

The 2000 Olympics: a comment on the behavior of the US sprinters

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Thirty-two years ago, on October 16, 1968, an action by two black US sprinters at the Mexico City Olympics shook the sporting world and to this day remains a symbol of the struggle against oppression.

Tommie Smith and John Carlos, the gold and bronze medalists in the men's 200-meter race, took their places on the podium for the medal ceremony barefooted and wearing civil rights buttons, lowered their heads and each defiantly raised a black-gloved fist as the *Star Spangled Banner* was played.

The two athletes, members of the Olympic Project for Human Rights, directed their protest against US racism and the hypocrisy of the American government on human rights. Their act won the sympathy and respect of innumerable young people, including the author of this article.

The stand taken by Carlos and Smith was widely interpreted as a challenge to those in power in America. Olympic officials and US politicians certainly felt threatened. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) demanded disciplinary action. Within 30 hours of the protest, the athletes were suspended and placed on a plane back to America by the USOC (United States Olympic Committee).

After the suspension of Carlos and Smith, Peter Norman, the Australian sprinter who came in second in the 200-meter race, and Martin Jellinghaus, a member of the German bronze medal-winning 1600-meter relay team, also wore "Olympic Project for Human Rights" buttons at the games to show support for the banished American sprinters.

At this summer's Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia, the post-performance demonstration by the US men's 4x100 meter relay team also left an indelible memory. This exhibition, however, was of a quite different character. The gold medal victors in the event—Maurice Greene, Jon Drummond, Brian Lewis and Bernard Williams—created a circus atmosphere after their win that was as crass as it was backward. They preened, flexed their muscles and generally played the fool for the crowd. While Greene was on the podium he continued the clownish act, repeatedly sticking out his tongue for the benefit of the cameras. The general behavior of the sprinters—lording it over their opponents in a taunting and self-congratulatory manner—was the opposite of what the Olympics are supposed to be about: international friendship and solidarity.

The treatment meted out to the members of the 2000 relay team was considerably different than that received by Carlos and Smith. On October 13 the national governing body for US track and field

events, USA Track & Field (USATF), issued an apology on behalf of the four sprinters and announced it planned to establish new guidelines to avoid "regrettable" displays in the future.

USATF officials stated the Sydney incident was "especially disconcerting" because Drummond, Williams, Lewis and Greene were "conscientious representatives of American track and field and proud Americans." A spokesperson for the association stated the four sprinters would not face sanctions for their behavior.

The four sprinters were not the only athletes to act disrespectfully toward their rivals. US hurdler James Carver, while running in a preliminary heat, arrogantly reached his arm back egging his competitors to catch up to him as he passed them in his event. Swimmer Amy Van Dyken repeatedly spit in the lanes of her opponents before heats. The men's basketball team, dubbed Dream Team III, continued the tradition of bad-mouthing and taunting their opponents.

How does one account for the sharp differences in the conduct of Olympic athletes between 1968 and today? Is the deterioration in behavior simply a result of the different individuals involved or are their subjective qualities rooted in social processes?

The actions of Carlos and Smith emerged from a definite sociopolitical environment, a broad-based radicalization that occurred in the late 1960s, particularly among young people. The two were no doubt influenced by the civil rights movement, the urban unrest, the mass opposition to the Vietnam War and the spread of various radical ideologies—from Maoism to black nationalism.

The late 1960s was a period of political crisis and unrest in America and internationally. The May-June 1968 general strike in France witnessed one of the greatest mobilizations of the working masses in history. In the US from 1964 to 1967 rioting exploded in major cities. Frustrations over the inability of the civil rights movement to resolve the problems of poverty and racial discrimination led to the growth of black-power movements, such as the Black Panther Party. In April 1968, just six months before the Olympics, over 100 cities erupted in violence following the assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.

The period was dominated by protest politics, based on the illusion that the government could be pressured to carry out the will of the people. Nonetheless, millions were prepared to sacrifice and suffer because they wanted to change the world for the better.

This massive upsurge was sabotaged and betrayed by the Stalinist, Social Democratic and trade union bureaucracies. Their

actions gave the ruling classes, led by figures such as Thatcher and Reagan, the opportunity to launch a counteroffensive. The protracted decay of the old workers organizations, combined with an ideological attack on all socially progressive thought and action, has laid the basis for some of the present difficulties. Masses of people feel abandoned and bereft of any sense of alternative to the status quo.

These phenomena have had a corrosive effect on all layers of society. Commercialization of sport, even so-called “amateur” sport, has also developed apace. The best known athletes in the US rake in millions, even tens of millions of dollars a year. All this has helped produce among many sports figures—who are not encouraged to be thoughtful at the best of times—extraordinary arrogance and selfishness, as well as patriotism and chauvinism, which have the additional benefit of being bankable in the current climate.

A graphic example of this tendency was revealed in an article published in June in the *Washington Post* about HSI, a sports group which has attracted some of the biggest names in track and field. Greene and his fellow sprinters belong to HSI, as does sprinter Ato Bolton of Trinidad. The group's philosophy is the “brash in-your-face” outlook that has become popular in American sports.

The “H” and “S” in the organization's name come from the two founders of the group, attorney and business agent Emmanuel K. Hudson and track coach John Smith.

The *Post* article makes it clear that preening and strutting have been long-standing practices of the group, practiced in an attempt to intimidate and demean rivals. “‘There's a certain attitude you have to have even to be a member of HSI,’ stated Jon Drummond.”

At several meets this year, including the June event at which Greene set a new record in the 100 meter dash, HSI sprinters have draped HSI flags around them as they glare and trash-talk other runners. Hudson admitted that while other athletes do not like their antics, he and Smith encourage it. “We don't apologize at all,” he said.

In the *Post*, Hudson, who handles all of the business deals, boasted of HSI's athletic and financial success. Its most successful members, like Maurice Greene, earn salaries in the seven figures. Greene has business relationships with Coca-Cola's Powerade and Konami, a Tokyo video-game maker. Before the Olympics, Greene also signed a contract to place his photograph on commemorative boxes of Kellogg's cereal. The sprinter drives a Mercedes Benz with a vanity plate that reads “MO-GOLD.” He wears a T-shirt proclaiming himself “Pheno-MO-nal.”

In the behavior and personalities of Maurice Greene and Tommie Smith we see a contrast between two periods and two social outlooks.

Contacted in 1998, 30 years after his protest, Smith reaffirmed his beliefs. “I have no regrets,” he stated. “I will never have any regrets. We were there to stand up for human rights and to stand up for black Americans. We wanted to make them better in the United States.”

In 1968, far from discussing their personal fortunes, the athletes, according to John Carlos, considered boycotting the games. They opted against this because too much hard work had gone into

preparing for the event. They decided that the best course of action would be to leave it to each individual to decide how he would respond if he won. Carlos said that he and Smith felt their principles were more important than medals.

“The people you run for—the officials—overshadow you with their political ambitions, with the *face* they want *you* to put on your country,” stated Carlos. “The Olympics is nothing but a full political scene—everything in world athletics is,” he continued. “You tell a kid the Olympics is the highest form of athletics. That it's man against man, soul against soul. But when you get to the Games it's all different from what you've been told all your life. It's country against country, ideology against ideology. The Olympics would be beautiful if they just let the athletes get together and run together, instead of having us all stand up on some podium so the world can count how many medals each country won.”

It should be noted that in society as a whole today and even within the sports world there are powerful countervailing tendencies. There are many signs that growing numbers of young people are disgusted with the state of American society—social inequality, militarism, the dominance by corporate power. This is just a foretaste of what is to come, particularly when the stock market boom ends and the basic realities of capitalist social life impress themselves on wide layers of the population.

The US athletes are not monsters. They're uncritically reflecting the prevailing ethos of individualism and “winning at any cost.” (In a television interview, Greene seemed like a perfectly decent individual.) The fact that their behavior disgusted a good many of the Olympic competitors is a healthy sign. And, in any event, there were many examples of athletes at the Sydney games, American and otherwise, acting generously, congratulating rivals and embracing one another.

Sportsmen and women reflect the complex political and ideological forces that exist in society. The modern Olympics have always contained corrupt and even reactionary elements. They have never taken place in a social vacuum. But there is no question that the views of Smith and Carlos emerged out of a growing, although politically diffuse, opposition to capitalism—an opposition that included the rejection of personal aggrandizement and sought to raise social consciousness. The revival of a socialist culture will not leave sports untouched.

Sports can be a celebration of the best humanity has to offer, of man's overcoming physical and psychological barriers. But for it to be that requires a higher social consciousness, incompatible with nationalism and selfish individualism.



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