

## **“Pre-Game”** by Dave Zirin

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*“Pre-Game” is drawn from Zirin’s 2013 book Game Over: How Politics Has Turned the Sports World Upside Down. As you read, keep that subtitle in mind, in particular the historical narrative it implies—that things are changing in sports—and watch for how that narrative appears in the essay.*

In March 2012, the Miami Heat chose to put down their basketballs and put on their hoodies. As a team, they stood shoulder to shoulder and did what we are told athletes no longer do: made a conscious political stand for justice. The entire Heat roster—from stars LeBron James, Dwyane Wade, and Chris Bosh to South Dakota’s Mike Miller to the nearly forty-year-old reserve Juwan Howard—stood as one for seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin, who had been recently killed by armed self-appointed “neighborhood watch leader” George Zimmerman. While Martin’s killer had a nine-millimeter, the teenager had nothing but a pack of Skittles and a can of Arizona iced tea in his pocket. Trayvon was wearing a hoodie when he died, which some pundits in their infinite wisdom believed made him “suspicious” and worthy of being pursued.

Of all the teams in the league, the Heat were the most shocking yet also most appropriate to step up and be heard. It was shocking because the Heat are often painted as being a collection of prima donnas as allegedly superficial as the town they call home. It was also appropriate because this was Trayvon’s favorite team, and he was killed after leaving his house during halftime of the NBA All-Star Game, where he was watching James and Wade perform.

Given the outrage over Trayvon Martin’s death, particularly in southern Florida, the Heat’s powerful gesture hardly came out of the blue. What may be surprising for many fans is that “the King” himself, LeBron James, drove the effort. The March 2012 team photo was reportedly James’s idea and was first posed to his personal Twitter account with the hashtag #WeWantJustice.

James later said, “It was very emotional, an emotional day for all of us. Taking that picture, we’re happy that we’re able to shed light on the situation that we feel is unjust.” His teammate Wade commented to the Associated Press, “This situation hit home of me because last Christmas, all my oldest son wanted as a gift was hoodies. So when I heard about this a week ago, I thought of my sons. I’m speaking up because I feel it’s necessary that we get past the stereotype of young, black men.”

Since he was a teenager, “King James” has been pegged as potentially the greatest basketball player alive. He’s a Fortune 500 company with legs and, thus far, has a carefully crafted apolitical image. He is also someone who was raised by a single mother in Akron, Ohio, at times so poor that they were living in a car. He has everything, as well as memories of having had nothing. Perhaps this is why he once said that his dream is to be “a global icon like Muhammed Ali.” We’ve rarely seen evidence of his efforts to achieve this dream, but the hoodie photo could be a result of the Ali in him straining to be heard.

At the Heat’s home game the following Friday night, James and several of his teammates took the floor with messages such as “RIP Trayvon Martin” and “We want justice” scrawled on their sneakers. Their actions inspired others across the NBA. Players spanning the gamut—from stars, like Steve Nash and Carmelo Anthony, to less famous jocks, such as Will Bynum and Brandon Knight—spoke out to raise awareness. Anthony, the high-profile star of the New York Knicks, changed his Twitter picture to show him in a hoodie with “I am Trayvon Martin” superimposed over his body.

Detroit Pistons center Greg Monroe explained to the *Detroit Free Press* why so many players wanted to say something. “These kids come from the same neighborhoods we walked—or worse. And we see the same news everybody sees. When we turn on CNN, we don’t have a special CNN channel. When we get pulled over, there’s no special millionaire cops. We’re just paid to play basketball.”

To put it in a different way, athletes aren’t cartoon characters or robots. They are a part of this world. We are often told that today’s athletes have no stake, as their forebears did, in fighting for change. At one time, athletes, particularly athletes of color and women athletes had a self-interest in broader struggles against discrimination, but no longer. The argument goes that we are now somehow a “postracial, postpolitical” society. But while there are more

people than ever telling us that the world had changed, injustice, discrimination, and inequality of opportunity still rule the land.

In the real world, any change at all has been incremental and hard-won. In the sports world, there's been a different kind of change, and it couldn't be more dramatic. Over the last thirty years, the athletic-industrial complex has transformed itself into a trillion-dollar, global entity. One way it's done this is by making its product and its players as explicitly apolitical as possible. From Peyton Manning to Derek Jeter to Danica Patrick, the dominant message projected by athletes has been that it's far more important to be a brand than an individual, and that a modern jock should never sacrifice commercial concerns for political principle. This credo echoes Jesse Owens, the great Olympic star, who once said, "The only time the black fist has significance is when there's money inside."

ESPN, twenty-four-hour talk radio, and a seemingly bottomless appetite for distraction have exploded the size of our sports world—and its profits—into the stratosphere. In conjunction with this expansion, politics has also been actively discouraged by management and slammed by sports columnists. Howard Cosell toward the end of his life dubbed it rule number one of "the jockocracy": sports and politics just don't mix.

Yet over the last several years, the specter of politics has been haunting sports. Cosell's Golden Rule has been repeatedly and flagrantly breached. More athletes are speaking out across the political spectrum as a series of revolutions, occupations, and protests has defined the global landscape. The real world is gaining on the sports world and the sports world is starting to look over its shoulder...As I hope to show, whether we see ourselves as sports fans or not, we all have a stake in understanding why the sports page is insufficient for understanding sports.

## **THE WALL BETWEEN SPORTS AND POLITICS IS BREACHED**

On Cinco de Mayo in 2010, the NBA's Phoenix Suns went where no American sports team had gone before. In their playoff game against the San Antonio Spurs, the squad took to the court wearing jerseys that read simply "Los Suns." They were coming out as one against Arizona's Senate Bill 1070, which critics said would codify racial profiling by criminalizing anyone suspected of being an undocumented immigrant. This was the first time in the U.S. sports history that an entire team—from owner to general manager to players—had expressed any kind of unified political stance. This audacious move by the Suns was perhaps the most publicized moment of a low-frequency sea change in the world of sports.

There were the members of the Green Bay Packers who stood—and continue to stand—behind the workers of Wisconsin under attack by the state's Governor Scott Walker.

There were the soccer players and clubs in the Middle East who played a leading role in the Arab Spring and, with unprecedented impact, are helping shape their revolutions.

There were two NFL players—Pro Bowler Brendon Ayanbadejo and New Orleans Saints Super Bowl hero Scott Fujita—who spoke out in favor of LGBT marriage equality in the fall of 2009. (They have been joined by basketball star Steve Nash, New England Patriot Rob Gronkowski, New York Giant Michael Strahan, New York Ranger Sean Avery, Charles Barkley, Michael Irvin and other players willing to speak out on what was recently a taboo locker room subject.)

Other political explosions have recently detonated inside the world of sports. Labor lockouts in the NFL and NBA have brought a taste of the broader economic crisis that provoked the occupy movement into this supposedly privileged space. The explosive child-molestation charges at Penn State University and broader issues of corruption in the NCAA have raised political questions that speak to the very role we expect our universities to play. College athletes in the "revenue-producing sports" of football and basketball have signed petitions to form organizations and unshackle themselves from an ugly, utterly corrupt system.

Discussions about Tim Tebow, Jeremy Lin, Caster Semenya, and many others have created a buzz and a dialogue beyond the confines of sports radio. When Boston Bruins goalie Tim Thomas turned down the team's invitation to go to the White House after they won the 2011 Stanley Cup, he wasn't content with quiet protest and instead posted a Tea Party-influenced monologue on his Facebook page. When Joel Ward, a black player for the Washington Capitals, scored a playoff-clinching goal on Thomas in 2012, the racist bile on Twitter was so intense that players and the media felt compelled to respond.

The most recent political eruptions are in many respects a hangover from the 2008 elections, when an unprecedented number of athletes went public in support of Barack Obama's candidacy and the efforts to elect an African American president. Some of the most commercially successful—and therefore some of the most commercially vulnerable—jocks became involved in the campaign. LeBron James wore Obama T-shirts to games and all-star players like Baron Davis and Chauncey Billups vocally supported his candidacy. Boston Celtics star Kevin Garnett wore sneakers with "Vote for Change" scrawled on their sides. Then Denver Nuggets star Carmelo Anthony pledged that he would score forty-four points in a game in honor of the future forty-fourth president (he only scored twenty-eight, which was, one can assume, not a tribute to Woodrow Wilson). When Billups was asked if he was concerned that his public support of Obama would hurt his endorsement chances, he said, "Like I give a shit."

As it turns out, a whole new generation of "Jocks for Justice" is rejecting the yoke of apathy and speaking out about the world. NBA players like Nash, Etan Thomas, and Joakim Noah, as well as NFL players Scott Fujita and Adalius Thomas, raised objections against the U.S. war in Iraq. Even Ultimate Fighting champion Jeff "the Snowman" Monson took to distributing antiwar pamphlets on his way to the "Octagon" and was arrested protesting at the 2008 Republican National Convention. As Marina Navratilova said to *Sports Illustrated* in 2008, "It's like athletes have woken up to what actors and musicians have known forever; I have this amazing platform—why not use it?"

These small acts of solidarity may seem negligible—but they matter. Whether we like it or not, athletes are role models; it's worth asking, then, what are they in fact modeling?

While not every athlete acts like his life's ambition off the playing field is to be featured on *MTV Cribs*, the media loves to highlight the salacious and scandalous. It's not just the worst examples, like football player Ben Roethlisberger, who was investigated twice for rape, or Adam "Pac Man" Jones getting in trouble with the law at "gentleman's clubs." As a rule, the pro athletes who engage in the most mindless conspicuous consumption are the ones who tend to be highlighted.

If, instead of modeling crass materialism, more athletes choose to display a broader sense of community awareness—no matter the issue or politics—we'd all be better off. Even when I personally disagree with the politics of an athlete (see Tim Tebow), the mere fact that he is saying anything has the potential to initiate a dialogue more full and involving than anything we get from Capitol Hill.

Having athletes risk their prime perch in society for the greater good also becomes a kind of weather vane, a crackling signal that we have entered a new era. In 1968, political struggle was part of the oxygen of the sports world. The people and the games we watched were shaped by the struggles in the streets.

In a time that has seen revolts from the Middle East to the Midwest, we can look at the facts on the ground and note that the citadel of American sports has also been breached. The apolitical 1990s were dubbed the "vacation from history." Well, vacation is over and history has returned with a vengeance—severe enough to cross the moat and enter the locker room.

Why are more athletes speaking out? Some point to social media as a critical delivery system for a generation of athletes who don't trust "old school" reporters. Hundred-and-forty character bursts and Facebook posts offer the ability to speak without a filter directly to fans.

Another theory is that players are now actually encouraged, for commercial reasons, to "define their own brand." I spoke at a seminar for NBA rookies where the dominant theme was how players could distinguish themselves and create a memorable persona for their audience. Just repeating clichés by rote, like "We give 150 percent and play one game at a time," is now seen as a liability. But the most compelling reason is simply, as Greg Monroe said, that the world is changing and athletes are part of that world.

But speaking out still has a cost. We saw this in May 2011, after al-Qaeda leader and "9/11 mastermind" Osama bin Laden was killed by U.S. Navy SEALs. In the aftermath of his assassination, the sports world embraced the public eruption of patriotism. From the spontaneous cheers of forty thousand fans in Philadelphia to amped "Military Appreciation Night" celebrations at stadiums around the country, the sports world exulted in the euphoria of bin Laden's dramatic demise.

Yet some athletes dared to buck the trend—and, in the process, learned a tough lesson about the limits of free speech in the jockocracy. Chris Douglas-Roberts. Former Memphis basketball all-American and Milwaukee Buck, responded to bin Laden's death with a litany of reasons why he wasn't joining the party, tweeting, among other things, "It took 919,967 deaths to kill that one guy. It took 10 years & 2 wars to kill that guy. It cost us (USA) roughly \$1,188,263,000,000 to kill that guy. But we winning though, Haaaa. (Sarcasm)."

Profanity, threats, and the general belief that he was "stupid" and a "moron" who should shut his "dumb [expletive] mouth" because he is "not intelligent" came rolling in. Douglas-Roberts tried to hit back, tweeting: "What I'm sayin has nothing to do with 9/11 or that guy (Bin Laden). I still feel bad for the 9/11 families but I feel EQUALLY bad for war families....People are telling me to get out of America now b/c I'm against MORE INNOCENT people dying everyday? B/c I'm against a 10 year WAR? Whatever happened to our freedom of speech? What I've learned tonight, athletes shouldn't have perspectives. But I don't care. We feel certain ways about things TOO."

Rashard Mendenhall, the Pro Bowl running back for the Pittsburgh Steelers, raised eyebrows even higher with his comments, writing, "[For] those of you who said you want to see Bin Laden burn in hell and piss on his ashes, I ask how would God feel about your heart?...What kind of person celebrates death?" Mendenhall then took it further and voiced his doubts about the official story of the 9/11 attacks, causing *Sports Illustrated's* senior football writer Don Banks to write a piece titled "Mendenhall Just the Latest NFL Player to Spout Utter Nonsense."

The outrage intensified to the point where Steelers president Art Rooney II, a big money bundler for President Obama and the U.S. ambassador to Ireland, had to actually issue a formal statement about a tweet, writing, "I have not spoken with Rashard so it is hard to explain or even comprehend what he meant with his recent Twitter comments. The entire Steelers' organization is very proud of the job our military personnel have done and we can only hope this leads to our troops coming home soon."

Whether or not you supported some or all the wars of the last decade, it should be clear that the guardians of jock culture are trying to teach athletes a lesson: you have signed away your right to have an opinion beyond your choice of sneaker or sports drink. This is something that runs very deeply in the marrow of our sports world: the idea that athletes, particularly athletes of color, should just "shut up and play."

Douglas-Roberts and Mendenhall also unintentionally exposed the most bizarre contradiction of this no-politics rule. Players are strongly encouraged by management, family, and the media to follow the rules and "never talk politics"—but whether we choose to acknowledge it or not, a politically charged atmosphere pervades all of professional sports. I don't just say that because I live in a town where people root for a team called the Redskins. I say so because at every sporting event we are encouraged to collectively celebrate the displays of nationalism, patriotism, and military might that festoon every corner. In addition, the politics of big business and big sponsorship deals saturate sports arenas. At one point, baseball owners wanted to put ads for *Spider-Man 2* on every second base, and only backed away when fans erupted in outrage. Even college football players, so-called amateurs, are trussed in ads to a degree that would shame NASCAR. If only the owners of pro sports teams could create a red, white, and blue beer, they might collectively keel over in joy.

But throughout history, we've also seen athletes take this setup and stand it on its head. This has happened when they have used their exalted, hyper commercialized platform to say something about the world and then dare those in power to shut them up. There is a reason we associate people like Jackie Robinson with the civil rights movement; Muhammad Ali with the 1960s; Billie Jean King with the women's movement; or 1968 Olympian Tom Waddell, the founder of the Gay Games, with LBBT rights. This history indicates that sports is never just a spectacle—that it has a potential to tap into sentiments for social change.

Our sports culture shapes societal attitudes, relationships, and power arrangements. It is where cultural meanings—our very notions of who we are and how we see each other, not only in which we understand and discuss issues of gender, race and class. And, as ever, it is crucial for understanding how these norms and power structures have been negotiated, struggled with, and resisted.