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The Evolution of Protest and Social Movements in the National Basketball Association from the
Mid-20th Century to the Present Day

By
Luke Messersmith

Abstract

For my thesis, I focus on the National Basketball Association (NBA) and the evolution of how its personnel—players, coaches, refs, owners, etc.—navigated racism, politics, social injustice, platform utilization, and other pressing topics from the mid-1900s to the present day. Monumental players that used their platform in the NBA to inspire change include Bill Russell (1960s), Kareem-Abdul Jabbar (1970s), Craig Hodges (1990s), and LeBron James (2010s). These men and many others risked their images, and in some cases, their NBA careers, in order to protest, march, boycott, and kneel for causes they believed in, such as the civil rights movement and accountability for police brutality. Covering the period from the 1950s to the 2010s, this project covers protest and the reaction to protest in the NBA. After outlining the history of protest in sport as well as the creation of basketball and the NBA in the introductory chapter, the next two chapters cover the role of NBA personnel in protest and social change. Chapter two covers issues including segregation, the civil rights movement, and police brutality, as well as the roles of Elgin Baylor, Bill Russell, and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar in their endeavors to motivate social reform through their writings, public speeches, and protests against discrimination. The section will also discuss the civil rights movement and major events surrounding it such as Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. The other sources used throughout include articles from the *Chicago Defender*, *New York Times*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Los Angeles Times*, and more. The third and final chapter covers the Rodney King beating and the reaction to it, as well as the specific NBA players in the 1990s who were dedicated activists such as Craig Hodges and Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf. The second part of chapter three will examine big events in the 2000s and present-day including the 2004 Piston-Pacers Brawl and 2020 NBA Playoffs

bubble boycott. The impacts of key figures in this era such as LeBron James and Adam Silver are covered at the end of the last chapter.

First Chapter

When someone mentions protests in sports, most people born after the year 1990 immediately think of Colin Kaepernick. But, unbeknownst to many, protest in sports has been going on for decades prior and isn't likely to stop any time soon. Protests can be inspired by a plethora of reasons including racially or politically motivated rationales and agendas. Whether it be in foreign countries during the Olympics or in the most well-known sports cities in the United States, American athletes—most commonly African-American athletes—have held protests during their sporting event or game, often motivated by a fight for equality and/or change.

Mounting protest during a sporting event can cost an athlete their salary, and in some extreme cases, their whole career. Even athletes playing in major American leagues sports during the 2010s have been “blackballed,” or secretly banned from the league for this reason. Yet, many still take this risk in order to stand up for what they feel is right. Athletes can protest in several ways, including kneeling during their country's national anthem, refusing to suit up for a game, or just letting their athletic performance do the talking. According to Clare Press, author of *Rise and Resist*, “Challenging ruling power structures takes courage and it can be dangerous...Protesters can face imprisonment, unemployment, eviction. They might risk trolling, ridicule, social isolation, or being disowned by the family. They also, of course, risk winning. Through their actions, they might reverse injustices, usher in fair regimes. They might change the world.”¹

The first notable sports protest that occurred in the twentieth century was orchestrated by long jumper Peter O'Connor in 1906 at the Olympic Games in Athens. Three Irish competitors arrived at the Games and learned they were not allowed to represent Ireland due to a rule

¹ Press, Clare. *Rise & Resist: How to Change the World*. Melbourne University Press, 2018, P. 7.

technicality. Even worse from the perspective of the Irishmen was that they had to represent Britain instead.² O'Connor finished second after a dispute with a biased judge and he had to stand with his silver medal, on the podium, under a British flag. The long jumper was not going to stand for this, and allegedly, "O'Connor used his jumping prowess to scale up the flagpole, holding out the Erin go Bragh flag to replace its British counterpart and becoming one of the first people to ever bring politics into sports in such a manner."³ "Erin go Bragh" translates to "Ireland Forever," and O'Connor never competed in another Olympic Games again after Athens. Nevertheless, his protest during a sporting event was as historic as it was revolutionary.⁴

Although this protest was centered around a dispute of nationality representation, the most common protest seen in the U.S. the past 100 years has been focused on racial conflict. Racial conflict has appeared in numerous sports since their creation, and one major sport that saw this during the mid 1950s was tennis. Althea Gibson was a pioneer for African-American athletes in America, specifically colored women, becoming the first black player to compete in and win the U.S. Nationals tennis tournament.⁵ Gibson received the same treatment as other black athletes during the mid 1950s, often being rejected from staying in hotels or denied luncheon reservations for events held in her honor.⁶ She also claims to have felt enormous pressure representing black Americans in a sport that lacked diversity.⁷ Although Gibson did not

² The Irish Times. "Pouring Oil on the Olympic Fire." The Irish Times, 24 Feb. 2013, <www.irishtimes.com/culture/pouring-oil-on-the-olympic-fire-1.1142750>.

³ The Irish Times. "Pouring Oil on the Olympic Fire." The Irish Times, 24 Feb. 2013, <www.irishtimes.com/culture/pouring-oil-on-the-olympic-fire-1.1142750>.

⁴ The Irish Times. "Pouring Oil on the Olympic Fire." The Irish Times, 24 Feb. 2013, <www.irishtimes.com/culture/pouring-oil-on-the-olympic-fire-1.1142750>.

⁵ Thomas, Robert. An Unlikely Champion. The New York Times, 29 Sept. 2003, <www.nytimes.com/2003/09/29/sports/an-unlikely-champion.html>.

⁶ Thomas, Robert. An Unlikely Champion. The New York Times, 29 Sept. 2003, <www.nytimes.com/2003/09/29/sports/an-unlikely-champion.html>.

⁷ "Althea Gibson." Encyclopedia Britannica, <www.britannica.com/biography/Althea-Gibson>.

mobilize protests or boycotts herself, Billie Jean King claimed Althea Gibson paved the path for other African-American players such as Arthur Ashe to participate in these major tennis tournaments and promote racial integration and equality via their tennis ability.

Often viewed as the greatest African American male tennis player in history, Arthur Ashe is the only black man ever to win the singles title at Wimbledon, the US Open, and the Australian Open.⁸ As Ashe became more popular and established in the athletic world, he felt he had to become more involved in the civil rights movement and spoke out about public issues, partially motivated by guilt due to his inaction earlier in his career. According to *History.com*'s Raymond Arsenault, "during the year preceding his Open victory, Ashe had experienced a social and political awakening that opened his mind and spirit to the task of bringing liberty and justice to an imperfect world burdened by racism, poverty and the legacy of colonialism. Amidst the turmoil of 1968, he found his public voice...he became passionately engaged in the struggle for racial and social justice."⁹

The most significant of Ashe's contributions towards racial progress stemmed from his relationship with the country of South Africa and fighting apartheid. Apartheid was a set of laws that upheld segregationist policies against citizens of color, and these laws began to be enforced once the National Party came into power in South Africa in 1948. The legislation meant Black residents were forced to live in different areas than whites and use different public facilities. The legislation did not begin to be repealed until 1990 and it likely would have taken longer had it not been for black activists such as Ashe. Starting around the 1960s, South Africa began to be

⁸ "Arthur Ashe: Class of 1979." HOF Inductees, VSHF, <web.archive.org/web/20101130130504/vshfm.com/hall/induct_ashe.html>.

⁹ Arsenault, Raymond. "How Arthur Ashe Transformed Tennis-and Athlete Activism." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 10 Sept. 2018, <www.history.com/news/arthur-ashe-black-tennis-champion-us-open-activism-courage>.

shunned by other nations for their apartheid policies, and in 1962, the United Nations even passed a resolution calling for a complete boycott of South Africa.¹⁰ South Africa was banned from participating in the Olympic Games and FIFA World Cup starting in 1964, but Ashe still sought out a visa in 1969 to participate in the South African Open tennis tournament. He was rejected for a few years and used it as a way to publicize the injustice, even testifying before a House Foreign Affairs subcommittee looking into potential action against South Africa.¹¹ Sadly, he received little support from his white competitors; however, finally, in 1973, “with South Africa facing considerable international political and economic pressure, Ashe was finally granted a visa for the South Africa Open, but he refused to play unless seating for his matches was unsegregated — a condition that was granted.”¹² Ashe was not done trying to promote change in the country, and a decade later in 1983, he teamed up with singer Harry Belafonte to found Artists and Athletes Against Apartheid, an organization that advocated for sanctions against the South African government.¹³ By the time his health began to decline due to HIV, Ashe was widely respected as a significant civil rights activist. Following his tragic death in 1993 at the age of 49, the Arthur Ashe Courage Award was created, and “although it is a sport-oriented award, it is not limited to sports-related people or actions, as it is presented annually to individuals whose contributions ‘transcend sports’.”¹⁴

¹⁰ “Apartheid, Exclusion and Ashe: South Africa's Complicated History in International Sports.” Arthur Ashe Legacy, 4 July 2010, <arthurashe.ucla.edu/2010/07/04/apartheid-exclusion-and-ashe-south-africas-complicated-history-in-international-sports/>.

¹¹ McDuffee, Allen. “When Arthur Ashe Fought to Play Tennis in Apartheid South Africa, He Faced Bitter Criticism.” Medium, Timeline, 29 Sept. 2017, <[timeline.com/arthur-ashe-south-africa-99c415a6aee2](https://medium.com/timeline.com/arthur-ashe-south-africa-99c415a6aee2)>.

¹² McDuffee, Allen. “When Arthur Ashe Fought to Play Tennis in Apartheid South Africa, He Faced Bitter Criticism.” Medium, Timeline, 29 Sept. 2017, <[timeline.com/arthur-ashe-south-africa-99c415a6aee2](https://medium.com/timeline.com/arthur-ashe-south-africa-99c415a6aee2)>.

¹³ Arsenault, Raymond. “How Arthur Ashe Transformed Tennis-and Athlete Activism.” History.com, A&E Television Networks, 10 Sept. 2018, <www.history.com/news/arthur-ashe-black-tennis-champion-us-open-activism-courage>.

¹⁴ Jenkins, Nash. “Caitlyn Jenner at the ESPY Awards: 'It's About What Happens From Here!'.” Time, 16 July 2015, <time.com/3960200/caitlyn-jenner-espys-espys-arthur-ashe-award-for-courage/>.

Ashe was not alone in his pursuit of racial justice during the mid-twentieth century, and another sporting event that has been subject to intermittent protests throughout its existence is the Olympic Games. 1968 was a tumultuous year for racial conflicts, and the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City were certainly no exception. Protests and boycotts were discussed leading up to the event, but the most significant protest that occurred was done by American track stars Tommie Smith and John Carlos. While on the podium after the two-hundred meter race, the gold medalist Smith and bronze medalist Carlos both put their heads down and raised their fists, a gesture intended to foster awareness for racial injustice and discrimination in the United States. Following the protest, at the press conference, Tommie Smith said “If I win I am an American, not a black American. But if I did something bad then they would say, a Negro. We are black and we are proud of being black.”¹⁵ The group that helped plan the protest during several meetings held prior to the summer of 1968 was named The Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR). OPHR was a group established by sociologist Dr. Harry Edwards in 1967 and the group included the most notable African-American athletes of the 1960s such as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (Lew Alcindor at the time), Smith, and Carlos. OPHR intended to boycott the 1968 Olympic Games if certain requests were not granted including restoring Muhammad Ali’s world heavyweight boxing title and banning South Africa from participating in the games. Some of their demands were met including the South African ban, however, Ali did not get his title restored until 1970.¹⁶ Nevertheless, Tommie Smith and John Carlos chose to participate in the games while Abdul-Jabbar passed, and their gesture on the podium was the result. The two

¹⁵ Chow, Kat. “A Brief History Of Racial Protest In Sports.” NPR, 2 Dec. 2014, <www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2014/12/02/367766230/a-brief-history-of-racial-protest-in-sports>.

¹⁶ Tower, Nikole. “Olympic Project for Human Rights Lit Fire for 1968 Protests.” Global Sport Matters, 19 Oct. 2020, <globalsportmatters.com/mexico/2018/10/08/olympic-project-for-human-rights-lit-fire-for-1968-protests/>.

runners were expelled from the 1968 Olympic Games for their protest and never ran for the U.S. track team again, a national team “blackball” essentially. As asked in an article published by *The Undeclared* regarding the 1968 Olympic Games boycotts and protests by many prominent black athletes, “How could [they] stay silent while police brutality, poverty and prejudice afflicted the black community?...How could they expect [them] to love America when America didn’t love [them] back?”¹⁷

1968 was not only a huge year for protest and boycott at the Olympic Games, but also for the protest against Vietnam War and conscription. Muhammad Ali—known as Cassius Clay prior to converting to Islam in 1964—was stripped of his heavyweight boxing title due to the fact that he refused to be inducted to the U.S. Army after being drafted, citing religious reasons. Although this was not a protest occurring during a sporting event, the refusal of one of America’s greatest black athletes to fight for his country's army was a political protest of monumental proportions. Ali grew up experiencing racism and the violence of Jim Crow, however, the boxer wanted to challenge conforming to the white man’s America. Ali contested a system that is still commonplace in American sports leagues today, the power struggle between the owners, the athletes, the promoters, and the fans. However, it was more racially charged during his era, and he even hired a black female lawyer to negotiate his contracts while simultaneously being nonconformist. Ali himself claimed, “Since the first day I became a fighter, I challenged the old system in which managers, promoters or owners looked upon fighters as brutes without brains. I’d known fighters to be the most human of humans and among the most

¹⁷ Smith, Johnny. “The Reign of Lew Alcindor in the Age of Revolt.” *The Undeclared*, 30 Mar. 2018, <theundefeated.com/features/lew-alcindor-kareem-abdul-jabbar-ucla-boycot-1968-olympics/>.

talented people to be found anywhere.”¹⁸ Part of his willingness to challenge societal norms likely led to his “unpopular” decision to refuse the Vietnam War draft.

In 1960, on his 18th birthday, Ali was classified as eligible for the draft, but, in 1964, after performing more tests at the Armed Forces Induction Center in Coral Gables, FL, he was reclassified as unqualified to serve. In conjunction with this, 1964 is the year that Ali proudly announced his conversion to Islam as well as his permanent name change. Surprisingly, the man who is most famous for being a Black Muslim in the United States, Malcolm X, claimed that Ali was “being used” by the Muslims.¹⁹ Nevertheless, Ali remained a proud Muslim and in 1966, he was reclassified again as being qualified to serve in the Armed Forces. Ali applied for draft deferment citing “the draft board was white to the “systematic inclusion” of African Americans.”²⁰ In addition to this deferment application, Ali labeled himself a “conscientious objector,” claiming that war and violence go against the religious teachings of the Quran. While discussing the topic, Ali infamously claimed, “Man, I ain't got no quarrel with them Viet Cong...Why should they ask me to put on a uniform and go ten thousand miles from home and drop bombs and bullets on brown people in Vietnam while so-called Negro people in Louisville are treated like dogs and denied simple human rights?”²¹ In the spring of 1967, Ali appeared in Houston for his draft induction, however, he refused to step forward after his name was called, and he was arrested and stripped of his boxing licenses and titles that very day.²² The protest by

¹⁸ Harrison, Benjamin T. “THE MUHAMMAD ALI DRAFT CASE AND PUBLIC DEBATE ON THE VIETNAM WAR.” *Peace Research*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2001, pp. 69–86. JSTOR, <www.jstor.org/stable/23608073>.

¹⁹ Harrison, Benjamin T. “THE MUHAMMAD ALI DRAFT CASE AND PUBLIC DEBATE ON THE VIETNAM WAR.” *Peace Research*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2001, pp. 69–86. JSTOR, <www.jstor.org/stable/23608073>.

²⁰ Harrison, Benjamin T. “THE MUHAMMAD ALI DRAFT CASE AND PUBLIC DEBATE ON THE VIETNAM WAR.” *Peace Research*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2001, pp. 69–86. JSTOR, <www.jstor.org/stable/23608073>.

²¹ Remnick, David, and Salman Rushdie. *King of the World: Muhammad Ali and the Rise of an American Hero*. Vintage Books, a Division of Penguin Random House LLC, 2016, pp. 287.

²² Roberts, Randy (1991). *Winning is the Only Thing: Sports in America Since 1945*. Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 171–172.

Ali inspired countless Americans of all races. Following his draft refusal, Ali became one of the most hated men in America, regularly receiving death threats and other forms of abuse.²³

However, he never backed down from fighting for what he believed in, and his political protest of the Vietnam War spurred fellow athletes, such as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and other OPHR members, as well as black Americans to do the same.

Throughout the history of the Olympic Games, athletes of many ethnocultural identities have faced barriers when trying to compete. One group that has been historically discriminated against are Jews. The most egregious example of discrimination against Jews at the Olympic Games occurred at the 1936 Summer Olympics hosted by the Hitler-led Nazi Regime in Berlin, Germany. These games were later recognized as one of the Nazi's greatest propaganda successes, as they covered-up their racist, discriminatory ideals by removing anti-Semitic signs throughout the country, while temporarily softening hateful public rhetoric.²⁴ In addition to this, the Nazi's hoped to use their success in the Olympics as a way to win over the hearts of the German people while also depicting Aryans as the superior race. Regardless of the Third Reich's best efforts to deceive foreign nations, several countries were still skeptical of participating in an Olympic Games held by the Nazi Regime. For one, the Germans "Aryan only" policies barred Jewish German athletes from participating in sporting competitions. Most notably, boxer Erich Seelig, tennis player Daniel Prenn, and high jumper Gretel Bergmann were all banned from representing Germany in world events.²⁵ Thus, boycotts were either held or considered in numerous parts of the globe in the years leading up to the 1936 Games, including Great Britain,

²³ Reemtsma, Jean (1999). *More Than a Champion: The Style of Muhammad Ali*. New York: Vintage, pp. 63.

²⁴ Krüger Arnd, and W. J. Murray. *The Nazi Olympics: Sport, Politics, and Appeasement in the 1930s*. University of Illinois Press, 2003.

²⁵ Krüger Arnd, and W. J. Murray. *The Nazi Olympics: Sport, Politics, and Appeasement in the 1930s*. University of Illinois Press, 2003.

France, Sweden, Czechoslovakia, and the Netherlands, but most significant were the disputes in the United States on whether or not Americans should attend. The doubt that had been cast over the United States' attendance in Berlin caused worry amongst the Nazis, given at that time that U.S. sent one of the largest teams, generating tremendous revenue in tourism from American spectators. In the end, the United States attended the 1936 Summer Olympics—49 total teams attended, the most in Olympic Games history at the time—and this can largely be accredited to the notorious Avery Brundage, former president of both the United States Olympic Committee (USOC, formerly known as AOC or American Olympic Committee) and the International Olympic Committee (IOC).

Avery Brundage was a former Olympic Games competitor and national track champion. Following retirement, Brundage became a sports administrator, quickly ascending through the ranks to become the USOC president in 1929, serving until 1953.²⁶ Responding to reports in 1933 on the persecution of Jewish athletes, Brundage claimed, “The very foundation of the modern Olympic revival will be undermined if individual countries are allowed to restrict participation by reason of class, creed, or race.”²⁷ However, amidst the barring of sport participation for athletes who were Jewish, Gypsy, or of African descent—groups Hitler and the Nazi viewed as “Untermenschen,” or subhuman—Brundage visited Germany to inspect the sports facilities and publicly declared the Games must go on as planned.²⁸ Unbeknownst to Brundage at the time, the Nazis put their resources into creating the illusion for Brundage's visit

²⁶ International Olympic Committee. “Avery Brundage.” Historical Archives, Olympic Studies Centre, 14 Apr. 2011, <stillmed.olympic.org/AssetsDocs/OSC%20Section/pdf/LRes_19E.pdf>.

²⁷ “THE MOVEMENT TO BOYCOTT THE BERLIN OLYMPICS OF 1936.” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Holocaust Encyclopedia, <encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-movement-to-boycott-the-berlin-olympics-of-1936>.

²⁸ “THE MOVEMENT TO BOYCOTT THE BERLIN OLYMPICS OF 1936.” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Holocaust Encyclopedia, <encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-movement-to-boycott-the-berlin-olympics-of-1936>.

that Jewish and non-Aryan athletes were being treated fairly.²⁹ Although Nazi Germany did their best to trick outsiders into viewing the country as tolerant and peaceful, many citizens and officials in the U.S., as well as other Western nations, saw right through the Nazi's facade.

The most influential advocate in America who called on the U.S. to boycott the 1936 Olympics was Judge Jeremiah Mahoney, president of the American Athletic Union (AAU) at the time. Mahoney was described as "a devout Irish-American Catholic known all his life for his stubborn opposition to racial and religious discrimination," and he fought his hardest to initiate a U.S. Olympic Games boycotting, fearing that U.S. participation would be seen as an endorsement of Hitler and the Nazis.³⁰ Brundage, known for his animosity towards those who integrated politics with sport, famously stated in response, "We actively combat the introduction of politics into the Olympic movement and are adamant against the use of the Olympic Games as a tool or as a weapon by any organization."³¹ In 1935, as the 1936 Olympic Games neared, Brundage even went as far as to say that a "Jewish-Communist conspiracy" was behind the effort to keep the United States from participating in the Nazi-hosted Olympics.³² His actions mirror those of certain news stations that currently operate in the U.S., the ones that promote outrageous conspiracy theories and advise athletes to stop bringing politics into sports. In the end, with some coaxing by Brundage, the AAU narrowly passed a vote to attend the Olympics in Berlin, and Brundage was offered a spot on the IOC of which he eventually became president.³³ As a result

²⁹ Marvin, Carolyn (April 1982). "Avery Brundage and American Participation in the 1936 Olympic Games". *Journal of American Studies*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, pp. 81–105.

³⁰ Schaap, Jeremy. "An Olympic Boycott That Almost Worked." *Olympic Sports*, ESPN, 13 Aug. 2009, <www.espn.com/olympics/news/story?id=4396362>.

³¹ Schaap, Jeremy. "An Olympic Boycott That Almost Worked." *Olympic Sports*, ESPN, 13 Aug. 2009, <www.espn.com/olympics/news/story?id=4396362>.

³² "THE MOVEMENT TO BOYCOTT THE BERLIN OLYMPICS OF 1936." United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, <encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-movement-to-boycott-the-berlin-olympics-of-1936>.

³³ Schaap, Jeremy. "An Olympic Boycott That Almost Worked." *Olympic Sports*, ESPN, 13 Aug. 2009, <www.espn.com/olympics/news/story?id=4396362>.

of his actions and public statements while serving different sports committees, Brundage is commonly viewed in modern times as an anti-Semite and racist; in the summer of 2020, the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco announced that it would remove its own bust of donor Avery Brundage from his place of honor.³⁴ Nevertheless, the United States participation in the 1936 Summer Olympics can be majorly attributed to Brundage, and it led to Jesse Owens historic performances in which he “protested” the Games by showcasing his superiority to his competition, both Aryan and non-Aryan runners.

Jesse Owens was an African American male who won 4 gold medals at the 1936 Summer Olympics, setting a record for the most gold medals won at a single Olympic Games that stood until 1984.³⁵ While staying in the Olympic village, German company Adidas met with Owens and he became the first black male athlete to ever receive a sponsorship. Initially, the Secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Walter Francis White, attempted to discourage Owens from participating in Games that promoted a racist regime. The NAACP persuaded Owen to publicly state that the U.S. should withdraw from the 1936 Olympics because racial discrimination was occurring against minorities in Germany, however, he still participated in the Games, overlooking Brundage’s label of the NAACP as an “un-American agitator” organization.³⁶ Although the Nazi Regime spoke harshly of both Jews and Blacks, they still had more hatred for the Jews. Owens was not originally supposed to run in four races, but he and fellow African American teammate Ralph Metcalfe ran in the 400-meter relay after being subbed in for Jewish-American teammates Marty Glickman and Sam Stoller; a

³⁴ Boykoff, Jules. “Racist IOC President Avery Brundage Loses His Place of Honor.” *The Nation*, 25 June 2020, <www.thenation.com/article/society/avery-brundage/>.

Kirschbaum, Erik. “How Adidas and Puma Were Born.” *Rediff*, Reuters, 8 Nov. 2005, <web.archive.org/web/20080117230846/in.rediff.com/sports/2005/nov/08adi.htm>.

³⁶ “Jesse Owens: Chapter 1.” PBS, Public Broadcasting Service, <www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/jesse-owens-chapter-1/>.

decision identified as an effort by the United States to appease the Third Reich's anti-Semitic principles. Speaking on this infamous decision several years later, Glickman recalled, "Jesse spoke up and said, 'Coach, I've won my three gold medals. I'm tired. I've had it. Let Marty and Sam run. They deserve it.' Coach Cromwell pointed his finger at him and said, 'You'll do as you're told.' And in those days, black athletes did as they were told."³⁷

Regardless of how Owens viewed the racial conflicts related to the Olympic Games and American team in the 1930s, he preferred to let his performance do the talking on political matters. An author who studied Owens asserts, "As an African American, Jesse Owens helped to shatter the beliefs of Aryan superiority in the presence of Adolf Hitler. Owens' gold medals during the 1936 Olympics in Berlin were in itself a symbol of racial equality."³⁸ Later, Owens preferred notoriously opposed Tommie Smith and John Carlos' protest at the 1968 Olympics, claiming, "they were trying to bring out what is wrong in our country. I told them that the problem certainly belonged in the continental borders of America. This was the wrong battlefield. Their running performances would have done more to alleviate the problem."³⁹ Throughout most of his life, Owens seemed to try his best to avoid political conflict when speaking in public. However, not even he could help himself from publicly condemning the United States treatment of black Americans in the twentieth century. In a speech following the 1936 Games, in front of over a thousand black people in Kansas City, Owens proclaimed, "Hitler didn't snub me—it was [Roosevelt] who snubbed me. The president didn't even send me a telegram."⁴⁰ Roosevelt never responded to Owens's allegations, and only white Olympians were

³⁷ Berkes, Howard. "Nazi Olympics Tangled Politics and Sport." NPR, 7 June 2008, <www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=91246674>.

³⁸ Evans, Rhonda. "Jesse Owens & Athletes Who Protest (or Don't)." The New York Public Library, 21 Feb. 2020, <www.nypl.org/blog/2017/09/12/jesse-owens-protest>.

³⁹ Evans, Rhonda. "Jesse Owens & Athletes Who Protest (or Don't)." The New York Public Library, 21 Feb. 2020, <www.nypl.org/blog/2017/09/12/jesse-owens-protest>.

⁴⁰ Large, David Clay. *Nazi Games: the Olympics of 1936*. W.W. Norton, 2007, pp. 103.

invited to the White House in 1936, leaving 18 African-Americans whose Olympic achievements were not even recognized by their own country until 2016, when President Obama commemorated them.⁴¹

In the years directly following the competition, most labeled the 1936 Olympic Games as a major Nazi political propaganda success. However, the 1936 Games also came to be most as the time that black male track star Jesse Owens' "protested" via a means of winning all of his events and embarrassing Hitler's "superior race" notions. Sports-reporter Jeremy Schaap notes, "The Games are now best remembered for the brilliance of Jesse Owens -- who won four gold medals -- and the success of the Nazis' propaganda machine. For the first time in the history of the modern Olympics, the Games were held hostage by the political goals of the host nation."⁴²

All the aforementioned historical occurrences regarding protest and politics in sport help exemplify how significant it can be for athletes to make their voices and messages heard. Throughout its entire history, one particular sport that has experienced much protest, often on matters of ethnocultural and racial discrimination or conflict, is basketball. In the winter of 1891, basketball was invented at a Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in Springfield, Massachusetts by Canadian native Dr. James Naismith, a 31-year-old Springfield College graduate student at the time. Exhausted by their inability to control an energetic group of young men stuck indoors due to winter weather, the YMCA faculty, specifically Naismith's advisor Dr. Luther Gulick, requested that Naismith create a game the campers could play indoors in hopes it would reduce their constant rowdiness. In its earliest form, basketball was a game of thirteen rules that Naismith had Springfield's stenographer type up after initially writing them by hand.

⁴¹ Bracken, Haley. "Was Jesse Owens Snubbed by Adolf Hitler at the Berlin Olympics?" Encyclopedia Britannica, <www.britannica.com/story/was-jesse-owens-snubbed-by-adolf-hitler-at-the-berlin-olympics>.

⁴² Schaap, Jeremy. "An Olympic Boycott That Almost Worked." Olympic Sports, ESPN, 13 Aug. 2009, <www.espn.com/olympics/news/story?id=4396362>.

He pondered many different elements of his new game as he was in the midst of creating it and faced problems such as how to ensure tackling wasn't necessary and choosing a ball shape that was better for passing versus carrying. To minimize roughness, Naismith wanted to encourage players to throw the ball in a vertical arc instead of horizontally straight. But the game's most pressing need was to successfully tire out its participants, thus, Naismith ensured the game would keep his campers running around by having the two goals at opposite ends of the gym. Initially, Naismith requested two boxes from the janitor to be used as the "goals," however, the janitor could only find two empty peach baskets, and thus the name basketball was given to this new game after a suggestion by YMCA official Frank Mahan.⁴³ Once he had his thirteen rules typed out, Naismith eagerly waited for his campers to arrive at the gymnasium. After they arrived, the counselor took roll call and told his students he would not try anymore experiments if his new game failed. According to Naismith himself, "When the teams were chosen, I placed the men on the floor. There were three forwards, three centers, and three backs on each team. I chose two of the center men to jump, then threw the ball between them. It was the start of the first basketball game and the finish of the trouble with that class."⁴⁴ Naismith only played two games of his own invention, one at a public demonstration of the new game held at the International YMCA Training School and the other at the University of Kansas in 1898. However, Springfield's school newspaper, *The Triangle*, published the rules of basketball under the heading "A New Game," and this edition was distributed to YMCAs and YMHAs (Young Men's Hebrew Associations) across the United States.⁴⁵ As a result of its immediate publicity, by the end of the

⁴³ Grasso, John. Historical Dictionary of Basketball, Scarecrow Press, 2010. ProQuest Ebook Central, pp. 5. <<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/union/detail.action?docID=662291>.>

⁴⁴ Grasso, John. Historical Dictionary of Basketball, Scarecrow Press, 2010. ProQuest Ebook Central, pp. 4. <<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/union/detail.action?docID=662291>.>

⁴⁵ Grasso, John. Historical Dictionary of Basketball, Scarecrow Press, 2010. ProQuest Ebook Central, pp. 5. <<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/union/detail.action?docID=662291>.>

1800s, the game of basketball was a popular sport played by college students, YMCAs, high schoolers, and local club teams both interscholastically and intramurally. Overall, Naismith's late nineteenth century invention of basketball positively impacted young Americans and youth organizations all over the continent by keeping impressionable children and young adults occupied as well as out of trouble.

The use of competitive sports as a method to captivate children and young men while simultaneously preventing the adolescents from engaging in bad behavior was the culmination of multiple things. For one, the concept of YMCAs had spread to the United States, after being founded by English philanthropist George Williams in 1844. Williams, a man who could relate to the young men living in cities during the Industrial Revolution, worried about the lack of healthy activities the young men could participate in. Aside from the tavern or brothel, there weren't many ways to amuse young men, and thus, YMCAs and other similar organizations were founded. For many Christians, the YMCA "combined preaching in the streets and the distribution of religious tracts with a social ministry."⁴⁶ Social reformers saw them as "places for wholesome recreation that would preserve youth from the temptations of alcohol, gambling, and prostitution and that would promote good citizenship."⁴⁷ The idea of admiring physical work through sport produced a new concept called "muscular Christianity," a philosophical movement distinguished by beliefs in "patriotic duty, discipline, self-sacrifice, manliness, and the moral and physical beauty of athleticism."⁴⁸ Meanwhile, the growth of public schooling transformed the daily lives of American children. Massachusetts became the first state to require children to go to

⁴⁶ J. William Frost, "Part V: Christianity and Culture in America", *Christianity: A Social and Cultural History*, 2nd Edition, (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1998), pp. 476.

⁴⁷ J. William Frost, "Part V: Christianity and Culture in America", *Christianity: A Social and Cultural History*, 2nd Edition, (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1998), pp. 476.

⁴⁸ Hall, Donald E. (2006-06-22). *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 66–89.

school in 1852, a piece of legislation that dramatically altered the way kids oriented their schedules and spent their free time. Mississippi was the last state to require children to attend school, passing the law in 1917, however, it is no coincidence that basketball was invented in the first state to mandate adolescent school attendance. According to Hilary Friedman, “With the institution of mandatory schooling, children experienced a profound shift in the structure of their daily lives, especially in the social organization of their time. Compulsory education brought leisure time into focus; since “school time” was delineated as obligatory, “free time” could now be identified as well.”⁴⁹

Even prior to the creation of the NBA, the sport of basketball has been one defined by ethnocultural dominance and controversy throughout its existence. Most modern NBA fans recognize that the league's current player pool is mainly African-American; however, around the time of its creation, basketball was a sport for impoverished urban immigrants, especially those of Jewish descent. During the Progressive Era which spanned from approximately 1896 to 1916, “the popularization of basketball among Jewish youth in urban areas primarily occurred both in settlement houses and at communal institutions. Jewish youth on New York’s Lower East Side played basketball on playgrounds and at schoolyards.”⁵⁰ Around the turn of the twentieth century, Americans valued basketball for the sports ideals which consisted of cooperation, discipline, and teamwork. In the early 1920s, once the populations in urban neighborhoods steadied, basketball spread throughout the country as a popular sport for Jews, as Jewish players often practiced or played at YMHAs, synagogues, and community centers before and after their college or professional careers. Although basketball was declared a sport which “Jews excel at”

⁴⁹ Trilla J., Ayuste A., Agud I. (2014) After-School Activities and Leisure Education, Handbook of Child Well-Being, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-90-481-9063-8_28>.

⁵⁰ “New Documentary Explores History Of Jews and Basketball.” NPR, 4 Feb. 2010, <www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=123368994>.

by *Newsweek* following a 1934 game between two schools, NYU and CCNY, the creation of a sustainable professional basketball league followed a lengthy, convoluted path.⁵¹

As basketball quickly evolved into a widespread North American sport following its conception, a permanent professional league took decades to perfect and preserve. Naismith's original sport was tweaked over the years, however, currently, the National Basketball Association (NBA) still abides by six of his original thirteen rules. In January of 1896, the first five-a-side basketball game was played and later that year, in November, professional basketball began in Trenton, New Jersey between two nearby YMCAs.⁵² In the summer of 1898, several men met in Philadelphia to formally found a league called the National Basketball League (NBL). Play began in the winter of 1898, but unfortunately, the league folded by the start of 1904. Rules continued to be tweaked as the twentieth century began, but by the start of the 1910s, most of the modern games rules had been developed and installed at the collegiate level. The AAU began sponsoring basketball in 1898, and throughout the first decade of the 1900s, leagues located in urban cities such as Philadelphia of New York City were established but short-lived. Following these attempts, the first true major professional basketball league, the American Basketball League (ABL), was founded in 1925 by National Football League (NFL) executives George Preston Marshall, George Halas, and Joseph Carr.⁵³ Large cities that were home to other professional sports teams such as Major League Baseball (MLB) teams welcomed basketball teams, and essentially all the best basketball players participated in the ABL with one minor exception; as was customary in the MLB at the time, no black players were allowed to

⁵¹ "New Documentary Explores History Of Jews and Basketball." NPR, 4 Feb. 2010, <www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=123368994>.

⁵² Grasso, John. *Historical Dictionary of Basketball*, Scarecrow Press, 2010. ProQuest Ebook Central, pp. 7. <<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/union/detail.action?docID=662291>>.

⁵³ "History of Basketball Leagues." All About Basketball RSS, <www.allaboutbasketball.us/basketball-history/history-of-basketball-leagues.html>.

participate in the league.⁵⁴ Unfortunately, in the midst of the Great Depression the ABL was shut down; however, it was restarted in 1933 and operated quietly for about twenty more years as an East Coast minor league. Part of the reason for the ABL's lack of popularity was the resurrection of the NBL in 1937 and the founding of the Basketball Association of America (BAA) by Walter A. Brown and fellow ice hockey arena owners in 1946. These two leagues are certainly the most significant, because the BAA eventually absorbed the NBL, and they combined to create what is known as the NBA. To avoid legal disputes, the BAA labeled the newly introduced NBL teams part of an expansion, and renamed the league the National Basketball Association. As a result of the BAA's expansion label, the NBA does not acknowledge any NBL statistics or records and claim the first ever NBA game was held in 1946—the year the BAA began its first season. The NBA's first season consisted of seventeen teams, however, this number dipped to just eight in the 1950s. Finally, in 1961 when the Chicago Packers joined the league, it began to grow and eventually hit a total of thirty teams in 2004, the same number of active teams in the NBA today.⁵⁵ The NBA faced some competition from the American Basketball Association (ABA) that emerged in 1967, however, the NBA made efforts to aggressively expand which led to it merging with the ABA in 1976, establishing the NBA as the best post-collegiate basketball player's choice.⁵⁶ The plans to solidify a major professional basketball league in the United States resulted in an intricate process. Clearly, it took several different founding attempts and multiple decades before a league with the longevity of the NBA would be sustainable and profitable. Nevertheless, less than sixty years after Dr. Naismith's invention, the sport of

⁵⁴ Grasso, John. *Historical Dictionary of Basketball*, Scarecrow Press, 2010. ProQuest Ebook Central, p. 9. <<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/union/detail.action?docID=662291>>

⁵⁵ "History of Basketball Leagues." All About Basketball RSS, <www.allaboutbasketball.us/basketball-history/history-of-basketball-leagues.html>.

⁵⁶ Pluto, T. *Loose Balls: The Short, Wild Life of the American Basketball Association*. New York, Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2007, pp. 45.

basketball had its own professional league whose influential athletes would find themselves at the forefront of inspiring social change in the United States during the latter half of the twentieth century as well as the twenty-first century.

The next few chapters will be a case study review and analysis of NBA icons that mixed politics and protest with their beloved sport of basketball in hopes to inspire societal change. In chapter one, the late 1950s until the early 1990s will be covered and it will feature NBA stars including Elgin Baylor, Bill Russell, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. The motivation for their political protests and outspokenness was centered around fighting racial segregation, progressing the civil rights movement, and encouraging the black power movement. These men pioneered using NBA stardom as a platform for inciting social change and fighting for personal beliefs. Without stars like Russell and Abdul-Jabbar setting the precedent for political protest in the NBA, it is possible modern athletes, such as the ones that will be discussed in chapter two, would not have been as inspired to utilize their NBA fame for progressive change in America.

Chapter two will cover the early 1990s starting from the Rodney King beating and reactions in 1991, up until the modern-day NBA with the 2020 playoff bubble protests and boycotts. As for specific NBA icons during this time period, players such as Craig Hodges, Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, and LeBron James will be analyzed, as well as commissioner Adam Silver, who replaced David Stern in 2014 and has been a dedicated advocate for racial progress since he assumed office. During the 1990s, Hodges and Abdul-Rauf engaged in protests aiming to help black American communities develop socioeconomically and feel equal—one at the White House and one during a pregame national anthem—which in turn, cost them their careers. The issues plaguing the modern-day athletes are slightly different than those faced by Russell and Baylor; however, the fight for racial equality is still alive and well in the NBA. The

movement has been primarily spearheaded by arguably the greatest NBA player of all time, LeBron James, a man who refuses to just “shut up and dribble”.⁵⁷ In addition to the political protests seen in the NBA throughout the 1990s to the present day, the politics of crowds and the impact these growing crowds have had on sports, specifically in the NBA, will be assessed. Regarding basketball, the crowd section of the chapter will center around the most infamous night in NBA history dubbed “The Malice at the Palace,” a night that led to an NBA dress code installation the following year and highlighted the leagues “gangsta” culture. Overall, NBA icons from the 1950s to the modern-day that risked their images, and oftentimes their NBA careers, in order to protest, march, boycott, and kneel for political causes will be the focus of chapters one and two.

Second Chapter

Most people view the 1949 merger between the BAA and the National Basketball League (NBL) as the formal creation of the modern-day NBA. After fending off competition from the

⁵⁷ Sullivan, Emily. “Laura Ingraham Told LeBron James To Shut Up And Dribble; He Went To The Hoop.” NPR, 19 Feb. 2018, <www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/02/19/587097707/laura-ingraham-told-lebron-james-to-shutup-and-dribble-he-went-to-the-hoop>.

American Basketball League (ABL) in the late 1960s, the NBA solidified itself as the best league possible for post-collegiate basketball players and is viewed as the preeminent professional basketball league. As with other major American professional sports leagues, both athletes and spectators of NBA competitions faced segregation of varying degrees including state laws and team rosters.

Breaking down arguably the toughest of all segregation barriers, as the 1950 NBA Draft unfolded, Chuck Cooper and Earl Lloyd made NBA history by becoming the first African-Americans to be drafted to the league. Lloyd further made history by becoming the first Black male to play an NBA game when he debuted for the Washington Capitols on October 31, 1950, a day before Cooper's first game for the Boston Celtics. In addition to Cooper and Lloyd, Nathaniel "Sweetwater" Clifton—who made his debut four days after Lloyd—became the first African-American player with an NBA contract after the New York Knickerbockers signed him from the Harlem Globetrotters, just before the 1950-51 season.⁵⁸

These three brave men were pioneers for the desegregation of the NBA and the sport of basketball as a whole. However, without the help of Hall of Fame coach Red Auerbach and Celtics owner Walter Brown, this historic milestone in NBA history might have been delayed for years. The book *Basketball Slave* by Mark Johnson is a biography written detailing his father Andy Johnson's experience playing professional basketball in the mid-20th century. In this book, Mark claims, "It was no coincidence that 3 of the 4 teams that did have black ballplayers were associated with Red Auerbach. He was the one person that was truly responsible for helping bring down the barriers preventing African Americans from entering the NBA."⁵⁹ It was

⁵⁸ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Earl Lloyd". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 30 Mar. 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Earl-Lloyd>. Accessed 9 February 2021.

⁵⁹ Johnson, Mark. "Basketball Slave: Racism in the Early History of the NBA." *Harlem World Magazine*, 8 May 2014, <www.harlemworldmagazine.com/basketball-slave-racism-early-history-nba/>.

Auerbach's conversation with Celtics owner Walter Brown on the night of the 1950 NBA Draft that convinced Brown to draft Chuck Cooper in the 2nd round. As the story goes, after Brown announced to the draft room that he was taking Cooper with his pick, someone asked, "Walter, don't you know he's a colored boy?" to which Brown replied, "I don't give a damn if he's striped, plaid or polka-dot! Boston takes Chuck Cooper of Duquesne!"⁶⁰ With this exchange the Celtics made history by breaking down the NBA's color barrier in Boston, a place often viewed as one of the most racist sports cities in the country.

Crossing the color line in a professional sports league is never easy. As the 1950 season began, players like Lloyd, Cooper, and Clifton faced racial abuse from white fans as close as the front row and the refs tried to avoid making calls that went in a Black player's favor. In addition to this, neither black team family members nor fans were allowed to attend these games, thus, initially the only Black Americans that could get close to the games were those who were playing in it. Furthermore, author Mark Johnson claims that regardless of talent and scoring ability, the Black players were not supposed to score any baskets. He writes, "They were just "on the team" for little more than appearance, relegated to passing and rebounding. And, even within these confines, most of them earned honors."⁶¹ Just 6 years after helping to break the NBA's color barrier, Celtics coach Red Auerbach would forever shake up the league once again. In preparation for the 1956 NBA Draft, Auerbach traded two white, future Hall of Famers in order to move up in the draft and select basketball's first African-American superstar, Bill Russell. Russell was another pioneer for the Celtics during the mid-20th century who would go on to win

⁶⁰ Frank, Foster. *Sweetwater: A Biography of Nathaniel "Sweetwater" Clifton*. GOLGOTHA Press, INC, 20.

⁶¹ Johnson, Mark. "Basketball Slave: Racism in the Early History of the NBA." *Harlem World Magazine*, 8 May 2014, <www.harlemworldmagazine.com/basketball-slave-racism-early-history-nba/>.

11 NBA Championships and 5 NBA Most Valuable Player awards (MVPs), yet many of his greatest contributions to the sport did not occur on the court.

But another player and NBA legend who inspired Russell to fight for social and racial change was Elgin Baylor. Although Russell was drafted to the NBA in 1956, it wouldn't be until 1961 that he engaged in his first protest. Prior to this, in 1959, Baylor is believed to be the first player to use his platform to protest segregation by boycotting a 1959 NBA game due to Jim Crow rules at the team hotel. Baylor was the first overall pick in the 1958 NBA Draft after the Minneapolis Lakers—who relocated to Los Angeles for the 1960-61 season—drafted and signed him in the hopes of saving their franchise. Baylor did just that, winning rookie of the year in his first season and setting several league scoring records that still stand today. Lakers owner Bob Short even said in a 1971 interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, “If he had turned me down then, I would have been out of business...The club would have gone bankrupt.”⁶² His immediate dominance of the league at the beginning of his career is significant because only the most talented, prominent African-American players would have a chance of their voice being heard at the time. Baylor knew his worth, and on January 16, 1959 in Charleston, West Virginia, he made history by becoming the first player in NBA history to boycott a game. After the Lakers' Black players were denied rooms at one team hotel, the entire roster relocated to a new hotel. In addition to this, Baylor and his Black teammates, Boo Ellis and Ed Fleming, were all denied service when it was time to eat and they had to buy sandwich supplies at the local grocery store. This was the last straw and Baylor initially refused to leave his hotel room before finally agreeing to attend the game but not dress for it. While in the locker room before tip-off Baylor

⁶² Knoblauch, Austin. “Greatest Sports Figures in L.A. History, No. 17: Elgin Baylor.” *Sports Now, Los Angeles Times*, 14 Oct. 2011, <latimesblogs.latimes.com/sports_blog/2011/10/greatest-sports-figures-in-la-history-no-17-elgin-baylor.html>.

recalls in his biography, “I feel so small...as I sit in the dressing room, my body slumped, studying the floor, my anger building, the sour taste of bile rising into my throat, my stomach in a knot, I know exactly what I must do...I will not play. I will stage my own private protest. For myself, if nothing else.”⁶³ As the team gets ready to take the court, Laker teammate and Charleston native Rod Hundley asks Baylor why he isn’t dressed and his response exemplifies the dehumanization and injustice felt by black NBA players in the late 1950s. Disappointed by Baylor’s choice, Hundley kept pressing Baylor to play and questioned his decision. Hundley told Baylor, “I thought we were friends. Elgin, I’d really like it if you would play,” to which Baylor answered with, “Rod, yes, you are my friend. But I’m a human being. I want to be treated like a human being. I’m not an animal put in a cage and let out for show. I am not an animal. I am a *human being*.”⁶⁴

Although this exchange occurred in 1959 on the night of his historic boycott, this conversation would not become public knowledge until 2018 when Baylor’s biography was published, showing how weak the voice of Black NBA players was. The media’s portrayal of them has been another topic of discussion for the league’s personnel since the NBA’s inception. Unsurprisingly, the Charleston-Gazette article written by A.L. Hardman covering this incident only addressed the disgruntlement of the white fans and owners, not Baylor’s protest or motives. Hardman writes, “The 2,356 basketball fans who braved cold weather and icy road conditions to see the Minneapolis Lakers play the Cincinnati Royals Friday night at the Civic Center were deprived of seeing the Lakers’ star rookie, Elgin Baylor, in action because of a misunderstanding

⁶³ Baylor, Elgin, and Alan Eisenstock. *Hang Time: My Life in Basketball*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018. pp. 163.

⁶⁴ Baylor, Elgin, and Alan Eisenstock. *Hang Time: My Life in Basketball*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018. pp. 164

over hotel accommodations for the Minneapolis team.”⁶⁵ The next day, the same author published an article that claimed the company that booked the game, ABC of Charleston, was filing a complaint against Baylor to send to NBA President Maurice Podoloff. Hardman summed up the dispute, claiming, “The American Business Club of Charleston, which dropped between \$800 and \$1,000 on the Minneapolis - Cincinnati professional basketball game Friday night at the Civic Center, Saturday filed a protest with the National Basketball Association over the failure of rookie star Elgin Baylor to appear in the Minneapolis lineup.”⁶⁶ The evolution of how these athletes interact with the press passed through many different phases, nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge how the press spins this event and other similar ones that occur during this era into their preferred narrative. In his autobiography, Baylor wondered, “I want people to know how outraged, saddened, and sickened this city has made me feel. But what would I say? And to whom? And even if I did say something, who would listen? Nobody. Who would listen to a highly paid professional athlete complaining about being the victim of racism in a small southern city? Who would care?”.⁶⁷ Baylor’s boycott was a groundbreaking moment in basketball history, and with help from other stars like Russell, such protests would lead even white Americans to fight for civil rights.

As the 1960s began, Russell took the lead from Baylor in “getting into good trouble.” William Felton “Bill” Russell, was and still is one of the most influential players in NBA history—a pioneer—both on and off the court. Although players like Lloyd and Baylor were the first players to break down the league’s color barrier and protest unjust treatment, Russell is

⁶⁵ Hardman, A.L. “Segregation Ruling Ires Pro Player.” *Charleston Gazette*, 17 Jan. 1959, <<http://www.wvculture.org/history/africanamericans/baylor01.html>>.

⁶⁶ Hardman, A.L. “Baylor’s Refusal to Play Here Brings ABC Protest.” *Charleston Gazette*, 18 Jan. 1959, <<http://www.wvculture.org/history/africanamericans/baylor03.html>>.

⁶⁷ Baylor, Elgin, and Alan Eisenstock. *Hang Time: My Life in Basketball*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018. pp. 127.

generally viewed as the NBA's first social activist; Russell was seen as a man who invested as heavily in his game as he did the future of his community and Black Americans in general. In 1961, at the age of 27, Russell orchestrated and led the first national NBA boycott. And, at the age of 87, his dedication to reform on and off the court hasn't wavered since. Part of his motivation to enact change for African Americans may have stemmed from his childhood. Born in Monroe, Louisiana on February 12, 1934, Russell was said to have battled several different illnesses before he was able to play sports such as basketball. His world changed completely when his father Charlie, sick of navigating a racially charged South, moved the Russell family to Oakland, California, an area where Bill would become a basketball superstar as an All-American center while at the University of San Francisco.

Throughout his college days and early NBA career, Russell and his black counterparts endured all types of racially-fueled abuse whether it be from the spectators, referees, opponents, coaches, businesses, and sometimes even teammates. Finally, in 1961, after being denied service before a basketball game in Lexington, Kentucky, Russell, as well as a few players on both the Boston Celtics and St. Louis Hawks, reached their tipping point and decided it was time to finally take a stand against the ceaseless inequality they faced. During the afternoon of October 17, 1961, future Hall of Fame Celtic stars Sam Jones and Thomas "Satch" Sanders were denied service in the coffee shop of the hotel they were staying at in Kentucky, a state known to enforce Jim Crow laws. The pair informed Russell the hotel wouldn't serve African-Americans and this infuriated him. Bill led the duo, along with another African-American Celtics future Hall of Famer named K.C. Jones, to Red Auerbach's room to inform him that they wanted to boycott the

game and leave Kentucky.⁶⁸ Auerbach was instrumental in desegregating the NBA, and Mark Johnson even writes, “It was no coincidence that 3 of the 4 teams that did have black ballplayers were associated with Red Auerbach. He was the one person that was truly responsible for helping bring down the barriers preventing African Americans from entering the NBA.”⁶⁹ Nevertheless, he still tried to convince the four Celtics stars to play instead of flying home to Boston. But, according to Des Bieler, “Russell, who by then had helped Boston to four of its 11 championships...would not be swayed. Instead, he made it clear that it was better for him and his Black teammates to walk away, and leave Lexington with a nonintegrated game.”⁷⁰ Russell would later recall that he felt it was imperative that people all over the country and hopefully the world knew that Black players putting their foot down. In a 2013 interview, Russell states, “I told Red we were leaving because it is important to me that everybody, everywhere, knows that the Black players decided to stand up for themselves.”⁷¹ Auerbach finally caved and agreed to bring the men to the airport. A fifth Black Celtics player, a rookie named Al Butler went with the men to the airport and two African-American St. Louis Hawks players, former first-round pick Cleo Hill and former ROTY Woody Sauldsberry, also boycotted the game to show solidarity with the Celtics players. Sadly for Hill, Bieler writes, “He earned the wrath of the Hawks’ owner, was subsequently ostracized by Hagan and other White teammates and—in something of a

⁶⁸ Bieler, Des. “Bill Russell Led an NBA Boycott in 1961. Now He's Saluting Others for 'Getting in Good Trouble.'” The Washington Post, WP Company, 27 Aug. 2020, <www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2020/08/27/bill-russell-nba-boycott/>.

⁶⁹ Johnson, Mark. “Basketball Slave: Racism in the Early History of the NBA.” Harlem World Magazine, 8 May 2014, <www.harlemworldmagazine.com/basketball-slave-racism-early-history-nba/>.

⁷⁰ Bieler, Des. “Bill Russell Led an NBA Boycott in 1961. Now He's Saluting Others for 'Getting in Good Trouble.'” The Washington Post, WP Company, 27 Aug. 2020, <www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2020/08/27/bill-russell-nba-boycott/>.

⁷¹ “Russell's House.” NBATV, WBKsportHistory, 8 Feb. 2013, 29:15. <www.youtube.com/watch?v=lc5wizzVVC8&feature=youtu.be&t=1739&ab_channel=WBKsportsHistory>.

foreshadowing of the fate that would befall Colin Kaepernick—he was out of the NBA after that season.”⁷² When reached by the press for comment after touching down in Boston, Russell said:

If I can help it I will never play where there is segregation...I think of athletes as entertainers. One of the ways the American Negro has attempted to show he is a human being is to demonstrate our race to the people through entertainment, and thus become accepted. I am coming to the realization that we are accepted as entertainers, but that we are not accepted as people in some places. Negroes are in a fight for their rights—a fight for survival—in a changing world. I am with these Negroes.⁷³

Sixty years NBA players and activists, similarly refuse to “shut up and dribble.”

All the white players still took part in the game, without hesitation. In 2020, in contrast, when Black NBA players felt a playoff game boycott was necessary, the white players agreed and joined them in solidarity, ensuring the game wouldn’t commence. Regardless, Russell, his Celtic teammates, and two Hawks players staged a protest that would set a tone and forever change how those affiliated with the NBA stand up for what they personally believe is right. Still, the media had a field day following this decision and either the Celtics or Russell’s’ name were featured in the headline of newspapers from Boston to Los Angeles for the next few days. On the front page of the *Los Angeles Times* the next day, the headline read: “Celtic Negro Stars Refuse to Play in Ky.” In the subsection of the article labeled “Game Goes On,” the author states, “The Boston players boarded a plane to return to Boston. The game between the two National Basketball Assn. teams went on as scheduled, with the Celtics having seven players and the Hawks nine.”⁷⁴ The article mentions that the hotel’s owner, Art Lang, claimed the hotel had no discriminatory policies and the refusal to serve the players was due to a misunderstanding.

⁷² Bieler, Des. “Bill Russell Led an NBA Boycott in 1961. Now He’s Saluting Others for ‘Getting in Good Trouble.’” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 27 Aug. 2020, <www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2020/08/27/bill-russell-nba-boycott/>.

⁷³ Pomerantz, Gary M. *The Last Pass: Cousy, Russell, the Celtics, and What Matters in the End*. United States, Penguin Publishing Group, 2019, pp. 143.

⁷⁴ “Celtic Negro Stars Refuse to Play in Ky.” *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995), Oct 18, 1961, pp. 1. ProQuest. Web. 22 Feb. 2021, <<https://www.proquest.com/docview/167965720/3B0F56C00CA94214PQ/1?accountid=14637>>.

However, the remainder of the article quotes Celtics' coach Auerbach as asserting, "We have had two previous bad experiences with serving problems for our Negro members."⁷⁵ Russell later recounted said that a St. Louis-based publication wrote that "the black players embarrassed the Celtics".⁷⁶ The African-American newspaper, the *Chicago Defender* published a piece two days after the protest with the headline "Apology Offered After Athletes Denied Service." This article reiterates claims by Phoenix Hotel manager Lang, and reads, "The game was played with white players and the Hawks defeated the Celtics, 128-103, before 9,000 fans...Lang said after he heard of the incident, he tried to find the players refused service to "offer them a free dinner of the house...But I couldn't locate them," he added".⁷⁷

Although crowds and fan treatment of different NBA players will be covered more thoroughly in the final chapter, it is necessary to address how this topic was felt and handled by Bill Russell. Sports fans who live in or support teams from the city of Boston have never been known as a racially tolerant group. Many sports stars of color, including athletes who played in the 2010s, have condemned the spectators in Boston and their treatment of opposing teams, and sometimes even their own players. Spencer Young from *Medium* writes, "Despite having the first African-American in the league, the first all-black starting five in NBA history, and the first black coach (which was also Russell), Boston never changed its ways. Not even thirteen rings could change the discriminatory attitude of Boston fans towards those early Celtics."⁷⁸ Russell

⁷⁵ "Celtic Negro Stars Refuse to Play in Ky." *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995), Oct 18, 1961, pp. 1. ProQuest. Web. 22 Feb. 2021, <<https://www.proquest.com/docview/167965720/3B0F56C00CA94214PQ/1?accountid=14637>>.

⁷⁶ "Russell's House." *NBATV*, WBKsportHistory, 8 Feb. 2013, 29:15.

<www.youtube.com/watch?v=lc5wizzVVC8&feature=youtu.be&t=1739&ab_channel=WBKsportsHistory>.

⁷⁷ "Apology Offered After Athletes Denied Service." *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition)* (1960-1973), Oct 19, 1961, pp. 2. ProQuest. Web. 22 Feb. 2021,

<<https://www.proquest.com/docview/493860978/pageviewPDF/65912B722A894C3BPQ/1?accountid=14637>>.

⁷⁸ Young, Spencer. "'Sick and Tired of It': Revisiting the State of Racism in the NBA." *Medium, Basketball University*, 14 June 2020, <medium.com/basketball-university/sick-and-tired-of-it-revisiting-the-state-of-racism-in-the-nba-2306be2c931>.

always felt the people of Boston never appreciated the team's feats as much as they should've, and that lack of appreciation likely stemmed from racist attitudes. In his 2013 NBATV interview, Russell notes, "We did a survey about what we could do to improve attendance...Over 50% of the responses were 'there's too many black players.' The Celtics, to me, were a blue team in a sea of red. That means there was really no connection for me between the fans in Boston and the Boston Celtics."⁷⁹ Russell's views on the average Boston fan was molded by the manner in which Bostonians treated his property when he was on away game trips. Young points out, "Throughout those years, Russell and his teammates saw their houses vandalized with racial slurs, defecation, and even a burning cross. When Russell's iconic #6 was sent to the rafters, he did it in private, creating a closed ceremony — all because he felt he was disrespected by Boston fans throughout his career."⁸⁰ The Boston police attributed the vandalism of Russell's house to raccoons and other invented perpetrators leading the Celtics star to purchase a gun for protection. Though it cannot be boiled down to a single instance, occurrences such as this, as well as the way that Russell felt that he and other Blacks were mistreated as a whole, all motivated him to become a profound figure in the fight for racial equality and civil rights.

The civil rights movement was multi-decade affair, ranging from 1954 to 1968. It's the goal of the movement was to end racial discrimination, disenfranchisement, and segregation in the United States. The organized effort had many key leaders and icons who would give speeches and hold marches/protests across the country, but most credit Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as the top leader and father of the civil rights movement. Russell was a leader for the

⁷⁹ Russell's House." *NBATV*, WBKsportHistory, 8 Feb. 2013, 29:45, <www.youtube.com/watch?v=lc5wizzVVC8&feature=youtu.be&t=1739&ab_channel=WBKsportsHistory>.

⁸⁰ Young, Spencer. "'Sick and Tired of It': Revisiting the State of Racism in the NBA." *Medium, Basketball University*, 14 June 2020, <medium.com/basketball-university/sick-and-tired-of-it-revisiting-the-state-of-racism-in-the-nba-2306be2c931>.

movement when he hosted events in Boston or New England, but he would also participate in events planned in other areas of the country such as the March on Washington. In addition to this, Russell founded and ran integrated basketball summer camps in attempts to encourage desegregation and give back to different communities. Russell owed some of his ideas about race and equality to W.E.B. Du Bois' notion of double-consciousness, as Du Bois puts it:

this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One feels his twoness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, — this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self.⁸¹

Bill Russell was one of the original athletes who embodied this consciousness and used his platform to express similar ideas. Aram Goudsouzian, author of *King of the Court: Bill Russell and the Basketball Revolution*, explains, "Russell personified this "double consciousness" in the modern sports world. He reflected a spectrum of ideas and emotions. He cherished an integrated community, and he raged with separatist impulses. While flowing with the black political tide, he charted new waters for the black athlete."⁸² With influence from being dually conscious, the goal, according to Du Bois was, "He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without losing the opportunity of self-development."⁸³ This goal was certainly relevant to the motivations that inspired the civil rights movement to take off nearly sixty years later, as well as those that encouraged Russell to immerse himself so deeply in the movement during the 1960s.

⁸¹ Bois, W. E. Burghardt Du. "Strivings of the Negro People." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, Aug. 1897, <www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1897/08/strivings-of-the-negro-people/305446/>.

⁸² Goudsouzian, Aram. *King of the Court: Bill Russell and the Basketball Revolution*. University of California Press, 2011, pp. 149.

⁸³ Bois, W. E. Burghardt Du. "Strivings of the Negro People." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, Aug. 1897, <www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1897/08/strivings-of-the-negro-people/305446/>.

In 1963, the civil rights movement gained a lot of momentum across the country following the publication of Dr. Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," in April. On May 8, 1963, Russell led a march from Roxbury to Boston Common, the site of a 10,000-person human rights rally. Goudsouzian claims, "The Boston rally echoed ideals of the Birmingham campaign, the dramatic civil rights demonstrations in Alabama led by Martin Luther King Jr...The march initiated a new era in Boston politics."⁸⁴ Following this, tensions rose further due to a standoff at the University of Alabama on June 11, 1963. Alabama Gov. George C. Wallace stood in a doorway on the school's campus to block two Black students from registering, not relenting until President John F. Kennedy sent the National Guard to the campus. Thus, a week later, on June 18, 1963, the NAACP organized a day called "Stay-Out for Freedom," where over 8,000 students boycotted schools in Boston and over 3,000 students of color attended one of ten "Freedom Schools" in the area instead. At these Freedom Schools, "All of the 3,000 school children were exposed to a uniform curriculum that included reports on the negotiations with the Boston School Committee; the singing of Freedom Songs; and lectures by community leaders and college professors on the civil rights struggle across the country and in Boston."⁸⁵ The speakers consisted of mostly professors, doctors, and reporters, however, most notably to many, Celtics superstar Bill Russell was there to share wisdom with the students and inspire them. On the subject of schools, the author notes, "the condition of the Boston schools stimulated a new generation of activists including Russell. He got involved through Thomas Atkins, chairman of the Boston NAACP. Russell became a lifetime member of the city's chapter...Russell captivated the students. He toured freedom schools, advising children to

⁸⁴ Goudsouzian, Aram. *King of the Court: Bill Russell and the Basketball Revolution*. University of California Press, 2011, pp. 149.

⁸⁵ Dunham, Audrea. "Boston's 1960s Civil Rights Movement: A Look Back ." *Openvault, GBH*, <openvault.wgbh.org/exhibits/boston_civil_rights/article>.

embrace not only education but also black pride.”⁸⁶ Less than two months later, Russell was down in the nation’s capital for the “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom” which took place on the 28th of August 1963. This protest advocated for the civil and economic rights of African Americans, and at the protest, the final speaker, King, delivered his historic ‘I Have a Dream’ speech that called for the cessation of racism in the country. Incredibly, the night before the march, Russell met King in the lobby of their hotel, after conversing for a while, an organizer invited Russell to give a speech on the same stage. However, the basketball icon declined, citing a potential inflated ego if he appeared on stage. Instead, “after marching toward the Lincoln Memorial with 250,000 others, he sat in the second row. King’s iconic ‘I Have a Dream’ speech climaxed the generous, hopeful spirit of the demonstration.”⁸⁷ Russell was not the only NBA player there; stars such as Wilt Chamberlain, Elgin Baylor, and Walt Bellamy all attended the march. However, only one NBA athlete was invited to speak at the Lincoln Memorial and that man was Bill Russell.

It is without a doubt that Russell cared about the civil rights movement as much as virtually anything in his life. This notion was reiterated in an article published in the *Chicago Daily Defender* in the summer of 1964 with a headline that read: “Russell Would Give Up Basketball For Rights.” In the article, it states that Bill Russell said he would quit basketball without hesitation, “to assist the civil rights movement if it would ease racial tension and aid Negroes.”⁸⁸ Further into the article, Russell expresses his dislike for GOP presidential candidate Barry Goldwater, and justifies it by discussing his experiences in Mississippi while running

⁸⁶ Goudsouzian, Aram. *King of the Court: Bill Russell and the Basketball Revolution*. University of California Press, 2011, pp. 149-150.

⁸⁷ Goudsouzian, Aram. *King of the Court: Bill Russell and the Basketball Revolution*. University of California Press, 2011, pp. 149-150.

⁸⁸ “Russell Would Give Up Basketball For Rights.” *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition)* (1960-1973), 20 July 1964, pp. 2. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender, <www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/russell-would-give-up-basketball-rights/docview/494070156/se-2?accountid=14637>.

“several integrated Negro clinics.” Luckily Russell never had to quit basketball, but his efforts in the civil rights movement did help African Americans countrywide. As a result of several elements, especially relentless pressure by civil rights activists, the Civil Right Act of 1964 was enacted on July 2, 1964. This landmark civil rights and labor law, “outlaws discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, and later sexual orientation and gender identity...It prohibits unequal application of voter registration requirements, racial segregation in schools and public accommodations, and employment discrimination.”⁸⁹ The passage of this piece of legislation is viewed as one of the most monumental achievements in the entirety of the civil rights movement, and it did not stop there. A year later, the Voting Rights act of 1965 was passed and signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson as a result of lackluster nationwide enforcement of the 15th amendment, the tragic events known as “Bloody Sunday” and “Turnaround Tuesday” that occurred during the Selma to Montgomery marches, and most critically, the momentous civil rights movement.⁹⁰

Unfortunately, all was not well following the passage of this racially progressive legislation, as, civil rights activists were being assassinated across the country, including, Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968, whilst standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. Following this tragedy, African American communities across the nation held protests, some evolving into riots. As a result, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1968 into law on April 11, 1968. This bill was an expansion of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the new legislation was dubbed the Fair Housing Act because it prohibited

⁸⁹ “The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.” Educator Resources, *National Archives and Records Administration*, <www.archives.gov/education/lessons/civil-rights-act#:~:text=In%201964%20Congress%20passed%20Public.added%20at%20the%20last%20moment>.

⁹⁰ Fager, Charles (July 1985). *Selma, 1965: The March That Changed the South (2nd ed.)*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

discrimination concerning the sale, rental, or financing of housing based on race, religion, national origin, and sex; all of which were common issues for impoverished Americans and those of color. It was certainly an eventful year for the United States, and to top it all off, in December 1968, “on the tail-end of Russell’s playing career, Sports Illustrated named him the Sportsman of the Year, in large part due to his efforts speaking out on social justice issues with his platform. Russell was a pallbearer at Jackie Robinson’s funeral in 1972.”⁹¹ Russell appreciated the award and comparisons to the revolutionary Jackie Robinson, stating, “My attitude was that Jackie took us from point A to point B...I wanted to go from point B to point C.”⁹²

Russell wasn’t the only basketball revolutionary pursuing racial equality as the 1960s concluded; African-American UCLA star Lew Alcindor was dominating the sport at the collegiate level. Both men followed something fairly unique for sports stars during their era and that was the Nation of Islam. In *King of the Court*, the author writes, “Russell further appreciated the Nation of Islam and Malcolm X, whom so many white Americans feared and reviled...Like many other African Americans, [Russell] identified with elements of black nationalism: racial pride, self-defense, economic autonomy, political liberation, black unity.”⁹³ But, Russell and Alcindor not only shared similar religious beliefs, they also were two of the first ever NBA stars to utilize their platforms in order to motivate change.

⁹¹ Milligan, Rashad. “Looking Back: The Time Bill Russell Never Played for the Hawks Because of Racism.” *Peachtree Hoops, SB Nation*, 17 May 2020, <www.peachtreehoops.com/2020/5/17/21258883/bill-russell-atlanta-hawks-racism-st-louis-details-story-conspiracy>.

⁹² “Russell’s House.” *NBATV, WBKsportHistory*, 8 Feb. 2013, <www.youtube.com/watch?v=lc5wizzVVC8&feature=youtu.be&t=1739&ab_channel=WBKsportsHistory>.

⁹³ Goudsouzian, Aram. *King of the Court: Bill Russell and the Basketball Revolution*. University of California Press, 2011, pp. 153.

Lew Alcindor was born in Harlem in New York, New York, on April 16, 1947. In 1950, his family moved to the nearby neighborhood of Inwood, something Lew felt was a large step up from their previous living situation.⁹⁴ Harlem, however, was always the place where he felt most at home and his service to the community has yet to cease at his current age of 73. Still, at the young age of seventeen, Alcindor was already volunteering in Harlem and trying to make a lasting positive impact on the neighborhood he called home. According to Nick Juravich, “In 1964, he joined a summer journalism program run by Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited, Incorporated (HARYOU), the pioneering social work and community empowerment agency...Abdul-Jabbar’s group was mentored by the historian John Henrik Clarke. They met with Malcolm X, posed interview questions to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and spent hours combing through the collections of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.”⁹⁵ Part of his influence for this was a result of the Harlem Riot of 1964, a series of uprisings after a cop killed a 15-year-old African-American boy. Alcindor said these riots made him feel “reborn,” and they pushed him to be an advocate for change in his community and later the nation.⁹⁶ During this time, until his enrollment at UCLA in 1965, a teenage Alcindor was unstoppable at the high school level, leading coach Jack Donohue's Power Memorial Academy team to three straight New York City Catholic basketball championships as well as a 71-game winning streak. However, it wasn't all positive as a high school star, as years later, “He talked openly of his lost

⁹⁴ Juravich, Nick. “Basketball and Black Pride: Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Resident Organizing in New York City Public Housing.” *Gotham Center*, The Gotham Center for New York City History, 6 Aug. 2019, <www.gothamcenter.org/blog/basketball-and-black-pride-kareem-abdul-jabbar-and-resident-organizing-in-new-york-city-public-housing#:~:text=Born%20in%20Harlem%20in%201947,until%20he%20left%20for%20UCLA>.

⁹⁵ Juravich, Nick. “Basketball and Black Pride: Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Resident Organizing in New York City Public Housing.” *Gotham Center*, The Gotham Center for New York City History, 6 Aug. 2019, <www.gothamcenter.org/blog/basketball-and-black-pride-kareem-abdul-jabbar-and-resident-organizing-in-new-york-city-public-housing#:~:text=Born%20in%20Harlem%20in%201947,until%20he%20left%20for%20UCLA>.

⁹⁶ Abdul-Jabbar, Kareem. *On the Shoulders of Giants: My Journey through the Harlem Renaissance*. Simon & Schuster, 2010, pp. 76.

respect for his high school coach, who used the word "nigger" as a motivational ploy.”⁹⁷ This occurrence stuck with Alcindor and encouraged him to fight harder for change. In his most recent book, titled *Coach Wooden and Me*, “my development as a basketball player paralleled my evolution as a social activist.”⁹⁸

Unfortunately for his 1965-66 college season, freshmen were not allowed to play at the varsity level, so Alcindor had to play on the freshmen team where he established his dominance. He only continued to get better, and as a sophomore, in his first varsity game he set the UCLA single game scoring record with 55 points, later that season he scored 61. The Bruins went 30-0 winning the NCAA national championship by fifteen points. The sophomore Alcindor was so unstoppable that the NCAA altered the rules for the upcoming 1967-68 season, a move many believed was intended to try and negate Lew’s impact. This rule would last approximately ten years and was most well-known as the “Lew Alcindor Rule.” In a fall 1967 edition of *The Chicago Defender*, Alcindor was quoted as saying, “To me the new ‘no-dunk’ rule smacks a little of discrimination...When you look at it all the way down to the high school level, most of the people who dunk are black athletes, I’m not trying to be biased, really, that’s just how it is.”⁹⁹ Interestingly, the article ends with Alcindor discussing Muslims where he claims they are doing tons of good for places like Harlem, getting drug addicts and prostitutes off the street whilst also instilling a sense of pride and direction in them. Alcindor’s relationship with the Nation of Islam will be further discussed as he becomes further immersed in it as years pass, yet, it is still

⁹⁷ Sakamoto, Bob. “KAREEM STILL RISES TO TOP OF HIS GAME ABDUL-JABBAR KEEPS THE PASSION BURNING.” *OrlandoSentinel.com*, 9 Jun. 1985, <www.orlandosentinel.com/news/os-xpm-1985-06-09-0300370194-story.html>.

⁹⁸ Juravich, Nick. “Basketball and Black Pride: Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Resident Organizing in New York City Public Housing.” *Gotham Center*, The Gotham Center for New York City History, 6 Aug. 2019, <www.gothamcenter.org/blog/basketball-and-black-pride-kareem-abdul-jabbar-and-resident-organizing-in-new-york-city-public-housing#:~:text=Born%20in%20Harlem%20in%201947,until%20he%20left%20for%20UCLA>.

⁹⁹ “Alcindor Calls No-Dunk Rule ‘Discriminating’.” *The Chicago Defender (National edition)* (1921-1967), Sep 16 1967, p. 18. ProQuest. Web. 4 Mar. 2021.

important to note that he explicitly endorses Muslims in 1967 as a sophomore in college. It wasn't only Alcindor who publicly criticized the rule change, legendary coach and lifelong friend of Lew's, John Wooden, also condemned the decision several months prior in an interview with *The Washington Post, Times Herald*. The author claims, "John Wooden, coach of UCLA and 7-foot-1's Lew Alcindor, said today he believed the college basketball rule change banning the dunk shot may have been aimed at his sophomore superstar and thinks the move will take excitement from the game."¹⁰⁰ However, the white coach's stance is not as firm as Alcindor's, as later in the article Wooden is quoted as saying, "The rule change will not hurt us but I think it might have been aimed at Alcindor. But Alcindor is not the only seven-footer in college basketball. There are 60 around the country."¹⁰¹ Wooden publicly defended his Black player, and the coach's actions such as this one are likely why he has maintained a lifelong friendship with Alcindor.

Before his junior season even started, Alcindor was focused on other things than the NCAA rule change, busy in his old neighborhood. In the summer of 1967, Alcindor held his first set of basketball clinics for children living in project housing built by the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), an organization initially founded in 1934 to alleviate the housing crisis following the Great Depression. It was the first agency in the U.S. to provide publicly funded housing, however, they would later come under fire for racially discriminatory practices. On January 27, 1964, *The New York Times* published an article discussing how the NYCHA would hold onto properties until they could be filled by white tenants. Initially the agency denied the allegations before ending the policy after pressure from the State Commission for Human

¹⁰⁰ "UCLA's Wooden Says Rule Aimed at Lew Alcindor." *The Washington Post, Times Herald* (1959-1973), Mar 29 1967, pp. 1. ProQuest. Web. 4 Mar. 2021.

¹⁰¹ "No-Dunk Rule: Rupp Likes It, Wooden Doesn't." *The Indianapolis Star, Associated Press*, 29 Mar. 1967, <www.newspapers.com/image/105641330/>.

Rights and housing strikes in Harlem. The article claims, “a spokesman for the authority said yesterday that all vacancies were being filled as they developed. The spokesman denied a statement by Jesse Gray, Harlem rent strike leader, that vacancies in Manhattanville Houses and other predominantly Negro Harlem projects were being kept open until they can bring in white families.”¹⁰²

Assisting underserved kids living in on NYCHA properties wasn't the only significant contribution Alcindor made during the summer of 1967, as he attended a summit in Cleveland organized by NFL star Jim Brown that included iconic African-American athletes such as Bill Russell and Muhammad Ali (formerly known as Cassius Clay prior to his conversion to Islam). The focus of the meeting was to discuss Ali's refusal to join the military and whether or not they should publicly endorse the decision. Alcindor claims the summit forever changed his outlook and goals in life, and it helped him understand Ali's motivation, something that also drew him to teachings of Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam. According to author Johnny Smith, “The summit proved an important turning point in Alcindor's life and in the revolt of the black athlete. In a demonstration of Black Power and solidarity, it marked the first time that black athletes unified across various sports to rally behind a single cause...Although he was the only college athlete who attended the meeting in Cleveland, he realized that day that he too had a responsibility to use his platform to speak out against racism and injustice, even at a cost.”¹⁰³

Alcindor valued giving back to the community he was raised in, and after his sophomore year at UCLA he returned home again. During the 1967-68 season, Lew's first year on varsity, he won

¹⁰² “HOUSING POLICY OF CITY CHANGED; Apartments Not Being Held for Integration Purposes.” *The New York Times*, Archives, 27 Jan. 1964, <www.nytimes.com/1964/01/27/archives/housing-policy-of-city-changed-apartments-not-being-held-for.html>.

¹⁰³ Smith, Johnny. The Reign of Lew Alcindor in the Age of Revolt. *The Undefeated*, 30 Mar. 2018, <theundefeated.com/features/lew-alcindor-kareem-abdul-jabbar-ucla-boycot-1968-olympics/>.

the NCAA basketball tournament MVP and led the Bruins to a championship. Still, he decided to spend his summer in Harlem yet again, running more NYCHA basketball clinics and spreading wisdom to the community's youth; however, his decision to return to New York City in the summer of 1968 was a much more monumental decision than the previous summer's, and it was a decision that sent shockwaves through the nation.

In the fall of 1967, after the positive experience of the Brown's Cleveland summit, Alcindor attended a meeting in Los Angeles on Thanksgiving Day organized by the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR). At this meeting, athletes such as Alcindor, Tommie Smith, and John Carlos discussed boycotting the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City unless certain changes were made. The OPHR made requests that were not granted by the time of the games, such as restoring Muhammad Ali's world heavyweight boxing title and banning South Africa from participating in the games. At the summit in November of 1967, however, Alcindor's words were said to have had the greatest impact after he told a story nearly being killed by a racist cop in Harlem. Historians claim his phrasing and choice of vocabulary echoed the writings and teaching of Malcolm X and this could be how he became such a good public speaker. He received a standing ovation from the attendees and although notions of the boycott fizzled out as the Olympic Games approached in 1968 with Smith and Carlos choosing to compete, Alcindor and two UCLA teammates, Mike Warren and Lucius Allen, refused to attend the USA basketball Olympic trials as a demonstration against racism in the U.S. and abroad. He knew the decision would result in immense backlash, yet he has no regrets. In his autobiography, Alcindor recalls, "This started a firestorm of criticism, racial epithets, and death threats that people still ask me about today...America was angry at me for not showing gratitude to the country that had given me so many opportunities. I was grateful, but I also thought it disingenuous to show appreciation

unless all people had the same opportunities. Just because I had made it to a lifeboat didn't mean I could forget those who hadn't."¹⁰⁴ Thus, his decision to return home to Harlem in 1968 was astoundingly more controversial than doing so the previous summer. Juravich writes:

[Lew Alcindor] could probably have been anywhere he wanted in the summer of 1968. Many people had expected—indeed had demanded—that he would lead the United States to Olympic glory on the basketball court, but he declined the tryout, boycotting the Mexico City games in solidarity with the Olympic Project for Human Rights. His principled stand sparked a racist backlash, which he could have weathered on a Southern California beach or in the private company of other elite athletes, far from the public eye. Instead, he came home to New York City and led thirty-two basketball clinics for the New York City Housing Authority, in whose buildings he himself had grown up.¹⁰⁵

This boycott by Alcindor was a tremendous statement, and it solidified his role in politics as well as the decision to be an African-American superstar athlete who did more than just play his sport and remain silent. Johnny Smith concludes his article on Lew's boycott asserting, "Although we remember the 1968 Olympics for John Carlos and Tommie Smith's demonstration on the victory stand, Alcindor was the most famous athlete who avoided the games. More than any other college basketball player, he defined his times, proving also that black athletes could speak their minds and win. No one could tell him to shut up and dribble".¹⁰⁶ Although the latter-half of the 1960s were filled with Alcindor discovering himself as an activist while assisting the community he was raised in, it was also around this time that Alcindor fully discovered his true sense of self.

Alcindor was a follower of Islam, but it was not until the fall of 1971 following his first NBA season that he officially converted to Islam and legally changed his name to Kareem

¹⁰⁴ Abdul-Jabbar, Kareem. *Coach Wooden and Me: Our 50-Year Friendship on and off the Court*. Grand Central Publishing, 2018.

¹⁰⁵ Juravich, Nick. "Basketball and Black Pride: Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Resident Organizing in New York City Public Housing." *Gotham Center*, The Gotham Center for New York City History, 6 Aug. 2019, <www.gothamcenter.org/blog/basketball-and-black-pride-kareem-abdul-jabbar-and-resident-organizing-in-new-york-city-public-housing#:~:text=Born%20in%20Harlem%20in%201947,until%20he%20left%20for%20UCLA>.

¹⁰⁶ Smith, Johnny. The Reign of Lew Alcindor in the Age of Revolt. *The Undefeated*, 30 Mar. 2018, <theundefeated.com/features/lew-alcindor-kareem-abdul-jabbar-ucla-boycot-1968-olympics/>.

Abdul-Jabbar as he is known today. His new name translates roughly to “noble, powerful servant of Allah,” and the switch made him the most notable athlete since Muhammad Ali, to legally change their name to a Muslim one. He had been studying Islamic teachings a few years prior to the name change, becoming a scholar of the religion while completing his degree at UCLA. He detailed some of his early exposure in an essay published by *Sports Illustrated* titled, “UCLA Was A Mistake”. In this personal essay, Abdul-Jabbar writes, “we'd walk straight up into the mountains and then sit up there and talk about things like Malcolm X and black pride and Islam. Malcolm X became my star to follow...All my life I'd been a practicing Catholic, and now suddenly it was over, and I had no regrets whatsoever. In my mind, I became an apprentice Muslim, reading everything I could get about Islam.”¹⁰⁷ He was so avid to learn about the religion towards the end of college that he wrote his senior thesis on Islam in North America.¹⁰⁸ Interestingly, although they had a good relationship, Kareem claimed he could not take Ali's path and join the Nation of Islam led by Elijah Muhammad, citing issues of reverse racism in their teachings. In part three of Abdul-Jabbar's *Sports Illustrated* essay series, he writes, “I found Elijah's religion too narrow, too negative, and in my opinion not truly Muslim at all...I could no longer believe that the white man was inherently cruel and black men inherently superior, as some of the other blacks are teaching nowadays. That is just the flip side of old racism.”¹⁰⁹ As a result, Abdul-Jabbar decided to become a Sunni Muslim, partially influenced by Malcolm X, a fellow Sunnite. Abdul-Jabbar had become obsessed with learning about topics like Black Power, black pride, and black courage, and his conversion to Islam helped him channel his energy into

¹⁰⁷ Alcindor, Lew. “UCLA WAS A MISTAKE.” *Sports Illustrated Vault*, *Sports Illustrated*, 3 Nov. 1969, <www.si.com/si-vault/1969/11/03/ucla-was-a-mistake>.

¹⁰⁸ Alcindor, Lew. “My Story: Part 3.” *Sports Illustrated Vault*, *Sports Illustrated*, 10 Nov. 1969, <<https://vault.si.com/vault/43087>>.

¹⁰⁹ Alcindor, Lew. “My Story: Part 3.” *Sports Illustrated Vault*, *Sports Illustrated*, 10 Nov. 1969, <<https://vault.si.com/vault/43087>>.

these ideas in ways that he viewed as most effective or beneficial to the cause. Kareem remains a proud Muslim today and he views the conversion as one of the most monumental decisions in his lifetime, fortunately, he is glad to have made this decision as he wrapped up his college career at UCLA and became an NBA superstar.

The Milwaukee Bucks were the luckiest team in the NBA during the spring of 1969 as they secured the #1 overall pick in the NBA draft lottery and were granted a chance to draft Abdul-Jabbar. Unsurprisingly, on April 7, 1969, the Bucks did select the three-time NCAA MVP and champion, and he picked up right where he left off once the 1969-1970 NBA season commenced. Although they placed second in the Eastern Division, Abdul-Jabbar ranked second in scoring and third in rebounding, securing an NBA Rookie of the Year award for his first season. The following season, Abdul-Jabbar won the NBA scoring title, an NBA MVP, and an NBA Championship all at the age of 24, solidifying himself as a force in the league for years to come. Abdul-Jabbar would play for the Bucks until 1975, winning another MVP in the process but failing to secure a second NBA Championship. That same season however, Abdul-Jabbar spoke out against the NBA's officiating, violating the league's gag-rule for its players but simultaneously emboldening NBA players to stick up for themselves and not give into the leagues and owner's every wish. In a *New York Times* article written in the spring of 1975, David Anderson sums up the dispute, Kareem's threat, and how the league viewed it. In the Bucks game prior to the publication of this article, Abdul-Jabbar was ejected by a controversial referee named Jerry Loeber and fined for speaking out about the poor officiating to the press. Anderson writes, "Players and coaches have hesitated to criticize game officials publicly because of the threat of automatic fines—the gag rule. But now, with a \$300 fine due Tuesday in the National Basketball Association office, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar of the Milwaukee Bucks threatens to take

that immunity for N.B.A. officials to court with an American Civil Liberties Union attorney defending his freedom of speech.”¹¹⁰ The article mentions how the league has installed this rule that prevents club owners, general managers, coaches, and players from publicly criticizing referees; and referees are certainly not about to criticize themselves. Discussing the situation, Kareem claimed, “I’m tired of that rule. Tonight I’m going to speak out...They fine you when you say things about officials, but I think he stinks...He's done this to us before. He completely takes the game away from the players. He takes everything away.”¹¹¹ It is clear Abdul-Jabbar does not approve of Loeber’s game-calling; unfortunately, however, the article fails to mention any opinionated insight into if the Abdul Jabbar/Loeber dispute was racially motivated or not. Defending the gag rule following Kareem’s fine, then NBA commissioner Walter Kennedy asserted “that in his 12 years as commissioner, “12, maybe 15 or 20 players” have been in touch with him.”¹¹² That quote provides a stark contrast to the modern-day affairs of the NBA and commissioner Adam Silver’s relationship with the players, as it wouldn’t be surprising if Silver talked to over twenty players a day depending on what is currently going on in the league. In another *New York Times* article published two days later, journalist Sam Goldaper wrote that the majority of the league’s players and general managers supported Kareem’s criticism and “his right to speak his mind.”¹¹³ Furthermore, the Milwaukee Bucks paid for his fine and General Manager Wayne Embry released a statement on the situation, claiming, “We have not analyzed Kareem's situation, but in the past, if we thought any players were right, we have paid their

¹¹⁰ Anderson, David. *The Case for Kareem*. *The New York Times*, 30 Mar. 1975, <www.nytimes.com/1975/03/30/archives/dave-anderson-the-case-for-kareem.html>.

¹¹¹ Anderson, David. *The Case for Kareem*. *The New York Times*, 30 Mar. 1975, <www.nytimes.com/1975/03/30/archives/dave-anderson-the-case-for-kareem.html>.

¹¹² Anderson, David. *The Case for Kareem*. *The New York Times*, 30 Mar. 1975, <www.nytimes.com/1975/03/30/archives/dave-anderson-the-case-for-kareem.html>.

¹¹³ Goldaper, Sam. N.B.A. Players Supporting Abdul-Jabbar on Fine; Several Factors Still Unsettled for N.H.L. Playoffs. *The New York Times*, 1 Apr. 1975, <www.nytimes.com/1975/04/01/archives/nba-players-supporting-abduljabbar-on-fine-several-factors-still.html>.

finer...If Kareem feels strongly about something, yes I support him; that's about anything.”¹¹⁴

Although Kareem drew negative attention from personnel in the league as well as its fans, he stood up for what he thought was right and spoke his mind even if it got him into trouble. This is something that he—like Bill Russell—did that inspired the future of the NBA and proved as a catalyst for the gradual acquisition of personal rights as a player. Although this topic will be scrutinized more heavily in the next chapter which focuses on NBA affairs in the 1990s and twenty-first century, it is important to note that Abdul-Jabbar revolutionized the way in which athletes conduct themselves, not just in the NBA, but in professional sports as a whole in the United States.

The 1975 NBA season was an eventful one, and it concluded with the Bucks losing the NBA Championship series to the Boston Celtics after seven intense games. Abdul-Jabbar and the Bucks clearly weren't meeting expectations with only one title under their belt after six seasons, and Kareem felt he needed a change of scenery. Thus, he requested a trade to somewhere that “better fit his cultural needs” than the Midwest, asking to be offered to either the Los Angeles Lakers or the New York Knicks. A *New York Times* article published on June 17, 1975 details the trade and quotes Kareem as saying, “Milwaukee is not what I'm all about. The things I relate to aren't in Milwaukee.”¹¹⁵ The Knicks wanted to bring Abdul-Jabbar home but couldn't meet his salary. The Los Angeles Lakers did. In the summer of 1975, the Lakers completed the blockbuster trade and with help from teammate and NBA Hall-of-Famer Earvin “Magic” Johnson, they became a force to be reckoned with until Abdul-Jabbar's retirement. Abdul-Jabbar

¹¹⁴ Goldaper, Sam. N.B.A. Players Supporting Abdul-Jabbar on Fine; Several Factors Still Unsettled for N.H.L. Playoffs. *The New York Times*, 1 Apr. 1975, <www.nytimes.com/1975/04/01/archives/nba-players-supporting-abduljabbar-on-fine-several-factors-still.html>.

¹¹⁵ Cady, Steve. Abdul-Jabbar Traded by Bucks for Four Lakers. *The New York Times*, 17 June 1975, <www.nytimes.com/1975/06/17/archives/abduljabbar-traded-by-bucks-for-four-lakers-jabbar-traded-to-lakers.html>.

would go on to win five more NBA Championships, putting his career total at six, and retired in 1989 as the NBA's all-time leading scorer, a record he still holds today. But, his impact on Black Americans and motivating positive change in America should be viewed as equally if not more valuable than his impact on basketball. Although the 1980s were uneventful for social movements and the peak of Kareem's social change efforts occurred around the end of the 1960s, he remained a prominent progressive figure throughout the end of his NBA career and post-retirement and still is today at the age of 73. Jurvavich concludes his article on Kareem's social impact stating, "We know Kareem Abdul-Jabbar today as a brilliant activist and public intellectual as well as a basketball superstar, a man who was honored with the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2015. As historian John Matthew Smith wrote earlier this year, Abdul-Jabbar's legacy "transcends the game; in the age of Black Power, he redefined the political role of black college athletes."¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ Juravich, Nick. "Basketball and Black Pride: Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Resident Organizing in New York City Public Housing." *Gotham Center*, The Gotham Center for New York City History, 6 Aug. 2019, <www.gothamcenter.org/blog/basketball-and-black-pride-kareem-abdul-jabbar-and-resident-organizing-in-new-york-city-public-housing#:~:text=Born%20in%20Harlem%20in%201947,until%20he%20left%20for%20UCLA>.

Third Chapter

Upon the arrival of the 1990s, widespread social demonstrations, mainly aimed towards achieving equality, were reignited following the horrific beating of Rodney King by multiple LAPD officers on the early morning of March 3, 1991. This calamity was one significant motivator out of several that persuaded civil rights activists to keep applying pressure to enact changes, specifically ones regarding police brutality and gun violence. Regarding the NBA, players such as Craig Hodges and Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf were impacted by the King incident as well as personal experiences and the adversity they had witnessed fellow African American community members face. They would fight for change through methods paved by players like Abdul-Jabbar, Russell, and Baylor decades prior, such as protests, boycotts, and political advocacy. These types of demonstrations would continue into the twenty-first century with players like LeBron James and even higher-up personnel such as commissioner Adam Silver eventually taking the activism torch from brave men like Hodges and Abdul-Rauf in order to continue enacting positive change. Nevertheless, NBA personnel who expressed a passion for change were rejuvenated following a tragic spring morning in 1991, and it is important to examine this event and the way it impacted not only residents of Southern California but America as a whole.

On the morning of March 3, 1991, a confrontation occurred that will not soon be forgotten, one that shook the entire nation. Early that morning, around 12:30 a.m., police noticed a Hyundai Excelsior speeding down interstate 210 in the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles. The driver, Rodney King, and two friends named Bryant “Pooh” Allen and Freddie Helms (all African American), were on the way home from drinking and watching a basketball game at

another friend's house.¹¹⁷ Wary of violating his parole if caught driving under the influence, King refused to pull over when the LAPD flashed their lights, and the cars engaged in a high-speed chase that was clocked at speeds as high as 117 MPH at one point.¹¹⁸ The hot pursuit eventually ended when officers cornered King's vehicle and surrounded him. The first officers to arrive on the scene were Stacey Koon, Laurence Powell, Timothy Wind, Theodore Briseno, and Rolando Solano.¹¹⁹ Once more officers arrived, Officer Tim Singer ordered King and his friends to exit the vehicle and lie face down on the ground. This is when the beating begins, as officers violently begin to beat the three men once they are on the ground with King being assaulted the worst; several officers, kicked, punched, stomped, tasered, and beat the men with batons. Sadly, during this century, similar racially motivated incidents had likely occurred and blown over with no repercussions, however, this time it was different because plumbing salesman George Holliday recorded a video on his camcorder of the beating from his apartment. This incriminating video made the incident impossible to ignore and sparked nationwide outrage after Holliday delivered it to local news station KTLA to air. It immediately made news all over the world, and thus, "A nine-minute and twenty second videotape taken by George Holliday turned what would otherwise have been a violent, but soon forgotten, encounter between Los Angeles police and Rodney King into one of the most widely watched and discussed incidents of its kind."¹²⁰ The viral video of the incident put the confrontation into the limelight and highlighted failures in policing systems such as the LAPDs, yet, the situation would not reach its boiling

¹¹⁷ Linder, Doug. "An Account of the Los Angeles Police Officers' Trials." (The Rodney King Beating Case), 2001, <law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/lapd/lapdaccount.html>.

¹¹⁸ Linder, Doug. "An Account of the Los Angeles Police Officers' Trials." (The Rodney King Beating Case), 2001, <law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/lapd/lapdaccount.html>.

¹¹⁹ Whitman, David. "The Untold Story of the LA Riot." *U.S. News & World Report*, 23 May 1993, <www.usnews.com/news/articles/1993/05/23/the-untold-story-of-the-la-riot>.

¹²⁰ Linder, Doug. "An Account of the Los Angeles Police Officers' Trials." (The Rodney King Beating Case), 2001, <law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/lapd/lapdaccount.html>.

point until the verdict of the court case against the officers charged with assault and use of excessive force.

Before summarizing the court case verdict, it is important to note how basketball stars, specifically Craig Hodges, were already attempting to organize demonstrations against what had happened to King. In an activism effort, Hodges attempted to convince the NBA two's largest stars at the time, Michael Jordan and Magic Johnson, to protest Game 1 of the 1991 NBA Finals between the Bulls and Los Angeles Lakers by boycotting the game. The NBA Finals were just a few short months after the King incident and Hodges wanted to make a statement. He told the pair of his plan, adding, "we would stand in solidarity with the black community while calling out racism and economic inequality in the NBA, where there were no black owners and almost no black coaches despite the fact that 75% of the players in the league were African American."¹²¹ Sadly, Hodges was sure it would be futile anyway, stating in an interview, "I knew the answer before I went to them. What's funny to me, is how quick they dismissed it. Both conversations lasted less than two minutes."¹²² He recalls Johnson claimed it was "too extreme" while Jordan just told him, "man, that's wild, man."¹²³ So, his efforts in 1991 did not go far, however, he would pursue demonstrations in the future motivated further by the Rodney King verdict, and these actions could likely have cost him his NBA career.

Briefly summarizing the court case, four LAPD officers were charged with assault and use of excessive force on King, the previously mentioned officers Koon, Powell, Wind, and

¹²¹ Hodges, Craig, et al. *Long Shot: The Triumphs and Struggles of an NBA Freedom Fighter*. Haymarket Books, 2017, pp. 114.

¹²² Wimbish, Jasmyn. "Craig Hodges Weighs in on NBA Protest and Activism: 'They Should've Never Went Down There in the First Place'." *CBSSports.com*, 30 Aug. 2020, <www.cbssports.com/nba/news/craig-hodges-weighs-in-on-nba-protest-and-activism-they-shouldve-never-went-down-there-in-the-first-place/>.

¹²³ Wimbish, Jasmyn. "Craig Hodges Weighs in on NBA Protest and Activism: 'They Should've Never Went Down There in the First Place'." *CBSSports.com*, 30 Aug. 2020, <www.cbssports.com/nba/news/craig-hodges-weighs-in-on-nba-protest-and-activism-they-shouldve-never-went-down-there-in-the-first-place/>.

Briseno. The nation followed the case intently and the majority of the population seemed to feel certain that the men would be convicted. Astoundingly, on April, 29, 1991, after seven days of jury deliberation, all four men were acquitted of the assault charge, and three were acquitted of excessive force while the jury was hung on whether or not to charge Powell with the count. The verdict is hardly a coincidence once accounting for the fact that the jury was ten Caucasians, one Asian man and a Hispanic woman. The Hispanic woman, Virginia Loya, was the only one arguing for a conviction and it was her determination that resulted in the hung jury for officer Powell on the excessive force charge.

As one can imagine, many officials and American citizens were shocked and outraged, specifically those of color or those residing in the L.A. County area. People gathered for demonstrations across the country, with several culminating into riots, most notably those in downtown Los Angeles. The uprisings in L.A. from the night of the verdict lasting until May, 5, 1992, are now known as the 1992 Los Angeles riots. Once the riots had finally subsided, there were 63 confirmed deaths, more than 2,000 injuries, over 12,000 arrests, and property damage in the area exceeded \$1 billion. Los Angeles Police Chief Daryl Gates had been pressured by public figures, including Mayor Tom Bradley to resign and he had hesitantly done so prior to the verdicts being announced. However, Mayor Bradley was still in office and he spoke out about the verdict the next day, claiming, "Today, the system failed us...The jury's verdict will not blind us to what we saw on that videotape. The men who beat Rodney King do not deserve to wear the uniform of the LAPD."¹²⁴ Still, countless Americans took a contradictory stance on the verdict, with the most significant of those being George H.W. Bush, President of the United States at the time. Bush, who had stated the King videotape made him sick a year prior, issued a statement

¹²⁴ Mydans, Seth. "THE POLICE VERDICT; Los Angeles Policemen Acquitted in Taped Beating." *The New York Times*, 30 Apr. 1992, <archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/02/08/home/rodney.html>.

about the verdict, asserting, “The court system has worked. What's needed now is calm, respect for the law.”¹²⁵ As racial tensions and divisions grew the strongest they had been in years, Hodges reflected on the court ruling through his own words, in his autobiography titled, *Long Shot: The Triumphs and Struggles of an NBA Freedom Fighter*. The late April verdict is delivered as Hodges and the Chicago Bulls are in the middle of the NBA playoffs. He notes, “I tried not to let the events in L.A. distract me, but I felt too close to the situation to ignore it. Many people were dismissing the rioters as looters and thugs. This ignored not only the horrifying injustice of the verdict but also the decades of militarized oppression by law enforcement in Black communities.”¹²⁶ Obviously, he is dismayed by the court verdict and further upset by the media and white America’s portrayal of the uprisings, with the notion of thugs and looters being dropped, a common term used to describe demonstrators in the 2020 riots. He is still disgruntled at the lack of energy his NBA colleagues are putting into enacting social change. In his autobiography, he continues, “If I had my way, the ‘92 playoffs would have been boycotted until justice was served in the King case. And I felt somewhat alone in that conviction. Somebody asked MJ what he thought about the Rodney King verdict, and Jordan replied, “‘I need to know more about it’.”¹²⁷ Nevertheless, the 1992 NBA playoffs concluded, and Jordan and Hodges’ Chicago Bulls were crowned champions, winning their second consecutive NBA title. This triumph was one of the highlights of Hodges’ time in the NBA, however, it would be the NBA offseason in the mid-late summer of 1992 that would have the largest impact on Hodges NBA career and life.

¹²⁵ Mydans, Seth. “THE POLICE VERDICT; Los Angeles Policemen Acquitted in Taped Beating.” *The New York Times*, 30 Apr. 1992, <archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/02/08/home/rodney.html>.

¹²⁶ Hodges, Craig, et al. *Long Shot: The Triumphs and Struggles of an NBA Freedom Fighter*. Haymarket Books, 2017, pp. 163-164.

¹²⁷ Hodges, Craig, et al. *Long Shot: The Triumphs and Struggles of an NBA Freedom Fighter*. Haymarket Books, 2017, pp. 164.

As has been tradition for centuries for championship winning American sports teams, the Bulls were invited to visit the White House in October to receive congratulations from President H.W. Bush. After he started to voice his political views more publicly and on the record during the 1992 NBA offseason, Hodges made his most colossal activist demonstration thus far via his public appearance and actions during the Chicago Bulls' White House visit. Hodges showed up to the ceremony sporting a full-length dashiki (a colorful African garment) and holding an eighth-page letter that he planned on giving to President Bush. In the letter, Hodges detailed struggles faced by minority communities and the constant shortcomings of the nation's leaders to address said problems. In the note, it reads, "The purpose of this note is to speak on behalf of the poor people, Native Americans, homeless and, most specifically, the African Americans, who are not able to come to this great edifice and meet the leader of the nation where they live...It is time for a comprehensive plan for change. Hopefully, this letter will help become a boost in the unification of inner-city youth and these issues will be brought to the forefront of the domestic agenda."¹²⁸ Unfortunately, Hodges' actions at the White House in addition to his willingness to address social issues with the media did not sit well with much of the league, but most importantly, Bulls General Manager Jerry Krause did not support Hodges' cause. Although he was a key piece to the Bulls roster and recent success as a franchise, Hodges did not receive another contract offer to return to the Chicago Bulls. At first, he thought it was just his former team that was unable to sign him, however, the current NBA champion and three-time three-point contest champion did not receive a single offer from an NBA team, and he slowly realized

¹²⁸ Heisler, Steve. "Former Chicago Bulls Guard Craig Hodges Was Dropped in 1992 for Suspicious Reasons." *Chicago Reader*, 4 June 2018, <www.chicagoreader.com/Bleader/archives/2018/06/04/former-chicago-bulls-guard-craig-hodges-was-dropped-in-1992-for-suspicious-reasons>.

he had been blackballed from the league; blackballing is a demoralizing, career-costing concept that will be further assessed later.

Following Hodges' unspoken permanent ban from the NBA, another activist figure emerged in the NBA during the 1990s, a star player named Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, who would eventually suffer the same fate as Hodges did for his courageous actions and outspokenness. Born Chris Jackson until his conversion to Sunni Islam in 1991 and permanent name change shortly thereafter, Abdul-Rauf was a college phenom at Louisiana State University (LSU). He is believed to be the only freshman in history to average more than thirty points a game, and thus he was the third overall pick in the 1990 NBA draft, taken by the Denver Nuggets.¹²⁹ Although less dominant than he was in college, Abdul-Rauf concluded his first professional season by being named to the NBA All-Rookie Second Team.¹³⁰ He would continue to progress, winning the NBA's 1992-93 Most Improved Player award and leading the league in free throw percentage for two seasons, the 1993-94 and 1995-96 seasons.¹³¹ During the 1995-96 season, Abdul-Rauf was playing the best basketball of his career, setting personal career highs in minutes-per-game, three-point percentage, assists-per-game, and points-per-game; however, it is not coincidence that Abdul-Rauf was not offered a contract by any NBA team after the season ended.¹³² Instead, his activism and public stances that were heavily scrutinized by the media in the spring of 1996 would forever alter his basketball career as well as his life.

Abdul-Rauf stopped paying homage to the national anthem on the court at the start of the 1995-96 season in October, citing religious beliefs. It was not until March of 1996 that Abdul-

¹²⁹ Brockell, Gillian. "A National Anthem Protest Ruined His NBA Career. Now Former Nuggets Star Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf Is Being Honored by LSU." *The Denver Post*, 23 July 2019, <www.denverpost.com/2019/07/23/mahmoud-abdul-rauf-honored-lsu/>.

¹³⁰ "Year-by-Year NBA All-Rookie Teams." *NBA.com*, <www.nba.com/history/awards/all-rookie-team>.

¹³¹ "Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf Stats." *Basketball*, <www.basketball-reference.com/players/a/abdulma02.html>.

¹³² "Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf Stats." *Basketball*, <www.basketball-reference.com/players/a/abdulma02.html>.

Rauf's choice was put under the spotlight by media outlets, and it became a major topic of controversy throughout the nation. *Sports Illustrated's* Avery Yang writes, "For the better part of the 1996 NBA season, Abdul-Rauf either stayed in the locker room or didn't stand during the anthem, citing his belief that the song represented tyranny and oppression...It was after a random March game that season—with the Nuggets a paltry 26–35—that reporters finally noticed that he had avoided the national anthem."¹³³ He claimed that the American flag, along with the national anthem, symbolized oppression that went against his Muslim beliefs, as "You can't be for God and for oppression."¹³⁴ So, once it became the hottest topic in American sports, on March 12, 1996, the same day Abdul-Rauf gave his reasoning for leaving the court during the anthem, the NBA suspended him without pay and fined him until he agreed to stand in a "dignified posture."¹³⁵ Less than two weeks later, Rick Reilly wrote, "Abdul-Rauf on March 12 became the highest-profile U.S. pro athlete ever suspended over a song. Emotional debate ensued over whether Abdul-Rauf had a right to boycott the anthem."¹³⁶ Two days after the fine and suspension, Abdul-Rauf made a deal with the NBA where he would stand during the anthem, under the condition that he could cup his face with his hands and pray during it. He still wanted to make it clear that he had not backed off his stance or changed his views. After striking the anthem compromise with the NBA, Abdul-Rauf stated, "In no way I'm saying I'm compromising

¹³³ Yang, Avery. "Before Kaepernick, Abdul-Rauf Didn't Stand for the Anthem." *Sports Illustrated*, 16 Feb. 2020, <www.si.com/nba/2020/02/16/black-history-month-mahmoud-abdul-rauf>.

¹³⁴ Boren, Cindy. "Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf on Colin Kaepernick: 'the Same Thing Happened to Me': His Own Protest More than 20 Years Ago Effectively Ended the Denver Nuggets Player's Career in the NBA." *The Washington Post*, 2017. ProQuest. Web. 18 Mar. 2021.

¹³⁵ Brockell, Gillian. "A National Anthem Protest Ruined His NBA Career. Now Former Nuggets Star Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf Is Being Honored by LSU." *The Denver Post*, 23 July 2019, <www.denverpost.com/2019/07/23/mahmoud-abdul-rauf-honored-lsu/>.

¹³⁶ Reilly, Rick. "PATRIOT GAMES MAHMOUD ABDUL-RAUF CAUSED AN UPROAR WHEN HE SAT OUT THE NATIONAL ANTHEM." *SI.com, Sports Illustrated Vault*, 25 Mar. 1996, <vault.si.com/vault/1996/03/25/patriot-games-mahmoud-abdul-rauf-caused-an-uproar-when-he-sat-out-the-national-anthem>.

what I believe in. I don't feel that in any way I was wrong in my stand. But in Islam, if there's a better approach to things, it's only wise to take that approach. And after thinking about it more and discussing issues with people, Muslims, I said maybe that wasn't the best approach.”¹³⁷

Abdul-Rauf was booed every time he touched the ball in his first game back, but he still dropped a cool 19 points in a loss to Michael Jordan’s Chicago Bulls. Abdul-Rauf would not get an offer to return to the Nuggets in the summer of 1996 nor would he ever play as many minutes as he had the previous season. Despite leading his team in points and assists per game, he was traded to the Sacramento Kings where his game minutes continued to decrease. He played there for two seasons, playing less than half the minutes in the 1997-98 that he did in 1995-96 and he was not offered an NBA tryout by any team following the 1997-98 season. Sadly, Abdul-Rauf and many others knew why; Yang claims, “For this simple protest, he paid the price, like many activists before him. Abdul-Rauf said he was excommunicated from the league after the 1998 season, just two years after he averaged nearly 20 points—and sat for the anthem.”¹³⁸ Abdul-Rauf himself acknowledged he knew what was happening and how he had been blackballed. In a 2016 interview, he acknowledged parallels in his career regarding modern athletes and asserted, “It’s a process of just trying to weed you out. This is what I feel is going to happen to [Kaepernick]...They begin to try to put you in vulnerable positions. They play with your minutes, trying to mess up your rhythm. Then they sit you more. Then what it looks like is, well, the guy just doesn’t have it anymore.”¹³⁹ After this occurrence, Abdul-Rauf played worldwide, joining teams in any country that valued his services. He continued to receive death threats and hate

¹³⁷ Denver Nuggets Star Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf Agrees to Stand. Washington, D.C.: *NPR*, 15 Mar. 1996. ProQuest. Web. 19 Mar. 2021.

¹³⁸ Yang, Avery. Before Kaepernick, Abdul-Rauf Didn't Stand for the Anthem. *Sports Illustrated*, 16 Feb. 2020, <www.si.com/nba/2020/02/16/black-history-month-mahmoud-abdul-rauf>.

¹³⁹ Washington, Jesse. Still No Anthem, Still No Regrets for Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf. *The Undeclared*, 3 Sept. 2016, <theundefeated.com/features/abdul-rauf-doesnt-regret-sitting-out-national-anthem/>.

mail, even having his house burnt to the ground while it was vacant and for sale in 2001.¹⁴⁰ He played in Turkey, Russia, Italy, Greece, Saudi Arabia, and Japan before finally calling his professional basketball career in 2011. Luckily, he still lives with no regrets from his decision to take a stand. Towards the end of his 2016 interview with *The Undefeated*, he declared, “It's priceless to know that I can go to sleep knowing that I stood to my principles...Whether I go broke, whether they take my life, whatever it is, I stood on principles. To me, that is worth more than wealth and fame.”¹⁴¹ Overall, Hodges and Abdul-Rauf were the most influential and dedicated activists in the NBA during the 1990s. They aimed to utilize their platform to leave a lasting positive impact for future generations. They fought for causes they believed in including protests of police brutality, systematic oppression, and the U.S. government's neglect of underserved communities. Unfortunately, they both paid the price for their public efforts and it cost them each an NBA career. Following the conclusion of the 20th century, another incident occurred in the mid-2000s that would again result in emotional debates between players, fans, league personnel, analysts, and more.

As for the start of the 2000s, they were relatively quiet years regarding NBA controversy, and although NBA players were gaining more freedom from higher-up league personnel, one fateful November night in 2004 would put a hold on that. On the 19th, at The Palace in Auburn Hills, Michigan, a fight between the Indiana Pacers, the defending NBA champions the Detroit Pistons, and numerous spectators broke out in the last minute of a game between the two teams. This fight came to be called the 2004 Pistons-Pacers Brawl; however, it is colloquially known as The Malice at the Palace and it is regarded the most infamous brawl in NBA history and

¹⁴⁰ Washington, Jesse. Still No Anthem, Still No Regrets for Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf. *The Undefeated*, 3 Sept. 2016, <theundefeated.com/features/abdul-rauf-doesnt-regret-sitting-out-national-anthem/>.

¹⁴¹ Washington, Jesse. Still No Anthem, Still No Regrets for Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf. *The Undefeated*, 3 Sept. 2016, <theundefeated.com/features/abdul-rauf-doesnt-regret-sitting-out-national-anthem/>.

arguably the most detrimental night ever for the league's image. What seemed like an average NBA game conclusion, with the Pacers closing out the last minute of a comfortable double-digit victory, would evolve into chaos following a hard fall by Ron Artest on the Piston's Ben Wallace with forty-five seconds remaining. A small scuffle broke out between the two teams which wasn't unusual, even Piston head coach Larry Brown claimed he wasn't concerned as these alterations usually last a few seconds.¹⁴² Once the sides were separated, Artest, the Pacer who had initially fouled Wallace, laid down on the scorer's table to defuse while countless Pistons fans hurled obscenities at Artest and the rest of the Indiana roster. As he was lying on the table, a full cup of soda came flying down from the stands and hit Artest in the chest, from there, all hell breaks loose and Artest does something never before seen in NBA history: he jumped over the scorer's table and front row seats to confront the fan in the stand who threw the cup.¹⁴³

On a phone interview with Jim Gray the night of the brawl, Artest told him, "I was lying down when I got hit with a liquid—ice and glass on my chest and on my face. After that, it was self-defense."¹⁴⁴ Artest ran into the stand and grabbed the man standing next to the actual cup-thrower and shook him asking if he was the one who had hit him. The man who did throw the cup, identified later as John Green, tried putting Artest in a headlock, and all the while this is going on, referees, security, Pacers players and coaches were all trying to break the fight up and simultaneously defend themselves. Stephen Jackson, one of Artest's teammates known to be a hothead, joined him in the stands, throwing punches and helping free his teammates from the crowd melee. Eventually, all the players were pulled out from the stands, but the altercation was

¹⁴² McCosky, Chris. "Pistons-Pacers Brawl Spills into the Stands." *USA Today, The Detroit News*, 20 Nov. 2004, <http://www.usatoday.com/sports/basketball/nba/2004-11-20-detroit-fans_x.htm>.

¹⁴³ "Malice At The Palace." *YouTube*, TheNBAFreak, 16 Aug. 2016, <www.youtube.com/watch?v=vOhsXPX1j54&ab_channel=TheNBAFreak>.

¹⁴⁴ Abrams, Jonathan. "The Malice at the Palace: An Oral History of the Scariest Moment in NBA History." *Grantland*, 12 May 2014, <grantland.com/features/an-oral-history-malice-palace/>.

far from over. Two fans ran onto the court to join the melee, and one fan, Charles Haddad, notorious for trying to instigate with NBA players from his courtside seat, received two punches from different Pacers, with Anthony Johnson's punch taking him aback and Jermaine O'Neal's punch knocking him out cold. Fortunately, O'Neal slipped on liquid mid-punch, had he not, many who saw the incident, including Pistons CEO Tom Wilson, believed that the 6-foot-11 center's punch would have killed Haddad. Former Pacers center Scot Pollard explicitly asserted, "That guy he tried to hit is lucky. There's not a question in my mind that there's a fan out there alive right now because my friend slipped on beer or whatever it was and missed that punch. It's good that he did, because he'd be in trouble or maybe be in jail right now."¹⁴⁵ While security and other league personnel intervened, the decision was made to not play the remaining forty-five seconds and instead help the Pacers safely reach their locker room and team bus. Unfortunately, the locker room tunnel was surrounded by two sections of spectators, and virtually all Pacers personnel were hit with a barrage of solids and liquids including popcorn, soda, beer, ice, and even a chair.¹⁴⁶ Several spectators and league personnel were treated for injury including Pacer radio broadcaster Mark Boyle who suffered a fractured vertebrae and head laceration while trying to prevent players from entering the stands. Pacers coach Rick Carlisle told reporters that he felt like he was fighting for his life during the event. NBA commentators and the analysts at ESPN were stunned, with several declaring it the worst night in league history. The Pacers fans started referring to their own team as the "The Thugs," and the relationship between the league's

¹⁴⁵ Abrams, Jonathan. "The Malice at the Palace: An Oral History of the Scariest Moment in NBA History." *Grantland*, 12 May 2014, <grantland.com/features/an-oral-history-malice-palace/>.

¹⁴⁶ "Artest, Jackson Charge Palace Stands." *ESPN*, 20 Nov. 2004, <www.espn.com/nba/news/story?id=1927380>.

higher-up, the players, and the fans were forever altered as a result of the 2004 Pistons-Pacers Brawl.¹⁴⁷

The day after the brawl, then NBA commissioner David Stern issued a statement condemning the fight and declaring new rule changes will be installed in order to prevent something similar from ever occurring again.¹⁴⁸ The statement said, “The events at last night’s game were shocking, repulsive and inexcusable—a humiliation for everyone associated with the NBA. This demonstrates why our players must not enter the stands whatever the provocation or poisonous behavior of people attending the games.”¹⁴⁹ It is apparent with the last line that Stern is placing a large portion of the blame on Pacers such as Jackson and Artest who engaged the crowd, and he wanted to reprimand his leagues’ players following the horror show in Michigan. On November 21, two days after the fight, the league announced several suspensions totaling 147 games, 136 for Pacers players and nine for the Pistons, additionally, the suspensions cost all the players involved a total combined salary of over \$11 million. Artest’s 86-game suspension remains the longest non-drug related suspension in NBA history and he lost over \$5 million in salary, nearly half of the combined total, as a result.¹⁵⁰ Five Pistons fans were charged with assault and permanently banned from Pistons game, and five Pacer players were also charged with assault. The three most involved from the Pacers corner, Artest, Jackson, and O’Neal, were all sentenced to one year of probation, 60 hours of community service, a \$250 fine, and anger

¹⁴⁷ Abrams, Jonathan. “The Malice at the Palace: An Oral History of the Scariest Moment in NBA History.” *Grantland*, 12 May 2014, <grantland.com/features/an-oral-history-malice-palace/>.

¹⁴⁸ Foltman, Bob. “Stern Response to Wild Brawl: Repulsive.” *Chicagotribune.com*, 27 Aug. 2018, <www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2004-11-21-0411210490-story.html>.

¹⁴⁹ Stern, David. “Statement from NBA Commissioner David Stern Concerning the Altercation During the Detroit Pistons and Indiana Pacers Game Last Night at The Palace of Auburn Hills.” *NBA.com*, 20 Nov. 2004, <www.nba.com%2Fnews%2Fcommissioner_statement_041120.html>.

¹⁵⁰ Burleson, Duane. “PALACE BRAWL LIVES IN INFAMY 1 YEAR LATER.” *MSNBC, Associated Press*, 26 Nov. 2005, <nbcports.msnbc.com/id/10089645/site/21683474/>.

management counseling.¹⁵¹ Yet, David Stern was still not done addressing their actions and shaping league policy as a result of the incident. The fight had severely hindered the league's image and amplified some views of commentators declaring that the NBA's players were too immersed in “gangsta” culture. As a result, the league tightened its grip on players' ability to express personas or style associated with blackness. In his book *After Artest: The NBA and the Assault on Blackness*, Author David J. Leonard recounts some of Stern's motivation to try and alter the image of his league and its personnel. He writes, “According to David Stern, ‘sponsors were flocking out of the NBA because it was perceived as a bunch of high-salaried, drug-sniffing black guys’.”¹⁵² The image of a group of giant African American athletes beating up on a bunch of white spectators did not sit well with much of the league's fans and boosters, most of whom were Caucasian. Thus, Stern and some of the league's top personnel pursue an endeavor to restrict individualism and personal expression from its players. As a result, the NBA instituted a dress code in 2005, a rule that many criticize as an attack on blackness and a direct response to *The Malice at the Palace*.

This dress code was the first of its kind in any of the major five American sports leagues, and it barred NBA players from wearing a plethora of attire, but most specifically, chains, pendants, baggy clothes, sleeveless shirts, all things often associated with Black culture.¹⁵³ Frank García, author of the journal titled “Inside the NBA: Black Dandyism and the Racial Regime,” examines the relationship between race and the NBA, offering an analysis of how the league has mobilized racist agendas and silenced its own players' voices over the course of its history.

¹⁵¹ McCosky, Chris. “Pistons-Pacers Brawl Spills into the Stands.” *USA Today, The Detroit News*, 20 Nov. 2004, <http://www.usatoday.com/sports/basketball/nba/2004-11-20-detroit-fans_x.htm>.

¹⁵² Leonard, David J. *After Artest: The NBA and the Assault on Blackness*, State University of New York Press, 2012. ProQuest Ebook Central, <<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/union/detail.action?docID=3407029>>.

¹⁵³ García, Frank. “Inside the NBA: Black Dandyism and the Racial Regime.” *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, vol. 51, no. 2, 2018, pp. 103–136. JSTOR, <www.jstor.org/stable/45151157>.

Garcia also voices the belief that the NBA's dress code imposed in the mid 2000s was a racially motivated decision, "intended to further demonize and control players and Blackness by rendering hip-hop culture both criminal and unprofessional."¹⁵⁴ It is often viewed as yet another attempt to silence the voice of NBA players, and Garcia even uses Laura Ingraham's notorious "shut up and dribble" quote as an example in his writing. Additionally, several players blasted the new rule as one that targeted black players, and NBA star Jason Richardson even said, "One thing to me that was kind of racist was you can't wear chains outside your clothing...I don't understand what that has to do with being business approachable...Just because you dress a certain way doesn't mean you're that way. Hey, a guy could come in with baggy jeans, a 'durag and have a Ph.D. and a person who comes in with a suit could be a three-time felon."¹⁵⁵ Stephen Jackson, one of the key figures in the 2004 Pistons-Pacers Brawl also claimed some of the dress code requests were certainly a racial statement.¹⁵⁶ Overall, the events in Auburn Hills, Michigan, on the night of November 19, 2004 resulted in something that would permanently change the dynamic of the NBA. The league tightened its grip on its players, and fan-player interactions had reached a boiling point that resulted in a debacle that may never be surpassed for decades to come. Ironically, Ron Artest legally changed his name to Metta World Peace in 2011, citing, "Changing my name was meant to inspire and bring youth together all around the world."¹⁵⁷ The melee caused a massive reversal of prior racial progress, as it inspired the league to campaign an "assault on blackness". Fortunately, there was a young superstar who had entered the league just

¹⁵⁴ García, Frank. "Inside the NBA: Black Dandyism and the Racial Regime." *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, vol. 51, no. 2, 2018, pp. 103–136. JSTOR, <www.jstor.org/stable/45151157>.

¹⁵⁵ Eligon, John. "N.B.A. Dress Code Decrees: Clothes Make the Image." *The New York Times*, 19 Oct. 2005, <www.nytimes.com/2005/10/19/sports/basketball/nba-dress-code-decrees-clothes-make-the-image.html>.

¹⁵⁶ Eligon, John. "N.B.A. Dress Code Decrees: Clothes Make the Image." *The New York Times*, 19 Oct. 2005, <www.nytimes.com/2005/10/19/sports/basketball/nba-dress-code-decrees-clothes-make-the-image.html>.

¹⁵⁷ "Artest's Name Change to Metta World Peace Approved." *ESPN, Associated Press*, 16 Sept. 2011, <www.espn.com/espn/wire/_/section/nba/id/6977785#:~:text=His%20publicist%2C%20Courtney%20Barnes%2C%20said,statement%20released%20after%20the%20hearing>.

a season prior to The Malice at the Palace that was going to spearhead the push in preventing the NBA from restricting their rights: LeBron James.

LeBron James was born on December 30, 1984, in Akron, Ohio. Throughout his childhood he was always seen as a generational talent, and he was drafted to the NBA in 2003 while finishing up his senior year of high school.¹⁵⁸ Although the league would eventually ban teams from drafting players out of high school, thankfully, this rule did not affect James' age group because he made an immediate impact on the Cleveland Cavaliers, living up to already incredibly lofty expectations. Following the blackballing's of Craig Hodges and Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, and additionally the 2004 Pistons-Pacers Brawl, current and former NBA players yearned for a new face of social activism and reform in the league, and as James became further immersed in the league, he emerged as the NBA's leading activist of his era. LeBron has helped battle racial injustice and assist marginalized communities through many avenues including: building schools, paying fines and helping to register voters, promoting Black identity and tolerance through mainstream media, partnering with Black entrepreneurs to create business opportunities for others, and more. He assisted the family of Tamir Rice, an unarmed black 12-year-old who grew up near James' hometown, and James has always shown support for the Black Lives Matter movement, sporting an "I Can't Breathe" shirt in warmups after the police killing of Eric Garner.¹⁵⁹ Throughout his entire NBA career, James who is now in the midst of his 18th NBA season has been passionate about issues and injustices affecting underserved communities, particularly African American ones. However, it was not until the summer of

¹⁵⁸ "LeBron James." *Biography.com, A&E Networks Television*, 6 Jan. 2021, <www.biography.com/athlete/lebron-james>.

¹⁵⁹ Woike, Dan. "NBA Players' Activism Is Not New, but Shaping Change Would Be." *Los Angeles Times*, 25 July 2020, <www.latimes.com/sports/story/2020-07-25/nba-players-activism-is-not-new-but-shaping-change-would-be>.

2020, during the temporary postponement of the 2019-2020 NBA season due to the COVID-19 pandemic that his activism and influence reached its climax.

The murder of unarmed Black male George Floyd by four Minneapolis police officers, with Derek Chauvin most culpable, cause nationwide outrage after close-up video of the nearly nine-minute suffocation went viral towards the end of May in 2020. The traumatizing video captures Floyd begging for his life telling officers that he is unable to breath, yet they don't let up. As a result of the event, nationwide protests were orchestrated in every state in the U.S., and countless American citizens pressured U.S. lawmakers to press criminal charges and enact legislative change. The tragedy of Floyd's death shook the entire nation, however, the NBA and other major sports leagues eventually resumed play and personnel from the top 22 teams in the current NBA standings arrived in Orlando, Florida on July 7th to prepare to finish the NBA season and subsequent playoffs. A majority of the NBA's players were still outspoken about the Floyd incident and Black Lives Matter movement on social media and during press conferences, however, they tried to focus on the bubble and winning the championship instead. Sadly, racial injustice could not further be ignored, because less than three months after the killing of Floyd, police officers shot African American, Kenosha, Wisconsin resident Jacob Blake seven times in the back as he tried to enter his vehicle leave the scene of a dispute he had recently broken up. This was also caught on close-up video and it was the tipping point; virtually all NBA personnel believed that racial injustice was unignorable and that a stand must be taken. On August 26th, before the first playoff game of the day between the Milwaukee Bucks and Orlando Magic, the Bucks' George Hill decided he wanted to take a stand like those who had done so before him, and he told his teammates he was going to sit the game out just twenty minutes before tip-off. Hill did not run the idea by his teammates, as he claimed he wanted every player to make their

own decision, however, his choice led to an unprecedented, long overdue decision: the entire Bucks team, a roster made up of several white and Black players, chose to protest the game with Hill. He recalls, “before the game, guys were trying to figure out why I wasn't playing. And we spoke about it. Sterling [Brown] spoke about it and wanted to stay in with us. And it was a trickle effect; every guy in our locker room stood by my side and said, ‘If my brother isn't playing, then we aren't playing’.”¹⁶⁰ The decision gained momentum throughout the league, and when the Orlando Magic chose to protest the game instead of taking the easy forfeit victory, every single team in the NBA made the group decision to boycott their upcoming playoff game and potentially even the playoffs as a whole.¹⁶¹ The second night of the boycott, all the teams still in the bubble for playoffs participated in a board meeting in one of the hotels. They held a vote on whether or not to cancel the rest of the season in protest, however, only two teams voted to cancel the playoffs. Unsurprisingly, one of these two teams was the Los Angeles Lakers, whose ringleader is none other than LeBron James. According to reports, James stormed out of the meeting after the vote was counted and it became clear that the league wanted the boycott to be short lived as he felt the owners were not doing enough.¹⁶² The other team who wanted to leave was the Clippers, and the Lakers and Clippers were the two best NBA teams during the 2019-20 season, so it is clear they truly believe in the cause and aren't making the choice to avoid an early playoff exit. LeBron claimed that the boycott would have to be a long one in order to make an impact, but the lack of support to cancel the playoffs led to James and others to make

¹⁶⁰ Bontemps, Tim. “George Hill Withheld Plans to Sit out from Bucks at First: 'Didn't Want to Put That Pressure on My Teammates'.” *ESPN*, 30 Aug. 2020, <www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/29769271/george-hill-withheld-plans-sit-bucks-first-want-put-pressure-my-teammates>.

¹⁶¹ Woike, Dan. “NBA Players' Activism Is Not New, but Shaping Change Would Be.” *Los Angeles Times*, 25 July 2020, <www.latimes.com/sports/story/2020-07-25/nba-players-activism-is-not-new-but-shaping-change-would-be>.

¹⁶² Amico, Sam. “LeBron Reportedly Storms out of 'Dysfunctional' Players Meeting as Tensions Rise.” *Sports Illustrated* Cleveland Cavs News, Analysis and More, 27 Aug. 2020.

a compromise and for resuming play on the 29th of August. A Wednesday night phone call with U.S. President Barack Obama was said to have encouraged James, and having a phone call with Obama that swiftly shows just how far President-NBA player relations have progressed.¹⁶³ The decision was also partially credited to the efforts made by Michael Jordan, the only Black majority-owner of an NBA team, and his discussion with National Basketball Players Association (NBPA) President, all-star Chris Paul. Their talks helped Jordan articulate what exactly the players were hoping to change and achieve at the owners meeting regarding the players' strike.¹⁶⁴ Many of the players spent their hours during the boycott calling local representatives and lawmakers to help enact change, specifically, Milwaukee Bucks players called the governor and governor lieutenant regarding the horrific shooting of Blake.¹⁶⁵ These protests and boycotts came amidst a turbulent election year, and that was one way James, Paul, and company ensured their voices would be heard. During the NBA Finals in September of 2020, Chris Paul proudly announced that 90% of the entire NBA was now registered to vote with fifteen teams being 100% registered. This is an incredible step up from the 2016 Presidential Election voting registration number for the NBA which was a measly 20% almost four years prior.¹⁶⁶ In addition to this, the league allowed players to wear messages supporting the Black Lives Matter movement and fighting racial injustice and police brutality. The league also allowed, better yet almost encouraged, kneeling during the national anthem before the game and

¹⁶³ "Obama Counseled Some NBA Players amid Multi-Day Protest." *YouTube, CNN*, 29 Aug. 2020, <www.youtube.com/watch?v=gBOMIV81_UA&ab_channel=CNN>

¹⁶⁴ Botkin, Brad. "NBA Boycott: How Players Reached Decision to Resume Season; Timeline, Overnight Disagreement, Owners' Role." *CBSSports.com*, 28 Aug. 2020, <www.cbssports.com/nba/news/nba-boycott-how-players-reached-decision-to-resume-season-timeline-overnight-disagreement-owners-role/>.

¹⁶⁵ Botkin, Brad. "NBA Boycott: How Players Reached Decision to Resume Season; Timeline, Overnight Disagreement, Owners' Role." *CBSSports.com*, 28 Aug. 2020, <www.cbssports.com/nba/news/nba-boycott-how-players-reached-decision-to-resume-season-timeline-overnight-disagreement-owners-role/>.

¹⁶⁶ Hughes, Chase. CP3 Says over 90 Percent of NBA Players Have Registered to Vote. *NBC Sports Washington*, 5 Oct. 2020, <www.nbcsports.com/washington/wizards/chris-paul-says-over-90-percent-nba-players-have-registered-vote>.

several of the drastic improvements towards how NBA player activists are treated can be attributed to the progressive work of current NBA commissioner Adam Silver.

Adam Silver was appointed in 2014 to be the NBA commissioner, succeeding the controversial David Stern. Silver is arguably the best, most compassionate commissioner in all of American sports and his efforts to drive positive change cannot be ignored. Ever since his promotion, he has been highly respected by coworkers and the league's players find him quite approachable, unlike some commissioners prior. Before the start of the 2019 season, the NBA sent a statement from Silver to every player, personally encouraging them to speak out on issues that most mattered to them, and to express who they are in every aspect of their identity. This may seem insignificant, but in contrast to rival U.S.-based leagues, data shows that the NBA leads in just about every category that involves racial representation and balance among coaches, staff, and players, showing steady growth in every measure, while other leagues have shown a decline in the same period. Furthermore, before players arrived at the 2020 NBA Playoff bubble, Silver announced that the league was loosening dress codes restrictions, the same one still in place from Stern since 2005.¹⁶⁷ Silver acknowledged how the 2005 Piston-Pacers Brawl played a role in the code's initial installment, acknowledging, "The melee in Detroit had a profound and far-reaching impact on the NBA's image—well beyond the particular teams and players involved that night. But for the Pacers, the negativity lingered. The incident seemingly broke the community's deep bond with the team, and it took years to restore that connection."¹⁶⁸ His words sharply contrast those offered by Stern following the fight where he criticized the league's personnel and dominant culture to advocate for the dress code. Regarding the choice of the

¹⁶⁷ Wolf, Cam. "Bubble Boys: The NBA's New Relaxed Dress Code Kisses the Suit Goodbye." *GQ*, 1 July 2020, <www.gq.com/story/nba-dress-code-orlando-bubble>.

¹⁶⁸ Abrams, Jonathan. "The Malice at the Palace: An Oral History of the Scariest Moment in NBA History." *Grantland*, 12 May 2014, <grantland.com/features/an-oral-history-malice-palace/>.

NBA's players to boycott the playoffs, Stern supported it and released a statement praising the decision as well as outlining ways in which the league is going to cause lasting change. In a letter he penned to *The Athletic* as the boycott was underway, he writes, "First, let me say that I wholeheartedly support NBA and WNBA players and their commitment to shining a light on important issues of social justice. While I don't walk in the same shoes as Black men and women, I can see the trauma and fear that racialized violence causes and how it continues the painful legacy of racial inequality that persists in our country."¹⁶⁹ Further into the letter, he mentions that the league is going to be proactive in addressing issues such as increasing access to voting, promoting civic engagement, and advocating for criminal justice and police reform.¹⁷⁰ Although it is still quite early into this promise, the league has already followed through with some, turning NBA arenas into voting locations to improve access for underserved communities. Commissioner Silver's dedication to his players and progressive attitude has been revolutionary for the league, and without it, the league would not be nearly as successful in promoting and encouraging social reform. Hopefully Silver, and those who grace the position after him, continue to improve the league and maintain a strong stance on the issues that their personnel feel so passionately about.

Overall, politics will always have its place in sports. People often claim that athletes need to stop bringing politics into sports, but the fact of the matter is that politics have always played a role in sports and will continue to do so. According to *The L.A. Times*, "Despite claims that sports exist as an escape from the woes of the real world, that has not been the NBA's legacy.

¹⁶⁹ Banks, David. "Read Adam Silver's Letter to NBA Employees in Aftermath of Jacob Blake Shooting." *Los Angeles Times*, 28 Aug. 2020, <www.latimes.com/sports/story/2020-08-28/adam-silver-letter-nba-employees-social-justice-jacob-blake-shooting>.

¹⁷⁰ Banks, David. "Read Adam Silver's Letter to NBA Employees in Aftermath of Jacob Blake Shooting." *Los Angeles Times*, 28 Aug. 2020, <www.latimes.com/sports/story/2020-08-28/adam-silver-letter-nba-employees-social-justice-jacob-blake-shooting>.

Since players like Earl Lloyd, Chuck Cooper, Harold Hunter and Nat Clifton became the league's first Black players 70 years ago, they have been active participants in the drive for change."¹⁷¹ Starting with Elgin Baylor's historic boycott in 1959, numerous NBA players have commenced demonstrations to fight for causes they believe in. Sadly, Baylor passed away on March 22, 2021, shortly prior to the completion of this essay, nevertheless, his legacy will never be forgotten. Other revolutionary NBA activists have praised the stars of today following the 2020 NBA Playoffs bubble boycott such as Bill Russell, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, and Craig Hodges. Following the bubble boycott, Russell commended the players, telling them to keep "keep getting into good trouble."¹⁷² Hodges was especially impressed with James and the way in which he utilized his platform in the modern era to drive change and progress. He felt it was crucial the game's biggest star was at the forefront of the activism efforts. While talking about actions of James and other NBA players, Hodges states, "I love the fact that they're dealing with the information that they have, and they're working with the information that they have. You don't have to be a historical scholar, but you have to have empathy... You have to try to see the world not from your millionaire eyesight, but from the poorest person sitting on the corner with a can in their hand asking you for a dollar. That's the way I see some of these young brothers, they're feeling that, because they're not too far removed from that."¹⁷³ Platform utilization by NBA players to enact change is at an all-time high, and it will likely continue to evolve as the years pass. However, it is crucial to never forget the NBA's activist revolutionaries, those who

¹⁷¹ Woike, Dan. "NBA Players' Activism Is Not New, but Shaping Change Would Be." *Los Angeles Times*, 25 July 2020, <www.latimes.com/sports/story/2020-07-25/nba-players-activism-is-not-new-but-shaping-change-would-be>.

¹⁷² Bieler, Des. "Bill Russell Led an NBA Boycott in 1961. Now He's Saluting Others for 'Getting in Good Trouble'." *The Washington Post*, 27 Aug. 2020, <www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2020/08/27/bill-russell-nba-boycott/>.

¹⁷³ Gleeson, Scott. "In 1991, Ex-NBA Player Craig Hodges Sought Similar Game Boycott - but Had Little Support." *USA Today*, 30 Aug. 2020, <www.usatoday.com/story/sports/nba/2020/08/30/craig-hodges-nba-player-protest-boycott-1991-finals/5667258002/>.

risked it all to promote causes they stood for and motivate lasting change in the United States of America.