

Peter Norman 1942-2006

Australian athlete supported American civil rights struggle

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Thirty eight years ago, on October 16, 1968, the medals ceremony at the Mexico Olympics was converted into a symbolic demonstration of the struggle against oppression.

US black sprinters Tommy Smith and John Carlos, respectively first and third in the men's 200 metres, defiantly raised clenched fist salutes as the American national anthem played. Their stand in support of civil rights and against racism reverberated internationally. The photograph of their protest has become one of the most recognised images in the world, after that of the first moon landing.

The unexpected silver medalist, 26-year-old Australian Peter Norman, wore a button of the "Olympic Project for Human Rights"—a civil rights protest movement set up by black athlete Harry Edwards before the Games—in support of his two fellow athletes.

Norman died on October 3 of a heart attack. In a moving tribute, Smith and Carlos flew to Australia to deliver eulogies at his funeral in Melbourne on October 9. They recounted how they asked him, as they walked through the tunnel to the medals ceremony, whether he supported them in the action they intended to take. Norman replied that he agreed with human rights for everybody and would stand with them.

As a well-wisher leant over the barrier to shake Smith's hand, the three athletes asked him for his Olympic project badge. Norman pinned it on and wore it in support of the demonstration on the dais. Norman told reporters at Mexico: "I believe in civil rights. Every man is born equal and should be treated that way."

Carlos told mourners: "Not every young white individual would have the gumption, the nerve, the backbone to stand there. Peter never flinched. He never turned his eyes, he never turned his head. He never said so much as 'ouch'. You guys have lost a great soldier."

Norman's funeral became a poignant reaffirmation of the significance of that day. The dignified presence of Smith and

Carlos underlined the trio's principled stand in 1968. As they led the pallbearers in carrying out his coffin, accompanied by the theme from "Chariots of Fire", Smith and Carlos demonstrated an enduring bond of international friendship and solidarity.

The effect on all those present was palpable. As Norman's wife Jan reflected later: "It felt as though he would sit up in his coffin and say that he agreed with this."

The period 1968 to 1975 was tumultuous. It saw mass movements of workers in country after country, including the United States and Australia. During the 1960s, riots had rocked US cities. Six months before the Mexico Olympics, Martin Luther King's assassination provoked further unrest across America. In May-June 1968, French workers staged a general strike that almost brought down the De Gaulle government.

The demonstration on the podium was bound up with the experiences that the three young athletes underwent as part of these upheavals, and the radicalisation that occurred among young people around the world. All three came from working class backgrounds.

In contrast to the current glorification of individualism and financial success, where talented athletes are turned into high-priced commodities, they stood on principle at the Olympics—and paid for it. The US Olympic Committee, under pressure from the international body, expelled Smith and Carlos from the Games. Their lives and careers in international athletics were blighted from then on.

Norman also suffered official chastisement. Australian Olympic official Ray Weinberg told the funeral that although Norman qualified in every respect for the 1972 Munich Olympics, he was deliberately passed over when the Australian team was selected.

USA Track and Field official Steve Simmons told the funeral of his anger when he realised that Norman had been ignored and was not even attending the 2000 Sydney Olympics. He arranged for Peter and Jan Norman to attend,

giving up his hotel room for them and bunking in with the coach.

Jan Norman said: “Steve Simmons thought no-one here in Australia was taking any interest. That is when I first really felt what Peter represented to them. They treated us like royalty. I was almost asleep at the Olympic events—we had been to so many functions. We met Jesse Owens’s granddaughter, who said she was honoured to meet Peter Norman. That is when I got the first inkling of how they regarded it.”

Jesse Owens was the black American athlete who won four gold medals, including for the 200-metre sprint, at Hitler’s 1936 Berlin Olympics, famously confounding Nazi racial theories. Owens supported the 1968 stance taken by Smith and Carlos.

Letter writers to newspapers pointed out that Australian Prime Minister John Howard did not rush to Peter Norman’s funeral as he had to that of millionaire “crocodile hunter” Steve Irwin. Yet Norman still holds the Australian record for the 200 metres, at 20.06 seconds, and that time would have won gold at the Sydney Olympics. When a movie of his blistering last 50 metre run in Mexico was screened at the funeral, the audience burst into spontaneous applause.

October 9 was proclaimed Peter Norman Day by USA Track and Field, an unprecedented honor. Olympic athlete Michael Johnson sent a message to the funeral. “I came to know about Peter Norman when I became a huge admirer and fan of Tommy Smith and John Carlos, not only for what these men accomplished athletically, but for the courage and bravery they displayed in standing up for what they believed in on the medal podium at the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City.

“Having read much about the story I gained respect for Peter Norman, an Australian athlete far removed from the controversial issues that Smith and Carlos were protesting, who decided to cooperate with the protest.... They all could have selfishly celebrated their many years of hard work and the culmination of that hard work leading to success in Mexico City. Instead they decided to use that moment to bring attention to a greater cause. Peter Norman was not only a great athlete but a great individual.”

The hundreds of mourners reflected Norman’s wide range of interests, including various sporting groups and his work as an actor in a theatre restaurant troupe known as Circle Players. Dozens of teachers came from secondary schools in Melbourne’s western suburbs—colleagues from Norman’s years as a physical education teacher, as well as those of his wife.

One of the pallbearers, Colin Stevens, an art teacher who knew Norman for over 35 years, said: “I’ve never been interested in sport; I never really thought about his Olympic

record. I just regarded him as a friend I could rely on if ever I was in trouble.”

Norman worked for 20 years as a teacher at Williamstown Technical School, where he was a union activist in the technical teachers’ union, and was often selected as a spokesman for union delegations. On one occasion when teachers were on strike at the same time as workers from the neighbouring Williamstown Naval Dockyards, Norman spoke to a mass meeting of dockyard workers as a representative of the teachers, bringing a message of solidarity in the same town hall where his funeral was held.

Trade union participation by teachers then was the norm, with strikes and demonstrations connected with a desire to make decent education a right for everybody. From the 1980s, the degeneration of the unions saw them and the state and federal Labor governments inflict defeat after defeat on the working class.

As militancy subsided in the schools, earlier gains were wound back. Although the photograph of his run in the Mexico Olympics had pride of place in the school hall, Norman’s teacher training qualifications were questioned and he was summarily dismissed from teaching. He was forced to revert to his former trade as a butcher. However he was able to fight back and achieve reinstatement at Melton Technical School, where he worked for a short period before being employed by the Department of Youth, Sport and Recreation.

Last year, San Jose State University commemorated the Mexico demonstration with a statue, and Norman attended the unveiling ceremony. He was unconcerned that the statue excluded him, and this was bound up with his unassuming attitude toward his own part in 1968. “I was only a pebble thrown into deep, still waters,” he told Smith at the time.

Norman is survived by five children—Janita, Sandy and Gary from his first marriage, and Belinda and Emma from his second.

Norman’s nephew Matt has made a film about his uncle’s life. When the web site for the movie was linked with Google after Norman’s death, the site received 850,000 hits in a week, with many people sending messages of condolence. This statistic alone indicates that popular consciousness is stirring, and there is a deep interest in egalitarian principles, despite the never-ending media barrage to reduce sport and every other aspect of social life to grasping self-interest.



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