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What Happened to the Revolt Black Athlete?

A Look Back Thirty Years Later

An Interview with Harry Edwards

by David Leonard

Harry Edwards was the main organizer of the 1968 Revolt of the Black Athlete which led to the famous Black Power salutes by Tommie Smith and John Carlos on the victory podium at the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City. He is now professor of sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, and a consultant to various professional and collegiate sports organizations and to the media.

David Leonard of the ColorLines editorial staff interviewed Dr. Edwards on January 26, 1998, at his Berkeley office.



ColorLines: What activities led to your involvement in the 1968 Olympic protest?

Harry Edwards: The 1968 Olympic protest was something that I originated. It grew out of the circumstances of blacks in sports during the 1960s. I had been a student-athlete at San Jose State and graduated from there with honors in 1964. I had won a Woodrow Wilson fellowship, and chose graduate school over tryouts with the San Diego Chargers or the Minnesota Vikings. I earned my masters degree at Cornell University and then took a part-time teaching job back at San Jose State.

All of the race-related problems that were at San Jose State when I was a student-athlete were by now exacerbated. The segregation was awful. You couldn't live in approved housing if you were black because they were afraid white students would move out. There were restaurants we couldn't eat in. Blacks didn't have access to the recreation hall on campus. If you went to a dance, you almost always danced with white women because there were virtually no black women on campus. But the minute you did that you could be in big trouble. I knew athletes who believed their scholarships were taken, who were kicked off campus, because they were accused of dating a white woman.

Blacks faced academic inequities. If blacks wanted to major in something outside of social welfare, physical education or criminology, they had to go through all kinds of changes. In order to major in sociology, I had to petition. The basic wisdom was that blacks were natural athletes so we could cut it in physical education. Blacks could study social welfare or criminology, because we were always going to be criminals and welfare recipients. But we weren't allowed the same freedom to enroll in sociology, a more academically challenging and less "applied" field.

Black athletes were not graduating. There were about 70 blacks on campus, out of 22,000 students, and 60 or so were athletes, or former athletes trying to finish their degrees. I think I was the first athlete since 1951 to graduate within the period of his athletic eligibility.

So when I came back as an instructor all of those problems had escalated. They had begun to bring more blacks on campus as a consequence of the 1966 NCAA championship game where the University of Texas El Paso started five black players and beat the storied, lily-white University of Kentucky team. The Black Power movement had gotten underway. Anyway, when I came back I went to the president of the University to talk about the problems blacks faced. He sent me to each dean or vice president who was in charge of a specific area which I had raised a concern about. The president literally sent me to the vice president in charge of housing, to the dean in charge of academics, etc. They literally laughed in my face -- they took my concerns as a joke.

At that point I began to organize the athletes. We got mobilized and were able to get a football game canceled when blacks on both teams threatened to boycott. Then Governor Reagan promised to call out the National Guard to assure the game was not disrupted. Time and Newsweek picked up the story because it was the first time in 100 years of

NCAA Division I history that a football game had been canceled because of campus protest.

We began to get letters from athletes all over the country. So I began traveling around the country and organizing what came to be known as the Revolt of the Black Athlete. By traveling we found out that those black athletes who were being shafted on the campuses, were the same athletes the nation depended on as part of its Olympic contingent. These black athletes could participate in the N.Y. Athletic Club's indoor track meet at Madison Square Garden, but weren't allowed to join the Club or be housed there with their white peers. So it was not a huge jump from the Revolt of the Black Athlete on college campuses to the Olympic Project for Human Rights. Many of the people at the higher echelons of the NCAA were also connected to the United States Olympic Committee. It was all one sports hierarchy. We were battling one beast that had several heads. That was essentially the evolution of the Olympic Project for Human Rights.

CL: What was the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR) about, in terms of tactics, goals, ideologies?

HE: The Project was not just about athletic goals. We recognized that the black athlete was inextricably embedded in and reflective of the community circumstances from which these athletes emerged. We felt we had to speak not just about the predicament of athletes, but to the interests of their communities. To simply speak to athletes' interests would not only have been short-sighted, but self-serving. We had to understand the broader context and configuration of the black struggle for freedom and justice.

This enabled us to link up with the broader civil rights movement. Up until that time everybody saw sport as the citadel of brotherhood and harmony and understanding, where what counted was not the color of your skin or previous condition of servitude, but only how well you played the game -- that it was a level playing field. Well, we demonstrated that the slant of the playing field in sport was the same as in the broader society. Therefore, whether in sports or elsewhere, the struggle for freedom was one struggle. This enabled us to join up in a very strategic fashion, not just spiritually, not just sympathetically, with the broader civil rights movement. So, our goals were not limited to things like more black coaches, more equitable treatment, but were part of the whole movement.

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We wanted to establish an organic link with the struggle of Dr. King, the struggle of Malcolm X, the struggle of SNCC, the struggle of CORE, the struggle of the Panthers. What we were fighting for in athletics was part and parcel of the same struggle. We were simply struggling in the athletic theater. We wanted to make that clear from the Olympic podium. Predictably, the media only focused on the raised fists, but the whole pose -- the

bowed head, the shoelessness, and so forth -- was meant by Tommie and John to be a powerful statement about the poor conditions of black people as a whole in this country.

CL: How did the protest of John Carlos and Tommie Smith come about within the larger context of OPHR activities?

HE: I knew all those guys because they were students at San Jose State during the time that I taught there. They were basically the core athletes in this situation. These were guys that would go out and run world record times on the track and then, with the cameras flashing and microphones in front of their face, they would leave, not for a party, but to drive up to East Palo Alto or Oakland, and participate in a march against police brutality. Tommie and John were deeply involved in the civil rights movement long before the Olympic demonstrations. They were involved in helping to organize the Black Student Union and the Black Studies program at San Jose State long before the Olympic Project for Human Rights. They were not simply athletes, but deeply involved individuals committed to the struggle for human rights in America.

CL: What was the response of the athletes to the initial calls for a boycott and the OPHR?

HE: The only way that there would have been a complete boycott was if the Olympics would have been held, literally, the day after Martin Luther King was assassinated. When people have time to take a deep breath and think, they tend to put their own individual aspirations first, as opposed to what politically and emotionally they may feel at a heated moment.

So we determined quite early that not all black athletes were going to agree with our analysis of the problems in sports or the society, and most certainly not our solutions and approaches to dealing with the problems. Therefore we had two choices: we could condemn everybody that didn't agree with us. Or we could say, okay, let us continue to propagandize and politicize the problem, and then everybody can make up their own minds about what they think is a conscionable response.

Not surprisingly, most black athletes did nothing. Some wore arm bands or OPHR buttons to indicate their agreement with us. Then there was a small minority that completely boycotted the games -- people like Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Lucius Allen, Mike Warren and a few others. And there was an even smaller number that demonstrated once they got to the games: Tommie Smith, John Carlos and the relay team of Lee Evans, Ron Freeman, Larry James and Vince Matthews. Everybody did what they felt was conscionable.

CL: What was the decision-making process like?

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HE: We talked a lot. I visited universities all over the country. I met with student groups. Everywhere we went we engaged in conversation. Here is what we are thinking, what do you think? We used the same methods that SNCC had used throughout the late 1950s and '60s. Education and political propagandizing were the methods of both the Revolt of the Black Athlete college movement and the Olympic Project for Human Rights. It wasn't a thing of intimidation and threats. The media tried to play it like that, but that was not our tactic. We were all in the same boat, which is why the movement spread so fast.

CL: Why were the Olympics such an important site for the protest?

HE: It was an international stage. In the early 1960s, Malcolm X stated that we must move beyond civil rights, which made us depend on the political machinery of the United States, and begin to talk about human rights, which made our struggle of international significance. He argued that we had to see our circumstances as part of a broader system of inalienable rights that extended beyond the rights accrued through citizenship. This meant that we had to move beyond appeal to the U.S. court system, the Congress and so forth, to the world stage. There are certain inalienable human rights which the United Nations and the rest of the world recognize as legitimate, but which are violated in the U.S. That was what made us think of the Olympic Games.

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The Olympic stage was second only to the United Nations as an international political forum. The Olympics was the only international/political stage that grassroots blacks had access to. The Olympics were about politics: which nation would prevail, which nation would demonstrate social, political, economic, and physical superiority through the performance of its athletes. Athletes had become soldiers in a global struggle between East and West. That is why the Olympic podium became so important as a forum for political issues.

CL: What were some of the failures of the OPHR?

HE: Some of our greatest supporters -- the Harvard University crew team, Hal and Olga Connolly, Bill Toomey -- were white. Even with the tremendous Black Power thrust of the movement, and its emphasis on black culture, I should have made a greater effort to publicly enunciate and embrace that interracial relationship. Even though the media didn't want to hear it, and they didn't because they wanted to paint it as a wild, militant Black Power thing, I should have put greater emphasis on the interracial dimensions of what we were trying to accomplish. We probably would have lost some people on the black side, but I think the long term validity, clarity and honesty about what actually happened, and who was actually with us in this effort, would have been enhanced. It would have simply been more valid.

We also didn't do the job we should have done in terms of women. Even with all of those black women athletes in the Olympics, we never really approached them. In today's language that means we were sexist, an indictment that could be extended to the whole civil rights movement.

CL: Were you or other organizers aware of the protests of Mexican students and the response of their government?

HE: Oh yeah! We had contacted them to let them know we understood the challenges they were confronted with and that we were fighting a similar battle on this side of the border. We understood what they were saying in terms of the immense amount of money and energy that was being expended on the Olympics by the Mexican government while people were literally living and sleeping in the streets of Mexico City. These very progressive students were systematically murdered by their government. We were also very active in the international effort to ban South Africa and Southern Rhodesia from the Olympic movement.

These were guys that would go out and run world record times on the track and then, they would leave, not for a party, but to drive up to East Palo Alto or Oakland, and participate in a march against police brutality.

CL: Where does the black athlete stand today, in terms of legacy of the 1968 Olympic protest for Human Rights?

HE: Everything moves on. Nothing stands still. The athletes who stood up thought of themselves as human beings. I am not just an athlete, I am a man. The movement started to run out of energy. Once there were concessions, once black athletes were making more money, playing more positions, and getting more recognition than ever, the force and direction of the movement dissipated. By our own success things have been granted and cleavages in the black community have been opened up. The black middle class is clearly now very different than the black underclass. Athletes no longer really talk about black athletic solidarity because there is not a lot of difference between the circumstances of black athletes and white athletes in the sports we have major access to, except that there may be more of us, and maybe we make more money. So the focus on black athletes as a group has dissipated.

So, ironically, the outcome of the actions of Muhammad Ali, Tommie Smith, John Carlos, Jim Brown, Curt Flood, Bill Russell, Spencer Haywood and others who paved the way is Dennis Rodman, Deion Sanders, and so forth. There are a whole bunch of athletes whose focus is on ME, and I am so militantly about me, that there are no rules that I need recognize. Whatever serves to promote me is legitimate. So you have guys who are not demonstrating and raising a fist at a podium in deference to a greater cause, but doing anything to draw attention to themselves as individuals.

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Today's black athlete is very different. Their identity is different -- they live in a rich, largely white world, a world where black individuality is tolerated so long as it is without reference to the black community. If you asked them about the history of the black athlete, many couldn't tell you much. They don't find that history relevant to their world. Some even get angry when you ask them about it. One up-and-coming NBA star was asked about Oscar Robertson and he said, "Don't know, don't care, and don't take me there." They don't care about whose shoulders they stand on. They have no idea about who set the table at which they are feasting. And the worse part about it is not that they are ignorant of this history, but they are militantly ignorant. The sad part about it is that when people forget how things came about, they are almost certainly doomed to see them go. And I think that is where this generation of black athletes may be headed in sports.

CL: What does 1968 mean to you?

HE: It was a watershed year in a lot of ways. It was a year when we had some tremendously gifted athletes, some great athletes, who not only had great ability, but the intellectual acuity to understand a complicated problem, a problem that was nested in all of the rhetoric, the fame, the glory, and so forth, of the world of elite athletics. But beneath the veneer of fame, fortune and glory they saw the ubiquitous reality of black inequality in America. They had the intellectual acuity to cut through that, to understand the interface of race, sports and society. They also had the political courage, which is even more astounding. They not only understood the situation of blacks and spoke heroically about it, militantly about it, but acted uncompromisingly, based upon their conscience and convictions. To find people with world-class athletic ability, with the ability to think, and with the political courage and commitment to act, is extremely rare.

There was, for God knows what reason, a generation of great athletes who came of age in a unique historical era around 1968 -- Muhammad Ali, Curt Flood, Spencer Haywood, Smith and Carlos, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Mike Warren, Lucius Allen, the Harvard University Crew team, Jim Brown, and Bill Russell. To have such a collection of people come of age and speak out, and literally change the dynamics of an institution, to take up the struggle that was pioneered by Jackie Robinson, Joe Louis, and Jesse Owens, and elevate that struggle from a fight for access to a battle for respect and dignity and human rights -- that was historic. That is what 1968 means to me as I look back on it. I was fortunate enough to have experienced it, to have been part of it, to know all of these people. I will always look back on this period as one of the greatest moments in my life and a watershed in the history of modern sports throughout the world. ■

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[top of page](#)

[Summer 98 Issue](#) | [ColorLines Home](#) | [ARC Home](#)

