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RESEARCH NOTE

Retrospective reflections on the Black American male athlete and the 1968 Olympics: an elite interview with Dr Harry Edwards

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This research note presents an abbreviated version of an ‘elite’ interview conducted with pre-eminent sport sociologist Dr Harry Edwards. As the architect of the Olympic Project for Human Rights, Edwards’s activism targeted racial apartheid in the USA and in South Africa. Edwards’ leadership in the area of human rights catalysed the African-American boycott of the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. A series of semi-structured, retrospective interview questions were posed to Edwards to garner his perspectives on the progress that Black American, male Olympic athletes have made in the USA from 1968 to present day. Analysis of the interview with Edwards revealed the following about Black American, male Olympic athletes: (1) the social conditions in the USA had changed for the better since 1968; (2) in the second millennium these have become ‘commoditised’ after the Olympics and gain substantially from their celebrity; and (3) Black male, American athletes can become enslaved to the economics of their celebrity if they are not careful.

Keywords: 1968 Olympics; Black American athletes; Harry Edwards

Introduction

Nearly four decades ago, Dr Harry Edwards emerged as one of the prolific leaders in human rights movement globally. Utilizing sport as a platform, he was instrumental in utilizing sports as a vehicle to address racism, inequalities and politics. As the architect of the Olympic Project for Human Rights, Edwards’s activism targeted racial apartheid in the USA and in South Africa, as well as the racial injustices occurring within many areas of sport. His scholarship that includes books such as *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* (1970), *Sociology of Sport* (1973) and *The Struggle that Must Be* (1980). His focus was in the areas of race, sport and human rights, and the specific analysis of sport sociology. Moreover, Edwards paved the way for a more critical analysis of the role of the Black athlete and the significance of not only the competitive aspects but also on the parameters of power and control. Edwards is considered by many to be a consummate scholar-activist.

The purpose of this research note is to provide a retrospective reflection on the state of Black American, male, Olympic athletes through the ‘expert’ lens of Dr Harry Edwards. The primary purpose of the interview is to determine whether

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social and economic conditions for Black Olympic athletes have improved since 1968 Olympics. Moreover, this paper serves as a reminder that Harry Edwards' voice brought global attention to the racial and social problems in the USA during the post-civil rights era that adversely impacted Black American athletes, including Olympians. For the purposes of consistency and brevity in the construction of this research note, the term 'Black Olympian' is used as a surrogate for the descriptor 'Black American, male, Olympic athlete'. The rationale for using this term lies in the fact that in the original transcript generated from the interview, Edwards' focus was on commenting on male athletes due to the limited involvement of Black female athletes in the 1968 Olympic protest.

Method

In order to understand complex and rich social phenomenon such as the changing state of Black Olympians it is often necessary to engage the 'elite' experts in a discipline. Elites are 'people who occupy, by heritage, merit or circumstance, a key place in power networks' (Undheim, 2006, p. 14). The 'elite', possess insight knowledge through their participative experience and expertise that provides unique insights into key events in history. A semi-structured interview was conducted utilizing a six-question interview schedule. In this research note, the narrative from four of the six responses is presented. The questions were grounded in the corpus of literature published by Edwards. The focal point was Edwards' reflections and experiences with the Black Olympian in the USA. Upon completion of the interview, the audio file was transcribed, checked for accuracy and then forwarded to Edwards for verification. Upon verification of the accuracy of the information contained in the interview, the researchers continued with their review of the transcript. The abbreviated interview is presented below and is formatted using the acronyms 'IN' for the interviewer and 'HE' representing the responses of Harry Edwards.

The interview with Harry Edwards

IN: Dr Edwards, in your assessment, in 1968, how were Black athletes in the USA treated as they prepared to compete for our country in the Olympics?

HE: Black athletes in the late 1960s were treated as really 'storm troopers' in the service of American political interests. We had, at that time, this global ideological struggle between east and west, largely carried out in the athletic arena. We had the USA and the Soviet Union, in particular, in this titanic struggle for ideological hegemony. The basic assumption being that whoever won the Olympic Games demonstrated the superiority of its ideology. The superiority of its social, economic and political system. Athletes, Blacks and Whites, but particularly Blacks, because of what was happening in the country at the time with the Civil Rights Movement and Blacks challenging what was an American version of apartheid, segregation in all kinds of arenas, in this country.

Blacks in particular became foils in that struggle between east and west. Between the USA and the Soviet Union, particularly in the struggle for hearts and minds in third world resource-rich countries. So, Black athletes being on the US Olympic team and going out and succeeding in the athletic arena not only demonstrated the superiority of the American ideological, social, political and cultural system but it also served as a counter as to what was being seen and so many parts

of the world as America's racist domination and suppression, repression of Black people in this country. So, as Black people were being dribbled down the sidewalks of Alabama, Mississippi and Georgia with fire hoses – as Black people were being denied admission to colleges and universities, as Black athletes, even, were being denied admission to the Southeastern Conference Universities until the Southwest Conference Universities, Baylor and Southern Methodist University, and so forth, as Black athletes were being denied admission to Atlantic Coast Conference institutions, there was this image of Blacks running and winning for America in the international Olympic games as a counter to those realities and so the circumstances that existed essentially projected African-American athletes as first-line troops in the struggle for international ideological hegemony and in the struggle for hearts and minds in the third world while totally ignoring the reality that even in this country Blacks did not enjoy the freedom that the USA was trying to project as its main message and mission overseas. In that regard, Black athletes in 1968 were in no better shape than Jessie Owens was when he went to the Nazi Olympics in 1936 and came back to this country with four gold medals, representing the USA and being projected as a hero in the American struggle against Nazism, while he himself had to ride on the back of a bus and could not check into hotels, even in Columbus, Ohio, where he went to Ohio State and was a star collegiate athlete.

In 1968, the circumstances of Black athletes who participated for the US Olympic team had not changed significantly since that date. There was not even an African-American on the US Olympic committee. Not even Jessie Owens, up until we pointed out the fact, through the Olympic Project for Human Rights Movement that there was not an African-American on the US Olympic Committee. There had never been an African-American on the US Olympic Committee! At that point, they appointed a Black person to the US Olympic Committee, Jessie Owens, and one of his first tasks was to attack us. So at the end of it, not much had changed and that too was a spur to the kind of action that we took at the time.

IN: As we head into the 2012 Olympiad in London, on the whole, do you think that Black American Olympic athletes are any better off now than the athletes were in 1968?

HE: One of the most difficult measures that one can attempt is to assess progress. There has been change, but the extent to which there has been progress becomes another issue, especially under circumstances where there is such an imbalance in power. So, there is no question that today an athlete that goes and wins gold medals and becomes a big hero and so forth, whether it is the dream team, the basketball team that won the Olympics in the 1990s, or whether it is a track athlete, there is no question that there are more rewards to be had in the sense of endorsements and so forth and so on. But Black athletes still have not escaped the liabilities of speaking out earnestly and honestly about race and issues of race in American society. An athlete who stands up and makes a statement about race and issues of race in American society, irrespective of his or her Olympic championships and awards and so forth, is likely to be challenged, if not condemned, in the mainstream media and by the sports establishment because Blacks do not exercise sufficient power to be able to make those kinds of assessments and still remain somewhat shielded from the consequences. So, in that regard because there continues to be a tremendous power imbalance between Blacks and mainstream American society, not much has changed.

With regard to the benefits and rewards and so forth to be had, absolutely a great deal has changed. As long as the person tows the line, sticks to the mandated perspectives, and so forth, they can do quite well in American society and typically there are groups of a whole bunch of handlers and people who control their endorsement opportunities and who market them and who choreograph their public appearances and so forth to make sure that they do not cross forbidden lines, in terms of their statements and their actions and activities. Particularly, when it comes to race. So in that sense, not only has not much changed, but because there is so much more at stake from the perspective of some of the younger people, in particular who do not know the history of development that interface of race and sport in American society, they are far less inclined to risk anything in order to make statements and assessments relative to race.

The other point is that there is not that broad scale of Black social cultural political movement that helps define and create a context for any statements that might be made relative to race and justice in American society. So one can legitimately ask on whose behalf are these athletes speaking? For that group that migrated out of Black society into and onto the peripheral of White society or are they speaking for that mass of African-Americans who were left out and left behind by the Civil Rights Movement of the 50s, 60s and 70s. Who were they speaking for? By the time one gets through sorting through that, you probably would have made as many enemies or at least detractors in the Black community as you would have made in the mainstream. So, the inclination of many athletes because of what is at stake under existing conditions and the lack of a broad scale, Black social cultural political movement that would set a context for any standard they might take, they are just disinclined to do it to make a statement to become political to speak out on critical race-related issues in American society today. So, has there been some progress? Absolutely! You can look at personal rewards, the amount of money that athletes can make today. Has that progress been absolute? Absolutely not!

IN: Dr Edwards, are Black male athletes in the USA entrapped by the business or the free enterprise aspect of the Olympic Games?

HE: I think that today, athletes of all colours and all genders have been so commoditised and commercialised that one almost has to understand them, within the context of the business enterprise of sport, not its social cultural and institutional structure dynamics and ramifications, but its business and commercial structure and ramifications. You cannot overlook that. The amount of money that is available through the vehicle of sports entertainment today rivals what used to be the case only for the biggest rock stars and the greatest and the greatest and most noted movie stars. You can have an Olympian who may have come in second in the Olympic games, who might be a perpetual second to someone else, but who is necessary in order to make the race interesting making a million dollars a year in appearance money, second place money and endorsements and so forth. So you cannot, today, think about sports without thinking about the commodification of the athlete. He is a commodity, she is a commodity to be marketed, promoted, produced and the commercialisation of the sport activity of the event of what that athlete does.

Many athletes have become so totally engrossed in that dimension of sports, that they have become to erode the integrity of the traditions of the sport, because the money to be made is – comes from separating yourself from all of the others. Separating yourself, even in the smallest way, from all of the other track and field athletes that might be vying for an Olympic slot. Somebody with a tattoo on their

neck or covered with tattoos on their arms and different kinds of tattoos. I mean, you see all of this, which is part of the showmanship separating themselves out from the crowd and to a certain degree as a consequence, undermining the integrity of the sport itself. So, all of this is about this commodification and commercialisation that has come about and you really cannot understand what it is you are looking at and understand the dynamics of what is going on unless you understand that dimension of it. It is not enough to simply understand the institutional dynamics and so forth of sport or even of a particular sport anymore. You have to understand it within this commercial context and within the context of the commodification of the athlete as a product marketed, sold and often times choreographed.

IN: Dr Edwards, some cultural critics insist that Black American male athletes are '40 million-dollar slaves'. Do you consider this to be true with respect to Black American Olympians?

HE: I think that we have to understand again the context within which these athletes function. Only to the extent that an athlete caves into the pressures, gives into the pressures, to stick with the marketing line, to stick with the commercialised, commodified line and image can you really make that statement. He becomes a slave to the marketplace to what the mainstream wants, desires and finds comfortable. We see a lot of Black clowns, for example, in many sports today, the bigger clown that you can be, the more attention you tend to get. I get a question all the time: Where is the John Carlos and Tommie Smith? Where is the Muhammad Ali? Instead of one guy after another, who is either clowning or doing something so outlandish that it comes down to: hey look at me. Whether it is wearing a wedding dress, whether it is coming out with tattoos all over you essentially saying nothing. Whatever happened to the serious athlete that was connected to serious issues in society? Well, that situation bespeaks the circumstances that these athletes find themselves in. If you tow the line so absolutely that you literally become a creature of the commercial enterprise process, you become totally commodified where you can be marketed almost any kind of way whether it is a 'King Kong' gorilla type of a pose and picture as LeBron James found himself in or whether it is a gangster type of pose and picture. Once you get so caught up in these things that whatever is needed to market a product that you are endorsing, whatever is needed to project a certain type of image that some commercial interest wants projected, then to that extent 'yeah'. You can become enslaved to this process but that is not a necessary condition.

When you go back to the 1960s, athletes such as Smith and Carlos and Muhammad Ali most certainly put everything on the line. You cannot put any more on the line than everything, irrespective of what the sum might be. So to be enslaved to this situation today is a choice that these athletes have made. So even today, even though you are talking about millions of dollars, it still comes down to an issue of consent. So, is there an element of twenty-first century slavery involved irrespective of the money or perhaps precisely because of the money? Absolutely. Do those athletes have a choice? Absolutely.

Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this interview was to retrospectively examine whether the social conditions for Black Olympians had improved since 1968 through the expert lens of sport sociologist Dr Harry Edwards. One of the salient points Edwards reinforced

was that affirmative progress has been made by Black Olympians and one of the trappings of that progress is the material gain obtained through success in sport. In the recent history, those Black Olympians who perform well in high visibility events are able to successfully parlay their elevated stature into multi-million dollar endorsement deals with major corporate sponsors, thus gaining a level of economic security often accompanied by an accumulation of other 'perks' and 'privileges'. Relatedly, one of the more striking points in the interview was Edwards' cautionary note about commoditisation and the ease of becoming enslaved to the monetary lure of post-Olympic success. In the manner of a 'sage' Edwards urged the Black Olympian not to lose site of the athletic and personal integrity of predecessors such as Tommie Smith and John Carlos who 'put it all on the line'. (?)

The voice of Edwards in this interview serves as a reminder of both the progressive struggles and the successes that these athletes have traversed since 1968. The scholarly evidence suggests that their plight has positively shifted over time, but the nagging question is, how much? In recent years, Edwards has expanded his work to include consultations with the National Football League and the National Basketball Association. It is here that he continues his advocacy on the part of Black American athletes that he began over 40 years ago.

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