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Abstract

Despite the fact that athletic activism is nonnormative behavior, there is still a long, albeit small, tradition of individuals who use the playing field to advocate for political and social justice. This article examines such individuals who, while in their role as athletes, engage in social or political activism to foster progressive social change. Using data from 21 in-depth interviews conducted with athletes who have been involved in activism on a range of issues, we identify four embedded dimensions of sport that have strong implications for a progressive and activist political orientation. These dimensions are social consciousness, meritocracy, responsible citizenship, and interdependency. In conclusion, we make the case that sports can and should be a vehicle for progressive social change.

Keywords

sport, athletes, activism, social change, politics

In the 1990s, Nike ran a popular advertisement that featured female athletes alluding to the empowering potential of sport. Although some criticized this advertising campaign for representing women as lacking agency (Lucas, 2000), the underlying message of the ad is that sport can be a powerful force for individual and collective social change. The notion that sport can have such transformative and progressive effects is questionable to some and preposterous to others. Although there is a common perception that sport leads to an increase in self-esteem, confidence, poise, and self-assurance, a number of researchers suggests that the positive outcomes of participating in sport are not universally experienced (Beller & Stoll, 1993; Coakley, 2007; Eitzen, 1999; Eitzen & Sage, 2003; Goodman, 1993; Rees & Miracle, 2000).

Not only is the connection between sport and positive social development debatable but also many argue that sport contributes to the perpetuation of various hegemonies

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of oppression and inequalities such as sexism (Davis, 1997; Nelson, 1995), racism (Hoberman, 1997; Jarvie, 1991; King & Springwood, 2001a, 2001b; Lapchick, 2001), ableism (Wolff, Hums, & Fay, 2005), and homophobia (Anderson, 2000; Griffin, 1998). Sport has also been linked with promoting a violent, militaristic masculinity and a predilection for war (Jansen & Sabo, 1994; Stempel, 2006). In their review of the literature, Rees and Miracle (2000) find that participation in sport reinforces “existing inequalities of gender and race” and perpetuates “the status quo” (p. 284). In addition, Henricks (2006) argues that

sport has been a central setting for the development of a distinctive version of masculine identity and a bastion of sexist ideas. Looking at the sporting world in this broader way also reveals the extent to which class and ethnic differences have restricted sports participation and continue to do so. (p. 48)

Sport sociologists working from a Marxist perspective have also critiqued sports for fostering alienation, obscuring class consciousness, and negating human potentials. Henricks (2006) notes that by focusing so intently on kinesthetic and bodily excellence, athletes are less likely to develop personal awareness and growth. Such athletes strive for specialization at the expense of a more holistic orientation. Henricks suggests that this Marxist critique may also be leveled at fans of sport. By congregating socially and directing their attention at the “spectacularly pointless endeavor” of viewing sport, individuals are missing the opportunity to pursue other socially beneficial activities (p. 48). Rowe (1998) adds to this by suggesting that sport impedes the development of class consciousness. Sport reproduces the capitalist order by

extracting profits from the proletariat while also distracting workers from the real, unequal conditions of their existence. Organized sport’s capacity to promote local and national chauvinism further deflects the critical gaze of the oppressed from the appropriate ruling class target onto fellow subaltern groups. (p. 243)

Following this Marxist analysis of sport, Beamish (2002) argues that if the athlete qua worker is alienated—that is, is separated from the product, the process of production, and his or her potential—then the possibility of sport being an arena for personal growth is severely compromised:

[I]f sporting activity is so rich with creative potential—so robust with opportunities for individuals to explore their own limits and the limitations for human physical performance—the loss of control of the product can have devastating consequences for the creative potential of physical activity. (p. 37)

Instead of engaging in sport as a medium of self-expression and intrapersonal exploration, athletes are driven by market forces and, subsequently, the benefits for individual expression and human potential may be severely curtailed. Although sport may have liberating effects, if it becomes an alienating manifestation of the

capitalist mode of production, then these positive and humanistic benefits may never be realized. The positive attributes of sport as *play* (see Henricks, 2006) become lost, clouded, and unreachable.

Historically, the question of using sport as a vehicle for progressive social change is equally complex. Sports have always been used to promote political movements and encourage specific political outcomes (Baker, 1988; Bloomfield, 2003). Gorn and Goldstein (1993) point out how, in the early 20th century, sport took on an important sociopolitical function of socialization and Americanization. Thousands of immigrant children were introduced to the “American” way of sport and in the process were taught about duty, patriotism, honor, and obedience. More specifically, with the advent of World War I, athletics became even more salient as one of the key social institutions through which the United States would cultivate its strength. Similar examples can be found historically and cross-culturally by looking at the political use of sport by Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and Eastern bloc nations, and most recently, China, among others.

Using sport as a vehicle to promote progressive social change becomes even more paradoxical when individual athletes, and not national or state institutions, are the ones promoting the political issues. In effect, when the personal becomes political in sports, the cheerleading often comes to an abrupt halt. If athletes use their status and recognition to promote social and political causes, they often find themselves criticized and pushed to the sidelines (Kaufman, 2008). As Candaele and Dreier (2004) note, being a “jock for justice” is not without its consequences. Although it is generally accepted when Hollywood celebrities use their status to advance social and political issues, athletes are expected to play and not protest. When athletes do join the political discourse and advocate for social justice, they are likely to face a backlash of contempt and scorn. Indeed, there is a long list of athletes who have experienced such a reaction after publicly proclaiming their political convictions on the playing field: Tommie Smith and John Carlos (and Peter Norman), Muhammad Ali, Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, Carlos Delgado, Toni Smith, Steve Nash, Marco Lokar, Etan Thomas, and Craig Hodges, among others.

Sport and Progressive Social Change

Despite the foregoing analysis, there is still support for the notion that sport can, and indeed should, be a vehicle for progressive social change. Donnelly (1993) argues that as democratization increases across the globe, we need to look more closely at how this process reciprocally affects sport. The idea that sport is a *human right* is already fairly well established; however, sport can also be used to promote greater participatory democracy:

It is possible that the struggle to achieve a fully democratized sport and leisure might result in the capacity to transform communities. People could learn initiative, community endeavor, collective rather than individual values, self determination, etc., that could permit them to begin to take charge of their own lives and communities. (p. 428)

Tapping into classical sociological theory to make his case, Henricks (2006) notes that sport is often said to foster many of the same values that Durkheim promoted through his moral sociology: self-discipline, diligence, obedience to (moral) authority, and collective responsibility. Countering some of the Marxist critiques of sport, not only may this Durkheimian vision of sport lessen the anomic tendencies one may feel in larger, modern society but also athletic pursuits may help foster an integrative orientation by helping to level differences in gender, race, class, religion, and the like. Indeed, many sport teams reflect Durkheim's notion of organic solidarity to the extent that they are characterized by cooperation, cohesiveness, reciprocity, and respect. With such values being promoted within the team structure of sport, it seems only logical to use this orientation as a starting point to extend these values outward to the social world beyond the team.

Maguire (2004) makes a strong case that the "sports-industrial complex" needs an "intervention"—an alternative paradigm to replace the win-at-all-costs mentality. He calls for an "involved advocacy of a human development model" to replace the dominant "achievement" approach to sport. In this model, "justice, citizenship, and equity" will be the overarching themes (p. 314). Echoing calls for a more public sociology (Blau & Iyall Smith, 2006; Burawoy, 2005), Maguire contends that it is the responsibility of sport sociologists to take the lead in such a reinterpretation of the sporting world. Fulfilling the dual role as teachers and researchers, sport sociologists must work to shape this more democratic vision of sports. Even nonsociologists can and should work toward this humane vision of sport and society:

We must work together towards shaping future sports worlds that are better—better for individuals, for communities and the environment. To promote sport worlds that balance our local needs with growing global interdependence: that is the challenge that faces us both as individual researchers and teachers and as a community of scientists. (Maguire, 2004, p. 318)

Maguire's ideal is shared in part by Giulianotti (2005) who sees the potential for sport as a tool to promote greater human rights. Arguing that sports have an inherently liberal-democratic ideal with their focus on such themes as "fair play" and "sportsmanship," Giulianotti suggests that sport, although by no means a panacea for the world's problems, does encourage humanitarianism as well as offer a platform to promote it on a larger scale:

Sport is a vehicle for, and an index of, the growing juridico-cultural importance of human rights and the greater relevance of humankind. . . . Major sports events occasion global fascination, and thereby represent cultural media through which their followers can more vividly imagine the community of humankind. Sports participation enables the dissemination of humanitarian messages and the implementation of contemporary policy initiatives. (p. 216)

In this article, we look at athletes who have engaged in social or political activism while in their role as athlete and who use sport to promote progressive social change. Despite the fact that athletic activism is nonnormative behavior, there is still a long, albeit small, tradition of individuals who have used the playing field to advocate for political and social justice. In the United States and abroad, athletes have fought for a variety of human rights causes such as racial, gender, and sexual equality, unionization and worker rights, peace and social justice, freedom from political persecution, ability rights, religious freedom, and free speech, among others (Edwards, 1969; Kidd & Donnelly, 2000; Pelak, 2005; Scott, 1971). We use the voices of activist athletes to make the case that sports can and should be a vehicle for progressive social change. We identify four embedded dimensions of sport that have strong implications for a progressive and activist political orientation. These dimensions are social consciousness, meritocracy, responsible citizenship, and interdependency.

Method

Between 2003 and 2008, 21 in-depth interviews were conducted with athletes who have engaged in social or political activism. The athletes were selected by searching news reports, Internet sites, and following leads from friends, colleagues, and other athletes. The number of athletes engaging in social or political activism is relatively small, and subsequently the task of finding interviewees is difficult. The athletes in the sample participate in a variety of sports including basketball, football, baseball, cycling, speed skating, rowing, track and field, bodybuilding, and soccer, and the level at which the athletes perform ranged from the professional to the collegiate to the amateur. The athletes have used the platform of sports to protest a variety of issues such as sweatshop labor, war, racism, sexism, inequality, homophobia, sexual violence, corporate democracy, ableism, and ecological degradation. The type of activism in which they engaged was also wide-ranging and included starting advocacy organizations, engaging in symbolic protests during competitions, and resigning from a team as a form of protest. Most of the interviews lasted between 1 and 2 hr, were usually conducted by phone (three were conducted via e-mail, one was conducted in person), and were transcribed shortly thereafter. The interview schedule covered questions about socialization, development of an athletic and activist identity, reactions to the athlete's activism, and, most important, for the purposes of this article, the connection between athletics and activism.

The Sporting Arena: A Field of Play and Protest

The connection between sports and activism is by no means evident, obvious, or even accepted. As already noted, sport does not necessarily increase one's moral or ethical reasoning, and, in fact, it may even diminish such traits. Nevertheless, it is our belief that there are inherent qualities of sport and the athletic experience that do indeed suggest an orientation toward progressive social change. This view became most apparent

to us while interviewing the 21 activist athletes and listening to the reasons they gave for combining sports and activism.

Social Consciousness

Sociologists, and particularly feminist researchers, often talk about the importance of reflexivity—the capability to recognize one’s biases and then work to transform them so that they do not produce detrimental and oppressive effects on others (Bourdieu, 1996; Wasserfall, 1997). By biases, these researchers are referring to the sociohistorical aspects of one’s life such as race, gender, nationality, social class, and the like. Being reflexive, or engaging in what Giddens (1984) refers to as the process of “reflexive monitoring,” suggests that individuals evaluate and appraise the social structural situation in relation to their agentic capabilities. At the very least, reflexive individuals are attempting to be cognizant of the structural reality that positively and negatively affects their lives and the lives of others. In listening to some of the activist athletes, it was evident that many of them developed a social consciousness that was borne out of a reflexive process.

Ramogi Huma is a former football player at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and one of the founders and current president of the National College Players Association (NCPA), an advocacy organization for college athletes. During his playing days at UCLA, Huma was involved in teamwide action to wear black arm bands during its nationally televised game against the University of Miami. The black arm bands, and an accompanying press release, were meant to symbolize the team’s opposition to Proposition 209 which aimed to end affirmative action in higher education in California. Ultimately, all team members agreed to wear these armbands. During our interview, Huma recounted how his and his teammates’ social consciousness was cultivated largely through a meeting organized by the team leaders and the Black Student Union. We quote from his interview at length because his experiences point to the potential intersectionality between sport, reflexivity, and activism. When Huma began merging his position as a privileged athlete with an audience, with his position as an underprivileged member of society, not only was his social consciousness formed but also his activist identity was solidified:

They passed out this information and I saw a familiar picture. It was a picture with John Carlos and Tommy Smith. I didn’t know their names at the time or anything. I remember vaguely of seeing somewhere that picture with them on the Olympic pedestal with their fist in the air and their heads bowed. Not too long after in comes one of the leaders from the Black Student Union and basically they introduced John Carlos. John Carlos walks in. He was talking about what it was like to make his stand. Basically, that at the time he was in a position to where he had a platform in front of the whole entire world, and at the time when black people didn’t have equal rights. His athletic talent put him in front, gave him a certain amount of potential that he could choose to channel or not to

channel. But he made the experience real for us. He talked about what was really going on. [H]e talked about why he did it. He said that really it wasn't even so much just a black thing. [H]e said the Olympics were a perfect forum because there were people throughout the world being abused and taken advantage of and mistreated. It was more of an empowerment. It was a sign to show that the status quo wasn't good enough. And that all people of all races and all ethnicities and backgrounds and classes should be treated as equal.

[So] we're at UCLA and people are protesting, people are sitting in, marching and regular students doing all that stuff. We kind of knew what was going on but none of us were active really. That's what it was all about. Really the idea was for us to make some kind of statement and use our platform because the Miami game was going to have national coverage. The idea was that we could use the game to bring awareness to the situation. We were kind of aware of Prop. 209 but the Black Student Union kind of broke it down a little further for us. [They] made us more aware of the situation and how it would hurt people who are already from underprivileged backgrounds. They reminded us that some of us were from an under privileged background and not everybody has the power, you know, media's power and not everyone has that power to even make a statement. Most voices are never heard to the degree in which we have a chance to make it on a national level. Really again that combined with the idea that we could do something I think that combination right there transformed us from just players to I guess you can say potential activist. It wasn't too long before most of the players agreed that we wanted to do something. That was clear pretty quickly.

Although this is a long interview excerpt, it is a mere snapshot in Ramogi Huma's life. And yet, there is a clear delineation of how his social consciousness was formed. Huma identifies what we might call the points of persuasion that transformed him and his teammates "from just players" to "potential activists." With the help of John Carlos, the Black Student Union, and other activist students at UCLA, Huma and his teammates came to two powerful realizations: First, as athletes they had the potential to effect change because of the platform and audience that participating in sport granted them. Second, they gained a deeper understanding of power and powerlessness. They were privileged athletes on a college campus, but many of them came from underprivileged backgrounds. Most of them were non-White, but they learned that race was not the only issue of injustice. By realizing how these systems of hierarchy are simultaneously expressed and experienced such that everyone is both oppressor and oppressed (Collins, 1991; Weber, 1998), Huma became eager to participate in the Proposition 209 protest.

The transformation of Huma's social consciousness from athlete to activist athlete was articulated by other individuals we interviewed. Although not all of these athletes referenced a socially disadvantaged background, they did engage in critical reflection about their current social position and used this insight to develop a deeper awareness of the world. For example, Joey Cheek, the Olympic gold-medal speed skater who gained world renown as an activist against the genocide in Darfur, talked about how

traveling around the world for competitions broadened his perspective. It was his athletic experience of competing with and against others that helped cultivate Cheek's reflexivity and subsequently led him to become a leading global activist to end the violence in Darfur.

I spent some time visiting a friend who lived in East Berlin. This is maybe a decade after the wall had come down. I was still this young, young skater. It was one of my first times overseas, and I met this guy from junior worlds and he invited me to come stay at his house. So, I'm staying at his dad's flat in the former East Germany in Berlin and I just couldn't believe that my grandfather had fought in WWII against most likely his grandfather. Had things gone slightly different, I could have been fighting and killing this guy. Now, I was 17 and I was fortunate 'cause if I hadn't been training and competing I never would have met this guy, I never would have had this experience. But you have enough of those experiences and slowly you start to look at the world a little differently. . . . And you can only travel around the world so much—I've been all over Asia and Europe, and now working on Africa—there's only so many times you can travel and meet people and start talking to people from other countries before you start realizing that there's a whole lot of stuff out there that's not the United States of America.

What Joey Cheek is alluding to here is a foundational form of social consciousness: the development of the sociological imagination through understanding one's biography and history (Mills, 1959). Whereas Cheek's experience of traveling around the globe is common to most world-class athletes, amateur athletes are also afforded the opportunity through sport to see the various conditions of other peoples' lives. Very few athletes practice their trade in just one location. Traveling to other schools, towns, cities, and states is common for many athletes. Through these travels, one will be confronted with not only how people live differently but also how they experience sport differently. Seeing the varying conditions of fields, gymnasiums, equipment, and the like could be an eye-opening experience for many athletes and could help cultivate an understanding of one's biography and history. This is not to suggest that all athletes will automatically develop such a social consciousness through these athletic experiences but the potential is certainly there.

A third example of developing a social consciousness comes from Kevin McMahon, a two-time U.S. Olympian and national champion in the hammer throw. McMahon's awareness was heightened when he realized that he was benefiting from the unjust working conditions endured by others. One day, while driving home from practice, he was listening to a radio show about the sweatshops in Central America that produce NBA jerseys. He was particularly bothered by the report when he realized that these "people are doing honest work and they're being exploited." He then began to reflexively monitor his own involvement in this situation: "And then it really hit home that, wait a minute, I might not be an NBA basketball player, but I do have a

form in my life when I walk out with logos all over me and it made me really look at that for the very first time.” The more he thought about it, the more powerful the issue became:

It was a real difficult time for my conscience 'cause I had previously had no qualms wearing Reebok or Adidas or whatever. I'm an athlete, so it was cool that that's what you were wearing. And it was free. Why wouldn't you wear it? But it nearly sickened me to think that for those however many years I was advertising for these people. That I was promoting their stuff. That I, in my ignorance, had possibly caused harm to these people that are just being exploited. And I think there was that sense of guilt and that sense of responsibility. If you just look at the countries that they've [the sportswear companies] hopped from one to the other, it's a who's who of countries that really desperately need jobs, desperately need money and they take advantage of that. And it's great that they give them jobs but they could treat them more like human beings.

In many respects, Kevin McMahon's transformation is one that could be similarly experienced by most athletes. Developing a social consciousness around athletic clothing and equipment seems to be another potential point of persuasion. All athletes rely on sports paraphernalia that, like most consumer goods, largely comes from sweatshop factories in less-developed countries. The problem is that most of us fail to see the human social relationships that go into making these goods—what Marx famously referred to as commodity fetishism (Marx, 1967). That McMahon was able to pierce the shroud of commodity fetishism and develop both an awareness and solidarity with global workers is certainly unique. But it is not accidental that he became attentive to these issues through his participation in sports. As the three examples in this section suggest, being an athlete provides one with a number of entry points on the path toward developing a social consciousness.

Meritocracy

There is a widely held belief, particularly in the United States, that people succeed and fail based on individual merit. If you work hard, possess good skills, and maintain a positive attitude, then you will achieve success. If you are lazy, unskilled, and unmotivated, then you will fail and will have no one to blame but yourself. The reality, of course, is much different, and sociologists have continually exposed this notion of meritocracy as largely a myth (McNamee & Miller, 2004). Nevertheless, the general population continues to believe that the United States is a meritocracy even as the gap between the rich and poor continues to grow each year (Wolff, 2002).

Interestingly, one place that meritocracy may actually exist is in the world of sports. This point was articulated by Adonal Foyle, a veteran NBA player who founded Democracy Matters, a college-based national grassroots political organization that promotes campaign finance reform. When asked why he started Democracy Matters,

Foyle explained the parallels between politics, basketball, and a world where we are truly evaluated on our individual merits:

When I talk to a lot of people I say that if the NBA was a place like politics you would need a large amount of money to enter and you would need to have connections to other people. There wouldn't be any great basketball players because most of the people who play in the NBA come from, for the most part, very poor backgrounds. So imagine, instead, a league that is not dominated by Michael Jordan, Grant Hill, Kobe Bryant, and Shaquille O'Neal, but instead by Bill Gates and George W. Bush. And I play that [analogy] out to the point where they are competing against each other, you know, look at George go and Gates is throwing an elbow and you know [laughs]! And they seem to get that because I then tell them where I'm from. I'm from the Caribbean and I grew up very poor and the opportunity to be an NBA player would not be possible if I had to pay this entrance fee. And you know in politics it costs millions and millions of dollars to run a political campaign.

Foyle makes a compelling point in his desire to ensure fair elections and clean government. If other social institutions operated like politics, then there would be even greater inequality than there is now. Conversely, if politics operated more like the world of sports, then the benefit of having a financial and or political lineage would not be as significant. If one can outperform one's peers athletically, then it is highly probable that one may gain attention from the professional sporting world. However, if one has great political vision or even the ability to work cooperatively and broker deals, there is no guarantee that one's political talent will be realized unless one has the necessary resources (i.e., financial capital).

Paul Farber, a former member of the University of Pennsylvania track team and a cofounder of PATH (Penn's Athletes and Allies Tackling Homophobia and Heterosexism), also suggested this idea of meritocracy when he noted that "athletics is a great metaphor for life because what you put in you get out, whatever you see as utterly impossible becomes reality." In essence, that is the vision, albeit a mythical one, of the American Dream: the impossible becomes a reality. But in the everyday socioeconomic reality of most individuals, the impossible is usually unreachable. As Farber notes, however, athletes are regularly striving for and often achieving the impossible:

[A]thletics is all about pushing you to your best and pushing you to your most productive and your limits. So it should be all about doing away with the status quo. If the status quo is an 11.3 [second] 100 [meter sprint] then an 11.2 100 is breaking the status quo. [. . .] For me I was on the track every single day and you're running and you're running your fastest and there's a time that you run and that's what gets put down. And what you really deal with in track is your personal records, your personal best, PRs. My goal is to win my race and beat my own time. In basketball if I score 25 points in a game. The next time I'm

going to try and score 26. It's all about taking what you have in front of you, the standard, whatever you have accomplished and breaking through it.

We are not arguing here that sports are an ideal typical meritocracy. As Bourdieu (1984) and others have pointed out, sports participation is certainly limited by one's access to various forms of capital—be it economic, cultural, social, symbolic, or political. Our “choice” of athletic pursuits is influenced by our *habitus*, which itself is a product of our social structural location. As such, it is not surprising that certain sports have been, and still are, largely associated with particular social classes, races, ethnicities, and nationalities, not to mention gender. Nevertheless, although sports may not mirror an ideal meritocratic system, there is often a prevailing sentiment in sports that the playing field should be open to all, that individuals as well as teams should not succeed solely on their access to resources. For example, the notion of parity is often invoked favorably in discussing sports to demonstrate that athletic talent is being evenly spread out. Parity in sports is touted as a countertrend to the presumably dangerous tradition of the rich getting richer. Even in professional sports, attempts at cultivating greater parity have been initiated by various institutional measures such as implementing luxury taxes and salary caps (with varying degrees of success).

The idea of parity was articulated further by Jim Keady, a semipro soccer player, who gained notoriety when he quit his position as an assistant collegiate soccer coach with the defending national champions St. Johns University because of the university's affiliation with Nike and their use of sweatshop labor. As he tours the country speaking out against sweatshop labor, Keady often uses the metaphor of sports and the meritocratic impulse of sports to make his points:

I use sports a lot because you know it's so pervasive and people get it. One of the arguments I use is with regards to Nike's desire to dominate the global athletic apparel field. I liken it to when you were a little kid if you played in a recreation basketball league and there was one team that had all the big strong kids and every year they just run away with the league. One, it doesn't do anything for the kids on the other team because they're gonna get crushed every game; and two, for the kids that are good players all to be playing together on that one team, it doesn't do anything for them either 'cause there's no real competition. So what do parents do in those situations? You create parity in the league, you create balance. One, so it helps good players develop more; and two, so that there's real competition in the league so it's not just like a blow out and one team runs away. Why do we do that? 'Cause it's the right thing to do. So why can't we see those same values in global economics or global politics or in human relationships. You know I think if we were to live the values as adults that we try to impart to kids through sports the world would be a much better place.

The example that Keady raises is both insightful and ironic. On the playing field of sports, parents do try to instill a sense of fairness and ensure that no one team

consistently dominates the others. In this sense, the commitment to fair play seems rather evident. But as Gayles (2009) demonstrates, the parental inclination toward a meritocratic landscape for their children may not go far beyond the playing field. By drawing an analogy between steroid use in sports and SAT coaching services, Gayles shows that fair play may be more of an empty mantra than a core value. But even if this is true, the upside is that meritocracy is still valued in sports. At the very least, participation in sports provides a context through which athletes may become concretely aware of concepts such as fair play and a level playing field.

Related to this emphasis on meritocracy is our general love and appreciation for the underdog in sports. Anytime an athlete or a team seems to surpass all expectations, overcomes all odds, and finds itself in a position to “take down” one of the dominant powers, there is no shortage of attention and adulation. Much like the mythical figure of Horatio Alger, who pulled himself up by his bootstraps and achieved the American Dream, the underdog in sports ostensibly achieves success through hard work, dedication, unity, and cohesion. If sports represent the opportunity—be it symbolic or real—to overcome structural odds, and if as consumers of sports we overwhelmingly support such underdogs, why not transfer this orientation outside the sporting world? If sport represents an arena where individuals with fewer resources can compete fairly with individuals with greater resources, and if we applaud this defining characteristic of sport, why not promote such a similar arrangement on a societal level? And if as consumers of sport we embrace the notion that “on any given Sunday” even the last-place team can beat the first-place team, then should we not promote the idea that on any given day, the kid who goes to a run-down school and lives in the drug-infested, crime-ridden neighborhood should have the opportunity to achieve the same success as the kid from the well-endowed community?

Responsible Citizenship

Critics of activist athletes often argue that athletes should play and not pontificate, that the playing field is no place for political protests. Indeed, despite the views and actions of the athletes discussed in this article, we recognize that the overwhelming majority of athletes do not become political activists. In fact, many athletes seem to exist in a world devoid of political and social issues. Sage (1998) attributes this political inaction to a “neutrality vision of sport,” which assumes that sport exists outside the social, political, and economic realms of society: “The message of the neutrality argument is that political, economic, and social reform has no place in professional sports” (p. 222).

But there is no denying the fact that sports are imbued with political meanings. From the financing of stadiums through public tax dollars (Cagan & DeMause, 1999; Delaney & Eckstein, 2003) to the display and veneration of the flag, sports are inherently political. Therefore, to suggest that athletes cannot comment on—much less take action on—important issues of the day is an affront to the meaning of participatory democracy. How are athletes different from business people, doctors, and office workers? And how is the playing field any different from the board room, the factory, or the

town square? Neither should any single group be excluded from engaging in thoughtful political and social discourse nor should they have a monopoly on such issues. As noted by Eric Anderson, the first openly gay high school track coach in the United States, “everything we do is political and it’s pretty difficult to have political neutral terrain. So, yes, I mean, I think all institutions [including sports] should be used to bring about a greater sense of social cohesion.”

The argument that athletes, like all citizens, should be civically minded was also noted by Bradley Saul, a professional cyclist and founder of Organic Athletes, an organization dedicated to using sport to promote healthy living, ecological responsibility, and compassion for all life:

As citizens, we have an obligation to be informed. [And] one does have an obligation to be aware of injustices and to do something about them in whatever capacity. And if you’re an athlete well then you can do it through the tools you have as an athlete.

This sentiment was similarly expressed by Matt McGraw, a baseball player at the University of Maine, who was one of the founding members of Male Athletes against Violence (MAAV). When asked if athletes should have social responsibilities, McGraw elaborated on some of Saul’s ideas:

On the one hand, I feel like everyone should have social responsibility and therefore as an athlete you shouldn’t just write them off, but as an athlete you should use that too, to better a cause or promote some kind of social responsibility if you can in a proper manner. Athletes are people, and people should care what’s going on in their world. Athletes are allowed to vote, they’re still citizens, and it’s the citizens of the world that make up how our society flows, and just because you play sports for a living or play sports in college you shouldn’t lose that social power and just because you don’t play sports doesn’t mean that you should gain that social power.

In listening to Matt McGraw articulate a position on the civic responsibility of athletes, it is not hard to see parallels with the preceding discussions on social consciousness and meritocracy. Much like Ramogi Huma, McGraw understands that sports often give athletes a unique platform from which they may promote a social cause. Some may see this as a burden, but others see it as a privilege or a responsibility. And much like Adonal Foyle, McGraw draws a connection between sports and power. Athletes are first and foremost citizens who have the responsibility to be aware of global events and who should be allowed, and even encouraged, to assert their voice in the political arena. In effect, being an athlete does not mean that one should be devoid of a social consciousness nor should one not be expected to be civically involved.

For those athletes who are politically aware, much less those like the ones in our study who engage in social action, the notion of being an apolitical athlete is insulting

and degrading. This is particularly true for student athletes who find their identity not only on the playing field but also in the classroom. If we truly expect student athletes to be both students and athletes, then we should encourage them to find their political and social voice. Silencing student athletes, either through subtle pressure or direct influence, goes against the mission and values of most educational institutions. Although most schools do not explicitly promote progressive values in their statement of goals, the ideas of critical thinking, responsible citizenship, and engagement with the world are certainly commonly invoked themes in the mission statements of many educational institutions. These ideas were expressed by Deidra Chatman, a former basketball player at the University of Virginia, who, in solidarity with Toni Smith, turned her back to the flag during the playing of the National Anthem:

People said that it's not the place to be doing that but other people were glad that athletes actually took the time to think about these things. I mean, 'cause a lot of us are, a lot of people maybe think that we're just into our athletics and school and don't give a damn about anything else. I remember, like this sticks out in my mind so much, when [her coaches], I faxed them my grades from high school, they're like, "Wow, we didn't know you had such good grades!" That stuck in my mind. I still think about it, "Yeah, did you think you were just gonna recruit some dumb girl who just played basketball?"

As much as her coaches were surprised that she was such a good student, Deidra Chatman was equally surprised that her coaches failed to see her as more than just an athlete. But unfortunately, her experiences are not unique. When many athletes step outside their role in sports and enter into the role of responsible and active citizen, they are often viewed suspiciously at best and scornfully at worst. But being an athlete should not and does not occur at the expense of other social identities. Although they may spend inordinate amounts of time pursuing excellence in their chosen sport, athletes are also consumers, tax payers, parents, patients, voters, and above all, citizens. In this regard, athletes, like the rest of us, have an obligation to be aware of what is going in the world so that they may play an active role in shaping current and future policies—policies from which they are in no way immune.

On an even deeper level, being a responsible citizen is inherently connected to one of the earliest lessons we learn from sports: sportsmanship. Being a good sport in athletics is akin to being a responsible citizen in society. Again, the connection to the two previous dimensions is palpable: good sportsmanship suggests a socially conscious outlook such that one acts in a way that is fair and just. This understanding of sportsmanship as a form of civic responsibility is suggested by Arnold (2003) in his discussion of the three approaches to understanding sportsmanship:

[S]port involves a proper understanding of and a commitment to the two principles upon which it is based, namely freedom and equality. It recognizes that if the practice of sport is to be preserved and flourish, a great deal is dependent

upon the players, and officials, understanding and acting in accord with what is fair. (pp. 72-73)

Arnold's (2003) conception of sportsmanship actually extends beyond just *being* good; he also argues that sportsmanship implies *doing* good. For Arnold, sportsmanship is "a form of altruistically motivated conduct that is concerned with the good or welfare of another" (p. 76). Although not all athletes embrace this notion of sportsmanship, most do at least learn about what it means to be a good sport and, by extension, what it means to be a responsible citizen.

Interdependence

Social change does not happen with individuals working independently; any and all victories for social justice and human rights have come about because of the collaborative efforts of individuals. In much the same fashion, success in sports is dependent on a group of individuals working together to achieve similar goals—be they actual teammates, coaches, trainers, or supporters. Although being part of a team certainly does not guarantee that one will have a progressive orientation, it may increase the likelihood that one will develop a greater appreciation for the collective good. This point was articulated by Toni Smith, the basketball player from Manhattanville College who gained notoriety when she turned her back to the flag to protest rampant inequality in the United States as well as the war in Iraq:

I think if you take advantage of everything it means to be an athlete and every thing that comes with it, it covers a lot of what it means to be a complete person. [Interviewer: What are some of those things specifically?] Well, working as a team, for one, is one of the most important things I've learned from playing sports. There's never really a time in your life where you're not going to have to work as a team at some point. [Y]ou have to be very willing to work with people of other races. And with that comes other cultures and once in a while you'll have a Jehovah Witness or a Muslim on the team who either cannot take their head wrap off or cannot stand for the flag. And I think that teaches tolerance and sometimes acceptance. It doesn't always breed acceptance but at least tolerance. In a way, in other areas, you don't have to be tolerant. You can just avoid each other but [in sports] you can't, you absolutely cannot avoid people and I learned that this year when you try to avoid teammates in the middle of the season it's very, very difficult to keep playing as a team.

Smith makes an interesting point when she contrasts sports with other endeavors. Unlike those activities where one can avoid, ignore, or be indifferent to others, sports necessitate that one exists interdependently with others—or at the very least with one's teammates. Participation in sports compels us not only to be familiar with the rules of the game but also that we embrace the various roles that are assigned to each

individual. This component of sport is one that Mead (1934) identified in his distinction between play and game. Sports, like games, require that one has an awareness of the interdependence among players. In addition, as Mead suggests, this collective orientation supersedes one's individual impulses: "[T]he child must have the attitude of all the others involved in that game. The attitudes of the other players which the participant assumes organize into a sort of unit, and it is that organization which controls the response of the individual" (p. 154).

The extent to which sport can foster a stronger collective conscience was also noted by Whitney Post, a former world champion and Olympic rower and founder of Teaming with Power, a consulting practice that works to empower female athletes. Post reflected on her own experiences about how teamwork may lead to greater empowerment:

I was a spare for the 1996 Olympic team and as spare you are definitely marginalized and viewed as a second-class citizen. You feel all that political stuff like you're not quite as valued. You're really in that funny place. And all of the spares got together, we got to go to this competition, and we went on this trip and we really came together as a group. We painted the van, using the word spare as much as we could, like "can you spare a dime," and we really came together and celebrated our unity and our collectiveness and just really had fun. It was like being on our own team. And that to me was a way for empowering ourselves in the face of the second class citizenship thing and that spirit is so much of what I'm aiming for in my work which is when we come together, we can find power in these disempowered places. And when we open ourselves up to these different parts and we share these different parts then it feels really good and we can feel connected and we can be empowered. But when we are isolated with these things and with each other then that's when it's really hard to function. And I think it's the same way for activists. Anyone doing something hard whether you're an athlete on a team, an activist, or someone running for governor, you have to be supported. And I think that's probably one of the reasons why it's so hard to be an activist and I know that's the thing I keep running into again and again. By myself I can't quite accomplish my mission and I need to find the right people to team up with.

In considering the connection between interdependence and sports, we are not just discussing the notion of teamwork. Interdependence implies much more than just working together on a team to reach collective goals; it also implies a level of reliance on others to help the athlete achieve her or his desired goals. This is an important point that often gets lost—particularly in our overly individualistic Western culture. When athletes find themselves in positions of success and are prompted to express gratitude and appreciation, they commonly give thanks to their teammates, coaches, family, and fans. But to be a successful athlete, or even a mere recreational athlete, requires the assistance of a whole range of anonymous individuals. In addition to those mentioned

above, athletes need ground crews and janitors to keep playing surfaces safe and clean, factory workers to make the clothing and equipment, construction workers to build the gyms, tracks, arenas, and stadiums, ticket vendors and concessionaires to assist fans, and food workers to prepare meals and drinks that are necessary for energy, among many others. Without all of these hard-working people, all athletes from the professional to the recreational would have a difficult time pursuing their sport. Granted, few of us—athletes and nonathletes alike—think about our interdependence with others in these terms (an earlier quote from Kevin McMahon is one exception); however, our collective unawareness does not mitigate our implicit connection and reliance on others.

This notion of interdependence is certainly another potential point of intervention for fostering a greater progressive orientation among athletes. If athletes recognize how their pursuit of sports is dependent on working people across the globe, then they may be more willing to support campaigns for fair and just working conditions including a living wage, health benefits, safe working conditions, the right to organize and bargain collectively, and the freedom from job discrimination of all kinds. Similarly, if athletes recognize how they are directly affected by and dependent on the environment, how they need clean air to fill their lungs, safe drinking water to hydrate their bodies, and arable lands to cultivate foods for energy, then they may be more likely to support efforts to protect the earth and ensure that environmental degradation around the globe is halted and reversed. Both of these examples suggest an orientation toward interdependence, toward an understanding that the individual athlete needs other people and other resources to be able to participate in sports. Robert Cheeke, an activist vegan bodybuilder and member of Organic Athletes, alluded to this point when he said, “When people finally do start seeing the bigger picture then they’ll be more compassionate in everything.”

Sport and Progressive Social Change: Further Parallel Processes

Wasielowski (1991) argues that we can draw similarities between athletes and activists because of the acts in which they engage. This notion was similarly reflected by many of the activist athletes we interviewed. In addition to the four dimensions discussed above, there was a prevailing sentiment that the *process* of engaging in sport shared many of the same characteristics as the *process* of working for progressive social change. In effect, much of what made these athletes excel in the sporting arena was similar to what allowed them to be successful in the activist arena. Foremost among these processes was the importance of discipline. Nathaniel Mills, a three-time Olympian speedskater (1992, 1994, 1998), is one of the leading forces behind the Olympism Project—an attempt to emphasize and recapture the fundamental Olympic values of peace, humanitarianism, and denationalism. In discussing his work, Mills could not help but draw parallels between his success on the speed skating oval and his work as an activist:

All the things I learned as an Olympic athlete I bring to bear on the work I do now. The discipline, the goal setting, the long range planning, the fearlessness of it, the small steps of it, it's all this stuff. The skills and qualities that you nurture as you try to achieve Olympic athlete status those skills you cultivate you are going to need to bring to bear if you are going to take an activist approach or a radical approach.

The importance of discipline, goal setting, and a long-term perspective is not unique to world-class athletes. All athletes, in their relative pursuit of excellence, must stay focused and be mindful of their long-range objectives. This point was further articulated by Pat Lyon, a middle-aged woman who was part of "Cyclists Peace," a small contingent of women who were riding from Vermont to Washington, D.C. to protest the war in Iraq. Like Mills, Lyon commented on the parallels between engaging in sport, in this case bicycling, and working for social change:

The bicycle lends itself to openness from others, especially when traveling in small groups. I like the slow pace of using a bicycle to promote causes. The bicycle is about using your own power to go forward and this can apply to using your own power to affect change. Riding a bike is still a novel way of calling attention to an issue. Also, you can't just get on a bike and ride 100 miles. The lesson for change is discipline, consistency and looking to the long haul, as well as celebrating smaller changes.

Another parallel process between sport and social change is the pursuit of progress. From the weekend warrior to the future Hall of Famer, athletes are guided by the Olympic motto: *citius, altius, fortius*—faster, higher, stronger. Most athletes are not content to rest on their laurels; instead, they attempt to break records, set new personal bests, and win more championships. In their yearning to be better, athletes seek out ways to be more efficient, to be more advanced, and to find better ways to excel in their sport. In this sense, innovation and ingenuity are important components in sport as athletes look for ways to improve their equipment and their bodies. One needs only to look at old photographs of athletes to see the myriad ways in which in the world of sports have, and continue to be, revolutionized. To the extent that these changes have lead to significant improvements in safety, comfort, and performance, we can say that the constant yearning for progress and change in sport reflects athletes desire to experience greater satisfaction and enjoyment in their sporting pursuits.

Conclusion

In this article, we have briefly summarized the initial underpinnings for an activist athlete orientation. Based on the experiences of activist athletes, we have suggested that sport and the struggle for social and political justice are not mutually exclusive. We have tried to demonstrate that sport fosters or reflects four dimensions that can be linked to efforts for progressive social change. These dimensions are social

consciousness, meritocracy, responsible citizenship, and interdependence. These are not the only dimensions that may link athletics with activism nor have we fully explicated how these dimensions operate in both the athletic and the activist realm. However, we hope to have established the groundwork for a more comprehensive analysis of the interconnections between sport and activism.

We situate our work within the framework of what Feagin and Vera (2001) call *liberation sociology*. Following in the tradition of the early sociologists who approached their research as a vehicle to promote and foster progressive social change, liberation sociology works within the realm of praxis. The research goal is not merely the discovery of knowledge; rather the unabashed objective is to achieve a “duality of social change” whereby transformation is both the medium and outcome of scholarly activities. In talking to athletes about their activism, we hope to both legitimize and give voice to their experiences while simultaneously demonstrating to other athletes and nonathletes alike that there are mutually reinforcing dimensions of pursuing sport and pursuing social change.

We expect that there may be many detractors to our argument—in the world of sports, in the world of “objective” social scientific research, and in the larger population. Much like the athletes we study, we gather there will be some resistance to the idea that sports and politics, much less progressive politics, are inherently connected. Even among athletes and activists, there may be some wariness about forming bridges between these two groups. This point was suggested to us by Zach Warren, a member of the cross-country team at a small Division III college who brought together football players to raise money for sexual abuse. From his own experience of connecting college football players with women’s studies students, Warren learned of the pitfalls of cultivating such unions:

Many athletes have negative stereotypes of activists and vice-versa; competition is seen as dichotomously pitted against collaboration. Further, activists need athletes to cooperate in activism more than athletes need activists to cooperate in sports, so it is not a perfectly reciprocal, symbiotic, or mutual relationship.

Despite such potential obstacles to linking sports and progressive social change, we are encouraged by the 21 activist athletes in our sample and hope that more athletes will be compelled to make connections between playing and protesting.

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