

Review of The Kaepernick Effect: Taking a Knee, Changing the World

Prominent athletes have often taken a public and activist stance on the major social and political issues of the day. In one of the most iconic examples — just months after the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy — Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their black-gloved fists during the U.S. national anthem at the Mexico City Olympics to protest the suffering of Black Americans. The photo of the two on the podium after dominating the 200-meter race is perhaps one of the most indelible images of the 1960s. But the history of athlete activism didn't begin with Smith and Carlos — and it certainly didn't end there.

Just a year earlier the dominant running back in pro football, Jim Brown, along with basketball stars Bill Russell and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (then known as Lew Alcindor), staged a widely watched event in Cleveland to build public support for Muhammad Ali, the young heavyweight boxer who refused to be inducted into the U.S. Army. Ali went on to become perhaps one of the most famous and outspoken advocates for civil rights in the world.

As ESPN's Steve Wulf pointed out in a [2019 overview](#) of activism, athletes have been speaking out and protesting for a long time. In 532 A.D., when chariot racers in Constantinople protested to emperor Justinian to pardon two of their followers, it led to six weeks of rioting and resulted in the death of 30,000 people. Another notable protest prior to the modern era was by the first professional Black baseball player, Moses Fleetwood Walker, after prominent and racist leaders of the sport enacted a rule in the 1880s barring black players. That barrier, erected two decades after the Civil War, theoretically ended slavery and would stand for almost 70 years.

Jesse Owens' historic gold-medal-winning performances at Hitler's 1936 Berlin Olympics, Jackie Robinson breaking the color barrier in baseball in 1947 and, Curt Flood's challenge of baseball's reserve clause in the early 1970s all embodied a similar style of protest against the status quo; all those events later became broader symbols of civil rights and equality. In more recent times, athlete protests against other inequitable or discriminatory practices have virtually exploded—not only regarding issues of race but also gender equality, sexual orientation, authoritarian governments, and police brutality.

Sportswriter Dave Zirin has analyzed these latest athlete protests in his new book, [The Kaepernick Effect: Taking a Knee, Changing the World](#). An author, journalist, and podcaster, Zirin has written widely about the intersection of sports, politics, and modern culture. He is the sports columnist for two magazines probably least likely to even *have* a sports columnist (the hard-left-leaning political publications *The Nation* and *The Progressive*) and has been called the “conscience of American sportswriting” by the *Washington Post*.

Zirin's backdrop is former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick, who famously refused to stand for the national anthem in a preseason game on August 26, 2016, saying: “I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses Black people and people of color.” Kaepernick taking a knee, the controversy that followed and the price he ultimately paid (and is still paying) emboldened athletes, at all levels, across the country to stand up against injustice and discrimination more actively.

Zirin crystallizes the juxtaposition between two recent and enduring images. “The first was Kaepernick. Then there was Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on the neck of George Floyd, choking him to death. For many, it was a horrific inversion of Colin Kaepernick's peaceful protest against police violence, trying to start a conversation that clearly had not been heard.”

Kaepernick's actions in 2016 generated a storm of social criticism and controversy, which Zirin says "provoked something deep, ugly and primordial in the American conscience." Presidential candidate Donald Trump suggested that Kaepernick should find a different country to live in; he received countless death threats; and, although he had a successful season, he was effectively and quickly exiled from professional football. As Zirin puts it: "The athletic industrial complex, including their allies in the media, immediately went into motion to ensure that Kaepernick would become a cautionary tale." Kaepernick's message was not one that the NFL wanted to endorse.

It wasn't just right-wingers blasting Kaepernick; criticism also came from various liberal corners of the media echo chamber with the common sentiment, characterized by NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell, essentially being: "We support your goals, but not your methods." *New York Times* columnist David Brooks echoed that sentiment, as did other, more liberal outlets.

But that reluctance in the media didn't stop countless athletes across the spectrum from taking up Kaepernick's cause to make their own statements – and those actions form the basis of Zirin's book. He chronicles (sometimes in almost repetitive detail) how Kaepernick's actions catalyzed a whole new generation of athletes to action. Zirin captures stories of little-known high school and collegiate athletes across the country who took a stand, as well as top professional and Olympic athletes who have elected to stand up for what they believe – even when it placed their reputations and careers in danger. Among the pro athletes, Zirin discusses are three-time world hammer-throw champion Gwen Berry; Kaepernick's teammate Eric Reid; and soccer superstar Megan Rapinoe. Each expressed what the events of the past year have meant to them, and how they have responded.

All of this comes at a time when there is a robust debate and controversy within the Olympic movement about enforcing [controls on athlete protest](#). With the Tokyo Games opening later this month, American and international Olympic officials are at odds about where to draw the line as more and more athletes utilize their platforms to promote issues of political and social justice. The constraints on athletes' ability to voice their opinions have gradually lessened over the years but the IOC remains staunchly opposed to even subtle demonstrations on the actual podium and hasn't ruled out punishment — stripping of medals or banishment from the Games — for athletes that decide to challenge that apparent red line.

As might be expected, there are no references in Zirin's book to endurance sports like cycling or triathlon. Most of the stories recounted in this book all took places miles away from endurance sports, in sports that are far more diverse. Indeed, it's hard to think of many professional sports as "non-diverse" as cycling or triathlon; as a result, these searing issues of equality and justice don't get much airtime. At the peak of the protest movement last year, and while other sports like basketball and baseball engaged in major protests, [even boycotting post-season games](#), pro cyclists could only stage a [half-hearted effort](#) to show solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. During one stage of the pandemic-delayed Tour de France, ASO suggested that Kevin Reza, the only Black rider starting the race, line up alongside the yellow jersey at the front of the race for a few minutes.

The dedicated athletes described in Zirin's book might be forgiven for cringing at the comments of the now-retired bike racer Tejay van Garderen, who summed up the general response of the professional peloton: "We're going to use the COVID-19 face coverings with the hashtag 'no to racism' written across, so when we go to sign-on or give interviews, everyone can see plain as day that we as cyclists are against racism."

And unfortunately, it's not just a lack of urgency or a generally ho-hum attitude toward these issues in cycling. Outright racial insensitivity and controversy surfaced last fall when multiple world champion Chloe Dygert "liked" and seemingly endorsed several racist and transphobic tweets, one directly criticizing Kaepernick. It took weeks for her team and key sponsors to publicly denounce her behavior. Later, Trek-Segafredo team rookie Quinn Simmons was suspended for tweets described by the team as "divisive,

incendiary and detrimental to the team.”

In a [commentary last fall in *Bicycling magazine*](#), Bucknell University Professor P. Khalil Saucier weighed the situation and the uncomfortable truth of white privilege in cycling. Saucier characterized the problem as being more systemic than individual in nature. He wrote: “Cycling must reject interventions that continue to individualize anti-Black racism, and work to break down the structures that allow whiteness to retain power in the sport. Anti-racist efforts within cycling must move beyond the trite euphemisms of inclusion, diversity, sensitivity, and allyship, and begin to seriously consider the dimensions of power at play. Yes, control of cycling resources is important, as are safe spaces to ride one’s bike, but the power of whiteness within cycling remains unsullied.”

Cycling, along with most other elite endurance sports, may seem worlds away from the powerful individual statements and intensity of protests discussed in *The Kaepernick Effect*. Yet at the same time, and in the absence of concerted efforts to address inequalities in our sport’s organizational structures, some of our athletes have very visible platforms from which to spark change. Zirin’s book persuasively reminds us that sports reflect society and that elite athletes have a powerful platform. They have the influence to not only bring controversial issues into the national or global conversation but also to work for change and to begin to correct some of the systemic social injustices that afflict our sports and our world.

Written by Steve Maxwell, July 14th, 2021