

“Sport inevitably, unavoidably recapitulates society, the character of its human and institutional relationships, and the ideological and value sentiments rationalizing and justifying those relationships.”

Harry Edwards

“Sport inevitably, unavoidably recapitulates society, the character of its human and institutional relationships, and the ideological and value sentiments rationalizing and justifying those relationships.” In my 1971 Cornell University dissertation, I termed this “The First-Principle of the Sociology of Sport”.

From this principle, it follows that ideological and value conflicts and contradictions under contention in a society would come to be expressed in some degree and measure in its sports. And where there are active movements provoked by conditions imposed upon a party to ideologically framed and fueled conflicts, those conflicts—whether over race, class, gender, religion, or political ideology itself—will come also to be recapitulated in sports.

At core, much of the political expression in sport related to conditions extant in and shared with the broader society are struggles for “definitional authority”—struggles to establish the legitimacy of a group’s definitions of the situation.

In America, for example, Black people have never been broadly perceived by mainstream interests to be creditable witnesses to their own experiences, outcomes, or realities. This is an enduring situation dating back to Black enslavement when the White slave master said, “My slaves are happy!” and those enslaved said “We want to be free!”—and carried out over 300 violent slave revolts to prove it, largely to no avail. Today such definitional conflicts have been and still are expressed in connection with, for example, among other issues, whose version of police violence is authoritative, the camera phone captured murder of George Floyd under cover of the badge notwithstanding.

Football player Colin Kaepernick’s protest against such violence and his banishment from the National Football League (NFL) was only a modern instance of an effort to squelch Black definitional legitimacy, an effort that the

mainstream media has always been a conscious party in propagating . Going back to the post-Civil war year through the turn of the 20th Century , even positive characterizations and projections of Black athlete performance were eschewed by the mainstream media (as in the case of Jack Johnson's 1908 knock out of Tommie Burns or Eddie Tolan's two gold medal performance in the 1932 Olympics, or even Jesse Owens' four gold medal performance in the 1936 Berlin Games beyond its utility in anti-Nazi pre-WWII propaganda; still neither Tolan's nor Owens' championship performances at the time were shown in American theaters along with the performances of White Olympic medal winners- lest Black Americans be provoked to dangerous delusions of equality, if not superiority). On the other hand, when they were not completely ignored , Black sports performances were sometimes interpreted in the mainstream media as “ instinctive, [animalistic](#)”, if not — as in the case of both Jack Johnson and - 27 years later - — Joe Louis interpreted as mindless “savage” behavior .

The rise of ~~modern~~ mass communications technology and the mainstream's inability to manage and control it has “leveled the definitional playing field” to an unprecedented degree. Athletes and other activists in the definitional struggle are no longer dependent upon the mainstream media to frame and project their actions and definitions of their situation - — just as sure as the killer of George Floyd is in prison today because a 17 year old Black teenager filmed what amounted to murder under cover of the badge — an all too common scenario that Black people had protested for generations and that mainstream society and media had by definitional authority vehemently denied.

This presentation will explore the ramifications and impact of modern media technology for activism in sport and compare it to past challenges facing [activists](#) and my own experiences in organizing and implementing the goals of the “Olympic Project for Human Rights” over half a century ago.