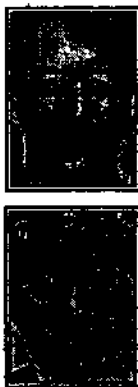


GUEST COMMENT

Athletes deserve to be heard on significant political issues

By KELLY CANDAELE
AND PETER DREIER



Not a week goes by without either President George W. Bush or Democratic challenger John Kerry attempting to show how much athletics is part of his life.

The day before the Democratic convention began in Boston, Kerry visited Fenway Park to throw

out the first pitch at a Red Sox-Yankees game.

While Kerry was there, Bush let the press know that he had called Lance Armstrong to congratulate him on his sixth straight Tour de France cycling title. The president will undoubtedly invite the NBA champion Detroit Pistons to visit the White House soon, which will produce friendly photos and benign commentary.

On and off the field, sports and politics are inextricably linked. In recent years, pundits have identified key voting blocs as "soccer moms" and "NASCAR dads." Many team owners regard political involvement as essential to doing business. They contribute to both Republicans and Democrats; invite elected officials to sit next to them at games; and lobby city, state and federal officeholders on legislation and tax breaks for new stadiums.

Pistons' owner William Davidson, chief executive officer of Guardian Industries, gave more than \$72,000 from 1999-2003 to political candidates, political action committees and officeholders, according to Federal Election Commission data compiled by the Center for Responsive Politics. During that period, the owners and executives of National Basketball Association, National Football League, and Major League Baseball teams gave

more than \$1.2 million in campaign contributions.

In contrast, most professional athletes stay on the political sidelines.

Despite their wealth, very few make campaign campaigns. Records show that since 1999, only two players from Detroit's pro teams made contributions to federal officeholders: Lions' defensive end Robert Porcher, \$2,000 to U.S. Sen. John Edwards, and Red Wings goalie Curtis Joseph, \$500 to President Bush.

But money is only one way for athletes to express political views. They also can use their celebrity.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s several athletes wore their political values on their uniform sleeves. Pro-football linebacker Dave Meggyesy had his career ended prematurely after he spoke out against the war in Vietnam. Tennis great Arthur Ashe campaigned against South African apartheid well before that became a popular movement. Ashe's tennis colleague Billie Jean King spoke out for a woman's right to choose. And Muhammad Ali, who is beloved now but only in retrospect, was stripped of his boxing title because of his stand against the Vietnam War.

Today, Hollywood celebrities frequently lend their fame and fortune to candidates and causes, but athletes are expected to perform, not pontificate.

There are some exceptions. L.A. Laker Karl Malone has lent his name and face to the National Rifle Association's "I'm the NRA" campaign. Earlier this year, Minneapolis Timberwolves guard Fred Hoiberg endorsed Democrat Edwards for president.

When he's not playing center for the Golden State Warriors, Adonal Foyle is frequently speaking at high schools, colleges and conferences about the corrupting role of big money in politics, as part of a grassroots group he founded, Democracy Matters.

A few prominent athletes have

publicly expressed sentiments against the war in Iraq. Dallas Mavericks guard Steve Nash wore a T-shirt to media day during the NBA's All-Star weekend that said "No War — Shoot for Peace." Several sports columnists criticized Nash for speaking his mind, one saying he should "just shut up and play."

Since last season, Toronto Blue Jays first baseman Carlos Delgado has faced the boos of some fans and attacks by some sportswriters for quietly protesting the war by staying in the dugout while "God Bless America" is played during the seventh-inning stretch.

Nevertheless, athletes who have strong opinions should take the initiative to speak out on the issues. In this election year, there will be many opportunities to address war and peace, environmental degradation, civil liberties and the growing gap between the rich and poor.

So, when President Bush has the Pistons to the White House, it would be appropriate — and interesting — if some players reminded him about the plight of Detroit and other urban areas. They might point out that the Detroit area has lost over 57,000 private sector jobs since Bush took office in January 2001.

Some sportswriters and fans might criticize this kind of protest as an unwarranted "political act" or an attempt to upstage the president. But allowing the president to use the Pistons as a prop during his re-election campaign is no less political.

Athletes are not children — to be seen but not heard. Many are well-informed and have strong opinions. Let's hear them.

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