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Abstract

The attitude toward athletes engaging in political speech has varied over time, with activism often discouraged, but encouraged on rare occasions. The paper seeks to reconcile the two conflicting positions through proposing a more nuanced way to think about the relationship between athletes and political activism. Specifically, I argue that political speech, while obviously appropriate outside the field of play, has no place within the sporting arena. The paper begins with descriptions of the Colin Kaepernick case and the Zola Budd case. The main substance of the paper comes in laying out the position that athletes should not be activists, acknowledging a challenge to that position, and incorporating the notion of sacred space to establish the final conclusion.

Key Words: Colin Kaepernick, Zola Budd, athlete activists, sacred space, separate spheres view

1. Introduction

The act of athletes engaging in political protest or making political statements has become common over the last several years. In many cases, the response from the public has been that athletes should "stick to sports" and "shut up and play." While this is true enough now, the attitude toward athletes engaging in political speech hasn't always been thus. Following the strategy of getting a longer perspective, I will look at an example from relatively recent history in which the exact opposite occurred. That is, pressure was exerted on an athlete—Zola Budd—to speak up and make a political statement.[1] Examination of Budd's case and consideration of the ways in which it differs from Colin Kaepernick's follows. What I hope to do is reconcile the two conflicting positions through proposing a more nuanced way to think about the relationship between athletes and political activism. To be clear, this is not a paper about Colin Kaepernick; I use his case as an example to contrast with Budd's, both in historical fact and normative judgment. Public reaction to Kaepernick's actions motivates my inquiry into the very different reaction to Budd's actions, but the focus of the paper is more on Budd as I argue for the

superiority of her view. As well, this paper is about neither police violence nor apartheid, although those are the issues the two athletes addressed. Specifically, I will argue that political speech, while obviously appropriate outside the field of play, has no place within the sporting arena. The paper begins with a brief sketch of the Kaepernick case and a historical reminder of the Budd case, before some remarks on how Budd's case fares under a Kantian framework. The main substance of the paper follows, laying out the position that athletes should not be activists, acknowledging a challenge to that position, and incorporating the notion of sacred space to establish the final conclusion.

2. Colin Kaepernick

National Football League player Colin Kaepernick's refusal to stand during the pre-game playing of the national anthem during the 2017 season reinvigorated the debate about what part, if any, politics should play in sport. Explaining his action, Kaepernick said, "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color. To me, this is bigger than football, and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way" (Gregory, 2016, 39). Players from other teams and other sports followed, some imitating Kaepernick's action, others choosing different ways—locking arms, wearing messaged t-shirts, raising fists—of expressing the same message. Of course, these were just recent examples of athletes using the visibility of sport to make symbolic gestures to challenge perceived injustice. One of the most famous occurred in the 1968 Olympic Games when track and field athletes John Carlos and Tommie Smith raised their black-gloved fists on the medal stand during the playing of the national anthem. When asked about Kaepernick's protest, Carlos was fully supportive, noting the exposure provided by the league's broadcasting: "Where else is he going to make a statement where he's going to reach the far ends of the earth?" (Gregory, 2016, 39). Reaction to the protest seemed also to extend from the far ends of the earth as sports fans, columnists and commentators, politicians, and people only casually interested in football divided in support and condemnation of the back-up quarterback's position and way of exhibiting it.

Many echoed sportscaster Howard Cosell's "rule number one of 'the jockocracy': sports and politics just don't mix" (Zirin, 2013, 4). United States Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader

Ginsburg, for example, initially called Kaepernick's protest "dumb and disrespectful" (Macur, 2016, ¶ 1), others said athletes should "shut up and play" (Zirin, 2013, 9). League owners arguably have a similar attitude as no team has shown any interest in having Kaepernick on its roster for the coming season. This development, in turn, has ignited the passion of those who support Kaepernick's actions, prompting a protest outside the National Football League's headquarters in New York. Of Kaepernick, protest organizer Kevin Livingston said: "He stood up for our community. He took these issues to a national platform. I feel that it's only right that we stand up for him. We want to let the NFL know, we are not sitting silently, we are buying consumers and we want to make sure he gets a fair shot (Vrentas, 2017, ¶ 3). Only time will tell how Colin Kaepernick's career, and his influence on other athletes, will play out, but the issue of how sport and politics ought to mix, if at all, deserves more analysis.

3. Zola Budd

In 1983, Zola Budd was named South African woman athlete of the year, cross country athlete of the year, and South African junior athlete of the year (Keiderling, 2016, 76). On January 5, 1984, Budd added the title of women's fastest 5K ever, by running 15:01.38. However, because Budd was South African, and South African athletes were banned from international sporting events (from 1964-1992) due to the country's practice of apartheid, her accomplishments were not officially recognized outside the country. Unofficially, people took notice. Most importantly for what was to occur, a reporter from Britain's *Daily Mail* newspaper not only recognized Budd's talent, but also discovered that her paternal grandfather had been British, making Budd eligible to apply for British citizenship. As Budd was only 17, the newspaper negotiated a deal with her father, and the family was taken quietly out of South Africa in late March 1984. Budd's father received $140,000 (the equivalent today to over 350,000 U.S. dollars) and the *Daily Mail* got exclusive rights to her story. Zola was granted British citizenship within two weeks and soon recorded a fast enough race time to qualify for the British Olympic team.[2]

Zola's success on the track was undeniable, but so was her nightmare off the track. Anti-apartheid protesters, angry that Budd had been given British citizenship, were a vocal presence at

her every appearance in public, bombarding Budd with screams of 'racist scum' and 'fascist bitch,' at the Olympic Trials (Budd, 1989, 59) and at least once going so far as to come onto the race course and force her to dash into the bushes and abandon the race for her own safety (Budd, 98). She would later call this the 'Budd syndrome': "while most athletes had only to arrive at a venue and run, I had first to fight a political fight in which I had no interest and where I was at an immediate disadvantage" (Budd, 98). The Budd syndrome extended to nations as well, when a number of countries, including Norway, Spain, and the African nations ruled by black majorities, threatened to boycott the Olympics in Los Angeles if Budd was allowed to compete (Keiderling, 2016, 86). And, yet, despite the intense pressure, Budd refused to condemn apartheid, which was taken to indicate support for the practice.

Budd's reluctance to comment, however, was in large part on account of far less philosophical or political commitments. There were at least three reasons, Budd chose to remain silent. First, what many have forgotten in the retelling of this story is that while she could understand and speak English, she wasn't at all comfortable with it because Afrikaans was her first language. She was, as she put it, "Feeling [her] way around the English language like a blind person in an unfamiliar room…at a distinct disadvantage" (Budd, 1989, 72). As well as the language disadvantage, she also knew enough to know how little she knew. "Only a fool speaks publicly on a subject they know very little about and in my late teens I was certainly no expert on political systems" (Budd, 174). In fact, Budd has said on several occasions that she had never heard of Nelson Mandela until she arrived in London. "I was brought up ignorant of what was going on. All I knew was the white side expressed in South African newspapers—that if we had no apartheid, our whole economy would collapse. Only much later did I realize I'd been lied to by the state" (Friedman, 2010, 127). Finally, the intense pressure on Budd to make a statement resulted only in increasing her stubborn resistance. "The irony was that I abhor apartheid as much as those that criticized me do….But the attacks on me for my silence on the subject, which I felt was my right, only stiffened my resolve not to make a statement" (Keiderling, 2016, 105). It would be almost five years before an older, wiser and more experienced, (and less stubborn) Budd issued the following statement:

> As an athlete who still hopes to pursue an international career I am not interested in joining the political circus and I have always resisted attempts to force me into taking a particular political stance. I object to being used as a political pawn and as a matter of principle do not think that my own political views, or those of any sportsman or woman, should be a matter for public concern. An athlete, however, does not have to be a politician to recognize that people everywhere have basic human rights and I, as a Christian, hold that view. I do not support any political system that entrenches the superiority of one race over another (Budd, 1989, 177).

Young and naïve in 1984, Budd really didn't have a political position upon which to comment. Five years later, she had and was willing to express a position on apartheid, and was developing a position on the relationship between politics and sport. Before moving to discuss that position, a short Kantian detour is in order.

4. A Kantian detour

The aspect of Zola Budd's story that I find most troubling is the near-universal willingness of various persons to use her as a means to further their own interests. As Kant famously put it in what has come to be called the Humanity Imperative: "*Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end*" (Kant, 1964, 96, emphasis in original). Yet it seems Budd, who explicitly told those around her that she did not want to leave her home in South Africa and that she did not want to run in the 1984 Olympics, was never treated by others as anything *other than* a means. Zola's father in essence sold her to the *Daily Mail* for monetary gain, all of which he received and controlled. Her coach, Pieter Labuschagne used her to further his career and reputation as the coach of a successful athlete, pressuring her to go along with the deal even though she clearly expressed her unwillingness. The *Daily Mail* used her story to increase the paper's circulation, and profits. As Zola put it, together they "turned me into some kind of circus animal" (Budd, 1989, 2). Her English passport was "a document that symbolized how other people had used me for their own ends" (Budd, 44); she

was treated like "a saleable commodity" (Budd, 4), and used "as a means of scoring political points" (Budd, 178) by the anti-apartheid lobby.

By 1988, when the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) encouraged the British Athletics Board to suspend her for having traveled to South Africa, Zola "was tired of being a political football to be kicked around by the IAAF and all the others who thought that by punishing [her] they would be striking a blow against South Africa" (Budd, 1989, 8). Knowing that she was being used as a means fueled her determination to exercise her autonomy by refusing to engage the activists:

> I have never been one to look for a simple solution to a complex problem and because I objected to being a pawn in a political chess game, to being moved around the board at the whim of every anti-apartheid lobbyist who could get a few seconds on television or a couple of paragraphs in a newspaper, I kept my mouth shut and my feelings to myself (Budd, 173).

A person may be more or less autonomous, and possess a differing degree of autonomy in different areas. So, Zola protested her lack of autonomy in decision-making about her career by exercising it in the only way left to her in deciding about what she would say.

This political pawn aspect strikes me as obviously ethically problematic. No matter the political issue or a person's position on it, no one should be used as a pawn to further the interests of another. This happened to Budd and it happens today when athletes like Kaepernick are pressured to take—or not take—a political position, issue a political statement, or make a political gesture. My argument is that the problem is avoided if we maintain a separation between sport and politics.

5. Athletes, not activists

Zola Budd has always believed that athletes should do athletics, and let politicians do politics. As soon as she arrived in London, she was asked to comment on South Africa's practice of apartheid, a request which puzzled her. She thought, "I am a runner. I'm here to run, not to explain a government policy in which I have no part" (Keiderling, 2016, 101). She affirmed that view in her 1989 autobiography: "it distresses me that politics has become such an overpowering

force in the sporting arena. My attitude is that, as a sportswoman, I should have the right to pursue my chosen discipline in peace" (Budd, 1989, 174). Again in 2008, she reiterated: "I don't believe sports people should be put in that position" (Longman, 2008, ¶ 15). And most recently, in 2017, she continues to assert that politics should be kept out of sport, in large part because of the selfish motives of those who would claim otherwise. "Politicians abuse sport, and did so especially in the apartheid era. They use sport as means to further their ends" (Z. Budd Pieterse, personal communication, May 4, 2017). But what if athletes wish to express political views? Ought they have that right? "Not while competing," she says, "but of course outside. The Olympic Charter even says this" (Z. Budd Pieterse, personal communication, May 4, 2017).

So, the idea here is that athletes, as individual citizens, have the right to engage in political statement outside the arena of competition, but ought not to do so, as athletes, within. Political words and gestures that are appropriate in one sphere are inappropriate in another. I think this view, calling for the recognition of separate spheres of activity, is exactly right, and I will do more to support it a bit later on. First, however, it will be helpful to acknowledge and examine the alternative position, i.e., that sport can never really be free from politics.

6. A challenge to the position

While the suggestion that sport and politics occupy distinct spheres is not uncommon, some have asserted that keeping the two separate is impossible.[3] Emily Ryall, for example, responds to the view with the claim that "the fact that sport is nevertheless part of a wider human society means such a view is arguably untenable. Moral, and subsequently political, decisions will inevitably affect sport in one way or another" (Ryall, 2016, 217). But nothing in the reasoning here defeats the view; everything is, to some extent, part of a wider human society. Sport is no different from education or religion in this way, and it isn't strange or uncommon to see arguments for the exclusion of politics from those spheres. Further, political decisions may *affect* sport, but the separate spheres position doesn't claim otherwise. Many have criticized the commercialization of sport, for example, which certainly has affected sport, but the critic's next move is generally to argue that the problem is not inherent in sport and, thus, can and should be overcome.

Ryall also points to the tension between the International Olympic Committee's official policy that "politics plays no part whatsoever" in the Olympic Games and the fact that the IOC has on occasion acted politically, perhaps most saliently here in banning South Africa from participating in the Games from 1964-1992 (Ryall, 2016, 218). "Politics is, and always has been, infused in the Olympic Games despite protestations to the contrary" (Ryall, 2016, 217). Even if this is true (and I do not dispute it), the IOC's failure to live up to its aspirations is no reason to dismiss them as undesirable or unattainable. Of course, ought implies can, so if it is true that politics cannot be kept out of sport, then it would be folly to insist that it should nevertheless be kept out. That case has not been made. Instead, we have some version of the is/ought gap: since it is the case that politics have been a part of sport, then that is how it ought to be. But it would be odd in this case to accept that the status quo is the best we can do, when in all other cases the status quo itself is open to critique.

We would also do well to be careful to avoid the appeal to false authority when considering the political pronouncements and actions of any organization or athlete. Athletes are very good at athletics; this does not confer upon them any special knowledge about political matters. As Budd put it:

> I accept that politics is an integral part of daily life but, as a sportswoman, I don't believe that I am in a position to pass judgment on any particular political system. Of course, I have my own views on politics, but because I am not a politician I prefer to keep them to myself (Budd, 1989, 173).

We might want to claim that many politicians equally lack the requisite knowledge, but it seems undeniable that athletes, like other celebrities, are not legitimate authorities on political matters, which constitutes a forceful reason to keep the political out of the sporting sphere. This lack of legitimate authority is one reason to support the separate spheres position, but it is not the most central. Instead, as Ryall recognizes, "we like to retain the view that sport is better than politics, that it has a higher moral standing than politics because it is an area where humans can cooperate yet at the same time compete with one another in a consensual paradigm" (Ryall, 2016, 222). I argue for this view in the next section.

7. Sacred space

The view that I want to support here aligns with Peter Heinegg, whose description of sport locates it in a kind of sacred space. "Sport, for all its simple-minded concreteness, is essentially a mode of escape from life," "a flight from the pain of existence" (Heinegg, 2003, 54). There is something set-apart and quasi-holy about the sporting arena.

> …sport sets out to build another world altogether. Observe the structure of most games. There is first of all an ideal space, the playing field or court. Here we have a tidy microcosm, carefully lined and ordered, set off from its workaday environment: nature humanized. While real life muddles along in opaque confusion, the ongoing action of sport is luminous (Heinegg, 2003, 54).

Once the threshold into the stadium or arena is crossed, action in the sporting arena follows a predictable set of rules, under which violators are punished (see also Eliade's description of the profane as "a foreign chaotic space", 1959, 29). No matter their personal views outside this sphere, within there is agreement and mutual questing for superior performance.

Also within this space, personal characteristics, like race and nationality, do not matter. Budd stresses that from her "experiential viewpoint, in South Africa, even at the height of apartheid, appreciation for sporting accomplishment, no matter race, was there" (Z. Budd Pieterse, personal communication, May 4, 2017). The desire to experience, and be in the presence of, sporting accomplishment also creates an obligation that participants do what is necessary to foster this goal. One of the prerequisites is to eliminate anything that would be a distraction. "There's an obligation towards people around you. Runner enjoys runner, and running; it shouldn't matter who they are or their politics. Sport is a hideaway from the world. Running is a chance to just be—to enjoy spending time with each other" (Z. Budd, personal communication, May 4, 2017). As soon as politics, or any other element of disagreement, is injected into this hideaway, the enjoyment is destroyed; thus, we have an obligation to our fellow athletes to keep the space pure.

What makes the space pure is our communal agreement that it be such. Victor Matthews, who has written extensively about sacred space, explains:

The designation of space as sacred, domestic, commercial, or polluted is the direct result of a reflective process. Seen in that way, space becomes an imagined, but not imaginary, concept. Each individual has a mental picture of the characteristics attached to specific places, whether large or small, important or insignificant (Matthews 2008, 149).

Our mental picture of the characteristics of a space legitimates and limits the actions, gestures, and statements that are appropriate to that space. So, certain types of communication—a handshake after a tennis match, for example—fit within our cognitive understanding of the sporting sphere, while others—like refusing to tap gloves before a boxing match—do not.

This explains why we find it so jarring or disagreeable when athletes do not act within the expected bounds. The sanctity of the sporting sphere is secure so long as the behavior within the sphere can be recognized as fitting. "When that façade is smashed by incorrect or corrupt behavior, the character of the sacred space is also damaged" (Matthews 2008, 150; see also Smith and Low, 2006). No longer sacred, the sporting sphere loses its ability to focus on sporting accomplishment and, instead becomes like any other profane environment, driving us apart as it highlights our differences. As Budd recognized in 2008, "sports is like music, bigger than politics," so making political statements within the sporting context "is a conflict of interest. It defies the object of having sport as a unifying effect" (Longman, 2008, ¶ 15). It "is a sacred area for people to come together" (Z. Budd Pieterse, personal communication, May 4, 2017), which becomes impossible with the insertion of divisive political communication.

Budd's comparison of sport to music may also explain why we would find it irritating for the conductor of an orchestra, a popular singer, or an actor in a play to interrupt the performance in order to make a political statement. Such action draws our attention from the shared experience as it reminds us of our differences, violating the shared understanding of the space and sullying the performance itself. And note also that this goes some way toward explaining why many of us may revere Muhammed Ali while disapproving of Colin Kaepernick. Ali engaged in plenty of forceful political statement and action, and was willing to bear the

consequences, but he never brought politics into the sacred space of the boxing ring. Instead, he focused—and allowed us to focus—on boxing within the sporting sphere, and politics within its more profane sphere.

8. Conclusion

To conclude, I have argued for a separate spheres view, which insists that the sporting sphere is a sacred space in which only some behaviors and communications are appropriate. Along the way, I pointed to the ethically problematic use of athletes as political pawns, no matter which side of any issue they personally accept. This view, which I drew from examination and analysis of the case of Zola Budd, has the strength of being able to explain the negative reactions we have when athletes insert the political into the sporting arena and the admiration we feel for athletes who take a political stand outside the sporting arena. Sport should unify us; thus, our cognitive understanding is disrupted when, instead, it divides by bringing to the forefront profane political communications. So, in the end, Kaepernick was correct when he claimed that "this is bigger than football," and he may even have been correct to claim that "it would be selfish" for him to ignore the issue. But his way of communicating his message was inappropriate and would have been better received if delivered outside the sphere of sport.

Notes

[1] Since the events of the story, Zola married and now used the name Zola Budd Pieterse. I use this name in citations from recent conversations, but retain the shorter name throughout the body of the paper.

[2] Many will remember that Budd did, in fact, run for Great Britain in the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles and was a part of an infamous in-race collision with U.S athlete Mary Decker. Crowd-favorite Decker failed to complete the race and Budd faded to seventh under a deluge of boos from the spectators.

[3] It is beyond the scope of this paper to rehearse the various positions that have been taken on the relationship between sport and politics. For an historical overview, see DaCosta (2014). For an example of a particularly well-developed view, see Morgan (2006). For a general discussion of social responsibility and how values in sport relate to those in society, see Simon, et al, (2015).

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