

Ohio State University Inspire Podcast

Athletes who lead the charge for civil rights

Sports have for decades been a platform for social activism. Today, athletes from the WNBA to college campuses are speaking out more than ever against the injustice they and others face.

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Robin Chenoweth: Sports are a microcosm of society — but also a grand or not so grand arena where joy, failure and perseverance play out for others to see. As such, sports provide a perfect platform for athletes to voice ideas and bring injustice to light. We, their fans, are a captive audience. But over the years, activism in sports hasn't just been frowned upon, it has been adamantly and forcibly opposed.

BBC Announcer: The Olympic 200 meters gold and bronze medalists had been suspended by the United States Olympic Committee and been given 48 hours to leave Mexico.

Ernie Johnson Jr.: In the aftermath of the LA riots, he delivered a letter to President George H.W. Bush detailing the problems plaguing the country. Hodges believes that moment of activism led to his never playing again in the NBA.

Donald Trump: Get that son of a bitch off the field, right now. Out. He's fired. He's fired!

Robin Chenoweth: But in the last several years, there seems to have been a shift. After a lull that lasted for decades, sports activism again found a voice — in presidential commendations given to athletes who spoke out against racial oppression in the 1960s. On social media, as whole teams donned hoodies to advocate for Black victims of gun violence. In public letters, denouncing a team co-owner who was running for the U.S. Senate.

Renee Montgomery: There was a letter written by all the players, signed by all the players, basically saying, like, No, we're not going for it. Like, Black lives do matter and we're not going for it.

Tiffany Hayes: People were getting behind us because they knew what was at stake for us. They know, like, we're making our voices heard and doing all this. And we're sacrificing so much. Like we're sacrificing... this is our job. This is our livelihood.

Robin Chenoweth: Lately, sports activism has taken on world leaders.

Lina Washington: Fans have seen Brittany Griner-inspired clothing popping up throughout the WNBA with entire teams coming to their games in these We Are BG shirts and hoodies.

Robin Chenoweth: Even college athletes, long barred from speaking out, have recognized the platform they stand upon. And they've used it.

Tyreke Smith: For far too long, Black Americans have suffered under systems of racism and oppression.

Marcus Williamson: This time, it's different.

Shaun Wade: This time, we've had enough.

Luke Farrell: As members of the Ohio State Football team

Justin Fields: We have a platform not only in central Ohio, but around the globe.

Tuf Borland: We stand in solidarity with the Black community

Master Teague III: And equal rights for all.

Robin Chenoweth: Experts who study activism in professional sports, and those who study the impacts of racism on college athletes, including Ohio State alumnus Joy Gaston Gayles, say overt and covert racism have been an inflection point for athletes to speak out.

Joy Gaston Gayles: You have this kind of moment, straw-that-broke-the-camel's-back moment where it's like I have to say something. I can no longer let this ride, because if you don't stand for something, you end up falling for everything, and anything.

Robin Chenoweth: In this episode of the Ohio State University of Inspire Podcast, as we commemorate the life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., we look at the role of sports in advancing civil rights in the United States. And how athletes have come to balance their lives on the playing field with the realities they live and see in the world outside of the sports arena. I'm Robin Chenoweth. Carol Delgrosso is our audio engineer. Meghan Beery is our student intern. Inspire is a production of the College of Education and Human Ecology.

Robin Chenoweth: If you think social activism in sports began when 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick took a knee during the national anthem, you may not know the rich history of civil rights advocacy in American sports. Kwame Agyemang is an associate professor of sport management at Ohio State who studies how Black sports professionals respond to injustice.

Kwame Agyemang: I'm really interested in how social actors, such as an athlete, or a working sport professional, or even an organization responds to unjust institutions and also their efforts to both tear down and create new and just ways of life and institutions.

Robin Chenoweth: So, how does race impact athletes in America?

Kwame Agyemang: Yeah, that's a loaded question, something that I've discussed and written about. I don't even think you can get that all in just one book. ... Donovan Mitchell who plays for the Cleveland Cavaliers, he was recently speaking about his experience, while playing for the Utah Jazz. ...He's talking about how playing in Cleveland has been much different because he sees people who look like him in the stands. ... The treatment that Black athletes are subjected to a lot of, of which white athletes don't have to encounter.

Robin Chenoweth: Did he feel it when he was on the court?

Kwame Agyemang: Yeah, he talks about that as interview. And it's not just him, there's a number of players who have talked about not only the jeering, or booing because that's, that's normal in sports. But it's the thing that the fans are saying to these athletes, you know, racial epithets are saying, personal things. ... And we've seen this a lot more in recent years with fans being removed from games because of the things that they have been saying to these athletes and about them.

Robin Chenoweth: In the AndScape interview, in fact, Donovan Mitchell said it was “draining” dealing with off-court issues, like fans’ response to his activism to stop the bullying of Black kids in Utah. He said: “It became a lot to have to deal with on a nightly basis. I got pulled over once. I got an attitude from a cop until I gave him my ID. And that forever made me wonder what happens to the young Black kid in Utah that doesn’t have that power to just be like, ‘This is who I am.’ And that was one of the things for me that I took to heart.” Much of that antagonism toward Mitchell came in the form of social media, which also has given athletes a broader platform to advocate for equity. But the pushback is anything but new. I asked Kwame Agyemang about this.

Robin Chenoweth: You do see more athletes being able to, to speak out. And I know it doesn't start with Colin Kaepernick. It goes much further back. So, can you give us a little bit of a history lesson on this?

Kwame Agyemang: I think it's good to point out Dr. Harry Edwards, who played an integral role in the 1968 Olympics and the protests that happened there with John Carlos, Tommie Smith and several others. He speaks about four different waves of activism.

Robin Chenoweth: The first wave came in the early 1900s through 1945. Jack Johnson, the first Black world heavyweight boxing champion. Paul Robeson, the first Black student at Rutgers University who took the football team to numerous victories. Of course, there’s Ohio State’s own track legend, Jesse Owens.

Kwame Agyemang: Back then, this was more so about pushing for recognition and legitimacy in, during that time, an openly racist society.

Robin Chenoweth: Wave 2. The mid 1940s to the mid-1960s, when tennis player Althea Gibson and others were pushing the limits of the integration of sports.

Tennis announcer: Into the net... there it is. A new national champion, Althea Gibson, a national champion of the United States, as she defeats Louise Brough, by a score of 6,3 and 6,2.

Kwame Agyemang: This wave is about more so breaking the barrier. You know, Jackie Robinson, well noted for breaking the color barrier when it comes to baseball.

Baseball announcer: Jackie Robinson steps in against Ford. Deep into left center, Irv Noren races after Robinson's blast. Jackie really teed off on Ford.

Robin Chenoweth: Wave 3, in the height of Civil Rights Movement. This is a turning point when sports figures are beginning to speak out about race issues that are not specifically sports related.

Kwame Agyemang: There's that iconic photo with Muhammad Ali, Jim Brown, Bill Russell Kareem Abdul Jabbar, then known as Lew Alcindor. And how they're supporting Muhammad Ali because of his protests against the Vietnam War.

Robin Chenoweth: John Singer received his PhD from Ohio State in sport management and is a faculty member at Texas A&M and an associate dean for diversity and inclusion. He says Harry Edwards' work, both as a scholar and an activist, was pivotal in this period.

John Singer: Dr. Harry Edwards was a sociologist who was a really an activist scholar during the Civil Rights Movement, who saw the need to really study issues around race, sport and the experiences of Black athletes. And, so, Dr. Edwards is considered a pioneer. He didn't do a lot of, I guess, what you call formal research where he collected data and wrote about the experience of Black athletes ... most of his, his writings and work was based more on his lived experiences and his organizing the Mexico City Olympics Boycott.

Robin Chenoweth: Edwards, a former scholar athlete from San Jose State, organized the Olympic Project for Human Rights, encouraging Black athletes to boycott the 1968 Summer Olympics. But U.S. runners Tommie Smith and John Carlos went to the games and placed first and third in the 200-meter race.

Announcer: It's Carlos and Smith. And here comes Tommie Smith! Smith has done it, with his hands in the air!

Robin Chenoweth: And then on the winners' podium, they engaged in silent protest.

ABC Newscaster: The United States leads the Olympics and metal awards and is just about supreme in the sprint races, thanks to men like Tommie Smith and John Carlos. Yesterday, they

came in first and third in the 200-meter dash, and then stood on the victory platform with bowed heads, wearing black socks and gloves in a racial protest.

Robin Chenoweth: Smith and Carlos raised gloved fists in protest of racism in America, and the poverty under which Black Americans were forced to live. The response was swift. The two were expelled from the Olympic Games and forced to leave Mexico. Kwame Agyemang.

Kwame Agyemang: But at those same Olympics, there was a gymnast from Czechoslovakia at the time, named Vera Caslavka. She also engaged in a silent protest, but she was not removed for the game.

Robin Chenoweth: Caslavka protested the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Russia.

Kwame Agyemang: She was not removed, but the two Black athletes were removed.

Robin Chenoweth: What followed in the 1970s, say Agyemang and Singer, was a period of stagnation in which Black athletes were nearly unwilling to engage in activism. John Singer.

John Singer: What many would describe as a dead period, where you had the commercialism of sport at an all-time high. Think back to some of those commercials with O.J. Simpson when he was running through the airport for Hertz. And you had the rise in athlete endorsements. That, in many ways, stunted and stymied the momentum we had from that Black Power Movement in the Civil Rights Movement, where you had in the third wave of activism this focus on power and respect. Where these Black athletes, we're demanding from the white establishment and the sport industry, you gonna give us our respect. ... What happened during that dead period — really starting probably in the 70s through the early 2000s — there was some activism. You have folks like Craig Hodges or the Chicago Bulls or Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, formerly known as Chris Jackson with the Denver Nuggets.

Robin Chenoweth: But Craig Hodges got let go, right?

John Singer: Oh, yeah, he suffered. And same with Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf But those types of individual levels of athlete activism were few and far between during this dormant period. ... A lot of these athletes just didn't really want to take the chance of messing up their money. The infamous quote by Michael Jordan, you know, "Republicans buy sneakers, too." Why would I speak out against some of the racism these Republicans and other politicians are engaged in at the systemic level and the more overt level, when, you know, they buy my product, too — my Air Jordans.

Robin Chenoweth: Jordan admitted this in 2020, saying the comment was made in jest, but that his apolitical stance was probably selfish. Kwame Agyemang.

Kwame Agyemang: In 2012, I actually wrote an article about Michael Jordan, and his impact on the lack of activism at that time. And there was this infamous commercial back in the early 90s, *Be Like Mike*.

Commercial song: Like Mike, if I could be like Mike. I want to be, I want to be like Mike. Like Mike. If I could be like Mike.

Kwame Agyemang: And I wrote that Black athletes at the time were being like Mike more so than just on the court, but in their disregard or not engaging in activism. And it was to the point that William Roden, who wrote a book called *The \$40 million Slave*, he said that Black athletes at the time had abdicated the responsibility to the Black community compared to what other previous generations had done.

Robin Chenoweth: John Singer.

John Singer: You think about the backlash, right? Or what people call the white lash against some of the progress that was made during the Civil Rights Movement. Right? I mean, many of the gains that were gotten, many of them were reversed, particularly in the 80s.

Robin Chenoweth: What do you think was the turning point? When did that all change and that dormant period stop?

John Singer: Edwards talks about how the fourth wave really began at the beginning of the 21st century, within that first decade. If you think about what was going on, we had the election of the first quote, unquote, Black president in Barack Obama; you had the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement, you had the introduction to social media. ... These Black athletes had a platform. You know, they didn't rely just solely on the mainstream media anymore to define self and the social causes they wanted to throw their platform and weight behind. And so I think, that coming together of all these different things, right societal issues, really contributed to the fourth wave of athlete activism.

Robin Chenoweth: Social media was a game-changer, for everyone. In 2012, LeBron James tweeted a photo of the Miami Heat wearing hoodies, bowing their heads in support of teenager Trayvon Martin, whose slaying became another inflection point for anti-racist activism. Kwame Agyemang.

Kwame Agyemang: From then, I would say, we started to see a lot more activism. And then we saw in 2014, with Eric Garner the "I can't breathe" T-shirts.

Robin Chenoweth: T-shirts worn by a host of players, from Kobe Bryant to the Georgetown University men's basketball team.

Kwame Agyemang: The St. Louis Rams, given what happened to Michael Brown, coming out into the field with their hands up.

USA Today reporter: Five Rams players entered the field displaying the hands-up, don't shoot pose. Tight end Jared Cook said they wanted to show their respect to the protestors in Ferguson and around the world.

Kwame Agyemang: We started to see a lot more activism.

Robin Chenoweth: There was blowback. Police unions condemned the Rams players' actions. But many in the media were beginning to acknowledge the civil rights violations that players were speaking out against. And then, in 2016, Colin Kaepernick took a knee at a San Francisco '49ers game.

Kwame Agyemang: He got a lot of criticism for kneeling during the national anthem. But we kneel in respect of a lot of different things.

Robin Chenoweth: I was going to ask how you interpret that? Because you kneel in church, a lot of different times before certain dignitaries.

Kwame Agyemang: Or even when somebody's injured in sports, they take a knee.

Robin Chenoweth: Why do you think that was just taken as such a disrespectful gesture?

Kwame Agyemang: I think at the end of the day ... it goes to people that didn't like what he was doing didn't really believe what he was saying was true. They don't believe in systemic racism. They don't believe Black people are more likely to get shot by the police. They don't believe that appraisers value Black homes, lesser than people from White homes. They don't believe all these different things. ... I think that goes to show that it wasn't really about the flag, it was really about what he was protesting.

Robin Chenoweth: But after George Floyd's murder by a Minneapolis police officer captured the world on social media, people began to believe. Kaepernick had been let go by the '49ers, but his protest now resonated. In 2020 the Milwaukee Bucks boycotted a game in protest of another police shooting.

Audie Cornish, NPR: The NBA has announced all three of tonight's scheduled playoff games have been postponed. They're following the lead of the Milwaukee Bucks. They were planning to boycott their game tonight against Orlando in protest of the police shooting of Jacob Blake in Wisconsin.

Robin Chenoweth: Now other players have taken up the mantle. The Women's National Basketball Association has been among the most vocal: Taking up voting rights, equity for LGBTQ persons and stricter gun laws.

Nneka Ogwumike: We live in that intersect. As women in sport, and of course a league of over 80% women of color, you know, it's just, it's just a part of who we are. ... You know, social justice was front and center. And we knew that we had to use our platform the best way that we could to make a difference in our communities and hopefully, bring light to awareness and causes that are important to us, and our fans.

Robin Chenoweth: College students, looking to their counterparts in professional sports, are also speaking up. Ohio State football coach Ryan Day joined his players in advocating for change on a video after Floyd's murder.

Ohio State athlete Josh Myers: We will no longer stand silent as these issues continue to plague our friends, citizens, neighbors and teammates.

Robin Chenoweth: Ohio State alumnus Joy Gaston Gayles is a professor of higher education at North Carolina State University. Her scholarship includes equity and inclusion as it relates to college athletics.

Joy Gaston Gayles: Part of what happened in that moment was that people felt the need to do something. And so, I think students have always tried to organize themselves. Student athletes, it looks a little different because when they come in, sometimes they sign their rights away, so that they are not doing things on social media that they might otherwise do. But, you couldn't do that in that moment. Because to try to silence anybody — student athletes, anybody for that matter — during that time would ... I don't think is ever the right thing to do. But it definitely wasn't the right thing to do in that moment.

Robin Chenoweth: Even high school athletes have begun to defend civil rights, looking to help others who will follow them.

Joy Gaston Gayles: The wrestler who had to cut his hair, because there was some rule that he couldn't participate because his hair was too long, I think he had dreadlocks. And so those kinds of cases, um in which, I couldn't speak out in the moment, but later, when I got myself together, like what just happened? And other people are speaking out on behalf of athletes when they are mistreated because of, views, preferences, that they have that don't align with whatever rules are a part of athletic associations.

Robin Chenoweth: The New Jersey ref was suspended and new rules were approved that forbid race discrimination based on hair style. And then there's the case of Noor Alexandria Abukaram, a fashion retail studies student at Ohio State. In 2019, while she was running cross country in Toledo, the Muslim high school student found out that she had been disqualified from running a race.

Noor Alexandria Abukaram: When my teammates told me that I was disqualified, I asked, for what? ... You have that split second before they answered. I literally, I laughed. I was like, for

what? And I thought it was for my bracelet because I always wear a bracelet. I was like, I should have taken it off. And they're like, no, Noor. It's not your bracelet. It's because of your hijab.

Robin Chenoweth: What thoughts were going through your head?

Noor Alexandria Abukarum: I was the only Muslim girl so I didn't have anything in common with them, except for cross country. And it was just really humiliating, because it was like that thing was taken away from me, from me having that connection to my teammates. It's so important, especially for like a young girl to have these teammates. So, at the moment, I was definitely just really embarrassed.

Robin Chenoweth: Joy Gaston Gayles

Joy Gaston Gayles: We know that we have a multicultural society. Yet, we still have policies and practices that prevent people from honoring themselves and their values. And it doesn't really make sense as to why. And so is it for safety? I think you can run safely with the hijab. You know, it seems to be more exclusionary than anything else.

Robin Chenoweth: Abukarum fought the Ohio High School Athletic Association's rule that barred anyone from wearing a head covering, even for religious purposes, without a waiver. She started an initiative, Let Noor Run.

Noor Alexandria Abukarum: Fighting discrimination and injustice and doing what we love. And that really, at first, it started off with centering around shedding light on discrimination in sport, and just showing that it's not something that just happened to me in Toledo, Ohio, but it happens some with Muslim women and a lot of people all around the world just for things like the hijab, natural hair ... there's so many different factors. ... February 2022, we passed an Ohio law prohibiting organizations from implementing discriminatory policies on the basis of religion. And since then, two other states have also passed a similar law. So right now, we're working on is just like inclusivity in sport and access.

Noor Alexandria Abukarum: It was really important to me to not just tell my story, but also make sure that there's change so that I can not only tell my story, but reassure that I'm doing all the work to make sure that it doesn't happen to others. And I think that's where that kind of came from and then also being an older sister, having a younger sister. If I'm an activist for anybody, it's for her, because I would never want to see her go through what I've been through.

Robin Chenoweth: Isn't that what activism is all about?

The College of Education and Human Ecology will host an MLK Commemorative Event on Jan. 24, about the role of sports in advancing civil rights. Ohio State alumnus and NFL player Malcolm Jenkins and others will discuss the issue. A screening of *Behind the Shield, The Power and Politics of the NFL*, will follow, with a discussion by filmmaker Dave Zirin and Associate Professor Kwame Agyemang. See the college's events calendar at ehe.osu.edu for details.

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