



SPORT, PRESIDENTS AND THE US ELECTION

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“You need to use your voice, how big or small the platform is. I saw a quote from Dr Martin Luther King that said:

‘The silence of the good people is worse than the brutality of the bad people.’” [Coco Gauff]

“I haven’t experienced over-policing, racial profiling, police brutality or the sight of a family member’s body lying dead in the street. But I cannot stand idly by while there are people in this country who have had to deal with that kind of heartache.” [Megan Rapinoe]

Introduction

1. Shortly after the election of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States (US), the BBC asked how the election of the new US president would impact upon sport[1]. At the time the US was interested in the 2024 Olympic and 2026 FIFA Men’s World Cup bids. In August 2016, Eric Garcetti, a Democrat who supported Hillary Clinton, acknowledged that IOC members had concerns over Trump stating that “An America that turns inwards ... isn’t good for world peace, isn’t good for progress, isn’t good for all of us”[2].

2. World Cup bids only succeed with firm government backing and solid financial support but at the time additional concerns were raised about how Trump’s obsession with a border wall between the US and Mexico would impact upon a three-country bid involving the US, Canada and Mexico? In the run up to the 2016 election the then-presidential nominee talked of threatening trade deals and many wondered how his isolationist rhetoric would impact the growth of American sport and whether the National Football League’s (NFL) global ambitions—as well as those of the National Basketball Association (NBA) and Major

League Baseball (MLB)—would be caught up in Trump’s plans to import tariffs on imported goods.

3. Some or all of the following arguments talk to the world of US politics and sport in the 21st century (though not exclusively the US or the 21st century): (i) Governments and civil society use sport to deliver political messages and garner support for their policies; (ii) sports organisations use power to pursue their own sectional interests; (iii) sport matters as a form of soft power- it is less aloof and more accessible than formal forms of diplomacy; (iv) the popular scale and reach of sport make it an attractive vehicle for both social and geo-political struggles; and (v) more so than ever, sport is capable of demanding meaningful social change. All have been invoked during the current presidential administration, whether they be the president’s own initiatives, those of his administration and/or party, or in response to his retrograde position on racial justice, class equality, and the rights of women and LGBTI communities.

4. Given the multiple ways in which sport matters, it has increasingly become an important political force field, control over which brings authority, visibility, and power. There is a reason President Trump routinely castigates politically-active athletes at election rallies: sport is an extremely effective tool for propaganda.

**** We are grateful for the feedback provided by Bruce Kidd, Professor, Olympian, activist and formerly Principal and Vice-President at the University of Toronto. We are also grateful for the reminders from former diplomat and US ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Power, on how not to give up on activism.

[1] See **Conway, R.** (2016). BBC. Donald Trump: How will the US President impact upon sport? 9 November 2016. [See here](#)

[2] See **Smith, D.** (2016). The Los Angeles Times. 23 November 2016. [See here](#)

Who Backed Who in the 2016 Election?

5. Evidence from the 2016 Federal Election Commission records suggests that the owners of teams in the four major sports leagues – baseball, football, basketball and hockey – had distinct political leanings[3]. The total sport donations to Republican candidates or committees (\$23,378, 415) was significantly greater than the contributions made to Democrat candidates and causes (\$2, 728, 868)[4].

6. Football, baseball, hockey and basketball all leaned towards the Republican cause, though basketball showed the most liberal leanings towards the Democrats. NFL owners were the most prolific with funders, and they were also the most conservative. \$8, 052,410.00 went to Republican causes compared to \$189.610.72 to Democrat causes[5]. Baseball followed with a total of \$7,316,801.63 in donations with \$6,204,732.07 for the Republicans and \$912,402.88 for the Democrats. Republican leanings can also be found in Hockey; NHL team owners donated a total of \$4,613,232.76 of which \$4,087,952 went to Republican efforts[6].

7. Basketball team owners were the most liberal of the four sports with one in five dollars targeting Democrat causes. From total donations of \$6,125, 198.71 - \$1,049, 876.13 supported Democrat effort[7]. A glaring exception to basketball's relatively Democratic leanings was Orlando Magic's owner Richard M DeVos Sr, father-in-law to Trump's Education Secretary Betsy De Vos, whose \$2,647,322.92 in contributions (almost exclusively to Republican efforts) included a \$500,000 donation to Freedom Partners Action Fund, a Super Pac at the fore of the conservative donor network helmed by billionaire industrialists Charles and David Koch. He also made a \$250,000 contribution to Trusted Leadership (Cruz) and Right to Rise USA (Bush)[8].

8. However, trends for donations to the two presidential candidates, Hillary Clinton and Trump,

were reversed. Clinton (\$873,371.94) received almost four times that of Trump (\$182,480.00)[9]. With Republican—and often conservative—leanings, it is significant that team owners did not want sport in the hands of Trump.

9. Football's most generous donor in 2016 was Houston Texans majority owner Bob McNair, who made 61 donations amounting to more than \$7m to conservative groups and campaigns. The biggest of these was a \$1.1m donation to the Congressional Leadership Fund, a Super Pac dedicated to electing Republicans to the US House of Representatives. He also made two separate \$1m gifts to the Senate Leadership Fund, a newer Super Pac established in January 2015 that looked to maintaining the Republican majority in the US Senate[10].

10. Other top-line donors included, at the time, Arizona Diamondbacks owner Earl G. Kendrick, who gave \$700,000 to Rubio's Conservative Solutions Pac less than three weeks before the Florida senator dropped out of the race, and New Orleans businessman Tom Benson, owner of the NFL's Saints and NBA's Pelicans, who gave \$150,000 to Believe Again, the Super Pac in support of Bobby Jindal's abbreviated presidential run. Yet the consequences of such patterns of funding and the 2016 presidential result have impacted further upon both sport and politics.

Trump America and the Politics of Sport

11. If Clinton received the majority of funding, and the popular vote, Trump wasted no time using sport to energize his base. His familiarity with American football, especially after a failed bid to buy the Buffalo Bills, allowed him to further link patriotism to American football and garner support among conservatives. But so too have athletes used sport to resist Trump's conservatism and policies[11]. Under Trump's presidency, more professional athletes have spoken out about social policies and social circumstances than at any other moment in US history.

[3] See sports donations recorded in the 2016 Federal Election Commission records.

[4] See **Bryan Armen Graham** (2016). Sports team owners make huge political donations. The Guardian 11th November 2016. [See here](#).

[5] See sports donations recorded in the 2016 Federal Election Commission records.

[6] See 2016 data [here](#).

[7] See 2016 data [here](#).

[8] See **Bryan Armen Graham** (2016). Sports team owners make huge political donations. The Guardian 11th November 2016. [See here](#).

[9] See 2016 data [here](#).

[10] See **Bryan Armen Graham** (2016). Sports team owners make huge political donations. The Guardian 11th November 2016. [See here](#).

[11] See **Trimbur** (2019). Taking a knee, making a stand: social justice, Trump America, and the politics of sport. *Quest* 71(2) 252-265 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00336297.2018.1551806>

12. Activism can be caused by a number of factors including economic recessions, a call for transparency and greater levels of democracy, a lack of food, water, single-issue and or multi-issue campaigns. The politics of Trump America have publicly been about putting America first and making America great again, which has consisted first and foremost of aggression and antagonism toward anything international or bilateral: breaking international climate accords, leaving carefully crafted nuclear deals, breaking up trade agreements, divesting from the World Health Organization, diminishing human rights, ignoring a pandemic crisis, and threatening to go to war with major economic powers.

13. While such factors have not been limited to the US, the way in which activism, protest, and social movements have worked with and through sport to challenge authoritarian governments in the US has played out in a number of ways. For the first time ever, athletes at every level of play as well as coaches, team owners, and fans are speaking out publicly and loudly about the administration's lack of transparency and its antipathy toward equality. For the first time ever, the major professional leagues saw wildcat strikes that temporarily disabled sports events, showing the widespread discontent with Trump's presidency and the flex of political muscle that athletes now know they possess in this struggle.

Kaepernick, Taking a Knee and Making a Stand

14. Though he had protested two times earlier, when Colin Kaepernick[12] remained seated during the national anthem on August 26, 2016, the media took note and asked him about his refusal. He explained to the NFL Media, the league's media operation, why he was not participating in the pre-game ritual:

"I'm going to continue to stand with the people that are being oppressed. To me, this is something that has to change. When there's significant change and I feel that flag represents what it's supposed to represent, and this country is representing people the way that it's supposed to, I'll stand. This stand wasn't for me. This is because I'm seeing things happen to people that don't have a voice, people that don't have a platform to talk and have their voices heard, and effect change. So, I'm in the position where I can do that and I'm going to do that for people that can't"[13].

15. As we now know, Kaepernick was not picked up by any NFL team when he became a free agent the next season despite being a talented quarterback. After a legal case that was settled out of court, it has widely become accepted that the league conspired to blackball him. During the 2016 season, he was met with jeers and boos at games, harassment on social media, and phone calls with death threats. But he had support. Despite Trump's determination to frame Kaepernick's actions as un-American, military personnel stood behind his right to protest. Only 29% of Americans approved of the San Francisco 49ers action to sit during the national anthem in protest[14]. Over 72% of African American men and women polled supported his protest[15]. Possibly most significantly, he galvanized a new generation of sportspeople. A mere four years later, professional sport saw successful wildcat strikes, and unprecedented labour action.

Branch, Patriots and Doing it for the Children

16. Trump's actions and rhetoric drew protest from the most media-shy and politically reticent athletes. Alan Branch of the New England Patriots had little interest in political discussion or debate but felt forced to boycott the celebratory gathering at the White House after the team's Superbowl Victory. Disturbed by Trump's treatment of women and his defence that it represented standard locker room talk, Branch reflected:

[12] See **BBC** (2016). From Trayvon Martin to Colin Kaepernick. [See here.](#)

[13] **Sandritter, M.** (2017). A timeline of Colin Kaepernick's national anthem protest and the athletes who joined him. NFL News 25 September 2017. [See here.](#)

[14] [See here.](#)

[15] [See here](#)

“It’s disgusting the way that he talks about women and I just can’t deal with it and that’s why I have no interest in going and shaking his hand”[16]

Branch became an unlikely and therefore incredibly important voice challenging Trump’s misogyny. He explained:

“I’ve gotta go back home and look my daughters in the eye, and I don’t want them to view me in a different light just because I did that [meet Trump at the White House] ... I’m very against it and I’d hate for my son to see me go to the White House and act like it’s okay to do whatever you want if you’re a celebrity. I don’t want my kid to think that’s OK to say that”[17].

17. Branch was one of five players who refused to visit the White House and his decision influenced other teams. In the first two years of Trump’s presidency, 20 sports teams earned titles but ten of those teams either refused to visit the White House or were not invited or disinvited by the President in anticipation of a rejection. As early as the 2016-17 season, both the men’s college basketball champions—the North Carolina Tar Heels—as well as the women’s college basketball champions—the South Carolina Gamecocks, refused the White House. NBA champions, The Golden State Warriors, who had sparred with Trump on twitter and through the media, were never invited. Of all sports associations, college football, NASCAR, and the NHL tended to accept invitations [18].

Rapinoe, Trump and Inequality

18. If Colin Kaepernick and Alan Branch demonstrated the first political dissent in American football in Trump America, Megan Rapinoe represented the National Women’s Soccer League. Rapinoe joined political protest early and her support has been unwavering. One of the first athletes in professional sport to support Kaepernick, Rapinoe kneeled during the national anthem before a match between the Seattle Reign and the Chicago Red Stars on September 4, 2016[19]. She asserted at the time:

“I haven’t experienced over-policing, racial profiling, police brutality or the sight of a family member’s body lying dead in the street. But I cannot stand idly by while there are people in this country who have had to deal with that kind of heartachet”[20].

19. The US Soccer Federation found Rapinoe’s protest so threatening that by early February of 2017, it had adopted Policy 604-1, requiring all players “stand respectfully” during the national anthem[21]. The policy drew substantial criticism and proved to be so widely unpopular that US Soccer was forced repeal the policy three years later[22]. In a public statement, they acknowledged:

“We have not done enough to listen - especially to our players - to understand and acknowledge the very real and meaningful experiences of Black and other minority communities in our country. We apologize to our players - especially our Black players - staff, fans, and all who support eradicating racism. Sports are a powerful platform for good, and we have not used our platform as effectively as we should have. We can do more on these specific issues and we will”[23].

20. Two weeks after the US women’s football team almost shutdown the centre of Manhattan having won the 2019 FIFA Women’s World Cup Rapinoe, the team’s co-captain and most visible member, talked openly about her hopes for political change and her public stand-off with the US President, who accused her of disrespecting her country, the White House and the flag[24]. Rapinoe addressed the contradiction she and the team posed for Trump. She pointed out:

“We are everything he loves... sportspeople, winners, Team America ... with the exception that we are powerful strong women.” [25]

21. The President responded that “Megan should win before she talks”[26], an unusual assertion about the US women’s soccer team, the most successful in the sport’s history and ranked number one in the world both at the time and four years later in 2020[27].

[16] Bird, E. (2017). Patriots Alan Branch skips White House visit over Trump’s sexist remarks. CNN News 20 April. [See here.](#)

[17] Bird, E. (2017). Patriots Alan Branch skips White House visit over Trump’s sexist remarks. CNN News 20 April. [See here.](#)

[18] [See here.](#)

[19] [See here.](#)

[20] Vernon, P. (2020). Interview with Megan Rapinoe. The Sunday Times 11 July 2020. [See here.](#)

[21] [See here.](#)

[22] [See here.](#)

[23] [See here.](#)

[24] Vernon, P. (2020). Interview with Megan Rapinoe. The Sunday Times 11 July 2020. [See here.](#)

[25] Vernon, P. (2020). Interview with Megan Rapinoe. The Sunday Times 11 July 2020. [See here.](#)

[26] Vernon, P. (2020). Interview with Megan Rapinoe. The Sunday Times 11 July 2020. [See here.](#)

[27] FIFA Women World Rankings - [See here.](#)

22. Extremely astute politically, Rapinoe understands how to use space and solidarity to fight for equality, gay-rights and against police brutality and racism. At the 2020 ESPY awards and in the wake of the George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmadu Arbery's murders, Rapinoe joined NFL star Russell Wilson and WNBA great Sue Bird to demand racial justice:

“It's important that we keep this dialogue going and this energy alive, because for centuries, there have been fights for justice and equality in this country, led by Black people. This movement is no different, but as white people, this is the breaking point. This time, we've got to have their backs”[28].

Sport, Soft Power and Cuba

23. Under President Obama, diplomatic ties with Cuba had been restored in 2015 after being severed in 1961. Some trade restrictions had been eased and the White House had been lobbying the US Congress to terminate an economic embargo that had been in place for decades[29].

24. It was baseball that finally brought Cuba and the United States out from half a century of a cold war deep freeze, as Barack Obama's historic visit concluded with a frenzied, but friendly, sporting clash. They have been playing baseball in Cuba since 1864, but there can have been few more eagerly anticipated games than that between the Cuban national team and the US Major League Baseball side the Tampa Bay Rays. Major League Baseball had been lobbying hard for the relaxation of US labour laws so that it could hire some of Cuba's top talent to play in the US[30].

25. But this was not just sport in action but soft power in action. The Americans were the first nation to introduce a specific sports diplomacy operation. The U.S Department of State's vanguard initiative was the Sports United programme, which was born after 9/11 as a way of engaging young, disenfranchised people across Africa, the Middle East and South Asia. Sports United focused on three main activities; sports envoys, sports grants and sports visitors[31].

26. The Sports Diplomacy Division (SDD) made significant strides during the Obama Administration, including the creation of two new programmes aimed at increasing access to sport participation for women and girls and developing female emerging leaders in sport. In a 2013 study conducted by Management Systems International and the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Office of Policy and Evaluation, 92% of respondents said that their views of the American people had improved after participating in SDD programming [32].

27. According to the US Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, Sports diplomacy exchanges increase dialogue and cultural understanding between people around the world. The use of sports as a platform exposes international exchange participants to American culture while providing them with an opportunity to establish links with U.S. sports professionals and peers. In turn, Americans learn about other cultures and the challenges young people from other countries face today. Sports diplomacy exchanges have involved tens of thousands of people from more than 100 countries to do just this[33].

28. In early 2016, the SDD brought stars like NBA Hall of Famer Shaquille O'Neal to Cuba to engage directly with Cuban youth and build upon the work of people-to-people exchanges. Sport was seen as a natural avenue for engaging Cuban youth and encouraging a closer relationship between the two nations in the decades to come.

29. The Cuban government has itself a history of creating and seeking opportunities to engage in collaboration, diplomacy, commerce, and trade in order to pursue its own concepts of progressive international development, which have involved garnering much needed hard currency and political benefits for its national interests[34]. Such strategies included the organisation and deployment of sport and physical activity programmes[35].

30. So here was something of mutual interest, a space created by sport where the US and Cuba could work to create better cultural relations.

[28] [See here.](#)

[29] See [BBC](#) (2016). Barack Obama: Change is going to happen in Cuba. [See here.](#)

[30] See [BBC](#) (2016). Barack Obama: Change is going to happen in Cuba. [See here.](#)

[31] See [Jarvie, G., Murray, S. and MacDonald, S.](#) (2017). Promoting Scotland, diplomacy, and influence through sport. *Scottish Affairs*. 26 (1): 1-22.

[32] See a full range of sport activities under the US Department of State by entering sport in the search function to be found [here](#). Further information on US soft power funding can be found on the University of Edinburgh, Academy of Sport, Sport Matters Research Blogs of 26 March 2018 found [here](#).

[33] See [US Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs](#).

[34] See [Huish, R. Carter T. and Darnell, S.](#) (2013). The soft power of sport: the comprehensive and contradictory strategies of Cuba's sports based internationalism. *International Journal of Cuban Studies*. 5 (1) 26-40.

[35] See [Huish, R. Carter T. and Darnell, S.](#) (2013). The soft power of sport: the comprehensive and contradictory strategies of Cuba's sports based internationalism. *International Journal of Cuban Studies*. 5 (1) 26-40.

31. The former President's visit to the Estadio Latin-American was intended to celebrate a sporting passion that has been shared on both sides of the political divide through decades of conflict. The game was seen as a symbolic opening of more than just sporting ties. Following the Baltimore Orioles in 1999, the Rays were only the second Major League team to play in Havana since the Cuban Revolution of 1959. They came amid a rising tide of interest in the island's baseball scene. A scene financially impoverished, culturally rich but also rich in talent.

32. Where economic/business ties, geopolitical interests, and government cooperation change, the soft power of cultural connection can often foster cooperation. Sometimes, when there is nothing else to build on, sport can present a jumping off point[36]. In his book <The World as It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House> Ben Rhodes, a senior adviser to President Obama, depicted the White House's efforts to put on the exhibition baseball game to be played between the Tampa Bay Rays and the Cuban national team as a beginning of the process of opening the doors of cooperation between Cuba and the United States[37].

33. Obama stayed on to give television interviews and let baseball diplomacy do the work of détente. Baseball working in a softer less aloof way than formal press conferences and speeches that often struggle at times to convey social and political messages in a way that is mutually supportive of forging long-lasting cultural relations.

34. During the election campaign the then President elect had tweeted he would "terminate" Mr Obama's policy on normalising relations with Cuba at a time when thousands of Cubans queued to pay their respects to Fidel Castro[38]. On 16 June 2017, President Trump announced that he was suspending what he called a "completely one-sided deal with Cuba" [39]. Trump characterized Obama's policy as having granted Cuba economic sanctions relief for nothing in return. Cuba denounced the roll back of policy stating that "The government of Cuba denounces the new

measures toughening the embargo,".... But it also reiterated "its willingness to continue the respectful dialogue and cooperation"[40].

Sport in the 2020 US Presidential Campaign

35. Before the election of Trump and Kaepernick's protest in 2016, several teams tested the waters of political activism and with success. On March 23, 2012, the Miami Heat, led by LeBron James, wore hooded sweatshirts covering their faces before a game to protest the killing of Trayvon Martin. On November 9, 2015, 30 football players at the University of Missouri threatened to boycott games unless the institution addressed its systemic anti-black racism[41]. The actions of both teams- the Heat and the University of Missouri- were met with tremendous support, laying the groundwork for the protests of 2020.

36. The WNBA demonstrated that it was willing to accept fines and forfeit games in order to protest. In July 2016, the Minnesota Lynx wore black shirts with the text "Change Starts With Us: Justice & Accountability" and held a press conference in which they would only talk about police brutality. Several days later players from the New York Liberty, Indiana Fever, and Phoenix Mercury wore shirts during warmups which stated that "#BlackLivesMatter".

37. The WNBA quickly fined each team and each player for not wearing league-sanctioned clothes on the court. Despite this WNBA players maintained their activism in sport by developing community programmes, kneeling during the national anthem, remaining in the locker room during the national anthem, and advocating for criminal justice reform. They also maintained their activism outside of it. In July 2020, several players forfeited playing in the league in order to focus all of their energies on racial justice. More so than any other league, the WNBA risked their careers to stand firmly against racial oppression and brutality[42].

38. It is important to reflect on the pace and extent of the change given that not so long ago Colin Kaepernick was driven out of the NFL for kneeling during the

[36] See **Norby, G.** (2019). What can baseball teach us about soft power? [See here.](#)

[37] See **Norby, G.** (2019). What can baseball teach us about soft power? [See here.](#)

[38] See **BBC** (2016). Trump threatens to terminate US-Cuba thaw. [See here.](#)

[39] See **BBC** (2017). Cuba denounces Trump policy roll-back. [See here.](#)

[40] See **BBC** (2017). Cuba denounces Trump policy roll-back. [See here.](#)

[41] See **Tracy, M.** (2015). Black football players lend heft to protesters at Missouri: The New York Times: 8 November. [See here.](#)

[42] [See here.](#)

national anthem and during the summer of 2020 the entire NBA took a knee during the opening of each game. Whereas Trump likens Black Lives Matter to criminals and terrorists, 'Black Lives Matter' was emblazoned on every court where the remainder of the 2019-20 season was played out with widespread tv coverage, every player wore a social justice slogan on his shirt, and major sponsors ran supportive advertising. In many ways this has got to legitimize the dissent that fuels the anti-Trump forces in the 2020 election.

The Sports Industry

39. For the first time in Gallup's 20 years of tracking Americans' views of various business and industry sectors, farming and agriculture is the clear leader in the run up to the 2020 Presidential election[43]. In a review of 25 industries, the sports industry is amongst those losing the most ground, with only the pharmaceutical industry and the federal government having worse negative views.

40. The sports industry now has a negative image, on balance, among Americans as a whole, with 30% viewing it positively and 40% negatively, for a -10 net-positive score[44]. This contrasts with the +20-net positive image it enjoyed in 2019, when 45% viewed it positively and 25% negatively[45]. This slide in the sports industry's image comes as professional and college leagues are struggling, and not always successfully, to maintain regular schedules and playing seasons amid the pandemic. It also comes as professional football, baseball and basketball games have been suspended to highlight the Black Lives Matter movement and as more athletes are using their platform in sport to voice their political perspectives, no matter the consequences.

41. It is notable that sport has lost more support from Republicans and Independents than from Democrats[46]. In fact, Democrats' view of the sports industry has not changed significantly in the past year, while Republicans' has slipped from a +11 net-positive score in 2019 to a net -35 today, and independents from +26 to -10. The sports industry's image has

deteriorated more among women than men, and among older adults than those younger than 35. Sport has lost more support from non-White than White Americans but given the extraordinarily high ratings from non-White adults a year ago, this group continues to view the sports industry positively on balance today. That is not the case with White adults, who now view the sports industry more negatively than positively, and by a 22-point margin[47].

US WADA Funding Threat

42. The threat to withdraw from international agreements and agreed shared obligations can hurt a country's reputation. Threats to international organisations dealing with climate change, health and trade have been a hallmark of the Trump Presidency. It perhaps should have come as no surprise that a threat to the world organisation responsible for policing sports doping and drug violations emerged but emerge it did in September 2020 when the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) reported that a funding conflict with the US Government could ultimately ensnare American athletes and threaten their ability to compete in major international competitions, including the Olympics[48].

43. President Trump's drug policy office contended that the U.S. government is the largest contributor to WADA, giving \$2.7 annually, and that "American taxpayers should receive a tangible return on their investment in WADA in the form of clean sport, fair play, effective administration of the world anti-doping system and a proportionate voice in WADA decision-making"[49]. The latter being particularly problematic to the international doping committee, including Dick Pound the WADA founder and longest serving International Olympic Committee (IOC) member. WADA President Banka noted that:

"We will never let athletes become hostages to political games" while the ONDCP US report demanded a stronger U.S. voice in WADA affairs, Banka and Pound questioned the motives behind the report and the U.S. funding threat, arguing the United States always has been well represented on its committees and decision-making boards"[50].

[43] Saad, L. (2020). Farming rises, sport tumbles in US industry rankings. Gallup. [See here](#).

[44] Saad, L. (2020). Farming rises, sport tumbles in US industry rankings. Gallup. [See here](#).

[45] Saad, L. (2020). Farming rises, sport tumbles in US industry rankings. Gallup. [See here](#).

[46] Saad, L. (2020). Farming rises, sport tumbles in US industry rankings. Gallup. [See here](#).

[47] Saad, L. (2020). Farming rises, sport tumbles in US industry rankings. Gallup. [See here](#).

[48] Maese, R. (2020). White House threats could put US Olympic athletes in middle of anti-doping funding fight. The Washington Post: September 4: 2020. [See here](#).

[49] Maese, R. (2020). White House threats could put US Olympic athletes in middle of anti-doping funding fight. The Washington Post: September 4: 2020. [See here](#).

[50] Maese, R. (2020). White House threats could put US Olympic athletes in middle of anti-doping funding fight. The Washington Post: September 4: 2020. [See here](#).

The Big Ten

44. Though President Trump seemingly enjoyed attending college football games during his Presidency, such outings should not be mistaken for universal political support. The president selectively chose games in states where he would receive relatively warm reception, particularly in the South. His reception would not have been so warm had the President attended sporting events in more liberal cities. Despite this selectivity, President Trump has used football in general to bolster his 2020 campaign. As early as April 2020 both the President and Vice-President Mike Pence spoke with sports industry leaders and then took on the politically pivotal Big Ten all but ignoring schools in Democratic voting states. Trump first demonstrated his interest in the college football season's viability by retweeting a post by Clemson quarterback Trevor Lawrence in support of the athlete-driven #WeWantToPlay movement. Lawrence and Trump spoke later in the week by phone, the President said at a news conference on Aug. 15 "I wish they would come back"[51].

45. Presidential nominee Joe Biden wasted no time in using football to strengthen his own campaign. In early September in response to democratic party pressure to move away from a focus on law and order, Biden turned to college football. Run in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, Biden's ad displayed shots of empty football stadiums with text that read:

"Trump put American on the side lines. Let's get back in the game"[52]

46. On September 16th, the formal announcement that the Big Ten Conference would return to play in late October revitalized Trump's use of the sport in his campaign and the topic quickly became a talking point. The Big Ten was the first major US Conference to cancel the fall season and also the first to reverse the decision. A number of factors influenced this sporting U-turn, including medical advancements, fan reactions

parental pressure, and relatively successful starts to the season in other sports- and political pressure. For five weeks the US President pressured the Big Ten to change its stance on not playing. Looking for support in key swing voting states such as Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Michigan, Trump repeatedly spoke to football commissioner Kevin Warren and was quick to claim he had played a major return in football's return tweeting that "It is my great honor to have helped!!!"

47. Biden's ad campaign and Trump's tweet signalled that the return of the Big Ten was going to become a political talking point in the election campaign. And, indeed, at the first presidential debate on September 29th, it was. In the worst official public political argument among presidential candidates ever, Trump once again asserted his primacy in the Big Ten's return. Speaking both out of turn and without any time on the clock, Trump asserted, "I'm the one that brought back football. By the way, I brought back Big Ten football. It was me and I'm very happy to do it... and people of Ohio are very proud of me"[53].

48. In August 2020 former President Obama accused President Donald Trump's administration of undermining the United States Postal Service and attempting to suppress votes during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. President Trump openly stated that he was "blocking \$25 billion in federal funding for the US Postal Service to impede voting by mail"[54]. Democrats fear that the changes could impact the 2020 presidential election between Trump and the Democratic nominee Joe Biden, where more voters than ever before are expected to cast their ballots by mail. Such concerns are not solely a Democratic concern. Both parties have voiced concerns about drastic operational changes made by new Postmaster General Louis DeJoy, a major donor to Republicans and Trump-supporting committees, which have led to reports of widespread mail delays.

[51] **Binder, A.** (2020). In push to play, college football stars show sudden unity. *New York Times*. August 10. [See here](#).

[52] **Rychciks, S.** (2020). Let's Get Back in the Game: Biden Ad Takes Aim at Trump for Cancelled Sporting Events. [See here](#).

[53] The claim was made and challenged in the First 2020 Presidential Debate. [See here](#).

[54] **Breinger, K.** (2020). Obama rips Trump administration for 'suppressing the vote' amid pandemic, urges early voting. *CNBC News*: 14 August 2020.

49. Furthermore, it should not be forgotten the extent to which US Olympic athletes supported the call to postpone the 2020 Olympics in the interests of public health, and that some US teams lent their arenas for shelters, food depots, testing sites and voting stations, all of which implicitly contests the Trump's message that the virus is 'no big deal' and that the voting process is likely to be rigged.

50. The former President asserted “Everyone depends on the USPS. ... They can't be collateral damage for an administration more concerned with suppressing the vote than suppressing a virus”[55]. Trump's Democratic predecessor urged eligible voters in states with early voting options to do so as soon as possible. In a eulogy at the funeral of John Lewis, Obama forcibly and eloquently railed against the actions, arguing:

“those in power” who are “doing their darnedest to discourage people from voting — by closing polling locations, and targeting minorities and students with restrictive ID laws, and attacking our voting rights with surgical precision, even undermining the Postal Service in the run-up to an election that is going to be dependent on mailed-in ballots so people don't get sick”[56].

51. Obama's eulogy, unlike others, did not mention the word “sport.” The memorial speech delivered, by the then President of the United States, at the memorial to Nelson Mandela where Obama recalled:

“We remember the gestures, large and small — introducing his jailors as honoured guests at his inauguration; taking the pitch in a Springbok uniform; turning his family's heartbreak into a call to confront HIV/AIDS.”[57]

“We, too, must act on behalf of justice.....The questions we face today — how to promote equality and justice; to uphold freedom and human rights; to end conflict and sectarian war — do not have easy answers” and that “It was Nelson Mandela who reminded us that it always seems impossible until it is done.” [58]

52. US sport has responded to the voting crisis with a plan to turn sporting stadia into polling stations. By the end of August, 12 professional sports teams had planned to open up their stadia with the number expected to rise to at least 25. Teams included the Los Angeles Clippers, Washington Wizards, Golden State Warriors, Indiana Pacers, New Jersey Devils and the Pittsburgh Penguins. Under pressure from their players, teams from baseball, basketball, hockey and football are also considering converting their stadia as well.

53. Further actions have been announced by LA Lakers star LeBron James who is working with the LA Dodgers and Detroit Pistons to open up their arenas as polling places for the November election. James has formed a More than a Vote campaign seeking to influence black athletes, artists and voters and in particular spearhead a multimillion-dollar effort to recruit poll workers in Black electoral districts ahead of November's general elections. The intervention is also aimed at overcoming a wave of voter suppression tactics including, impeding voting by mail; dysfunctional voting machines; lack of polling staff as well as a reduced number of polling stations. In April 2020 Milwaukee, Wisconsin, which has a 40% African American population, had only five in person polling stations, down from the normal 180.

Black Lives Matter

54. It is not just in electoral politics that athletes are protesting. Players from the youth to the professional level have supported Black Lives Matter in a variety of ways, using the resources at their disposal. During the US Open, Naomi Osaka wore seven different masks with the names of black men and women killed by the police. Each round she wore black masks with white letters of the names of Breonna Taylor, Elijah McClain, Ahmaud Arbery, Trayvon Martin, George Floyd, Philando Castle and Tamir Rice, powerfully drawing attention to racism in US policing.

55. When a reporter somewhat tone-deafly asked Osaka why she was wearing the mask, she replied:

[55] Obama's eulogy for John Lewis. The New York Times: 30 July 2020.

[56] Obama's eulogy for John Lewis. The New York Times: 30 July 2020.

[57] See **Graeme Souness** 'We can lead the anti-racism fight' The Sunday Times, 28 June 2020:13.

[58] [CBC News 27 June 2020](#).

“Well, what was the message that you got was more the question. I feel like the point is to make people start talking”^[59].

56. It is not only in the US that athletes are protesting racist violence. British Formula One driver Lewis Hamilton, joined the protest by wearing a T-shirt calling for the arrest of the police officers who killed Breonna Taylor after winning the Tuscan Grand Prix at Mugello, Italy. He tweeted a picture of himself wearing the t-shirt with the text “It’s been 6 months since Breonna Taylor was murdered by policemen, in her own home. Still no justice has been served. We won’t stay silent. #JusticeforBreonnaTaylor”^[60]. Ten days later, only one officer involved in the shootings was charged.

57. When former NBA stars and sports commentator Charles Barkley and Shaquille O’Neal attempted to justify the police’s actions and no-knock warrants in general, they were attacked on social media and their defences of police summarily dismissed. The response to Barkley and O’Neal signals that the US is no longer content with a business-as-usual approach to policing.

Homophobia and Racism

58. With little to no media attention until early October, a second-division soccer team in San Diego has been quietly living by its conscience and working collectively to take their own stand with the active participation of its manager and support of the team’s owners. In late September, a member of the San Diego Loyal, Elijah Martin, was subjected to racial harassment in a match against the LA Galaxy II. Manager Landon Donovan hadn’t noticed the racial abuse but said that he would have pulled his team if he had. After the game, team announced its decision to forfeit a point earned after the incident and the team’s owner explained:

“We don’t even want to recognize being part of a match where these types of actions take place.”^[61]

59. The team received support but sceptics argued the gesture was empty as it’s not up to a team to decide which points it keeps or forfeits. But after the incident, Donovan met with the team and the team owner to discuss what had happened and what the team would do in the future. The team decorated the stadium with signs reading “I will speak. I will act,” signalling its zero-tolerance policy for any form of discrimination.

60. Several days later their commitment was tested when a member of the Phoenix Rising hurled a homophobic slur at Loyal player Collin Martin, one of the only openly-gay athletes in professional men’s sport. Donovan asked the referee and Phoenix coach if they would suspend the player. When both refused, the Loyals took a knee and left the field. In doing so they forfeited the game, in which they held the lead, and any chance at the playoffs. Donovan explained:

“Personally, I felt totally empowered, because I feel that I’m able to do whatever I believe is right because of past success, my financial situation, etc., I feel like I’m willing to take that risk. But our players, I think, feel that because they know they have an organization and a club and a president and an owner who will stand by them when they believe in something that’s right”^[62]

61. Later on, Twitter, Donovan elaborated:

“We went through a really hard incident last week in the LA match and we made a vow to ourselves, to our community, to our players, to the club, to USL, that we would not stand for bigotry, homophobic slurs, things that don’t belong in our game... We don’t want to just talk about it. We actually want to do it and we wanted to send a message”^[63]

Biden Tops Sports Advertising League Table

62. Hotels and resorts owned by the Trump family may have earned millions of dollars from people and organisations seeking to secure political advantages from the President or the inner circle, but Joe Biden heads the sports advertising league tables. According to

[59] Bumbaca, C. (2020). US Today. [See here](#).

[60] Benson, A. (2020). BBC 14 September 2020: [see here](#).

[61] [See here](#).

[62] [See here](#).

[63] [See here](#).

the New York Times foreign dignitaries, advocacy groups, wealthy individuals and more than 200 businesses have spent heavily at Trump owned venues, notably the hotel in Washington and Mar a Lago in Florida. Some sixty customers generated more than \$12 million in revenue and “almost all saw their interests advanced”[64]. Despite such activity and despite the perception of money being no problem Trump cancelled a number of adverts in key states as either funding seemed to be a problem or other means of reaching voters, particularly in key battlegrounds, were selected by the Trump campaign.

63. Trailing in the national polls at 12 October 2020 Trump’s election team cancelled advertising in several northern battlegrounds in order to focus on a handful of key battleground states in the in the southeast and southwest. In contrast Biden’s election team looked to extend airtime in key states. The Biden campaign enjoyed a record fundraising month in September, exceeding that of the Trump campaign by more than \$100 million. Between October 5 and October 12, 2020, the Biden campaign spent some \$36 million on TV and radio spots, including sport sports, and almost double that of the Trump campaign during the same period[65].

64. Fluctuations in voter sentiment and schedule changes in the sports world generated almost daily adjustments in the more than 25 hours of ads ordered. CBS Patriots-Chiefs game on Oct. 4, for example, was bumped to the next night. A sample of 22 affiliates booked \$607,000 of NFL-related orders for that day, much of which will be either shifted to a different timeslot, different market or cancelled altogether[66].

National Trump spending breakdown

Programming <small>Total no. of airings (No. of unique spots)</small>	Estimated Spend	Impressions
NFL <small>34 (8)</small>	\$5.03m	69.91m
MLB <small>2 (2)</small>	\$74.6k	438.23k
College Football <small>2 (1)</small>	\$31.18k	331.63k
WWE <small>2 (1)</small>	\$47.09k	1.7m
Fútbol Mexicano Primera División (Spanish) <small>2 (1)</small>	\$28.61k	975.68k

Source: iSpot.tv • Get the data • Created with Datawrapper

National Biden spending breakdown

Programming <small>Total no. of airings (No. of unique spots)</small>	Estimated Spend	Impressions
NFL <small>68 (12)</small>	\$18.31m	241.38m
NBA <small>12 (6)</small>	\$753.76k	23.3m
College Football <small>14 (3)</small>	\$430.75k	5.4m
NWSL <small>4 (3)</small>	\$86.72k	1.35m
Fútbol UEFA Súper Copa (Spanish) <small>2 (1)</small>	\$84.31k	223.88k

Source: iSpot.tv • Get the data • Created with Datawrapper

Concluding Observations

65. Beginning with the Miami Heat’s stand after Trayvon Martin’s murder and the 49ers Colin Kaepernick’s public and widely-debated kneel, many athletes have re-entered the world of politics and demonstrated that they have no intention to leave. Walking in the footsteps of Wilma Rudolph, Bill Russell, John Carols, Tommie Smith, Muhammad Ali and many others, athletes are changing the terms of the debate, showing that their actions won’t be confined to the pitch, the court, the track, or the ice but rather that they are invested in anti-racist, pro-LGBTI, and feminist politics and action.

66. In 2020, after a ground-swell of actions in sport at all levels, athletes making political statements, taking political positions, and engaging in political action has become acceptable. Politics in sport is now ordinary.

67. But athletes are not content to merely make political statements. They are also willing to risk their careers and their pay-checks in order to take a stand. When the NBA, which has a no-strike clause, held a wildcat strike, athletes risked fines and action from the league as well as backlash from fans. Similarly, when the San Diego Loyal left the pitch to protest anti-gay slurs, they left behind their chance at a postseason.

68. The 2020 presidential election could be the most important in the US’s history. With massive economic suffering, retrograde domestic policies that hurt working families, a failed response to the global pandemic, and a

[64] Hoyle, B. (2020). The Guardian. 12 October 2020: 30.
 [65] Broughton, D. (2020). Presidential ad spend reaches \$41.1 million. Sports Business Journal 12 October 2020.
 [66] Broughton, D. (2020). Presidential ad spend reaches \$41.1 million. Sports Business Journal 12 October 2020.

foreign policy in crisis, the decision to re-elect the current president would produce a US very different than the one prior to 2016. The voices and actions of athletes are and can continue to be powerful antidotes to conservative media outlets, and be a visible part of a collective conscience of the country, modelling for others what people can do in an environment that often feels paralyzing.

69. Significant components of mainstream sport support significant social change. As one former Olympian put it:

“My perception is that while the capitalists cartels are losing public support, the athletes are gaining it; they are no longer portrayed as renegades or selfish millionaires in the media, but selfless champions of justice.”

70. It was Mandela who told us that it always seems impossible until it is done. When Nelson Mandela was released from prison and came to the United States for the first time, the first-person Mandela wanted to meet was Arthur Ashe. One of the last things the tennis player and civil and human rights activist did before he died was to urge, then President Clinton, to appoint a pro-Civil Rights Justice in the Supreme Court. Ashe successfully blurred the lines between athleticism, politics and struggle for human rights. An athlete helping to challenge and change the narrative.

71. The time and context maybe different today but the need for athletes to use the space, profile, platform and opportunity given to them to make a difference is needed as much as ever.

Sports Observation Editors

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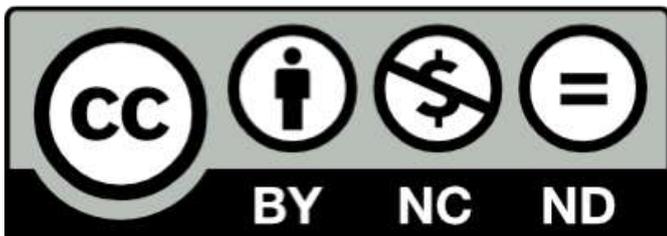
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