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Where Are the Jocks for Justice?

Cultural changes and lucrative endorsements may explain a drop in activism.

Peter Dreier and Kelly Candaele June 10, 2004 | This article appeared in the June 28, 2004 edition of *The Nation*.

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Adonal Foyle, 29, is a 6-foot, 10-inch center for the NBA's Golden State Warriors. Like most pro athletes, he spent his youth perfecting his game, hoping for a shot at big-time sports. But off the court he's an outspoken critic of America's political system. "This mother of all democracies," Foyle insists, "is one of the most corrupt systems, where a small minority make the decisions for everybody else."

Co-author Kelly Candaele's mother played for the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League in the 1940s, and his brother Casey played ten years in the major leagues.

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Kelly Candaele is a writer, a founding member of the Peace Institute at California State University, Chico, and a...

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Three years ago Foyle started a grassroots group called Democracy Matters (www.democracymatters.org). Its goal is to educate young people about politics, mobilize them to vote and bring pressure on elected officials to reform the nation's campaign finance laws. When he's not playing basketball, Foyle is frequently speaking at high schools, colleges and conferences about the corrupting role of big money in politics. "I have lots of support [from fellow players] and I explain to them a lot what I'm doing," says Foyle. "The players understand that I want people to be excited about the political system."

Foyle's activism is rare in the world of professional sports. Many athletes visit kids in hospitals, start foundations that fix inner-city playgrounds, create scholarship funds to help poor students attend college and make commercials urging kids to stay in school and say no to drugs. But when it comes to political dissent, few speak out on big issues like war, sweatshop labor, environmental concerns or the increasing gap between rich and poor. While Hollywood celebrities frequently lend their fame and fortune to candidates and causes, athletes are expected to perform, not pontificate. On the few occasions when they do express themselves, they are often met with derision and contempt.

Last year, for example, just before the United States invaded 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. Numerous sports columnists criticized Nash for speaking his mind. (One wrote that he should "just shut up and play.") David Robinson, an Annapolis graduate and former naval officer, and then center for the San Antonio Spurs, said that Nash's attire was inappropriate. Flip Saunders, coach of the NBA's Minnesota Timberwolves, told the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*: "What opinions you have, it's important to keep them to yourselves." Since then, no other major pro athlete has publicly expressed antiwar sentiments.

Although political activism has never been widespread

Peter Dreier and Donald Cohen
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Peter Dreier and Donald Cohen

among pro athletes, Foyle is following in the footsteps of some courageous jocks. After breaking baseball's color line in 1947, Jackie Robinson was outspoken against racial segregation during and after his playing career, despite being considered too angry and vocal by many sportswriters, owners and fellow players. During the 1960s and '70s some prominent athletes used their celebrity status to speak out on key issues, particularly civil rights and Vietnam. The most well-known example, boxing champion Muhammad Ali, publicly opposed the war and refused induction into the Army in 1967, for which he was stripped of his heavyweight title and sentenced to five years in prison (he eventually won an appeal in the Supreme Court and didn't serve any time). Today he is among the world's most admired people, but at the time sportswriters and politicians relentlessly attacked him.

Many others were also unafraid to wear their values on their uniforms--and sometimes paid the price. Coaches and team executives told Dave Meggyesy, an All-Pro linebacker for the St. Louis Cardinals in the late 1960s, that his antiwar views were detrimental to his team and his career. As he recounts in his memoir *Out of Their League*, Meggyesy refused to back down, was consequently benched, and retired at age 28 while still in his athletic prime. Tennis great Arthur Ashe campaigned against apartheid well before the movement gained widespread support. Bill Russell led his teammates on boycotts of segregated facilities while starring for the Boston Celtics. Olympic track medalists John Carlos and Tommie Smith created an international furor with their Black Power salute at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, which hurt their subsequent professional careers. When St. Louis Cardinals catcher Ted Simmons came to the majors from the University of Michigan in 1967, some teammates were taken aback by his shaggy hair and the peace symbols on his bat, but they couldn't argue with his All-Star play. In 1972, almost a year before the Supreme Court's landmark *Roe v. Wade* ruling, tennis star Billie Jean King was one of fifty-three women to sign an ad in the first issue of *Ms.* magazine boldly proclaiming, "We Have Had Abortions." Washington Redskins lineman Ray Schoenke organized 400 athletes to support George McGovern's 1972 antiwar presidential campaign despite the fact that his coach, George Allen, was a close friend of McGovern's opponent, Richard Nixon.

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