

**MEDIA EDUCATION  
FOUNDATION  
STUDY GUIDE**

**NOT JUST A GAME**

Featuring Dave Zirin

Study Guide Written by SCOTT MORRIS

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## NOTE TO EDUCATORS

This study guide is designed to help you and your students engage and manage the information presented in this video. Given that it can be difficult to teach visual content – and difficult for students to recall detailed information from videos after viewing them – the intention here is to give you a tool to help your students slow down and deepen their thinking about the specific issues this video addresses. With this in mind, we’ve structured the guide so that you have the option of focusing in depth on one section of the video at a time. We’ve also set it up to help you stay close to the video’s main line of argument as it unfolds. The structure of the guide therefore mirrors the structure of the video, moving through each of the video’s sections with a series of key summary points, questions, and assignments specific to that section.

**Key Points** provide a concise and comprehensive summary of each section of the video. They are designed to make it easier for you and your students to recall the details of the video during class discussions, and as a reference point for students as they work on assignments.

**Questions for Discussion & Writing** provide a series of questions designed to help you review and clarify material for your students; to encourage students to reflect critically on this material during class discussions; and to prompt and guide their written reactions to the video before and after these discussions. These questions can therefore be used in different ways: as guideposts for class discussion, as a framework for smaller group discussion and presentations, or as self-standing, in-class writing assignments (i.e. as prompts for “free-writing” or in-class reaction papers in which students are asked to write spontaneously and informally while the video is fresh in their mind).

**Assignments** encourage students to engage the video in more depth – by conducting research, working on individual and group projects, putting together presentations, and composing formal essays. These assignments are designed to challenge students to show command of the material presented in the video, to think critically and independently about this material from a number of different perspectives, and to develop and defend their own point of view on the issues at stake.

## PROGRAM OVERVIEW

We've been told again and again that sports and politics don't mix, that games are just games and athletes should just "shut up and play." But according to *Nation* magazine sports editor Dave Zirin, this notion is just flat-out wrong. In *Not Just a Game*, based on his bestselling book *The People's History of Sports in the United States*, Zirin argues that far from providing merely escapist entertainment, American sports have long been at the center of some of the major political debates and struggles of our time. Touring the good, the bad, and the ugly of American sports culture, Zirin first traces how American sports have glamorized militarism, racism, sexism, and homophobia, then excavates a largely forgotten history of rebel athletes who stood up to power and fought for social justice beyond the field of play. What results is an alternative history of political struggle in the United States as seen through the games its people have played.

## PRE-VIEWING QUESTIONS

1. Do you think politics and sports should be kept separate?
2. Should athletes speak out about issues they are passionate about or should they just butt out, keep their opinions to themselves and stick to their day jobs?
3. Can you think of any instances where sports or athletes have been political? Who and when and how?
4. Do politicians ever use sports in political ways?
5. Do you think American sports shape our perceptions of the world? If so, how?
6. Have you ever heard people say we should keep sports pure? What do you think that means? In what ways has modern sports culture supposedly become impure?
7. Define commercialism. In your view, how does commercialism affect sporting events, sports leagues and athletes?
8. What are the gender characteristics people typically associate with sports, jock culture, and pro athletes?
9. What is "ideology"? What are its features, and how does it work?

## INTRODUCTION

### Key Points

- Throughout history, we've been told that sports and politics don't mix, that the two spheres should remain separate from each other. Athletes shouldn't be political and politics should exist wholly outside the realm of sports.
- This no-politics attitude expresses what the late, great sports commentator Howard Cossell called "Rule #1 of the jockocracy" – the idea that sports and politics don't mix.
- But the fact is that sports are very much a political and a cultural force, a shared social space that reflects and shapes ideas and beliefs about who we are, how we view others, and how we view ourselves as a country.
- Like many Americans, Dave Zirin grew up watching and playing sports, idolizing athletes like Lawrence Taylor, Gary Carter and Magic Johnson.
- During the lead-up to the first Gulf War in 1990, Zirin went to a basketball game at Madison Square Garden that included a halftime show where one mascot beat up another mascot dressed as an Arab while the crowd chanted "USA! USA! USA!"
- Since that day at Madison Square Garden, Zirin has carved out a career in sports journalism looking at the intersection of sports and politics – as a commentator on ESPN, the sports editor of *The Nation* magazine, and the host of *Edge of Sports* on Sirius radio.

### Questions for Discussion & Writing

1. Why do you think there's such social pressure to keep sports separate from politics? What other spheres of society do we tend to think of as devoid of politics? What do you think is behind this anti-political mentality?
2. How is the incident Dave Zirin witnessed at Madison Square Garden in 1990 an example of politics being injected into sports? Do you think everyone would recognize those events as political? Why does Zirin say he found this incident so disturbing?
3. What do you think Zirin means when he says sports have an important social function? What role do sports play in the wider culture?
4. Zirin says the sports world is a good place to look if you want to understand how power arrangements work in society more generally. What does he mean by "power arrangements"? How do "power arrangements" play out in the arena of sports?

5. Why do historians view the kinds of events that took place in the Coliseum in Ancient Rome not only as sporting events, but also as culturally significant – and often political – events as well? What are some other historical examples where sports and politics seem so clearly to co-exist?

## Assignments

1. *Not Just A Game* opens with the famed Olympian athlete Jesse Owens saying, “To me, politics has no part to play on the field of strife and competition.” Research Jesse Owens and the 1936 Summer Olympics, and write a response paper answering the following questions: Can it be argued that Jesse Owens’s participation and the results he achieved in the 1936 Olympics were themselves a political act, regardless of his individual stand on the issues of his day? If so, how and why? If not, why not? Why and how do you think Jesse Owens himself might argue that he wasn’t acting politically? Do you agree or disagree with the kind of separation he’s trying to establish between sports and politics?
2. Go to the archive of Dave Zirin’s writing collected on his blog “Edge of Sports,” at <http://www.edgeofsports.com/archive.html>. Read one or two of his columns and write a response paper summarizing and examining the issues he covers. How do his topics relate to politics? What are his main arguments? How do these arguments relate to the overall argument he makes in *Not Just A Game*? Do you agree or disagree with the positions he takes in these columns? Finally, can you make any connections between the specific issues he looks at in these pieces and the incident at Madison Square Garden that inspired him to become a sports writer in the first place?

Note: Try to pick an article that deals with an issue you’re familiar with, and make sure to *summarize* Zirin’s point of view before you analyze it.

## IN THE ARENA

### Key Points

- Sports culture has traditionally, and historically, been thought of as a male arena – a masculine world dominated by male athletes and male spectators.
- A specific brand of masculinity still pervades the sports world: hyper-masculine, pumped up, immune to pain, comfortable with violence, and against showing vulnerability.
- Players in the National Football League (NFL) are often described as warriors or soldiers, and comparisons linking football to war are frequent.
- Despite the no-politics rule, the NFL promotes the American military –with flyovers of military aircraft before games, pre-game salutes to the armed services, even military personnel participating in the Super Bowl coin-toss.
- Militarism is also common at Major League Baseball (MLB) games. A good example is the Washington Nationals game Dave Zirin attended where President George W. Bush threw out the first pitch and Marine recruits were sworn in at home plate.
- The point isn't that sports leagues showing support for the military is bad, but that these kinds of displays are *political* – and that this seems to be a little-noticed, but glaring, contradiction in the supposed no-politics rule in sports.
- According to Zirin, the fact that this kind of politics isn't noticed is precisely because of how ideology functions: it normalizes and naturalizes a narrow set of ideas and images while deflecting attention away from other possible realities. In this case, it naturalizes militaristic ideas and ideals that crowd out equally American anti-war attitudes and positions.
- At the same time, on the level of identity, this narrow, glamorized view of militarism conceals many of the real-life costs and consequences of the fictionalized ideal of male invulnerability presented in sports culture.
- For one thing, it masks the traumatic toll a career in the NFL takes on the human body, often concealing these facts:
  - The average NFL player will die 20 years sooner than the rest of the population;
  - 6 in 10 players suffer at least one severe concussion during their career;
  - Football-related concussions have been linked to depression, problems with memory, concentration, speech impediments, Alzheimer's and even Lou Gehrig's disease.

- The story of Pat Tillman provides an especially clear example of how both sports and military culture glamorize a narrow set of cartoonish images and ideals of manhood that often collide with reality.
- Tillman gave up a successful NFL career by joining the Army Rangers in response to the terrorist attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001.
- When he died in Afghanistan in 2004, the Pentagon reported that Tillman was killed by enemy fire. He was heralded as a hero, awarded a Silver Star for “gallantry in action,” and his memorial service was aired on national television.
- But an investigation would later reveal that key parts of the Tillman story that circulated in the media had been fabricated by the military, and that in reality he was killed by what’s called “friendly fire”.
- What’s even more important is that the media blitz after Tillman’s death concealed the fact that before he died he had turned completely *against* the war in Iraq.
- The way Tillman’s story was spun is in keeping with how ideology works generally: it shows how inconvenient facts often go missing if they don’t fit into the dominant storyline of a culture.

### Questions for Discussion & Writing

1. What are some of the macho or manly characteristics we traditionally associate with sports?
2. How might the violent ideal of masculinity found in sports culture – specifically the message that real men should be willing to inflict and endure tremendous amounts of pain -- contribute to definitions of manhood beyond the world of sports? Can you think of examples of boys and men being encouraged to either inflict or endure pain outside the realm of sports?
3. Why does Zirin point out that professional sports culture is rife with military tributes? What’s the larger point he’s trying to make here? And why do you think these military displays seem so often to go unnoticed?
4. What are some of the hidden costs and consequences of the hyper-masculine version of manhood we often see in sports? What are some of the costs and consequences of a lengthy NFL career?
5. How does comparing sports to battle glamorize war? Why do you think we constantly compare football to war? And according to Zirin, what’s the main problem with this?

6. How did Pat Tillman – a pro football player turned Army Ranger – step outside the dominant narrative of what it means to be a man? In doing so, do you think he modeled another kind of manhood that should be valued in the wider culture? Explain.
7. Why do you think the Pentagon initially reported that Pat Tillman was killed by enemy fire? How does the Pentagon’s original story line up with what Zirin refers to as the “real man myth” that often gets reinforced in sports?
8. Do you agree with Zirin that the story of Pat Tillman matters politically? Why or why not, specifically?
9. Finally, what does Zirin say about “ideology” here in this section, about how it works and why it matters? And in what ways might the Tillman story, and the militarization of our sports culture more generally, be considered ideological?

## Assignments

1. Watch the three video clips on sports concussions from HBO’s *Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel*, available at <http://www.mediaed.org/wp/notjustagame> under “Study Guide References,” **Reference #1** – or on YouTube in three parts:

Part 1: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hpiryx3DgkU>

Part 2: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3swoelmj60U>

Part 3: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CpsdztY3o9Y>

Write a response paper in reaction to the following questions: Why are Chris Nowinski and his colleagues at the Sports Legacy Institute so concerned about concussions suffered by professional athletes? What are some of the consequences they fear these concussions can lead to? What are some of the reasons the NFL has been denying the link between concussions and these consequences? Look online to see what the NFL has done and is currently doing to alleviate some of these concerns.

2. The Box Exercise: Draw a box on the chalkboard. First, come up with a list of characteristics of an athlete as presented through professional sports. Write these characteristics inside the box. Talk about any consistent theme or themes that emerge from what’s written inside the box. Then, outside of the box, write down characteristics of men and women who don’t measure up to these traits. What are some of possible consequences for those who possess qualities outside the box?
3. Watch the MEF movie *Tough Guise: Violence, Media & The Crisis In Masculinity*. Write a paper summarizing the connections between the types of masculinity presented in sports and the types of masculinity presented in movies and TV, as described in that film.

## LIKE A GIRL

### Key Points

- Those who fall outside the dominant forms of manhood associated with sports are often marginalized and mocked as un-athletic and unworthy of participating in sports.
- The history of women's participation in sports is rife with examples of men trying to keep women out of the athletic domain, and then justifying their prejudice by appealing to "science" or an alleged concern for women's safety.
- The history of female athletes trying to prove these men wrong in many ways mirrors the wider struggle for women's equality in American society.
- Scientists in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century warned that even mundane physical activities could cause a women's uterus to implode or, in the case of riding a bicycle, give her what some scientists called the "bicycle face" -- a physical condition marked by "peculiarities" including "pale complexion" and an "anxious expression."
- When basketball was invented in 1891, women started playing immediately. But organizers quickly instituted new rules prohibiting physical contact between the women.
- Olympic officials banned the 800 meters for 30 years after some female runners fell to the ground to catch their breath when the event debuted at the 1928 Olympics.
- In 1952, the president of the International Olympic Committee, Avery Brundage, expressed a desire to eliminate women's track and field altogether from the Olympic Games, saying that people should be "spared the unaesthetic spectacle of women trying to look and act like men."
- This sort of flagrantly sexist commentary was allowed to run unchallenged even in major publications, like when Pulitzer Prize winning sports columnist Arthur Daley of the *New York Times* wrote in 1953: "There's nothing feminine or enchanting about a girl with beads of perspiration in her alabaster brow, the result of grotesque contortions in events totally unsuited to female architecture," adding that, "any self-respecting schoolboy can achieve superior performances to a woman champion."
- What this mentality reveals is just how much women have had to fight and struggle every step of the way to even be allowed to participate in sports.
- In 1967, Kathy Switzer registered for the then male-only Boston Marathon as K.V. Switzer, so that officials wouldn't know she was a woman. Five miles into the race an official spotted her, jumped off a truck, and tried to physically remove her from the

course, yelling “Get the hell out of my race!” The men around Switzer stopped him as she kept running, finishing the 26.2-mile race in 4 hours and 20 minutes.

- Billie Jean King is one of the most important athletes in American history.
  - She brought feminism to sports, fighting for equal pay in women’s tennis and for women’s rights, more generally, in the wider culture.
  - She defeated the retired tennis star Bobby Riggs in straight sets in the “Battle of the Sexes,” one of the most important and most watched sporting events of the 1970s.
  - She became one of the first openly gay athletes when she was outed in 1981. It cost her endorsements and prestige, but she continued to speak out about women’s issues and women’s equality.
- When Title IX, a law granting girls and young women equal rights and access in education and athletics, passed in 1972, 1 in 35 (3%) American girls played some form of sport. Today, 1 in 3 (33%) American girls play sports.
- But despite these gains in participation, a recent study by sociologists Michael Messner and Cheryl Cooky found that coverage of women’s athletics has all but disappeared on TV news and sports highlight shows. The report concluded that airtime devoted to women athletes dropped from a high of 9% in 1999 to a paltry 1.6% in 2009.
- Furthermore, between 2004 and 2009, covers of *ESPN The Magazine* featured male athletes 95% of the time, with female athletes appearing on only six covers during that five-year span.
- This dominant masculine ideal in our sports culture not only affects women, women athletes in particular, it also affects boys and men who don’t measure up to this narrow ideal.
- Like sexism, homophobia persists in today’s sports world, as revealed in the attitudes of several high-profile athletes:
  - Jon Smoltz, the likely Hall of Fame pitcher, once compared gay marriage to bestiality, saying, “What’s next? Marrying an animal?”
  - Jeremy Shockey, the NFL tight end, said he wouldn’t want a gay teammate because “they’re going to be in the shower with us.”
  - Tim Hardaway, the former All-Star NBA point guard, said during a radio interview, “I hate gay people... I’m homophobic.”
- The prevailing homophobic atmosphere in sports culture has prevented gay athletes in the Big 3 pro sports – baseball, basketball, and football – from coming out of the closet.

Gay athletes, like former NBA center John Amaechi or former NFL lineman Esera Tuolo, waited until long after they retired to come out.

- Straight and married Scott Fujita, an NFL linebacker and defensive captain of the 2010 Super Bowl champion New Orleans Saints, offered a rare example of a pro athlete openly supporting gay rights when he attached his name and support to the National Equality March for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgendered Rights, even though he knew a lot of frightened straight guys would think he was gay for doing so.
- According to Zirin, this is how change happens – a few good people daring to stand up to the crowd to overcome injustice.

### Questions for Discussion & Writing

1. Throughout history, what sorts of justifications and fears have been promoted by male scientists and athletic organizers to discourage women from participating in sports?
2. Why would women riding bicycles present a profound threat to the social order? How did the bicycle change the landscape for women's participation in physical activity? And what is "the bicycle face"?
3. Why were physical contact and efforts to hinder the shooter quickly prohibited in women's basketball? How did this help maintain gender roles?
4. Why was the women's 800 meters event eliminated from the Olympics after its debut in 1928? How long did it take before the event was re-instated?
5. What's the importance of Billie Jean King's defeat of Bobby Riggs in the "Battle of the Sexes"? Why do you think so many people tuned in to watch the match?
6. What is Title IX? What impact has Title IX had on girls' and women's participation in sports?
7. What's happened to coverage of female athletes and athletics in news and highlight shows since 1999? Has it increased or decreased? Why do you think this is? Be specific.
8. What are some of the reasons you think no active male athletes in the three major American sports have come out of the closet?
9. Why does Dave Zirin encourage athletes to be like Scott Fujita? Why does he think Fujita's support of a gay rights march is important? Do you agree with him? What impact can such a gesture have?

## Assignments

1. Many of us are familiar with American skier Lindsey Vonn. She's one of the world's fastest skiers and, despite a severely bruised shin, won a gold and a bronze medal at the 2010 Olympic Games in Vancouver. On the other hand, very few have heard of Lindsey Van, an American ski jumper, because women's ski jumping isn't an Olympic sport and women aren't allowed to compete. Research Lindsey Van and the wider struggle to include women in Olympic ski jumping. Based on your research, write a position paper detailing whether you think the exclusion of women's ski jumping from the Olympics is based on sexism or something else.
2. Read Arthur Daley's *New York Times* column "More Deadly Than the Male," available at [http://www.mediaed.org/assets/products/151/Arthur\\_Daley\\_on\\_Women\\_in\\_Sports.pdf](http://www.mediaed.org/assets/products/151/Arthur_Daley_on_Women_in_Sports.pdf). Write a response paper that addresses the following questions: How does Daley defend a notion of manhood based on physical and intellectual superiority? What does Daley base his opinions on? Does he provide evidence?

Also, while Daley is talking about women here, he's also implying a lot about men. Talk about his attitudes toward men as well.

Finally, do you agree with any of what Daley says here? And why, specifically, do you think Dave Zirin finds this article so disturbing?

3. When Kathy Switzer tricked the organizers of the 1967 Boston Marathon into thinking her application was sent in by a man, she became the first registered woman to run the men-only race. But she wasn't the first woman to run the Boston Marathon – that honor belongs to Bobbi Gibb, who snuck onto the course unregistered the year before. Research Bobbi Gibb. Write a response paper based on your research that details how the different approaches these women took in pursuit of the same goal represent different philosophies about enacting social change. Make sure to clearly argue which tactic you think is more effective.
4. Read the April 23, 1967 *New York Times* article on Kathy Switzer, "Lady With Desire To Run Crashed Marathon," available at: [http://www.mediaed.org/assets/products/151/Kathy\\_Switzer.pdf](http://www.mediaed.org/assets/products/151/Kathy_Switzer.pdf). Write a response paper addressing the following:

Aside from presenting the facts involved in this incident, does this article express a certain point of view? How so?

Do you think a 20-year-old male who had just completed a marathon would be referred to as a "boy" as Switzer is repeatedly referred to as a "girl" in the article? Do you think language matters in cases like this? Why or why not?

Does anything else in the article stand out to you or surprise you?

5. Research the Michael Messner and Cheryl Cooky report *Gender In Televised Sports: News and Highlight Shows, 1989-2009*, available at: <http://www.mediaed.org/assets/products/151/tvsports.pdf>. In your own words, write up a two-part response:

First, summarize the primary findings and main conclusions of the report generally, as a whole.

Then, focusing more specifically on the section “How Can Change Occur?”, analyze the report’s recommendations for improving coverage of women’s sports. What ideas do the authors present? What do you think of these ideas? Do you have ideas of your own for improving the situation that aren’t mentioned in the report?

## BREAKING THE COLOR BARRIER

### Key Points

- In a direct parallel to the experience of white women, at one time the prevailing belief was that blacks were also biologically inferior to white men and therefore unfit for sports.
- This point of view began to change in a big way in 1910, when the African-American heavyweight fighter Jack Johnson defeated the “Great White Hope” Jim Jeffries – a victory that led to widespread celebration among African-Americans, while triggering deadly race riots among angry whites in many American cities.
- Major League Baseball was an all-white league until Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier by joining the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947.
- Major League Baseball still celebrates the courage and perseverance Robinson displayed during his playing years – shining a light on how he excelled despite hate-filled threats and abuse from a lot of white people who didn’t think African-Americans should be able to play in the majors.
- But, at the same time, these celebrations often overlook the political activism Robinson displayed – how he explicitly supported the civil rights movement, worked side-by-side with Martin Luther King, Jr., and fought hard for years to create more opportunities for African-Americans, athletes and non-athletes alike.

### Questions for Discussion & Writing

1. What did Los Angeles Dodgers owner Al Campanis mean when he said on the ABC News program *Nightline* in 1987 that the reason there are so few African-Americans managers and general managers in baseball is because “they may not have some of the necessities to be, let’s say, a field manager, or, perhaps, a general manager”? Is Zirin’s point in this section that this attitude was unusual, or part of a larger history of racist attitudes toward black athletes?
2. Why do you think so many white boxing fans were so angry when boxer Jack Johnson defeated Jim Jeffries in 1910? Put yourself in their heads: why do you think they would be pushed to the point of violence like this?
3. How did Jack Johnson represent a new brand of black masculinity?
4. What features of Jackie Robinson’s life and political struggle are typically left out of the yearly tributes commemorating the day he integrated Major League Baseball?

5. Zirin asks the question: “What if, instead of plucking out the most talented individuals from the Negro Leagues, Major League Baseball had chosen to incorporate entire teams, entire organizations, bringing along all the African-American owners and management as well?” Try to answer this question. What are some of the ways you think baseball might be different today if it had been integrated differently? How do you think American society might be different?

## Assignments

1. Watch Ted Koppel’s entire interview with Al Campanis from April 6, 1987 – available at <http://www.mediaed.org/wp/notjustagame> under “Study Guide References,” **Reference #2**. Write a response paper chronicling your reactions to one of the following:
  - a. This interview took place nearly 40 years to the day after Jackie Robinson proved that African-Americans could play baseball, eventually helping to integrate the sport through his individual example. How might the kind of racist viewpoint expressed by Campanis have been different if the actual structure of the Negro Leagues had been integrated into Major League Baseball in the 1940s and 1950s?
  - b. Research the 2007 incident in which radio host Don Imus referred to the Rutgers University’s women’s basketball team as “nappy-headed hos.” What was the reaction to Imus’s comments? What similarities and differences do you see between these two instances of racial prejudice in sports? Why do you think these attitudes persist?
2. Watch the movie *The Jackie Robinson Story* (available for streaming or download at [http://www.archive.org/details/Jackie\\_Robinson\\_Story\\_The](http://www.archive.org/details/Jackie_Robinson_Story_The)) and write a response paper addressing the following questions:
 

How does this film set Jackie Robinson within the larger narrative of the American Dream? Why does Zirin take issue with this version of the American Dream? What elements of Jackie Robinson’s story do you think this film biographical excludes? Are there examples of other movies that tell a similar overcoming-racism-through-sports story? Do you think it’s possible for these kinds of sentimental Hollywood narratives to be both inspiring and politically limited at the same time? Explain.
3. Research Major League Baseball’s “Reviving Baseball in Inner Cities” (RBI) program. Write a response paper detailing the program, its goals, and why the program was founded. Why is such a program necessary?
4. When they fielded a lineup that included infielder Pumpsie Green on July 21<sup>st</sup> 1959, 12 years after Jackie Robinson first took the field for the Dodgers, the Boston Red Sox earned the dubious distinction of being the last team in the Major Leagues to integrate. But, ironically, the Red Sox were also the first major league team with a real opportunity

to sign Jackie Robinson. The organization brought Robinson and two other black players in for a tryout in 1945, but the future Hall of Famer did not make the team. Research Robinson's tryout and write up a short investigative report about what you find. Be sure to explain why so many sports writers now refer to the tryout as a sham. On what specific basis have sportswriters and historians made this claim? Do you agree with their assessment?

## THE COURAGE OF ATHLETES

### Key Points

- The great writer James Baldwin once said that America is a country devoted to the “death of the paradox.” He meant that we like to keep things simple, uncomplicated, and, ultimately, separate.
- Baldwin’s observation is instructive in the context of American attitudes toward sports: It gives insight into why so many people seem to want their play to be play and their work to be work. In Zirin’s view, this mentality helps explain why there’s often such popular resistance to looking at the political implications of sports.
- And Zirin makes the further point that a big reason for this anti-political attitude is the commercialization of sports.
- LeBron James once declared that he has two goals in his life: 1) to become a “global icon like Muhammad Ali,” and 2) to be the richest athlete in the history of the world. According to Zirin, “While these may be two great goals, they don’t exactly go great together.”
- Muhammad Ali sacrificed everything to stand up for what he believed in, most notably being stripped of his championship belt and facing prison time for refusing to serve in the Vietnam War.
- In contrast, Michael Jordan has often put his endorsements and ties to corporations above all else:
  - During the medal ceremony at the 1992 Olympics, Jordan covered the Reebok symbol with an American flag because of endorsement deals with Nike.
  - In 1994, he refused to back an African-American Senate candidate running against a former segregationist because, as he said, “Republicans buy sneakers too.”
- Ali’s legacy, unlike Jordan’s, is in keeping with the legacy of Olympic sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos. Smith and Carlos won the gold and bronze medals, respectively, in the 200 meters at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, and during the medal ceremony they did the following:
  - they took off and carried their shoes to protest poverty;
  - they wore beads to protest lynchings;
  - John Carlos unzipped his jacket – a violation of Olympic protocol – to represent the working class of America, both black and white;

- And, in one of the most famous gestures in the history of sports, they raised their black-gloved fists during the National Anthem to show solidarity with the Civil Rights movement.
- As a result of their protest at the podium, Smith and Carlos were expelled from the Olympics and their athletic careers were ruined. They received death threats for years and had difficulty finding employment.
- When a BBC reporter asked Carlos what he would say to critics who claimed the two athletes should have been satisfied with their medals, he responded, “I can’t eat that and the kids on my block... they can’t eat publicity, they can’t eat gold medals... all we ask for is an equal chance to be a human being.”
- Zirin’s point is that moments like these are a crucial part of the history of American sports, even though in their own time they were often considered inappropriate or antithetical to the spirit of sports.
- And when we view sports solely as an arena of play, we overlook not only the political and cultural impact of sports, but also the courage of athletes who dare to sacrifice the rewards of their own success to improve the lives of others.
- While very few of us ever get the chance to play professional sports, we can all stand up for ourselves and others when we witness or are the victims of injustice – on and off the field.

### Questions for Discussion & Writing

1. Why does Dave Zirin quote James Baldwin saying America is devoted to the “death of the paradox”? How does Baldwin’s observation relate to the overall argument Zirin is making in this film?
2. Why do you think athletes are so often used to sell products? How might endorsement deals affect their ability to speak out on political issues? Be specific.
3. What has LeBron James proclaimed as his two main goals in life? Why does Dave Zirin think these two goals don’t go well together? Do you think they *necessarily* clash? Or is it possible for them to go together? Explain.
4. Zirin points out that Muhammad Ali helped to shape the 1960s, and that he was in turn shaped by the 1960s. What does he mean? In other words, how did Muhammad Ali change over the course of the 1960s? And how did he contribute to the immense change that happened in the United States over the course of that decade?

5. What's Muhammad Ali's birth name? Why did he change his name to Muhammad Ali?
6. How did Michael Jordan set the example for other star athletes being apolitical?
7. Why does Zirin say Muhammad Ali and Michael Jordan represent the twin poles of the story of politics in American sports?
8. What were track stars Tommie Smith and John Carlos protesting during the medal ceremony for the 200 meters event at the 1968 Mexico City Summer Olympics? How did they communicate this protest?
9. How did Olympic officials respond to their actions? What were other consequences of their protest? Why do you think their actions caused such a stir?
10. Why does Dave Zirin think this moment is a crucial part of the history of American sports?

## Assignments

1. In his book *What's My Name Fool? Sports and Resistance in the United States*, Dave Zirin quotes M.I.T. Professor Noam Chomsky saying:

Sports keeps people from worrying about things that matter to their lives that they might have some idea of doing something about. And in fact it's striking to see the intelligence that's use by ordinary people in sports [as opposed to political and social issues]. I mean, you listen to radio stations where people call in – they have the most exotic information and understanding about all kinds of arcane issues. And the press undoubtedly does a lot with this... Sports is a major factor in controlling people. Workers have minds; they have to be involved in something and it's important to make sure they're involved in things that have absolutely no significance. So professional sports is perfect. It instills total passivity.

Zirin then writes, "The weakness in Chomsky's argument, however, is that it disregards how the very passion we invest in sports can transform it from a kind of mindless escape into a site of resistance. It can become an arena where the ideas of our society are not only present but also challenged. Just as sports can reflect the dominant ideas of our society, they can also reflect struggle. The story of the women's movement is incomplete without mention of Billie Jean King's match against Bobby Riggs." He then references the contributions of Jackie Robinson, Muhammad Ali, Martina Navratilova, Tommie Smith and John Carlos.

Zirin also points to this quote from Lester “Red” Rodney, the editor of the Daily Worker sports section from 1934-1958:

Of course there is exploitation but there is also fun and beauty too. I mean, what’s more beautiful than a 6-4-3 double play perfectly executed where the shortstop fields a ground ball and flips it toward second base in one motion, the second baseman takes the throw in stride, pivots, avoids the base runner, and fires it to first on time. That’s not a put-on on. That’s not fake. That’s beyond all social analysis of the game. The idea of people coming together and amazing the rest of us.

What’s your take on all of this? Which viewpoint most closely matches up with your own? Is Chomsky right that sports only offer mindless distraction from the larger issues and problems we should be addressing, and in this way instills a politically damaging passivity in a population? Or is there value beyond the entertainment? Are there elements of truth in both of these perspectives? Be sure to use examples and back up your position clearly.

2. Research Peter Norman, the silver medalist in the 200 meters at the 1968 Olympics and the other man on the podium when Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their fists in protest of racism in the United States. Write a profile of Norman. Be sure to talk about how Norman showed solidarity with Smith and Carlos. And say something about the lessons athletes and sports fans today might be able to draw from his example.

Finally, explain why, when a statue was being built at San Jose State University commemorating the podium where Smith, Norman, and Carlos stood, Peter Norman said he wanted to leave his spot empty. What was his point in doing this? What do you think of his gesture?