

# NOT JUST A GAME

## Power, Politics & American Sports

[transcript]

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**Jesse Owens:** To me, politics has no part to play on the field of strife of competition.

**DAVE ZIRIN:** Throughout history, we've been told that sports and politics don't mix.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**Pete Sampras:** Listen, listen. I'm an athlete. I win or I lose.

**Reporter:** Do you think that sports people should take more of a political view?

**Sampras:** No, I don't.

**ZIRIN:** We've been told that in the arena of sport, it's all about things like achievement, athletic performance, competition, individualism, teamwork. Playing the game, and playing it well, is all that matters.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**Joe Buck:** Good evening everyone and welcome to a chilly night...

**ZIRIN:** And yet everywhere we look, there seems to be a strange contradiction of this no-politics rule: prominent and powerful displays of nationalism and patriotism and military might that seem nothing if not political.

All of it set against politics of an entirely different kind throughout the history of sport: performances and actions patriotic in their own right, and seemingly in keeping with one of the oldest credos of athletics: to do one's best, with respect for others and the rules of the game, without fear.

This is a film that takes sports seriously as a cultural force, a shared social space, and a political force that reflects and in turn shapes our often conflicting ideas and beliefs about who we are, how we view others, and how we see ourselves as a country.

**[TITLE SCREEN]**

**ZIRIN:** I'm Dave Zirin, and I love sports. I grew up idolizing guys like Lawrence Taylor, Gary Carter, and Magic Johnson.

I played baseball in High School and was the starting center on my basketball team, the Fighting Quakers at New York Friends. My god, we were terrible, but sports were my life. And like most young boys in this country, one message was fed to me every time I took the field or watched a game, and it's a message that's only grown stronger with time – what Howard Cosell called “rule number one of the jockocracy” – the idea that sports and politics just don't mix. We're all supposed to just kick back, relax, and enjoy the show.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**Announcer:** Good evening everyone and welcome to Madison Square Garden, the world's most famous arena.

**ZIRIN:** But for me, all of that changed back one day in the early 1990s. I'll never forget it. I went to Madison Square Garden, the world's most famous arena, to watch a basketball game. It was during the lead up to the first Gulf War in 1991. And at halftime—I kid you not—one of the mascots started to beat up this guy who was wearing this Arab costume. And the Jumbotron was whipping the crowd up into a frenzy getting everybody to chant "USA! USA! USA!" I mean, it was sick. I came to watch a game, but I got served something else entirely.

This was about as explicit a political spectacle as you could imagine. And I've basically made a career out of trying to understand that murky place where sports and politics collide – as a writer...

**[VIDEO CLIP – Outside The Lines]**

**ESPN Anchor:** To discuss athletes and activism, we now welcome Dave Zirin, author and sports editor of The Nation magazine.

**ZIRIN:** As a commentator on ESPN and other major networks, and in my sports radio show.

**ZIRIN [on radio]:** Yo, we got a hell of a show this week. This is where sports and politics collide.

**ZIRIN:** And one of the first things I discovered was that sports is political in ways we don't often even notice – especially on the level of culture, where our ideas and attitudes as a society are shaped.

**[VIDEO CLIP – Ben-Hur]**

*chariot race sounds*

**ZIRIN:** Historians have long known that you can find out a lot about the wider culture by looking at its sports culture.

**[VIDEO CLIP – Gladiator]***gladiator battle sounds*

**ZIRIN:** And history has taught us that sports is never just something that we just sit back and watch – that sports always have had an important social function. And the history of American sports is no different.

As in the far distant past, modern American sports culture shapes cultural attitudes, norms, and power arrangements. And it also serves as a key place to look if you want to understand how these norms and power structures have been negotiated, resisted, struggled with, and against.

It's here where societal and cultural meanings play out – our very notions of who we are and how we see each other. Not only as Americans, but as individuals. As boys and girls, and men and women. Ideas about gender and race and class.

And as we'll see, sports culture produces stories that become the dominant narratives that make certain ways of seeing the world normal, conventional, just the way it is. While at the same time, actively trying to silence anything or anybody who doesn't fit in this accepted frame.

We have to start then with what the big-time sports world is like at its seemingly most normal and natural.

**IN THE ARENA****[VIDEO CLIP – Saturday Night Live]**

**Athlete:** I don't know. I saw daylight and I was going through, coach. And this guy grabbed my arm and tore my arm off and I fumbled the ball.

**Coach:** What?

**Athlete:** Tore my arm off!

**Coach:** So it's a little injury, is it? You can't play hurt. Is that what you're trying to tell me, you creampuff!?

**DAVE ZIRIN:** More than anything else, the world of sports has traditionally been thought of as a male arena.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**NFL Narrator:** This is rough, hard football.

**NFL Coach:** We got a bunch of proud, valiant warriors.

**NFL Coach:** Fight! That's all I've asked you to do! Is fight for me with everything you're worth!

**ZIRIN:** An arena where a certain kind of manhood holds sway...

**[VIDEO CLIP – 2008 Wimbledon]**

**Tennis Announcer:** Phenomenal performance from the muscle man...

**ZIRIN:** Masculine, pumped-up, comfortable with violence, immune to pain, and against showing vulnerability of any kind.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**Vince Lombardi:** What are you doing out there?

**NFL Coach:** Buckle them chinstraps, prima donnas!

**ZIRIN:** Sports culture offers up role models for what it means to be a man. And real men will do whatever it takes to win.

**[VIDEO CLIP – We Are Marshall]**

**Coach:** Winning is everything.

**ZIRIN:** Whether that means taking steroids to hit more home runs or pitching on a bloody ankle, sports culture tells us that real men are willing to sacrifice their bodies for the team. They play with pain, they ‘man up,’ they ‘shake it off,’ they ‘get back in the game.’

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**Coach Rod Marinelli:** It’s gonna take a physical investment. When it hurts, you’re hurting, you’re sore, you’re tired, guess what? Nobody gives a [bleep].

**ZIRIN:** And nothing embodies – and reproduces – this masculine ideal better or more effectively than NFL football.

**[VIDEO CLIP – Varsity Blues]**

**Coach:** Never show weakness. Only pain that matters is the pain you inflict.

**ZIRIN:** Being masculine means being able to inflict pain, and to endure it – no matter how violent, and without regard for the consequences.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**High School Football Coach:** I’m Julius Caesar, and you’re gonna look over at me. You’re gonna look over at me. May God have mercy on them because we won’t! Let’s go!

**ZIRIN:** This warrior image moves beyond personal identity to link up with and reinforce larger forces and values in the culture – most notably militarism.

**[VIDEO CLIP – Patton]**

**Patton:** We're going to cut out their living guts and use them to grease the treads of our tanks. We're going to murder those lousy-hung bastards by the bushel.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**George Carlin:** In football, the object is for the quarterback, otherwise known as the field general, to be on target with his aerial assault, riddling the defense by hitting his receivers with deadly accuracy in spite of the blitz, even if he has to use the shotgun. With short bullet passes and long bombs, he marches his troops into enemy territory, balancing this aerial assault with a sustained ground attack which punches holes in the forward wall of the enemy's defensive line.

**ZIRIN:** And the militarization of sports culture might be even funnier if so many guys didn't take it so literally.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**Kellen Winslow:** It's war. They don't give a freaking you-know-what about you. They will kill you. They're out there to kill you. If I didn't hurt him, he'd hurt me. They're gunning for my legs. I'm gonna come right back at 'em. I'm a [bleep] soldier.

**ZIRIN:** Professional sports leagues actively promote this idea, making it so commonplace in our culture that we don't even notice it. We don't even question it.

**[VIDEO CLIP – Super Bowl XLIII]**

**NFL Referee:** All right gentlemen, congratulations and welcome to Super Bowl XLIII. General David Petraeus will toss the coin.

**ZIRIN:** But when you stop and think about it, it's actually downright bizarre how militarized sports culture has become. And it's not just the National Football League.

I went to a baseball game a few years back, and it turned out I was also attending something called Military Appreciation Night. Before the opening pitch, with George W. Bush in attendance, a whole group of marines were sworn in at home plate. Then the P.A. announcer came in and said: "For those of you in the audience who also want a career in the military, please visit the appropriate kiosk."

If going to war isn't political, then nothing is. And yet this mix of sports and politics seems perfectly natural to us. We're made to think it's not political at all, that it's just the way it is. And this is how ideology works: It naturalizes ideas and

images that deflect attention away from other realities. And this is where it really starts to matter.

**[VIDEO CLIP – ABC News]**

**Peter Jennings:** Many people who follow professional football were saddened to learn last week that the Hall of Fame center Mike Webster died at the age of fifty after years of combat on the field. He had heart disease and brain damage. However, it is hard to find a former pro-football player whose body hasn't paid a very high price.

**ZIRIN:** The dominant narrative in sports culture presents a narrow, glamorized view of militarism and violence that conceals many of the costs and consequences of this fictionalized ideal of male invulnerability.

**[VIDEO CLIP – ABC News]**

**John L. Williams:** You do feel like you are superman. Because, like I said, you can do anything you want. You can get anything you want. You can go anywhere you want to go.

**ZIRIN:** In the militarized spectacle of football, especially, there seems to be no room for the statistical fact that this sport takes a terrible toll on the human body.

**[VIDEO CLIP – ABC News]**

**John L. Williams:** I've had one, two, three right ankle – one, two, three, four, five, six, right knee surgery and a hernia surgery.

**Reporter:** Six out of ten former players say they have suffered at least one concussion while playing.

**ZIRIN:** The average NFL career is three-and-a-half years. And the average player will die twenty years sooner than the rest of the population. Twenty years. I've had players tell me that to play professional football is to skip middle age. I've been to retirement dinners. And I've seen guys who aren't much older than me walking with canes.

**[VIDEO CLIP – ABC News]**

**Former NFL Player:** It probably wasn't worth the kind of pain I'm in now, but would I do it again? Absolutely.

**ZIRIN:** All of which raises the question: Does the cartoon version of violence we see in American sports culture sanitize and lie about the real-life consequences of violence?

And, most importantly, if sports glamorize war – if they in effect deceive us about the reality and tragedy of war – are we looking at a form of propaganda here?

**[VIDEO CLIP – ABC NEWS]**

**Commentator:** He shoots it over the middle, and whoa! What a hit! Pat Tillman knocked the helmet off of Isaac Byrd.

**ZIRIN:** It's a question NFL star Pat Tillman would have been very interested in.

Back in 2001, Tillman was coming off the best year of his career. He was picked for Sports Illustrated's All-Pro Team and he had just turned down a \$9 million contract to stay with his team, the Arizona Cardinals. Pat Tillman was tough, and he was loyal. He was a coach's dream. Then came 9/11.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

*9/11 footage*

**ZIRIN:** Out of respect for the unfolding tragedy, the NFL postponed a week of games. But Tillman went further than that. He joined the Army Rangers.

**[VIDEO CLIP – NBC News]**

**Pat Tillman:** My great grandfather was at Pearl Harbor and a lot of my family has gone and fought in wars, and I really haven't done a damn thing.

**ZIRIN:** This was the real deal, a Pro Football player giving up a lucrative career to serve his country in the field of battle – a true patriot and a true American hero.

**[VIDEO CLIP – NBC News]**

**Tom Brokaw:** News of another American death has refocused attention on the meaning of sacrifice and service. Pat Tillman, who gave up a multimillion-dollar contract in professional football, has been killed.

**ZIRIN:** Twenty-two months after enlisting, Pat Tillman was dead. His memorial service was aired on national television. The Army awarded him a Silver Star for his "gallantry in action against an armed enemy." They said Tillman's convoy had been ambushed in Afghanistan. They said Tillman charged up a hill to protect his men but was shot down by the Taliban. That was the official story, but there was only one problem. It was a lie.

**[VIDEO CLIP – 60 Minutes]**

**Katie Couric:** When he died in Afghanistan on April 22, 2004, the Army told his family he'd been killed by enemy fire after courageously charging up a hill to protect his fellow Army Rangers. But that story didn't hold up. He was really killed by friendly fire – shot accidentally by his fellow soldiers.

**ZIRIN:** Since the official story didn't fit into the dominant narrative we've been

discussing, it was decided that the truth should be hidden.

**[VIDEO CLIP – NBC News]**

**Brian Williams:** Now the Army admits that its own investigators held back their finding that this was a friendly fire incident. They kept that fact secret for weeks, even from Tillman’s family, until after his nationally televised memorial service.

**ZIRIN:** And maybe the worst part about all of this was that this whitewashing of Tillman’s story also hid what might be the most important part of his story: that while he was stationed in Iraq in 2003, he had turned against the war.

**[VIDEO CLIP – ABC News]**

**John Krakauer:** He thought the war was illegal. He thought it was a mistake. He thought it was going to be a disaster. And in the Army, you’re not supposed to talk about that. You’re not supposed to talk politics. And Pat didn’t shut up. He told everyone he encountered, “This war is illegal as hell.”

**ZIRIN:** In fact, when Tillman was redeployed to Afghanistan in 2004, he began reading the anti-war activist Noam Chomsky.

**[VIDEO CLIP – Beyond The Frame]**

**Noam Chomsky:** In the last ten years, the United States has devastated the civilian society of Iraq.

**ZIRIN:** Tillman told his mother he wanted to meet Chomsky in person after he returned to the United States.

**[VIDEO CLIP – 60 Minutes]**

**Katie Couric:** Was there any solace in the story the military told you about how courageous Pat had been?

**Mary Tillman:** Well of course, but what’s interesting is the story itself seemed so contrived. The soldier, you know, running up the ridgeline, firing at the enemy, saving his men. It did sound kind of like a John Wayne movie.

**ZIRIN:** The reason this misrepresentation of Pat Tillman matters so much is because it so vividly exposes a fault line in the political mythology of sport. It shows how the ‘real man’ myth that gets reinforced in sports culture often works to marginalize actual men, whose true acts of courage – even if these take the form of standing up to the government – may be more admirable than the fictional half-truths assigned to them by the media-sports complex.

**[VIDEO CLIP – Fox NFL Sunday]**

**Host:** Good morning America and welcome to a special edition of Fox NFL Sunday.



**ZIRIN:** Which is exactly what happened recently when Fox NFL Sunday commemorated Veteran's Day by broadcasting from Bagram Airfield in Afghanistan and proceeded to pay tribute to Pat Tillman without even hinting at the more complicated facts of his story – even though his family has been fighting for years to make these facts known.

**[VIDEO CLIP – Fox NFL Sunday]**

**Host:** The memory of Pat Tillman lives on at the USO center on this very airfield here at Bagram.

**ZIRIN:** Rather than bothering to mention that Tillman had turned against the war, the Fox commentators, dressed in full camouflage, used his life and death to promote war.

**[VIDEO CLIP – Fox NFL Sunday]**

**Host:** Pam Oliver tells us, the tie between the U.S. military and the NFL has always been a strong one.

**Pam Oliver:** The ties between professional football and the U.S. military have existed since the start of the NFL back in 1920. That relationship grew immensely during WWII and today that bond is stronger than ever.

**ZIRIN:** They allowed Pat Tillman's personal story to circulate within a larger political mythology in sports culture that seems more comfortable with men who fight wars than with men who fight against them when they believe them to be unjust.

**[VIDEO CLIP – 60 Minutes]**

**Katie Couric:** What do you think Pat would think of all this?

**Russell Baer:** He'd hate it.

**Jade Lane:** He would be just insanely upset, and I think when he looked back on it he'd just laugh. This is just criminal. Those would probably be his exact words: This is criminal.

**ZIRIN:** It's as though being political in itself is somehow antithetical to being an athlete or a sports fan – that somehow caring about what goes on in the world, or questioning and wondering and thinking critically about the role sports plays in the wider culture, is somehow abnormal, uncool, and unmanly. And it's just this attitude that throughout the history of American sports has marginalized entire groups of people.

## LIKE A GIRL

### [VIDEO CLIP – Saturday Night Live]

**Men:** Throw the ball! Throw the ball, George.

**DAVE ZIRIN:** In sports culture, it's not just that a certain kind of manhood gets defined and privileged and naturalized, but that this normalization in turn defines those who fall outside this dominant ideal as somehow un-athletic, unworthy of sport, outside of its sacred space – making it hostile territory for those who don't fit, and making the history of sport in the United States a sort of window into larger social struggles for equality and justice, like the struggle for women's equality.

### [VIDEO CLIP]

**Newsreel Narrator:** How do they do it? Where do they find all that energy? That seemingly inexhaustible store of pep and ginger.

**ZIRIN:** When schools began offering physical education in the late 1800s, the prevailing belief was that women were too fragile for such physical exertion. Respected scientists even argued that sports would make women infertile, sex-crazed, or just plain insane – pretty much everything short of growing a tail. Then, along came the bicycle.

### [VIDEO CLIP]

**Newsreel Narrator:** Bicycling is a lot of fun, good exercise, and a fine means of transportation.

**ZIRIN:** As absurd as it seems now, the idea of women riding bicycles was a profound threat to the male social order because it would force women to take off their corsets. The so-called expert scientists howled that riding a bike would implode a woman's uterus or give her what they called "the bicycle face," which was marked by 'peculiarities' including 'pale complexion' and an 'anxious expression.' This was all part of a larger attitude toward women and physical activity. For many, women's sports were considered unnatural and unsightly – even unfeminine and downright un-American.

Take basketball. The sport was invented in 1891, and women started playing it right away. They were rough and aggressive despite having to wear dresses on the court. Alarmed that these players were becoming too manly, organizers instituted new rules that actually prohibited physical contact and any effort to hinder the shooter. And just like that, what started as scrappy and fun was made dainty and dull – all in the name of keeping men manly and women womanly.

Or take running. Surely women would be allowed to run, right? I mean, it's a no bicycle face, no contact sport. So what could be the problem? The women's 800 meters debuted at the 1928 Olympics. But at the finish, some of the runners fell to the ground to catch their breath. Perfectly reasonable, right? They were winded. We see this with men all the time too. But for some reason, this was considered so unladylike it caused an international scandal.

**[TEXT ON SCREEN]**

**Newspaper Headline:** 5 Women Track Stars Collapse In Olympic Race

**ZIRIN:** Deeming the sport too strenuous for the frail female form, Olympic officials promptly banned the women's 800 meters for thirty years. Thirty years! The idea stuck, so much so that one member of the International Olympic Committee would actually say in 1952 that he hoped to eliminate women's track and field competition all together from the Olympics so that we all might be, as he put it, "spared the unaesthetic spectacle of women trying to look and act like men."

In 1953, Pulitzer Prize winning sports columnist Arthur Daley of the New York Times said that eliminating women from the Olympics was "a great idea," writing that: "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."

And that's the point. Men like Arthur Daley and those on the International Olympic Committee weren't only trying to prevent women from harm. They were also defending a notion of manhood based on physical superiority.

This all changed in the 1960s and '70s when women began to organize. They broke out of traditional gender roles and took on responsibilities outside of the home. It was called the women's movement and the world has never been the same since.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**Striker:** There's another slogan that women have for this strike, which says 'Sisterhood is Powerful.'

**ZIRIN:** It took people who were willing to break the rules to change them. And this struggle reflected itself in electric fashion in the world of sports in the 1960s – on battlefields as unlikely as the Boston Marathon.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**Newsreel Narrator:** The race is twenty-six miles, three-hundred-eighty-five yards from Hopkinton to Boston. This is normally an all-male contest.

**ZIRIN:** Most believed that women just couldn't handle the distance. But in 1967, a woman by the name of Kathy Switzer registered as K.V. Switzer and got into the race.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**Newsreel Narrator:** Race officials are somewhat jolted when a girl appears. Wearing number 261, she's listed in the program with letter 'K' for first name. Second name: Switzer.

**ZIRIN:** Fives miles into the race, one of the marathon directors actually jumped off a truck to forcibly remove Switzer from the course, yelling: "Get the hell out of my race!" But the men running with her fought him off. For them, Kathy Switzer had every right to be there. And for them, the Boston Marathon wasn't about proving male supremacy – pitting boys against girls. It was about people running a race.

When the pictures from the marathon were transmitted across the globe, the world saw two opposing models of masculinity: the violence and paranoia of the marathon director vs. the strength and solidarity of the other male runners. And at the center of it all, the resolute focus of Kathy Switzer. In that moment, sports bridged the gender divide and gave the world a glimpse into what was possible.

But maybe the most influential example of the fight for women's equality in American sports was embodied in the great Billie Jean King.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**Billie Jean King:** Some fellows have such a bad ego trip that it's not worth it. I have enough trouble beating the little old ladies.

**ZIRIN:** King is widely regarded today as one the greatest women athletes of all time. But she was also important because she was really the first athlete to put feminism right at the center of sports.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**Bobby Riggs:** Billie, you mean to say that you think I put women down? Is that what you're saying I'm doing all the time?

**Billie Jean King:** Yes, I do. I don't think you give us credit for having any brains at all or any logic. You know, that's fine because if that's where you're at, then that's okay, that's right on for you.

**Bobby Riggs:** Well, I get on very well with a lot of girls.

**ZIRIN:** When we think of politics and Billie Jean King today, what a lot of us remember is her famous battle of the sexes match against Bobby Riggs in the early 1970s.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**Bobby Riggs:** The male is king. The male is supreme. I've said it over and over again. I still feel that way. Girls play a nice game of tennis for girls.

**John Chancellor:** Bobby Riggs plays Mrs. Billie Jean King on a tennis court in Houston tonight. It's a match that's being billed as an epic battle of the sexes.

**ZIRIN:** In front of a sold out crowd at the Astrodome, she beat the retired tennis star Bobby Riggs in straight sets in what remains one of the most watched television programs in the history of sports.

**[VIDEO CLIP – ABC News]**

**Charlie Gibson:** To change the world, you had to win.

**Billie Jean King:** I had to win, you're absolutely correct, Charlie.

**ZIRIN:** And even though there's no doubting the importance of this event – and the fact that it was a moment of tremendous symbolism – Billie Jean King's contributions to women's equality far transcend that one match.

**[VIDEO CLIP – Fox Sports]**

**Billie Jean King:** I knew it was a platform. It was very important to me to win that match to try to get people to maybe have a little bit of a shift in their mindset that it's important to help girls and boys to be the best they can be.

**ZIRIN:** Tennis has always been a country club sport, but Billie Jean King came from a working class background and grew up playing on public courts. And when she finally got into the game, she fought for pay equity every step of the way. She was the first ever president of the first ever Women's Sports Union that organized women's tennis. And she was also the first prominent woman to ever be out of the closet.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**Barbara Walters:** Last Friday, facing what is certainly the most serious crisis of her career, thirty-seven-year-old Billie Jean admitted she had had a homosexual affair with her former aid Marilyn Barnett.

**ZIRIN:** The revelation had an immediate blowback – costing her a ton of prestige and money.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**John Chancellor:** Billie Jean's contract to make television ads for E.R. Squibb Company is not being renewed. The New York Daily News quotes a company official as saying she was "too strong a personality," that she was "overpowering the product." He denied that the company's decision had anything to do with Mrs. King's disclosure of a lesbian relationship.

**ZIRIN:** It would take her years to win back her credibility, but she was somebody who never shied away from who she was and what she believed.

The fact that these women refused to accept the restrictive gender roles assigned to them, and the fact that their refusal sparked such widespread resentment and backlash from panicked men is a crucial part of the history of sports and of this country.

The result has been the full-scale transformation of sports, so that today we see an explosion of women's participation, a transformation that wouldn't have been possible without the political struggle that led to Title IX.

**[VIDEO CLIP – NBC News]**

**Reporter:** It all goes back to Title IX. The 1972 law gave young women equal opportunity in education and sports.

**ZIRIN:** Before title IX, roughly 1 out of 35 girls played some form of sports. Today that number is 1 out of 3. This is amazing.

**[VIDEO CLIP – 2010 ESPY Awards]**

*Best Female Athlete montage*

**ZIRIN:** It's a reform that has literally changed the lives of tens of millions of women. But you wouldn't know that by looking at our sports media. According to a series of studies done by sociologists Michael Messner and Cheryl Cooky, the major networks have pretty much stopped covering women's sports altogether. Coverage of women's sports on TV news and highlights shows has nearly evaporated since 1989 – from a high of 9% of airtime devoted to women athletes in 1999 to an unbelievable 1.6% in 2009. Women's sports now get 5% less airtime than twenty years ago.

And as with so much else in sports culture, ESPN the magazine might as well be a men's locker room. In the last five years, female athletes have appeared on 6 ESPN covers. Six! That means that the covers were men-only 95% of the time.

And in 2001, the only women to appear on the cover of Sports Illustrated—and this is a weekly magazine now—were the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders from 1972. You’ve got to be kidding me!

**[VIDEO CLIP – Fox Sports]**

**Anchor:** The Best Damned Sports Show Period on FSN is brought to you by Hooters.

**ZIRIN:** The major networks are more likely to promote women as swimsuit models, cheerleaders, or props for a beer commercial than serious athletes.

**[VIDEO CLIP – Fox Sports]**

**Anchor:** A bikini fashion show in the snow, ladies. How was that?

**Hooters Girls:** Cold. Brrr. So cold. Cold, yeah. Chilly.

**Anchor:** What?

**Hooters Girl:** Chilly.

**ZIRIN:** This fixation on women’s bodies is no different from Playboy’s Women of the Olympics issue or NBC’s primetime coverage of women’s beach volleyball, a sport that just so happens to be played in tiny bikinis! On synthetic beaches!

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**Volleyball Player:** You know, we want to go down as one of those teams that no one ever forgets.

**ZIRIN:** Athletes are no longer the focus. They’re just another excuse to sell women’s bodies to male viewers.

**[VIDEO CLIP - ESPN]**

**Commercial Narrator:** June heats up on ESPN.

**ZIRIN:** And as it turns out, this gendering of athletic achievement presents a problem not just for women who play sports, but also for the men who don’t measure up to the sports culture’s masculine ideal.

**[VIDEO CLIP – The Sandlot]**

**Boys Fighting:** Watch it, jerk! Shut up, idiot! Moron! Scab eater! Butt sniffer! Puss licker! Fart smeller! You bob for apples in the toilet and you like it! You play ball like a girl!

**ZIRIN:** As any guy who’s spent any time at all in the jock universe will tell you, from childhood forward, two great fears keep boys and men in line. One is the nightmare of being called a girl.

**[VIDEO CLIP – Friday Night Lights]**

**Football Player:** What's wrong with you all? You're all playing like some little girls! You all act like you've never played football before!

**[VIDEO CLIP – NBC Sports]**

**Rodney Harrison:** Tom Brady, if you're listening, take off the skirt and put on some slacks. Toughen up.

**ZIRIN:** And beyond this kind of sexism, the second great fear that binds the 'jockocracy' together is homophobia.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**Greg Anthony:** Even though we may think it's not a big deal, in our society, the reality is that there is still a lot of homophobia that exists, and sports is as about a macho of an environment as we have to offer in American culture.

**ZIRIN:** Like sexism, homophobia is everywhere in sports. So you have someone like Jon Smoltz, future hall of fame pitcher, who compared gay marriage to bestiality by saying: "What's next? Marrying an animal?"

Or repeat offender Jeremy Shockey of the Saints, who said that he wouldn't stand for having a gay guy on his team because "they're going to be in the shower with us."

**[VIDEO CLIP – ESPN The Magazine Photo Shoot]**

**Jeremy Shockey:** It looks amazing.

**ZIRIN:** As with sexism, this kind of homophobia functions to maintain a certain ideal of normal manhood by dehumanizing other people. And in the process, it keeps gay athletes in the closet. So it shouldn't be any surprise that, to date, no active player in the big three men's sports – baseball, basketball, football – has dared admit he was gay. John Amaechi played for seven seasons in the National Basketball Association. Then, in 2007, he became the first former NBA player to come out of the closet.

**[VIDEO CLIP – The Colbert Report]**

**Stephen Colbert:** But if we end up being open and accepting of homosexuals in sports will we not then begin to become open and accepting of homosexuals in other walks of life? I mean I'm just saying it's a slippery slope.

**John Amaechi:** I'm hoping it's a very slippery slope, yes. I'm hoping so.

**ZIRIN:** By coming out, Amaechi joined the likes of baseball player Billy Bean and NFL offensive lineman Esera Tuaolo. But all these guys waited until retirement to



come out of the closet. Why is that? Well let's consider how former NBA All-Star Tim Hardaway responded to Amaechi's announcement.

**[AUDIO CLIP – Dan Le Batard Radio Show]**

**Tim Hardaway:** Oh! Well, you know, I hate gay people. I let it be known. I don't like gay people. I don't like to be around gay people. I'm homophobic. I don't like it. It shouldn't be in the world for that or in the United States for it. So yeah, I don't like it.

**ZIRIN:** The point, again, is that sports culture is shot through with political meaning and struggle, and unless we're content to stay quiet in the face of bullying, we should make it our goal to speak up and try to change things when sports culture reinforces backward political attitudes that hurt people for no good reason.

**[VIDEO CLIP – It Takes A Team]**

**Martina Navratilova:** I think it's important for everybody to be treated with respect. Gay, lesbian, straight, whatever.

**ZIRIN:** Martina Navratilova helped found It Takes A Team to fight homophobia in sports.

**[VIDEO CLIP – It Takes A Team]**

**Martina Navratilova:** If that person sinks a three-pointer with two seconds to go when we're down by two, I don't think you're going to care whether she's Jewish or black or gay or anything or Southern or whatever. You just want to make sure that she makes the shot.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**Scott Fujita:** Peyton, I eat Oreos faster than you. I can eat Oreos faster than you.

**ZIRIN:** Scott Fujita, the free-spirited defensive captain and starting linebacker for the 2010 Super Bowl Champion New Orleans Saints, is not only the kind of guy who's more likely to razz an opposing player like Peyton Manning for the cookies he endorses than he is to call him a girl...

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**Scott Fujita:** I told him the Oreo joke. I told him the Oreo joke. I don't think he liked it.

**ZIRIN:** He is also the kind of guy who has the guts to speak up for gay rights in a hostile environment where it's not an easy thing to do. I interviewed Scott on my radio show and asked him why a straight guy married to a woman, like him, was

willing to lend his public support to the National Equality March for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgendered Rights – even though he knew full well that a lot of frightened straight guys would theorize that he must be gay. And here’s what he had to say.

**[AUDIO CLIP – Edge Of Sports Radio Show]**

**Scott Fujita:** By and large, this country is past the point where the issue of gay rights and equality – it’s past the point of debate. You know, for me, in my small platform as a professional football player, I understand that my time in the spotlight is probably limited. So I think the more times you have to lend your name to the spotlight to a cause that you believe in, you should do that.

**ZIRIN:** The fight for equality starts just like that, with a few good people daring to stand up to the crowd to overcome injustice. And the history of sports is in many ways the history of this fight.

## **BREAKING THE COLOR BARRIER**

**[VIDEO CLIP - Nightline]**

**Ted Koppel:** And I guess what I’m really asking you is to peel it away a little bit. Just tell me, why do you think it is? Is there still that much prejudice in baseball today?

**Al Campanis:** No, I don’t believe it’s prejudice. I truly believe that they may not have some of the necessities to be a field manager or perhaps a general manager. Why are black men, or black people, not good swimmers? Because they don’t have the buoyancy.

**Koppel:** I gotta tell you, that sounds like the same kind of garbage we were hearing forty years ago about players.

**DAVE ZIRIN:** It turns out that not only male power, but white male power, was so embraced as the athletic norm that the credibility of black athletes was thrown into as much question as the athletic abilities of women and gays, and in precisely the same ways – beliefs in biological inferiority feeding a sense of athletic inferiority.

Back in 1910, an African American boxer named Jack Johnson sent white America into a panic. At the time, the accepted scientific truth in society was that African Americans lacked both the mental and even physical ability to succeed in sports. But then Johnson became the first African American heavyweight champion, and after that there was an outcry for a great white hope to defeat Johnson and restore order to the universe. But Johnson defeated this great white hope, the former champion Jim Jeffries, in front of a hostile all-white crowd of

22,000 people on July 4, Independence Day. African Americans took to the streets to celebrate his victory, drawing the wrath of angry white mobs.

**[TEXT ON SCREEN]**

**Newspaper Headline:** 19 Negroes and 5 Whites Killed

**ZIRIN:** For many, Jack Johnson was much more than just a boxer. As a powerful symbol of black masculinity, he represented a direct threat to white male power both inside and outside the ring. And his example would inspire other black athletes to fight for equality in ways that would reverberate beyond sports. Four decades later, that fight would reach a culmination of sorts with Jackie Robinson.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**Newsreel Narrator:** Jackie Robinson, a pioneer in spikes. He not only made good with the Dodgers, he made the national pastime national.

**ZIRIN:** When he joined the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947, Jackie Robinson became the first African American to play for a Major League Baseball team, literally changing the face of mainstream American sports.

**[VIDEO CLIP – The Jackie Robinson Story]**

**Commentator:** In baseball, it's not who or what you are, but can you play the game? And Jackie Robinson sure is playing.

**ZIRIN:** Like Jack Johnson before him, Robinson demonstrated great courage in the face of hostility from legions of white people who believed black athletes had no business playing alongside whites. But while over time, we've rightly paid tribute to this amazing display of courage and perseverance, and while today we continue to remember and honor and celebrate the fact that Jackie Robinson was a pioneer in the fight to integrate Major League Baseball, the harder edges of what he was all about were softened into sentiment from the start.

**[VIDEO CLIP – The Jackie Robinson Story]**

**Robinson's Mother:** You've got a chance for what?

**Jackie Robinson:** Oh, I can be the first Negro to ever play in organized baseball, Mom, if I'm good enough, if I can make the grade, only I'll be taking a big chance.

**ZIRIN:** It was a spin on history that was set in motion when Robinson, himself, appeared in a 1950 biopic about his achievements.

**[VIDEO CLIP – The Jackie Robinson Story]**

**Jackie Robinson:** I know that life in these United States can be mighty tough for people who are a little different from the majority. I'm not fooled because I've had a chance opened to very few Negro Americans, but I do know that democracy

works for those who are willing to fight for it.

**ZIRIN:** In history's telling, Jackie Robinson just smiled, worked hard, never complained, and eventually broke the color barrier.

**[VIDEO CLIP – The Jackie Robinson Story]**

**Branch Rickey:** Suppose I collide with you at second base, and when I get up I say: 'You dirty black so-and-so.' All I can see is your black face, that black face right over me. So I pull up and punch you right in the cheek. What do you do?

**Jackie Robinson:** Mr. Rickey, I've got two cheeks.

**Rickey:** Good.

**ZIRIN:** This was more than anything else an All-American tale, the story of a single heroic individual whose hard work and calm, turn-the-other cheek resilience in the face of injustice, far from posing any threat to American ideals, actually confirmed them.

**[VIDEO CLIP – Brotherhood Week]**

**Jackie Robinson:** That's the great thing about athletics, you learn to act democracy, not just talk it. It's what a man can do that counts, not his religion or his race or from what country his parents come. Fair play of this kind is wiping out what the communists are thinking and saying about us.

**ZIRIN:** The public liked this version of Jackie Robinson. It was unthreatening. It neatly defined his achievements within the frame of American values and patriotism. And it also conveniently concealed how, despite his singular achievements, the grossest forms of institutional racism, segregation, and inequality were still legal and acceptable and practiced across a broad cross-section of the country.

**[VIDEO CLIP – CBS News]**

**Ernie Harwell:** The KKK, the Ku Klux Klan, the Grand Wizard Dr. Green, called the Atlanta ball club and said if Jackie appears on the field, he'll be shot and killed.

**ZIRIN:** A nightmarish reality that would eventually knock the seemingly conservative Robinson off script.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**Anchor:** Jackie Robinson, who was an aid to Governor Rockefeller, and who has left the Republican Party as a protest against the Nixon/Agnew ticket was back campaigning today. Robinson has endorsed Vice President Humphrey and accompanied him today on a swing through Harlem.

**Jackie Robinson:** I think that the mood of the Negro delegates is such that they

could not, would not, and will not support the nominee.

**ZIRIN:** And just like that, the innocent image of Jackie Robinson began to get a lot more complicated.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**Martin Luther King, Jr.:** I'm tired of war and conflict in the world. I'm tired of shooting. I'm tired of hate. I'm tired of selfishness. I'm tired of evil!

**ZIRIN:** In the 1960s, no longer content to let his bat and glove alone do the talking for him, Robinson lent his explicit support to the civil rights movement, joining forces with the great civil rights leader, Martin Luther King. He said of Robinson, that he was “a sit-inner before sit-ins, a freedom rider before freedom rides.”

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**Jackie Robinson:** As a black man, I find it quite discouraging to look around and find how little has been done to lift minorities from the depths of poverty and despair.

**ZIRIN:** Robinson started to speak out about how racism persisted, despite his individual achievements.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**Jackie Robinson:** All these guys who were saying that we've got it made through athletics, it's just not so. You as an individual can make it, but I think we've got to concern ourselves with the masses of the people – not by what happens as an individual, so I merely tell these youngsters when I go out: certainly I've had opportunities that they haven't had, but because I've had these opportunities doesn't mean that I've forgotten.

**ZIRIN:** He wanted to shift the terms of the discussion away from individual achievement to structural barriers to individual achievement. And Robinson's explicit statement that his contributions to the integration of baseball should be viewed less as a cause for celebration and triumphalism, than as a reminder of unfinished business, is something we'd do well to remember today.

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? How might American sports culture have been different if black athletes had more power and independence from the start, rather than having to adapt themselves to the existing power structure in sports? And, in turn, how might our view of ourselves as Americans have been different if we'd grown up learning

about the triumph of black teams and organizations, rather than the triumph of Jackie Robinson alone?

## THE COURAGE OF ATHLETES

### [VIDEO CLIP]

**Interviewer:** Now when you were starting out as a writer, you were black, impoverished, homosexual – you must have said to yourself: Gee, how disadvantaged can I get?

**James Baldwin:** No, I thought I hit the jackpot.

**DAVE ZIRIN:** The great writer James Baldwin once said that America was a country that was devoted to the ‘death of the paradox.’ He meant that we pride ourselves on keeping things simple, straightforward, uncomplicated. We want our play to be play and our work to be work. And I think this is at the heart of why we have such a hard time thinking of politics as mixing with sports. But there’s just one problem with this whole notion that sports is somehow pure and should remain untouched by the world outside. It’s not even close to being true.

### [VIDEO CLIP – Gatorade Commercial]

**Commercial Narrator:** Gatorade. That’s G.

**ZIRIN:** For one thing, it misses how the supposed purity of sports has long since been defiled by commercialism.

### [VIDEO CLIP – Gatorade Commercial]

**Singing:** If you want a revolution, the only solution: evolve. You gotta evolve. If you want a revolution, the only solution: evolve. You gotta evolve.

**ZIRIN:** The outside influence of commercialism and media money on American sports is so powerful that it has turned political rebellion into a brand.

### [VIDEO CLIP – Nike Commercial]

**Singing:** You say you want a revolution.

**ZIRIN:** It seems only commercialism is capable of making sports safe for politics. More than anything else, I’d argue that it is corporate power, and fear of a backlash from sponsors, that drives the anti-political attitude we find in our sports culture and makes athletes afraid to rock the boat.

**[VIDEO CLIP – Mercedes Commercial] Commercial Narrator:** Introducing the Mercedes Benz SLS ANG.

**ZIRIN:** And how athletes negotiate this pressure tells a story about American power and politics all its own. Some cave, some stand up for what they believe regardless of the consequences, and some, like LeBron James, can't seem to make up their minds.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

*Lebron James Nike ad*

**DAVE ZIRIN:** LeBron James has the kind of galactic talent that holds the potential to redefine basketball.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**Commentator:** Oh, LeBron just crushed it!

**ZIRIN:** But he has also declared that he has aspirations beyond sports. James has said he has two goals in his life. One is to be quote: “a global icon like Muhammad Ali,” and the other is to be the richest athlete in the history of the world. And while these may be two great goals, they don't exactly go great together. And that's because guys like Muhammad Ali didn't become global icons because they were rich, but because they were willing to sacrifice everything – including sponsorship deals – to stand up for what they believed in.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**Muhammad Ali:** All of my boxing, all of my running around, all of my publicity, was just the start of my life. Now my life is starting – fighting injustice, fighting racism, fighting crime, fighting indecency, fighting poverty. Using this face that the world knows through fame and going out and representing truth and helping certain causes. Boxing is just the dressing room, and the stadium is the world problems. Boxing is just to introduce me to the world. They say life starts at 40, right? You ever heard that? I'm 39.

**ZIRIN:** Muhammad Ali remains a 'global icon' not because of what he earned but for what he sacrificed. He wanted more than just money, more than fame, more than boxing titles. He wanted to change the world. And to do that, we need to remember that he had to change his own thinking about fame and glory first.

When he was 18 years old and won the Olympic Gold in Rome, young Cassius Marcellus Clay Jr. said that his dream was to bring professional wrestling into boxing. And he pointed to a flamboyant pro wrestler by the name of Gorgeous George as his hero.

By the mid 1960s, he changed his name to Muhammad Ali and had become a far more dangerous man.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**Interviewer:** Why do you insist on being called Muhammad Ali now?

**Muhammad Ali:** That's the name given to me by my leader and teacher, the honorable Elijah Muhammad. That's my original name, that's a black man name. Cassius Clay was my slave name. I'm no longer a slave.

**ZIRIN:** By the 1960s, remember, you had two grand movements: the African-American freedom struggle and the anti-war movement. The two movements didn't always merge, but they did in Muhammad Ali.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**Muhammad Ali:** I am the king of the world! I'm pretty! I'm a bad man!

**ZIRIN:** Ali was still the consummate showman, but now his hero was Malcolm X.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**Malcolm X:** What is it revolting against? The power structure.

**ZIRIN:** In 1964, Ali joined the Nation of Islam, a group feared and hated by white America, and started speaking out against racism.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**Muhammad Ali:** They rape our women daily, policemen pull black people over and hit them across the head and unjustly try them in courts, and none of the good white folks can be found to help us.

**ZIRIN:** A couple years later, he would become one of the earliest and most outspoken high-profile Americans to come out against the Vietnam War, laying everything on the line by resisting the draft in 1966.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**Muhammad Ali:** In war, the intention is to kill, kill, kill, kill and continue killing innocent people!

**ZIRIN:** It was an act of conscientious objection that would not only cost him his championship belt but also get him sentenced to prison.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**Newsreel Narrator:** The heavyweight champion Cassius Clay, at a federal court in Houston, is found guilty of violating the U.S. selective service laws by refusing to be inducted. He is sentenced to five years in prison and fined \$10,000.

**ZIRIN:** The fact is that Muhammad Ali was more than an athlete: when he believed in something, he believed in standing up for it outside of the ring, and he



did it with the fearlessness of someone who understood he was part of a larger struggle.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**Muhammad Ali:** Floyd Patterson and other fighters, they just don't take part. They make a million dollars, they get them a Rolls-Royce, they get them a nice home, they get them a white wife. Well, I made it. America's great, and the rest of them catching hell and he won't say nothing. But when one man of popularity can let the world know the problem, he might lose a few dollars himself telling the truth. He might lose his life, but he's helping millions. I just love the freedom and the flesh and blood of my people more so than I do the money. You can take it sure and play it right in Washington and let Nixon hear it.

**ZIRIN:** Of course, this was all long before corporations would be at a safe enough distance from the anti-corporate energy of those years to turn true rebellion into a marketing pitch for sports drinks and sneakers.

**[VIDEO CLIP – Gatorade Commercial]**

**Singing:** If you want a revolution, the only solution: evolve. You gotta evolve. If you want a revolution, the only solution: evolve. You gotta evolve.

**ZIRIN:** And long before kids like LeBron went from wanting to be a great man like Muhammad to wanting to be a great pitchman like Mike.

**[VIDEO CLIP – Gatorade Commercial]**

**Singing:** I dream I move, I dream I groove, like Mike. If I could be like Mike!

**ZIRIN:** Today, the former Chicago Bulls superstar Michael Jordan runs a division of Nike, but during his playing days, he too often acted as though Nike ran him.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**Marv Albert:** They were dubbed 'The Dream Team,' the greatest collection of basketball talent ever assembled, and they were on a mission to return U.S. basketball back to its once golden past.

**ZIRIN:** In 1992, Jordan went to Barcelona with the U.S. Olympic basketball team—nicknamed 'The Dream Team.' They rolled to the gold in fantastic fashion, but as the medal ceremony approached, Jordan had a crisis of conscience. Notice how Jordan has an American flag over his shoulder? Well, this apparently heart-warming display of patriotism would turn out to be something else entirely: Jordan was using the flag to hide the Reebok logo on the team jersey.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**Marv Albert:** The United States players who have other affiliations and particularly with the Nike company have covered up the word Reebok with the American flag. Michael Jordan in particular draped in the American flag and that is not just solely for patriotic reasons.

**ZIRIN:** He was using an American flag to protect his brand – a form of subservience to corporate power that Michael Jordan modeled yet again when he refused to endorse Harvey Gantt, an African American Democrat, when he ran against Republican Senator Jesse Helms, an outspoken opponent of civil rights and a former segregationist, all because he didn't want to upset the domestic sneaker market.

**[VIDEO CLIP – Outside The Lines]**

**ESPN Reporter:** Some social observers say it was Michael Jordan who set the example for star athletes on being apolitical. In 1990, he famously declined a back of Democratic African American Senate candidate, in his home state of North Carolina, by responding 'Republicans buy sneakers too.'

**ZIRIN:** The bottom-line requires offending as few people as possible. So, if you want to make money, you better keep your mouth shut.

**[VIDEO CLIP – Space Jam]**

**Michael Jordan:** That's all folks.

**Porky the Pig:** That's my line.

**ZIRIN:** In many ways, these two great athletes represent the twin poles of the story of politics in American sports – Ali, on the one side, showing how greatness in the ring doesn't require sacrificing greatness outside of it.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**Muhammad Ali:** Am I really the greatest of all time?

**ZIRIN:** Jordan, on the other, ushering in a new age of corporate rule that loves to glorify the image of rebellion while stripping it of its substance so it doesn't get in the way of its bottom-line interests.

There is a tremendous irony in the way that Muhammad Ali has been embraced by society now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It says something, I think, very damning about this country that Ali has been embraced now that he has lost the power of speech.

**[VIDEO CLIP – Hope For Haiti Now Telethon]**

**Chris Rock:** It is a privilege to stand next to the greatest. After he saw the destruction in Haiti, he wrote down a few words and asked me to read them aloud.

**ZIRIN:** That’s something that really weighs on my mind a lot of the time because, to me, Muhammad Ali was a voice of resistance, and I think we miss that voice very much.

**[VIDEO CLIP]**

**Muhammad Ali:** I’ll never want to fight again if it means I’ll have to sell out or maybe Uncle Tom or be a compromiser, I would say. On those terms, never.

**ZIRIN:** LeBron James and others concerned about their legacies would do well to remember the side of history Ali was on. They would do well to remember how today’s play-it-safe commercial mindset conceals a longstanding counter-current that’s been there throughout the history of sports – embodied in athletes like Tommie Smith and John Carlos, who turned American sports culture on its head in the late 1960s.

**[VIDEO CLIP – 1968 Olympics]**

**Announcer:** It’s a good start, and Carlos as usual has burst out of the blocks. Tommie Smith running pretty well so far. And in lane two Bombuk is strong. On the outside it’s Edwin Roberts. It’s John Carlos right now. It’s Carlos and Smith! And here comes Tommie Smith! Smith has done it, his hands in the air!

**ZIRIN:** They won a gold and a bronze medal at the '68 Olympics, and what they did next couldn’t stand in starker contrast to today’s de-politicized, sanitized, and hyper-commercialized sports world. They didn’t pull a Jordan at the 1968 Olympics and use their platform on the global stage to protect an endorsement deal. No, these guys had a point to make. As they walked to the platform, they took off their shoes and carried them to protest poverty in America, they wore beads to protest lynching, and John Carlos even unzipped his jacket—a violation of Olympic protocol—to represent as he told me, his working buddies, black and white, back home in New York City. And in perhaps the most famous gesture in Olympic history, they raised their fists during the national anthem to show solidarity with the Civil Rights movement. Their symbolic gesture inspired millions around the world, but their punishment was swift and severe.

**[VIDEO CLIP – BBC News]**

**Anchor:** Good morning to you. The Olympic Games are one week old today, and yesterday, the sixth day, was the most dramatic so far. It started with the news that the black power disciples, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, the Olympic 200-

meters gold and bronze medalists, had been suspended by the United States Olympic Committee and given 48 hours to leave Mexico.

**Avery Brundage:** I had said that if there were any demonstrations at the Olympic Games by anyone, the participants would be sent home.

**ZIRIN:** Smith and Carlos were expelled from Olympic Village. Their athletic careers were ruined. For years, they received death threats and were treated like traitors to their country. They couldn't find good jobs. Their wives and children suffered.

**[VIDEO CLIP – BBC News]**

**Interviewer:** Do you think the Olympic Games is the right place to do this kind of thing? That you ought to use this as a kind of world-stage?

**Tommie Smith:** David, since we are athletes – I am a teacher, but I'm not a politician. We use this so the whole world could see the poverty of the black man in America.

**Interviewer:** At the same time, cynics might say that you've got it all. You've got publicity, you've got medals, you've got martyrdom as well. What would you say to that?

**John Carlos:** I can't eat that, and the kids around my block that grow up with me, they can't eat it, and the kids that are going to grow up after them. They can't eat publicity. They can't eat gold medals, as Tommie Smith said. All we ask for is equal chance to be a human being. And, as far as I see now, we are five steps below the ladder, and every time we try to touch the ladder, they put their foot on our hands. They don't want us to climb up.

**ZIRIN:** Moments like these are a crucial part of the history of American sports – part of a long legacy of struggle and courage in the face of injustice that has largely been forgotten as politics has come to be considered not only inappropriate in the arena of sports but actually antithetical to it.

We want so much to see sports solely as an arena of play – not seriousness – but here's the thing: this can cheapen not only the greatness and relevance of sports to us as a society but also the courage of athletes.

And we do an injustice to them, and to what's best about sports, when we sanitize the past and rip athletics out of the political and cultural context it has always been a part of. Keeping our mouth shut in the face of injustice may help us make fun of others, and silence them, and assure that we stay popular with the keepers of normality. But real courage means standing up when it's not popular. And real men and real women don't ask permission to raise their fists.

**[CREDITS]**

**JIM BROWN:** The thing is that, when you are a popular athlete, and you accept the money and the fame, and you become a front person for those who have the power, and they say 'be like this guy,' and kids that are coming up say, 'well, be like him, I won't protest against anything, I'll accept everything, I'll just try to be a great athlete and make a lot of money.' So a culture dies when you do that. You're doing a great injustice to young kids that are coming up, and I never wanted to be a representation of less than a man and have young kids coming up emulating me.

[end]