but at the same time, they have to think about their actions and how it affects their followers. Many athletes such as Colin Kaepernick, LeBron James, Megan Rapinoe, and the late Kobe Bryant all use/used social media to shed light on movements or fundraisers to better society. For example, J.J. Watt (an NFL Defensive Player of the Year), once tweeted in 2017 a video of the disastrous Hurricane Harvey with a link to a donation website. He managed to get people to donate over 37 million dollars towards relief efforts in Houston. Overall, social media has provided athletes with an opportunity to make a societal and cultural impact in ways that would have been difficult without social media.

Without a doubt, certain changes need to be made in society. Sometimes it is not clear as to what that may be to the average person. Athletes have the opportunity to bring notice to such topics with their voices. In general, when a popular influencer speaks up against something that is unjust, many people will follow and help out to make a difference. Why would people not want this to happen? In fact, This is the case with athletes. “Celebrities have long defended their right to engage in social activism by claiming that their fame creates a platform that carries a responsibility to address social issues. Yet, to some far-right critics, athletes’ celebrity status

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serves as a condition for denying them a voice in the political arena.”- Spring-Serenity Duvall. The previous quote explores the curiosity of why critics deny athletes the opportunity to speak out. Is it only critics that feel this way? Why should people deny athletes their first amendment right just because they have a high social status.

However, it isn't just critics that think this, many younger people also feel the same way towards athletes speaking out. According to an Instagram poll created by Cedric Arline, a survey asked a group of 74 people from the age of 15-20 years olds whether or not athletes should keep their opinions to themselves. 62% of the participants voted that athletes should keep their opinions to themselves. The poll did not ask for specifics on why people felt the way they do. If speaking out helps, why do people feel this way? One student from Atrisco Heritage Academy wrote a comment on a New York Times stating, “I think that athletes should be able to comment on political issues whenever they like no matter how they feel. With that being said I do think that if an athlete's comments are insensitive and ignorant then they should be held accountable. Athletes are no different than us as they are just people with their own thoughts and opinions and to me personally, saying that they shouldn't be able to and should just "shut up and play ur sport" is extremely ignorant as it treats athletes as if they're less than us and are only there for our entertainment.” While reading over comments on this particular article, many others had the same ideas and opinions as this student. A common theme occurred, people do not appreciate when athletes speak insensitively or ignorantly on subjects they don't understand. This may be the number one reason people don't support athletes speaking out. With that being said, the effect of athletes speaking positively about matters that need to be addressed, outweigh the

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negative comments some athletes make. Society should attempt to support athletes speaking their opinions, and when the comments are ignorant or insensitive, they should be held accountable.

Freedom of speech and peaceful protest is a large topic in American society. When people want to cause change for good, peaceful protest is the most effective/ acceptable way. When athletes speak up, they are practicing peaceful protest. For example, Colin Kaepernick practiced peaceful protest when taking a knee during the National Anthem in the 49ers' final 2016 preseason game on September 1, 2016. He followed up on this action by commenting after the game. He stated, "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color." Colin received hate and praise from people all over America. Many thought it was disrespectful to the men and women who fight for their country. Eventually, Colin Kaepernick lost his job and became a Black Right activist. The question is why a simple act of peaceful protest caused such a divide in society. Many people felt that what Colin did was "un-American" and "insensitive to the military." Colin responded saying, "I don't understand what's un-American about fighting for liberty and justice for everybody." Through the years, military members have been asked how they feel about kneeling for the National Anthem. Many members agree that it is disrespectful and that there is a time and place for civil debates but not during the National Anthem. On the other hand, members agree with Kaepernick and the other players that joined in with him. Regardless of the debate on the topic, what Kaepernick and other athletes have done was undeniably a form of peaceful protest. Americans preach that in the push for change, violence should be the last resort. With that in mind, why do people still disagree with athletes using their platform to peacefully protest? In other words, would people rather athletes not encourage peaceful protest and rather have people protest with

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riots and destruction? Martin Luther King Jr. once stated, “Nonviolence is a powerful and just weapon, which cuts without wounding and ennobles the man who wields it. It is a sword that heals.”. The quote from Martin Luther King Jr. may not hit home at first to many. MLK’s quote states that nonviolence is a powerful and just weapon that cuts without wounding. This is true in regard to ways that people protest. Protesting can either be violent with riots or looting, or there is the peaceful protest route. Peaceful protesting can be speaking out like many athletes, taking to the streets, and rallying to be heard, or it can be done through writing or music or movies, or art. At the end of his quote, he says that the sword heals. When a peaceful protest is conducted and it achieves its goal, it heals those that felt strongly towards their protest. People get to walk away from their peaceful protest healed knowing that they were heard and changes are being made to help or support them. Overall, MLK’s quote applies even in today’s society where people turn on the news, or a sports game and see others speaking up for what they believe in. The viewer should be imposed to hear the person out at the least because, at the end of the day, nonviolence is better than violence.

Should athletes voice their opinions on social and political change? Athletes should continue to use their platform to peacefully protest and create change. Ultimately, what is at stake here is giving younger generations the opportunity to grow up in a world where race, gender, and religion are not crucial to your identity and credibility. Furthermore, they can grow up knowing that their favorite athletes are paving the way for them to have an easier life. If you are a sports fan, minority, politician, or anyone looking for a change, I encourage you to give athletes a chance to voice their opinions.

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