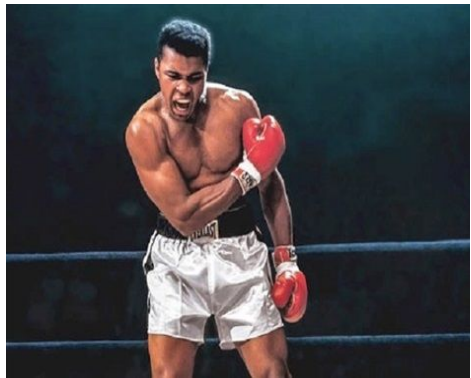


**“Legislating a Man’s Heart”:  
African-American Athletes’ Impact on the Civil Rights Movement**



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1963 March on Washington: Martin Luther King Jr. stood atop the Lincoln Memorial steps and delivered one of the most powerful speeches of all time. The “I Have A Dream” speech, to many people, was a culmination of all civil rights efforts up to that point. With this speech, African-Americans had a renewed sense of hope that events like the arrest of Rosa Parks, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and the Freedom Rides of 1961 were not for nothing. The year following the March on Washington, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed. Martin Luther King Jr. is the most well-known civil rights activist; however, there were others (“I Have a Dream' Speech”).

The Civil Rights Movement began in 1865, when the 13th amendment was passed, abolishing slavery. This amendment, followed by the passing of the 14th amendment guaranteeing due process to citizens of all colors in 1868 and the 15th amendment giving citizens of all colors the right to vote in 1870, jump started the Civil Rights Movement (“Civil Rights: Timeline of Events”). In 1896, the court decision of *Plessy v Ferguson* stated that segregation was legal as long as the separate places were of equal quality. Unfortunately, this did not happen. The reason for this inequality of facilities was the implementation of Jim Crow Laws. These were state laws formed in the South to ensure the continuing practice of racial discrimination (Urofsky).

From this environment, civil rights activists of all types emerged, from actors to musicians to even athletes. Three legendary African-American athletes had a massive impact on the Civil Rights Movement. Jesse Owens, Jackie Robinson, and Muhammad Ali played as important of a role in the fight against racism as civil rights legends Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. They had a profound impact on the movement through both their athletic

prowess on the field and their ability to use their national platform to spread their plea for racial equality across the United States. Although these athletes went about fighting social injustice in vastly different ways, from speaking out in the media to attending Supreme Court Cases or to just dominating in their respective sport, the result was the same. Unfortunately, despite their efforts, the fight is not yet over.

### **Background**

Many of the most notable and influential figures of the Civil Rights Movement did their work during the 1950s and 1960s. Some of these individuals came from modest backgrounds, some did not, but all of them sent a message to the masses that social injustice would no longer be tolerated. For example, Martin Luther King Jr. grew up the son of a pastor, and eventually became one himself, but it was his initiative to bring equality to people of color that resulted in him being a well-respected civil rights activist. Malcolm X also grew up the son of a Baptist minister, one who had a love for black activist Marcus Garvey. However, Malcolm's father drew so much criticism from the Black Legion, a white nationalist group, that they moved twice before Malcolm turned four. Malcolm X then grew up to be a civil rights activist as well, and though he was known to be militant than Martin Luther King Jr, they did work alongside each other ("Biography").

However, there were also more celebrities that were famous for their participation outside of the Civil Rights Movement that still made a drastic impact. These people were athletes that were known around the world for their prowess and dominance in their respective sports, and who used their platform of national prominence in the media to help bring equality to those of color. Jesse Owens was a professional runner and part of the first group of African-Americans

from the United States to race in the Olympics. He is seen as one of the original leaders in a push for a better quality of life for blacks, though he did it in a unique way.

### **Jesse Owens**

Because media coverage was rather sparse when Jesse Owens began racing, he relied on his athletic prowess to put himself on the national radar. Once this feat was accomplished, he used his continued dominance in track and field to show that African-Americans belonged alongside whites in the athletic world. The culmination of this was the 1936 Berlin Olympics, where he defeated white athletes from all over the world to win four gold medals. Owens' impact on the Civil Rights Movement stems mainly from his athletic prowess and the sentiment that arose from his dominance of the racing world. Many in support of racial equality used his ability to compete with whites to show that blacks were not inferior to whites and deserved to be given the same privileges.

Jesse Owens was born on September 13, 1912 in Oakville, Alabama. As a child, he was sickly and frail, and consequently, he was not able to help his family in the fields. He had many near death experiences as a child, including getting his leg stuck in a bear trap, getting hit by a car, and having his mother remove growths from his chest that would not stop bleeding. Growing up a "colored" person in Alabama, Jesse Owens was subjected to a life of living under the unbearable weight of racism in the South. In one harrowing experience, "He angered some local white boys, who were bent on carving their initials into his face. However, J.C.'s older brothers saved his good looks" ("Jesse Owens Biography").

Despite not having an athletic build as a child, Owens was recruited to the track team of his school in Cleveland in fifth grade. Soon, he transformed from being a frail kid to a successful track star, setting the school record for the 100 yard dash in middle school. His success continued into high school where “in 1933 he won the 100-yard dash, the 200-yard dash, and the broad jump in the National Interscholastic Championships” (“Jesse Owens Biography”). Needless to say, Owens carried this success on the track from high school into college and, eventually, the Olympics.

Growing up, Owens lived under the burden of Jim Crow Laws and the outcome of *Plessy v Ferguson* decision. Though *Plessy v Ferguson* said that utilities and buildings had to be equal, they rarely were. There were separate schools for blacks and whites, there were separate water fountains for blacks and whites, and, in many cases, different restaurants for each race. At the colored schools, the quality of teaching was not always as good because teachers were given less opportunities to learn their craft (Baker). As a result, Owens, and other blacks, had a smaller chance to succeed from the start.

With that being said, there were organizations that were put in place during Owens’ childhood that worked to fight these restrictions. The NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) was founded in 1909. The NAACP was formed mostly in response to violence towards blacks, and anti-lynching was central to their agenda. Eventually, they also won many big legal victories in the fifties and sixties that helped blacks in their push for civil rights (“NAACP”). In 1920, the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union) was founded. The ACLU “works in the courts, legislatures and communities to defend and preserve the individual rights and liberties guaranteed to all people in this country by the Constitution and

laws of the United States” (“ACLU History”). Both of these groups were instrumental in the Civil Rights Movement because they organized communities that would eventually protest alongside Civil Rights greats like Martin Luther King Jr, giving him and his message additional legitimacy (“Civil Rights: Timeline of Events”).

Owens took his athletic prowess to Ohio State in 1935. From the moment he stepped foot on the track, everyone knew he was going to be something special. “In one day, May 25, 1935... Owens equaled the world record for the 100-yard dash (9.4 sec) and broke the world records for the 220-yard dash (20.3 sec), the 220-yard low hurdles (22.6 sec), and the long jump (8.13 metres [26.67 feet]).” This race, which was the conference championship that year, showed the world that Owens had what it took to hold his own against the best athletes in the world, and earned him a spot in the 1936 Berlin Olympics (“Jesse Owens”).

Owens, however, endured serious racism while he was earning his spot at Ohio State. Typically, as part of a team, they traveled together, slept together, and ate together. However, it was much different for Owens and the other colored members of his team. They were forced to ride all in one car, and usually it was a small one, so they did not have much room. While on the road, they were not able to stay in the same hotels as the white athletes. Ohio State paid little attention to the discrimination that was being endured by their own athletes. William Baker, author of *Jesse Owens: An American Life*, claims that this was because the university convinced itself that they had already done their duty by allowing blacks to participate on the same teams as white athletes. As for the white teammates that Owens had, they knew that this sort of discrimination was occurring. But, according to Baker, what they did not think of was the fact that they had a responsibility to stand up against the racism these athletes faced (40).

On a non-athletic level, Owens even experienced racism at his job. He tried to run an elevator to earn some money while in school, but there were even limitations on what elevators he was allowed to operate: “The elevator he ran in the state house turned out to be a freight elevator; only white athletes were permitted to operate passenger elevators” (Baker 35). The experiences he had at Ohio State serve to help to show why breaking down barriers was so important to Owens. Due to the racism that he experienced, it only makes sense that he would be adamant about bringing civil rights to blacks. And because he was so dominant on the athletic field, it makes sense that he chose to break these barriers through athletic performance.

Owens was part of a group of black athletes that went to Berlin in 1936, and they were the first group of black athletes from the U.S. to be able to participate on such a large stage. When they went over to Berlin, they were seen as just as valuable as any other Olympic athlete. Owens, along with the rest of the group of African-American athletes, were seen as American heroes while over in Berlin, owing to their immense success. “His [Owens] four Olympic victories were a blow to Adolf Hitler’s intention to use the Games to demonstrate Aryan superiority” (“Jesse Owens”). During this time, Adolf Hitler was beginning his warpath to proving that Germans were superior to everyone and Nazism was the correct way of life. Americans feared what they heard about Hitler through the media, and for some time, they considered not sending a team to the Olympics. With that being said, the job of these black athletes was to go to Germany and dominate the Olympics; in doing so, they would remind Americans that they were still a powerful nation in all senses of the term: except for socially. Despite this, these African-American athletes proved that America would not succumb to the Germans and Hitler’s crusade (Schaap 228).

The 1936 Berlin Olympics as a whole proved to be a significant step in the right direction when it came to racial equality. The United States, and the world as a whole, was shown that athletes of different races were able to coexist. This point was only emphasized by the fact that they showed great sportsmanship on such an important stage like the Olympics. The most famous example of this sportsmanship came en route to Owens' long-jump gold medal. After fouling on his first two attempts in qualification, German Luz Long approached Owens, suggesting that he move his mark back from the official line so that he had no chance of fouling a third time. Owens did so, shattering the qualifying distance, and joined Long in the long-jump final. Owens went on to win the gold medal, and when Hitler realized that Owens was in position to win, he left the arena. Owens said that this "snub" by Hitler did not bother him in the least. The thing he took most from his experience in the 1936 Olympics was the friendship he made with Luz Long: "He was my strongest rival, yet it was he who advised me to adjust my run-up in the qualifying round and thereby helped me to win" (Rowbottom). This lasting friendship was the watershed moment for civil rights in an Olympic Games that proved to be significant in the push towards racial equality.

Upon returning home, Owens himself was among the most famous men in America at the time. Despite the racism that he encountered back home, when he went to the Olympics, he was "praised equally by the white and black press, celebrated for refuting Hitler's claims of Aryan superiority" (Schaap 231). Owens felt as though his success led to a small victory for African-Americans across America as well. Not only did he prove that blacks were capable of being equal with whites, but also he appealed to spectators of both races, as evidenced by him being asked for autographs from everybody. Though this may not seem like a huge



accomplishment today, what it meant to Owens was that he had won a small victory for African-Americans because the requests came from people who usually did not hold blacks to a high regard (Baker 43).

Despite his success in the Olympics, however, Owens claimed that he still felt a twinge of racism everywhere that he went:

‘[Racism] can be pure hell at times and can shake anyone’s sureness,’ he said. ‘Often it’s worse if you were the world’s fastest human. When you walk into [a fine establishment] wearing a face almost everyone recognizes and still feel that agonizing fear reflex deep in your gut, you still can’t help wondering with a part of your soul whether the maitre d’s smile is a sneer and if the woman at the next table thinks you should be waiting on her instead of sitting next to her. It’s worse than if you were simply an anonymous black man’ (Baker 43-44).

From a social standpoint, Jesse Owens was one of the athletes instrumental in gaining African-Americans more respect around the United States, and therefore obtaining more rights with less regulations. However, Jesse Owens had a different way of going about progressing the Civil Rights Movement than the other important figures in the movement. While most of the significant figures of the time were outspoken, Owens was the opposite. Owens was against the idea of mixing sports and politics. For example, when student-athletes from Texas Southern boycotted a meet because the officials of the venue announced they would not integrate the spectators of the stadium for the meet, Owens was upset. As Louis Moore, author of “Jesse Owens Ran the Wrong Race: Athletes, Activism, and the 1960s”, puts it, “While most liberal minded people around the country congratulated the athletes, one prominent black figure chastised the young men, Jesse Owens. Owens called the movement ‘a pretty silly thing to withdraw young athletes who are college students because of a social structure.’” Owens thought it was ridiculous that student-athletes were passing up the chance to run in a meet, especially one

with the magnitude of the Houston Master's Meet, just because the stadium officials would not integrate (Moore, "Jesse Owens Ran").

Rather, Owens biggest stance on the advancement of blacks was that their athletic performance would speak louder than their words, and thus it was better to perform well in their respective sport than to publicly speak out against oppression. He commented that "'We have been able to bridge the gap of misunderstanding more than anywhere else,' and suggested sports had been 'a great boon because as far as our understanding; we cannot legislate man's heart.'" Owens essentially thought that sports were the only way to bridge the gap between blacks and whites. He also believed that you could not create legislation and expect it to change the sentiment of a group of people right away. If the activists of the time were to try to push legislation through for the advancement of black rights, it would just make those against black rights more vehement. Owens believed that the whites would respect blacks if they performed well athletically (Moore, "Jesse Owens Ran").

Owens, socially, was not seen as a barrier breaker as much as the other athletes, but he was important to the cause. To many, including himself, Owens' significance in the Civil Rights Movement came from his athletic success, not using his platform to speak out against racism and oppression. He cited the fact that "'competition in athletics has broken down more barriers than almost any other thing,'" and he did not see any reason to believe that it could not work again (Moore, *We Will Win* 131). In Owens' mind, there was no reason to do anything other than continue to dominate in athletics, because, in his personal experience, athletics had put him on top, even if only for a brief period of time. And if you are seen as a hero numerous times, no matter how brief, eventually you should gain the respect that you deserve. However, one would

think that Owens would have known better in some regard, as even he admitted that in a way, it felt as though he faced more discrimination when he was known as the fastest man in the world (Baker 43-44). This discrimination might have been different, in the sense that it was not as outright as it could have been, but according to Owens, it was still very much there.

Finally, in his ideal world, if Owens earned respect it would eventually lead to all African-Americans gaining respect. He also believed that outside interference would do nothing for the locals that were suffering from the oppression of Jim Crow laws, but instead they had to resolve the issues on their own. “Owens critiqued, ‘I can’t see where they’re [activists] going to be of any great help... To have people from the outside go in, for some things I don’t think that’s a good idea’” (Moore, *We Will Win* 131). Here, Louis Moore shows us that Owens was extremely political influence on the Civil Rights Movement and aiding these people because he felt in the long run, it would not benefit them. Owens was only the first of many athletes to strive to have an impact on the Civil Rights Movement, and in a way, he laid the path for others to follow.

Owens had a rather miniscule impact on the Civil Rights Movement in relation to athletes who followed him. Nonetheless, it was the fact that he had put African-Americans on the national radar and had showed the world during the Berlin Olympics that blacks were equal to whites that cements his legacy as an athlete-activist. Though he was opposed to mixing politics and sports, and thus never spoke out against racial injustice, his actions were enough to begin a long line of athlete-activists that would follow in his footsteps.

### **Jackie Robinson**

One of those who followed in his footsteps was Jack “Jackie” Roosevelt Robinson. Because Robinson was working in the wake of Owens and his athletic dominance, it was easier for Robinson to get media coverage. This, along with him being the first “colored” person to enter a “white man’s game,” allowed Robinson to use his national platform to exact change more effectively than Owens. Robinson began his career following Owens’ sentiments, remaining rather silent in regards to racial inequality, but soon began his push against social injustice. Many in support of racial equality found hope in Robinson, as he was a well-known athlete who had made infiltrated baseball and was in a good position to exact change.

Born on January 31, 1919 in Cairo, GA, Robinson’s father left the family when he was still an infant, so his mother moved the family from Georgia to California. Here, the superstar-to-be grew up to become one of the most influential athletes to ever play the game of baseball (Costly). Robinson, growing up around the same time period as Jesse Owens, was affected by many of the same social issues that Owens was. He, too, had to suffer the burden of Jim Crow laws and “separate but equal” facilities that were, in fact, not equal. The only potential difference between the childhoods of Owens and Robinson was that the NAACP had already been active for about ten years when Robinson was born, so they were thoroughly involved in the community.

Robinson attended John Muir High School in Pasadena, and this is where he started to develop into the athlete he would become. He was the true definition of an all-around athlete in high school, playing football, baseball, basketball, and track (“Who is Jackie Robinson”). This overall athleticism led to him being highly recruited to UCLA, where he became the first person ever to letter (and star) in four different sports (Costly).

Despite his success at UCLA, Robinson was forced to withdraw from school for financial reasons in his third year. He decided to enter the Army in 1942, but the military was no escape from racism. “Robinson faced court-martial in 1944 for refusing to follow an order that he sit at the back of a military bus. The charges against Robinson were dismissed, and he received an honorable discharge from the military.” However, this racism that he encountered set a precedent in his mind for fighting racial discrimination. Following this, he went to play professional soccer in Hawaii, and then professional baseball for the Kansas City Monarchs, where his campaign to become the first black baseball player to play in the MLB began (Moore, *We Will Win* 146).

While on the Kansas City Monarchs, Robinson had a successful year athletically. He batted .345, had ten doubles, four triples, and five home runs. He was by far the best player in the Negro Leagues that year, and his success did not go unnoticed. Jackie Robinson caught the eye of Brooklyn Dodgers scout and President, Branch Rickey, and his path to becoming the first African-American in the MLB was underway (Costly).

When Branch Rickey decided that Jackie was the one to break down the MLB’s color barrier, he inked Robinson to a deal with the Dodgers minor league team, the Montreal Royals. When signed to the Royals, the fans in Montreal loved it. They were extremely excited about being a part of Jackie’s journey to breaking the color barrier, and obviously overjoyed about the skill set that he brought to the team. However, while he was a part of the team, fans in other cities did not accept him with as much gratitude as those in Montreal did. For example, in Baltimore, fans trapped Jackie in the clubhouse for hours before a game, angry that he was taking over a white man’s game (Graf). However, throughout this whole process in which Jackie

made his way through the farm system of the Brooklyn Dodgers, he maintained a cool head and kept one thing in mind: getting to the MLB.

That year in Montreal was a successful one for Robinson. He was not only a fan favorite of Montreal, but he was once again a top player in AAA baseball throughout the entire MLB farm system. Robinson finished the season with 25 doubles, eight triples, three home runs, sixty-six runs batted in, forty stolen bases, and a .349 batting average ("Jackie Robinson Stats"). These numbers would have been impressive coming from any AAA baseball player, but people were more in awe considering the fact that an African American produced these stats. But if anyone thought his life in the Major Leagues would be any easier, they were seriously mistaken.

Jackie Robinson's role as the pioneering black player in the MLB was a calculated and conscious decision. Jackie Robinson was the best player to break the color barrier of baseball for many reasons. But the reason that mattered the most to Branch Rickey, president of the Brooklyn Dodgers and the one who decided to take on the challenge, was that Robinson had the proper mentality. As Christine Graf, author of "Breaking the Color Barrier: Jackie Robinson and the Integration of Major League Baseball" puts it, "Rickey could have recruited the best player from the Negro Leagues, but he knew he needed more. He needed a player with tremendous self-confidence and self-esteem, but most importantly, he needed someone who could conduct himself with dignity and restraint when faced with racism."

In Branch Rickey's mind, the most important thing about whatever player that he chose to sign to the Dodgers farm system was that they would not get into any altercations with the media or other teams, and would be able to maintain a level head throughout the process. Rickey and Robinson had a difference of opinion when it came to this philosophy. Robinson originally

interpreted this philosophy of Rickey's by believing that it meant he needed a player who was too weak to stand up to racism. However, Rickey actually needed a player who would be strong enough to not give in to the jabs of the media and instead keep calm (Bergland).

This meeting between the two gentlemen revolved around the idea that Jackie was going to have to be able to keep himself composed through all of his trials. Robinson's grandfather wanted to make sure this was not going to be an issue. He continuously tried to provoke Robinson into a reaction, finally doing so by faking sliding into him with spikes on and getting right up in his face, saying, "What would you do?" (Marcus).

As soon as the announcement was made that Jackie Robinson would be going to the Brooklyn Dodgers association, newspapers around the United States started criticizing the management's decision. They claimed that Robinson was not good enough for the MLB and they were focusing more on making a political statement than what was best for the team. "He is a thousand-to-one shot at best. The Negro players simply don't have the brains or the skill" (Entine 210). The fact that newspapers had already doubted Robinson once, and they were proven wrong, should have meant an end to the criticisms from the media. However, it seemed as though racism in the media overtook them, and they continued to write about how Robinson would never make it. Needless to say, they continued to be proven wrong.

More likely than not, Robinson endured the worst racism of his life while playing for the Brooklyn Dodgers. The racism was so bad that one would think Robinson would have stopped playing baseball. However, the impact he could have on the Civil Rights Movement was far too important to Robinson and blacks everywhere for him to quit.

Robinson faced a variety of modes by which those who were opposed to integrating baseball displayed their racism. Even his own team displayed racist thoughts and actions about Robinson joining the Brooklyn Dodgers. Several players wrote and signed a petition to keep him off of the Dodgers, and when this was unsuccessful, an unnamed teammate asked for a trade. However, after a short while of playing with Robinson, the remainder of his team realized that he was just another talented baseball player who belonged in the league. The issue, ultimately, was not the Dodgers, but rather it was players on every other team in baseball. "Some pitchers intentionally hit him with pitches, and opposing players regularly shouted insults at him. According to one player, "“We called Robinson some of the foulest names he had ever heard, the worst things you could scream at another man”” (Graf).

At one point early in Robinson’s career, the Philadelphia Phillies were so opposed to Robinson playing that they threatened to boycott their game against the Brooklyn Dodgers. Had it not been for the commissioner threatening to ban these players from the league, the Phillies may not have been the only team to try this method of protest (Costly).

While it is common for fans to boo players, the things that were said to Robinson crossed the line. To make matters worse, it was not just the fans that were saying things to Robinson, nor just the players. In one of the most despicable moments in baseball history, Phillies manager Ben Chapman continuously yelled racial slurs at Robinson and demanded that his pitchers pelt Robinson when he stepped to the plate. This was seen to be more despicable than even players doing these same actions because managers are supposed to be leaders. But in this scenario, Chapman stooped to the lowest of lows. This game against the Phillies was the closest that Robinson ever came to breaking and undoing all of the progress he had made for the



African-American community. ““For one wild and rage-crazed minute, I thought, ‘To hell with Mr. Rickey’s noble experiment’”” (Tracy).

This game proved to be a important point in Robinson’s career for two reasons. First, he extinguished any remaining doubts that he had the mental fortitude to play in the MLB and deal with the repercussions of doing so. Secondly, this game gained Robinson sympathy from players and commentators alike. Eddie Stanky, Robinson’s teammate and native-born Philadelphian, began to shout at the Phillies fans for being cowards and verbally abusing Robinson, knowing he could not retaliate. Commentators also weighed in while broadcasting the game, showing sympathy for Robinson’s situation. According to Jonathan Eig, author of “Opening Day,” this was the first time that white folks had noticed the abuse that Robinson was taking on the playing field. “I interviewed a fan who had been a teenager who went to one of those games, heard the heckling, and was shocked” (Tracy).

According to Robinson, the reason that he was able to stay so level headed was because in his mind, there was no way he could jeopardize the future of blacks by losing his temper (Graf). Because of this, Rickey actually told Robinson that he could not speak out against racism for essentially three years; but that fourth year, the two decided it was time to speak their minds. “Robinson had remained silent the entire year. He had not answered any insults; he had not responded to any provocation; he had not spoken out against racism. He remained silent for another year. But in 1949, Robinson and Rickey agreed it was time for Robinson to speak his mind. When he did, his statements angered many players, owners, and fans throughout baseball” (Costly).

It was not just on the field that Robinson suffered adversity. During his career, Robinson and his family's lives were threatened on multiple occasions. According to Christine Graf, he and his family received numerous death threats. However, Robinson continued to play, and he continued to drive home the point that he was not doing it for himself, but for all black people. If he quit, it would close the doors on any opportunities for black athletes in the future (Graf).

Eventually, the baseball world grew accustomed to seeing Robinson on the baseball field, and towards the end of his career, he won over many of the fans and players hearts. The fact that he would not give up because he would not be the one to let all of the future African-American aspiring athletes down resonated with both black and white fans and players alike. As a matter of fact, one of the first public signs of affection for Robinson by another player was by teammate Pee Wee Reese. "In one event that has become baseball legend, Pee Wee Reese came onto the field and put his arm around Robinson's shoulder. It was the first time many people had ever seen friendly physical contact between the races" (Graf).

Many were shocked by this physical display of affection between the two players, especially considering they were of different races. Before this time, Robinson's teammates had stood up for him verbally, but they had never made such a strong gesture as Reese did on May 13, 1947. Because of the oddity of this occasion, many questioned whether or not the event actually occurred. However, both players acknowledged that this event happened, with Pee Wee Reese saying, "I was just trying to make the world a little bit better. That's what you're supposed to do with life, isn't it?" This gesture by Reese did just that, showing that blacks and whites were more than capable of getting along on the field, and maybe in society as well (Cronin).

Ultimately, Robinson also left his mark on the game of baseball through his performance on the diamond. He finished his ten year career with 137 home runs, 734 runs batted in, 197 stolen bases, and a .311 batting average. He was named an All-Star six years in a row, and he finished top-10 in MVP voting four times, including a win in 1949. Furthermore, he won a World Series with the Dodgers in 1955 (“Jackie Robinson Stats”). The appreciation of the MLB for all that Robinson did, both on and off the field, became evident in 1997, on the fiftieth anniversary of his debut in the MLB. On this day, the MLB retired Robinson’s number (42), making it the only number retired across the entire league. Even today, players celebrate the effect that Robinson had on the game by all wearing his number one day a year, April 15, and the day he made his MLB debut (Graf).

Jackie Robinson’s impact was so monumental on the field that sometimes it overshadows the effect he had on the Civil Rights Movement socially. The ability of Robinson to break the color barrier proved to be an important turning point for blacks and American society. A common theory among historians and sports analysts alike is that Robinson had such a profound impact on both black and white communities that his integration of baseball propelled the integration of society as a whole. “This idea- that if blacks were equal on the field, they were equal off it as well- began to infiltrate its way into society, thus beginning the subtle yet definitive shift in the American conscious and allowing civil rights activists and athletes to promote social justice in our country” (“The Role of Sports”). Robinson was, in some ways, proving the theory of Jesse Owens during his career; dominance on the athletic field was propelling white communities to respect black citizens more.

Not only did Jackie indirectly have an effect on the Civil Rights movement socially through his play on the diamond, but he also had an aggressive mentality when it came to the way he was going to make his impact felt directly. This mentality was not aggressive in the sense that he was violent, but rather that he was not going to sit back and wait for change to occur. He was going to go out there and make change happen. Robinson was of the mindset that outstanding performance was important, but African-American athletes had to remember to make their voices heard using their national platform.

Growing up under poor conditions and under the burden of Jim Crow Laws, Robinson knew as well as anyone that it was not easy to succeed coming from a background like his. The struggles he endured as a child propelled his eagerness to speak out against the oppression of blacks, and he pleaded other African-American athletes to do the same. “Robinson hit back. He reminded Owens that he had a duty to participate. ‘We must keep these youngsters aware--and especially we who have been fortunate like Floyd, Jesse, and myself--that no Negro has it made, regardless of his fame, position or money--until the most underprivileged Negro enjoys his rights as a free man’” (Moore 131). Robinson felt that even though there were a select few blacks who were successful enough to do what they loved, the vast majority of African-Americans were still being oppressed. Because of this, he was adamant that no black man or woman had truly made it until no African-American was without their civil rights.

Robinson was labeled an agitator when he began to speak out in 1949. While a white player speaking out would be considered having character, Robinson was considered as ungrateful for the opportunity to play professional baseball. Many people who opposed his position believed he should have been like the other negroes playing at the time: silent. But his

ability to speak out led to testifying in front of Congress in the summer of 1949, and as a result, allowed him to push harder for equal rights (“Robinson and the Civil Rights Movement”).

The summer of 1949, Robinson was summoned by John Stephens Wood, a member of the House Un-American Activities Committee, to speak out against Paul Robeson, who was being accused of being communist. At one point in the trial, Robeson told the jury that no black American would ever fight against Russia, and that he loved the feeling of freedom that blacks had in Russia as opposed to in the United States. Robinson struggled with the idea of speaking in front of Congress. For one, many of the people that were asking him to testify against Robeson were known to be affiliated with the KKK, a white supremacist group known to target African-Americans, especially in the South. Moreover, Robinson did not want to undermine a fellow black activist, despite the fact he did not agree with what Robeson was saying (“Robinson and the Civil Rights Movement”).

In the end, and with the support of the Richeys, he decided that he would testify in front of Congress. However, he decided that instead of denouncing Robeson, he would instead just refute the statement that no blacks would fight for their country against Russia. He told Congress that the thought of communism stirring up African-Americans was blurring lines and inhibiting the progress of the Civil Rights Movement. Although he did not necessarily agree with Robeson, he told the jury that he appreciated Robeson speaking his mind, and that neither of the men, nor anyone, could speak for 15 million blacks across the nation (“Robinson and the Civil Rights Movement”). Robinson testifying in front of Congress proved to be beneficial to his impact on the Civil Rights Movement as more blacks were beginning to gain the courage to speak out against their oppressors.

There were two momentous historical events during the fifties that show that not only was the United States starting to respect African-American communities more, but blacks were also starting to push for their rights more vehemently. The first of these events occurred in 1954: the decision by the Supreme Court on *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* (“Civil Rights: Timeline of Events”). This was the Supreme Court decision overturning *Plessy v Ferguson*, the court case ruling facilities could be “separate but equal.” The court ruled that it was no longer legal to have separate educational facilities for blacks and whites. This was mainly brought about because, though the facilities were supposed to be equal in quality, in reality, they were not. Consequently, the Supreme Court ruled that students could no longer be separated due to their skin color, and the mandate was implemented with “all deliberate speed” in 1955 (“Civil Rights: Timeline of Events”).

The second of these monumental events may not have had as immediate of an impact on the black community as the *Brown* decision, but it showed that African-Americans were no longer afraid to protest the failure to recognize their civil rights. On December 5, 1955, the Montgomery Bus Boycott began. On December 5, an African-American woman, by the name of Rosa Parks, sat in the front of a city bus. This proved to be potentially the most impactful seating choice in the history of America. She was asked to move to the back of the bus so that a white person could have her seat. When she politely refused, she was immediately arrested. Parks’ unwarranted arrest began a one year, fifteen day boycott on the public transportation system in Montgomery, Alabama by blacks and whites alike (“Civil Rights: Timeline of Events”).

However, Robinson’s impact on society did not end when he hung up his cleats. As a matter of fact, his retirement proved to only be the beginning of his journey to help blacks

receive their rights as citizens. His last big push for civil rights was his writings and speeches in regards to efforts to rebuild burned down churches in Albany, Georgia. This fundraising effort was the same one that Civil Rights legend Martin Luther King Jr. began his push for Civil Rights in. In 1962, King asked Robinson if he would speak out to help gain national attention for two black churches that were burned down in Albany, and Robinson jumped on the opportunity. “Jackie quickly agreed, spoke at a rally in Albany, and visited the site of the burned-out Mount Olive Baptist Church in Sasser, Georgia... Robinson’s fame and connections rebuilt three churches” (“Robinson and the Civil Rights Movement”). His ability to gain national attention for the churches that were burned down and raise enough money to build three new ones was the perfect example for how these athletes used the media spotlight to bring change and advance the Civil Rights Movement.

Robinson is the first person that people think of when they hear “athlete-activist.” Robinson’s legacy among the general public is the strongest, as he broke down the color barrier in major league baseball. This was such a momentous occasion for blacks and whites alike that it is hard for people to forget. However, what people do not often remember is that for the first four years of his career, he did not say anything to benefit the Civil Rights Movement. His use of the media, once he did begin to speak out, sparked a fire in the African-American public, and potentially lead to two very important historical events. Yes, Robinson had a profound impact on civil rights and he has the greatest legacy among any athlete-activist. Still, there were athletes that did more for the movement than Robinson.

### **Muhammad Ali**

One of those who did more for the movement than Robinson was Cassius Clay, better known as Muhammad Ali. Clay was the most assertive in using media to push for a progression in the Civil Rights Movement. Clay was firmly against not only racial injustice, but also the Vietnam War. This was the focal point around which his social impact hinged. For Clay, media was a readily available tool for spreading his message, and one of which he took full advantage. Clay went to the media many times to let the United States people know where he stood on the issues of social injustice and the war, and that it was time to exact change. And he did just that.

Born on January 17, 1942 in Louisville, Kentucky, Clay grew up in a time when racial segregation ruled this nation, and he endured the struggles of growing up in a southern state at the time. During Clay's childhood, Louisville had all of the African-Americans on the west side of the city, and the local amusement park was only open to blacks every once in a while. Owing to the combination of being subjected to a certain "zone" of Louisville and being given the impression that he was inferior to whites, it did not take long for Clay to realize that he had to do something about social injustice ("Education").

Clay took up boxing at the age of twelve when he met policeman and boxing trainer, Joe Martin, searching for his stolen bike. Martin told Clay that if he wanted to confront the thief and get his bike back, he would have to learn how to defend himself. This encounter resulted in Clay working with Martin and Fred Stoner, and started him on his path to become the most famous boxer of all time ("Education"). Stoner and Martin taught Ali well, as he won the Golden Gloves Tournament of Champions in Chicago and the national Amateur Athletic Union light-heavyweight title, as a 17 year old. Clay went on to win the gold medal in the 1960 Rome Olympics just weeks after graduating from high school ("Historical Timeline").



During this time period, African-Americans were still suffering and being treated poorly. For example, in 1955, a fourteen year old boy by the name of Emmett Till was murdered for supposedly flirting with a white woman. This young man was just a year older than Clay at the time of his death. In the same year, Rosa Parks was arrested and the Montgomery Bus Boycott followed. Having been exposed to these two events at such a young age, it is not a surprise that Clay was impacted by these social injustices (“Historical Timeline”).

Clay’s influence on the Civil Rights Movement was made even more potent by the fact that he is arguably the best boxer of all time. Clay began his boxing career as not only a successful boxer, but more importantly to his eventual impact on the Civil Rights Movement, a fan favorite outside of the ring. “In his early bouts as a professional, Clay was more highly regarded for his charm and personality than for his ring skills. He sought to raise public interest in his fights by reading childlike poetry and spouting self-descriptive phrases such as ‘float like a butterfly, sting like a bee.’” Furthermore, though many avid boxing fans of the time said that his technique was poor and some took offense to his nonchalant approach, it did not take long for Clay to become an elite and well-respected boxer (Wallenfeldt 352).

However, Clay’s eventual top-dog status in the boxing world came from a number of improbable defeats of other top boxers of the time. The first of these bouts was against Sonny Liston on February 25, 1964. Liston was considered the most intimidating fighters of the time, and Clay was widely considered the underdog. However, after six rounds, Clay was declared the winner and he stunned the world for the first of many times. Clay had a rematch against Liston on May 25, 1965, and won via a first round knockout. With this victory, he solidified his spot as

one of the best boxers of the current era. However, Clay's fight would soon become much more difficult than anything he could have faced in the ring (Hauser).

Just nine days after Clay defeated Sonny Liston the first time, he came out and announced to the world that he was converting to the Nation of Islam. Two days following this announcement, his mentor, Elijah Muhammad, announced that Cassius Clay was being renamed Muhammad Ali. Muhammad Ali decided to change his name because he felt Cassius Clay was a slave name, and he was not going to stand for being referred to with said name any longer. "I didn't choose it, and I didn't want it," he said. 'I am Muhammad Ali, a free name – it means beloved of God – and I insist people use it when speaking to me and of me'" (Staufenberg). Though this transition to the Nation of Islam was a positive change for Ali personally, it brought about many unwanted issues in the following years.

In February of 1966, Muhammad Ali was eligible for military service. However, owing to his shift in ideology to Nation of Islam, he applied for a conscientious objector exemption, stating that he was a pacifist and his beliefs prevented him from participating in the war. When he was denied this exemption, Ali appealed to the Kentucky State Appeal Board. The matter was transferred to the Department of Justice, who conducted an investigation into the validity of Ali's claims. The result of the investigation, and advice given by hearing officer Lawrence Grauman, stated that Ali should be given said exemption. However, that did not happen. As a matter of fact, the Department of Justice did not forward Grauman's advice on to the appeal board, nor did they tell Ali what the former Kentucky state judge had concluded. Rather, they wrote their own letter to the appeal board stating that Ali should not be granted the exemption. As a result, Ali reported to the Selective Service induction center on April 28, 1967, but he refused to be

inducted. This action of his had two major consequences: the loss of his boxing license and current championship, and potential criminal prosecution (Lederman).

Though these consequences would seem somewhat brutal to many, and in most cases would cause people to just accept their induction into the armed forces, Ali stood strong. He pointed to the idea that him going to prison would not be an issue since black people in the United States had been in prison for 400 years, referencing slavery and America's anti-black history (Staufenberg). Ali made his stance against going to Vietnam as much about his religious beliefs of pacifism as he did about how African-Americans were treated poorly in the nation. "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?" (Ali). Muhammad Ali could not find it in himself to go and fight other brown people for a country that did not care for or protect the rights of its own citizens. This viewpoint of the Vietnam war became the viewpoint that Ali clung to throughout his civil rights battles.

Eventually, while Ali was waiting for his criminal prosecution appeal, he took the New York State Athletic Commission to the Supreme Court for suspending his boxing license. After an arduous trial, Judge Declan P. Mansfield decided that there was only going to be a select few number of years that Ali was going to be physically able to fight, so by suspending him, the New York State Athletic Commission was harming him. The thought was that they were preventing him from making a living for no valid reason pending his appeal. Furthermore, the judge ruled that the harm to Ali could not be measured in damages, so he overturned the athletic commission's decision to suspend him (Lederman).

After having his boxing license reinstated, Ali had to work his way back to the top of the boxing world once again. There was only one clear way to do this: he had to beat Joe Frazier, the fighter who took his title when Ali was forced to relinquish it. In what was considered to be the “Fight of the Century” Ali was floored in the final round, got up to finish the fight, yet lost in a unanimous decision to Frazier. This was his first defeat as a professional boxer (Lederman).

Despite this loss, Ali fought Frazier in a non-title rematch six months later and defeated him. This victory led to arguably Ali’s most famous fight, and the one that solidified his spot among the best athletes of all time. “The October 30, 1974, fight in Kinshasa, Zaire, was dubbed the ‘Rumble in the Jungle.’ Ali, the decided underdog, employed his ‘rope-a-dope’ strategy, leaning on the ring ropes and absorbing a barrage of blows from Foreman while waiting for his opponent to tire.” This newfound strategy employed by Ali brought about a barrage of hate from some more traditional boxing fans, but in many people’s eyes, this strategy revolutionized boxing, and further solidified Ali’s legacy. Ali went on to defeat Joe Frazier in a third fight in the “Thrilla in Manilla” in 1975, but this proved to be his last major victory. Despite retaining the title for a while longer, he was never as dominant again (“Muhammad Ali”).

Muhammad Ali was a vocal athlete for the Civil Rights Movement. The point of emphasis around Ali’s push for more rights for blacks revolved around the Vietnam War. It was what Ali said during this time that he was awaiting his reinstatement into boxing that influenced the Civil Rights Movement the most. During this period, not only did he push for black resistance, but he also urged the public not to support the war. “Ali’s message of black pride and black resistance to white domination was on the cutting edge of the Civil Rights Movement.

Having refused induction into the U.S. Army, he also stood for the proposition that ‘unless you have a very good reason to kill, war is wrong’” (Wallenfeldt 353).

Ali was especially opposed to the Vietnam War. He believed he was being forced to fight for a government that did not support the advancement of blacks, in order to go kill more colored people. “‘My conscience won't let me go shoot my brother, or some darker people – some poor hungry people in the mud – for big powerful America,’ he said. ‘They never called me n\*\*\*\*\*. I’m not going 10,000 miles from home [...] to continue the domination of white slave masters of the darker people the world over’” (Staufenberg). Thus, he managed to tie the Civil Rights Movement into his urge for the public to resist the war. He was essentially telling people that encouraging the war would essentially be detrimental to the Civil Rights Movement.

Muhammad Ali had a lot of support when it came to expressing his voice against the war. Many of the major Civil Rights leaders, including Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., supported Ali’s stance of refusing to go fight in the war. Furthermore, the SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) released an antiwar manifesto about a month before Ali came out against the war, and they supported him throughout. Ali putting his livelihood on the line started a chain of events throughout the movement:

Crucial to Ali's connection to civil rights workers was their shared sense of urgency. Activists who were putting everything on the line, including their lives, could relate to Ali, who risked just about everything he had when he refused to be drafted into the Vietnam War. As Mississippi organiser Lawrence Guyot put it: ‘We were down there in these small, hot, dusty towns in an atmosphere thick with fear, trying to organise folk whose grandparents were slaves ... And here was this beautifully arrogant young man who made us proud to be us and proud to fight for our rights’ (Ezra).

In many instances, Ali used the media effectively to speak out against the war. He had an opportunity that Owens and Robinson did not have for two reasons: first, the Civil Rights Movement was getting a lot of coverage already, with Malcolm X and King starting their “crusades” against white supremacy. Second, the media was more readily accessible to both celebrities and common people alike. Ali received a lot of attention, mostly negative, from media outlets. For example, television host David Susskind called Ali a disgrace for not fighting for his country. He stated, ““I find nothing amusing or interesting or tolerable about this man. He’s a disgrace to his country, his race, and what he laughingly describes as his profession. He is a convicted felon in the United States. He has been found guilty. He is out on bail. He will inevitably go to prison, as well he should. He is a simplistic fool and a pawn.”” When Robinson and Owens were fighting against white supremacy, the media was not as readily accessible so it was harder for these athletes to speak out (Calamur).

Ali’s legacy stands strong today. Many celebrities and influential figures honor Ali for both his athletic skill and the impact he had on the Civil Rights Movement. Furthermore, they honor him for his bravery in standing up against the government and refusing to fight in Vietnam, and acknowledge that this helped propel the Civil Rights Movement forward. Reverend Jesse Jackson mentioned that Ali was the kind of winner that carried everyone on his shoulders, as opposed to being carried on everyone else’s shoulders (like a typical champion is) (Ali 221). President Barack Obama commented that Ali was a fighter among fighters: that he left his livelihood behind for what was right. He remarked, “His fight outside the ring would cost him his title and his public

standing. It would earn him enemies on the left and the right, make him reviled, and nearly send him to jail. But Ali stood his ground. And his victory helped us get used to the America we recognize today. Muhammad Ali shook up the world. And the world is better for it. We are all better for it” (Ali 241).

Ali’s impact on the Civil Rights Movement was monumental. He did something that no athlete before him ventured to do. He showed the United States that he was not afraid to accept the worst consequences imaginable. Though Robinson and Owens showed extreme bravery in speaking out, neither of them were ever confronted with jail time. Ali, however, faced five years in prison and was exiled from the boxing world. Nonetheless, he stood by his beliefs and stood up for bringing about change in America. He used the media to target the general population directly, and his charm and charisma won over many hearts. Thus, Ali had the greatest impact on the Civil Rights Movement of any athlete-activist.

### **Overview of Each Athlete**

For every athlete activist, his purpose of civil rights is different. Furthermore, it seems as though each athlete is more progressive than his predecessors in his thinking, and as a result, more inclined to use media. Jesse Owens believed that all of his activism should be as hands off as possible. He firmly believed that it was a terrible idea to mix sports and politics. Instead, he thought that he, and other blacks of the time, could influence the Civil Rights Movement through their athletic performance. Owens “believed the myth that the success of black athletes, especially in white sporting spaces, would break down racial barriers in society.” Instead of focusing on Owens’ lack of

speaking out, all of the media coverage that Owens received revolved around his running prowess and the fact that he was dominating the Aryan race in the 1936 Berlin Olympics. Though he was not in support of speaking out against racial discrimination, the media coverage of his athletic career allowed him to still bring about change (Moore, “Jesse Owens Ran”).

Robinson was more open to using the media than Owens was. Being the first player of color to break into the MLB, the media was already all over his story. Throughout the first part of his career, it was in his agreement with Rickey that he would stay silent and out of the media spotlight. However, as his career furthered, Robinson and Rickey came to the decision that it was time for him to speak out and make a push for civil rights (Costly). The media attention that came to Robinson was varied, but most of it was negative considering he was a black man in a “white man’s game.” However, his biggest push in the Civil Rights Movement was when he testified in front of Congress in the Paul Robeson trial. In this trial, he was able to both applaud a black activist for standing up against the government but also maintain a good image of African-Americans across the nation. Thus, it resulted in a win-win scenario for both Robinson and the Civil Rights Movement as a whole (“Robinson and the Civil Rights Movement”).

Robinson was more progressive when it came to speaking out against racial discrimination than Owens, resulting in a confrontation through the media. “Robinson believed athletes had to use their platform to exact change, while Owens continued to believe athletic success alone would be enough to fight Jim Crow.” As a result, Robinson



called out Owens through the media, telling him that he had a responsibility to the young African-Americans in the nation to speak out against social injustice. Owens replied by telling the media that he did not think it would be of any help to “go in from the outside,” claiming that each black community would have to solve their Jim Crow issues on their own. Robinson’s final rebuttal was that as athletes, they should know better than anyone that it was hard to make it to where they were. As a result, they should understand that no black person has made it until every black person no longer has to suffer (Moore, *We Will Win* 131).

Muhammad Ali became the most outspoken athlete when he began his civil rights push in the 1960s. Ali’s main point that his entire argument revolved around was the Vietnam War and his refusal to be inducted into the armed services. Ali was not afraid to go to the media and share his point of view. As a matter of fact, Ali’s willingness to speak to the media and make public appearances is what made him so well-liked. Though he was an impressive boxer, he quickly became a fan favorite because of his charm and his entertaining attitude (Wallenfeldt 352).

Ali was most able to use the media to his advantage because of how accessible it was during the height of his career. Thus, he had a large impact on the Civil Rights Movement because so many people were able to hear what he had to say in regards to the war and civil injustice. Furthermore, so much of what he said was extremely powerful, most likely resulting in a further advancement of the movement. Ali remarked, “I am not involved in a power struggle between black and white. I’m not trying to get power over white. I’m involved in a freedom struggle. Not a power struggle. We’re not trying to take

power away or rule anybody -- we're just trying to get up from under the rulers'" (Ali 116). He made it known to people that all he wanted was equality, both for races and for religions. The media, and his willingness to use it, allowed him to accomplish this.

### **Athletes Today**

These athletes helped push for civil rights before and during the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. However, with a monetary connection to big companies endorsing athletes today, it would make sense if they wanted to stay out of politics. However, this is not the case. Colin Rand Kaepernick, quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers in the 2012 Superbowl, is an athlete who has decided to take a political stance. Not only is Kaepernick picking up where other black athletes left off by using his national spotlight to exact change, but he is taking his role in civil rights a step further. Kaepernick is using a form of on-field protest, kneeling for the national anthem, to bring attention to "wrongdoings against African Americans and minorities in the United States." This protest is mainly in response to police brutality against minors, but encompasses a modern day push racial equality as a whole. By becoming another athlete activist, Kaepernick is joining the likes of LeBron James, Dwayne Wade, Chris Paul, and Carmelo Anthony (along with many WNBA athletes) in using their fame to put an end to racial discrimination. By kneeling for the national anthem, Kaepernick believes he is bringing to the American public's attention that there are issues bigger than football in the US that need to be resolved (Wyche).

Colin Kaepernick began his on-field protests at the beginning of the 2016-2017 NFL season. When asked why he felt it necessary to kneel for the anthem, he replied, "I

am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color,” (Wyche). This sentiment directly echoed Ali’s words when he discussed not wanting to fight in the Vietnam War. In both instances, the athlete took a stance for what they believed was right and would benefit their minorities in the United States in the long run. Despite there being a lot of criticism for Kaepernick right now, Ali’s stance proved to be beneficial for blacks eventually.

Like Ali and other athlete activists, Kaepernick has a number of allies in his efforts to exact change in the nation. At the 2016 ESPY’s, LeBron James, Dwayne Wade, Chris Paul, and Carmelo Anthony spoke out against police brutality and gun control in the wake of shootings in Dallas, Orlando, and Baton Rouge. “The system is broken, the problems are not new, the violence is not new, and the racial divide definitely is not new, but the urgency for change is definitely at an all-time high, said Anthony.” Also during this speech, Paul cited legends such as Jackie Robinson, Jesse Owens, and Muhammad Ali as inspiration for speaking out. Wade pleaded the public to help him spread the message that the senseless gun violence had to end, both by whites and revenge-seeking blacks. Though these athlete activists are the most high-profile of Kaepernick’s allies, his support does not end there (“Lebron James”).

Though he was not put on a roster for the 2017-2018 season, a large number of players have continued on Kaepernick’s movement in kneeling for the anthem. Some have knelt as a team, while others have had some players kneel and some stand with their arms around those kneeling. The movement has even spread across sports, with Oakland Athletics catcher Bruce Maxwell kneeling before a game against the Texas Rangers in

September of 2017 (Graham and Pengelly). Now, it seems as though the movement has spread across generations as well.

On April 1, 2018, two students who were performing the national anthem at the Seattle Mariners game took a knee while singing. Though this may seem odd, the fact is that this gesture proves to be very important to this rejuvenated Civil Rights Movement of sorts. With these two elementary students kneeling for the anthem, it shows that Kaepernick and all others who are standing up against racial injustice in this nation have support coming from the next generation. “‘The two young girls who kneeled during their performance at Sunday’s Mariners game are trailblazers, demonstrating that the quest for racial equality and social justice has support from a new generation,’ Yahoo Sports wrote.” This support from an upcoming generation could be exactly what the movement needs to become a fully-fledged renewed Civil Rights Movement (Dicker). Though there has been much support for Kaepernick and his movement, he has had his fair share of critics as well.

Kaepernick has received a large amount of criticism from the public and the media alike. Though Kaepernick and others by his side knew that there were going to be critics, they most likely did not believe their main adversary would be our nation’s leader. President Trump has been very outspoken against Kaepernick and the sentiment he has been trying to spread to NFL viewers and the public as a whole. President Trump has been repeatedly challenging team owners to take action and make their players suffer consequences for what he considers to be an offense to the nation. The president has also asked fans to stop attending games until the owners do take some sort of action to stop

the kneeling movement. ““If NFL fans refuse to go to games until players stop disrespecting our Flag & Country, you will see change take place fast. Fire or suspend!’ Trump wrote on Twitter.” (Graham and Pengelly). Naturally, there have been other critics of Kaepernick and what he is trying to achieve, but none have been as notable as our nation’s leader himself. With this being said, the consequences for Kaepernick’s actions have exceeded just being the target of the President’s criticisms.

The main consequence of Kaepernick’s stance is that he is not on an NFL roster because of it. Up until this year, teams and owners denied that his stance was the reason they did not have him on their team, though it seemed rather obvious that this was the case. However, April 13, 2018, the Seattle Seahawks became the first team to make it publicly known this was the reason he did not have a roster spot with them. The Seahawks, desperate for a backup quarterback, asked Kaepernick if he would stop kneeling for the anthem if they gave him a roster spot for this upcoming season. However, Kaepernick, not wanting to be silenced by higher-ups who did not seem to see the social injustices happening in this nation, wouldn’t give the Seahawks an answer. Because of this, the Seahawks postponed their meeting with Kaepernick indefinitely. Though they are still planning on meeting with the free agent quarterback, the Seahawks were not pleased with Kaepernick’s unwillingness to say he was done protesting (Schefter).

This consequence is much like that which Muhammad Ali faced as well. Ali’s repercussions for not entering the Vietnam War were that his boxing license was revoked and he was no longer able to make money. Because of this, the government was

essentially taking away Ali's livelihood (Lederman). In this situation, Kaepernick is not on a team because of his protests and his stance on something he deems to be a serious issue in the US. Like Ali, because he is standing up for minorities' rights, he is being denied his livelihood. Kaepernick not being on a team is not allowing him to make any money in his profession, just like Ali's license being revoked did. Kaepernick is rejuvenating a movement that has been on the backburners of people's minds since the likes of Ali and Robinson, and he is doing it in a way that nobody has an opportunity to ignore.

### **Conclusion**

African-American athletes have had a profound impact on the Civil Rights Movement as a whole. Jesse Owens began this push for racial equality in the thirties with his performance in the Berlin Olympics. Jackie Robinson followed suit in the forties and fifties by breaking the color barrier of Major League Baseball. Robinson also was the first athlete to speak out to the media against racial discrimination. Muhammad Ali followed Robinson in the sixties, protesting not only a lack of racial equality but also the Vietnam War. Ali was the most open of these three athletes when it came to speaking to the media to push his stances. Today, many athletes follow in these three legends' footsteps. Colin Kaepernick has started a new revolution of sorts by kneeling for the national anthem, and LeBron James, Chris Paul, Carmelo Anthony, and Dwayne Wade have urged the public to stop senseless gun violence all together. All of these athlete activists have used their spot in the national eye to advocate for racial equality and rights for minorities. Today, we are closer to achieving Martin Luther King's dream: "little

black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.” But we still have work to do.

### Bibliography

"ACLU History." American Civil Liberties Union. N.p., n.d. Web. 22 Jan. 2018.

This source came off of the ACLU website directly. It is a source that discusses the founding and purpose of the ACLU and the important events that they have been a part of throughout the Civil Rights Movement. This will be useful in my thesis just to provide a brief background of the ACLU for when I am telling my reader about certain civil rights events that have occurred.

Ali, Lonnie. Muhammad Ali Unfiltered: Rare, Iconic, and Officially Authorized Photos of the Greatest. New York: Jeter, 2016. Print.

This source is written by Lonnie Ali, the widow of Muhammad Ali. Thus, this source contains many quotes about the life of Ali, both from him and about him by significant people. The topic of these quotes span a variety of themes, from racism to his stance against the war to the impact he had on the millions of lives he touched as a result of his actions. This source will prove to be incredibly helpful to me. For one, it provides me with first hand quotes from Ali, which will help me delve more effectively into what he was thinking and why he did what he did. Furthermore, I will use it to show Ali's lasting effect on the world as we know it today, both through his quotes and quotes about him.

Baker, William J. Jesse Owens: An American Life. Urbana: U of Illinois, 2006. Print.

This source provides information into the types of discrimination that Jesse Owens had to endure while a student at Ohio State and also as a professional racer. The book also explains why Jesse Owens was not as outspoken as the other two athletes I am focusing on, claiming that his upbringing and his desire to not soil the African-American race any further caused him to control his emotions. I am going to use this source as further information about the types of discrimination that Jesse endured, and I am also going to use it as a way to show how he, though not outspoken, still had many victories in the Civil Rights Movement (such as becoming more accepted by white people and having them want his autograph).

"Biography: An Abridged Biography of Malcolm X" Malcolm X. N.p., 10 Feb. 2015. Web. 22 Jan. 2018.

This source provides the reader with information about Malcolm X. As many know, he is one of the most influential civil rights leaders, so I will be using this source to give the readers background as to who he was. Through using this source, I will hopefully learn and be able to portray to the readers why he was so invested in the civil rights movement as well.

Calamur, Krishnadev. "Muhammad Ali and Vietnam." The Atlantic. N.p., 4 June 2016. Web. 10 Apr. 2018.



This source discusses the ways that Muhammad Ali was able to use media to his advantage when influencing the Civil Rights Movement. The source says that despite most of the media attention he was receiving being negative, he was still able to use this national platform to express his ideas to the world as well. I will use this quote to show the readers that media was more readily accessible to Ali than it was to Robinson and Owens. This allowed Ali to be more outspoken against white supremacy, and in the end, have a larger impact in some ways.

"Civil Rights: Timeline of Events." *Findlaw*. N.p., 2017. Web. 10 Jan. 2018.

This source helped with my attempt to intertwine the athletes with civil rights events. It did this by providing me with dates on which each event occurred so that I could put them into place with when each athlete was pushing for civil rights from their standpoint. Thus, I will use this source mainly just to discuss dates and combine them with the athletic events.

Costly, Andrew. "Jackie Robinson: Desegregation Begins with a Baseball." Jackie Robinson - Constitutional Rights Foundation. Constitutional Rights Foundation, n.d. Web. 09 Oct. 2017.

This source provides a little bit of information about Robinson's pre-professional background and athletic career. Then, it dives into the backlash that Rickey faced for bringing Robinson into the MLB, and the idea that Rickey told Robinson he had to be able to contain himself if he was going to play in the MLB, despite all the racist things he would hear. This is the reason that Robinson waited to speak out against social injustice. However, the source also tells u that eventually Robinson was able to speak his mind and began his campaign against racism. I will use this source to show that not only did Robinson, but also Rickey, faced a lot of backlash for trying to be progressive. I will also use this source to contrast Owens and Robinson and to show that even though at first Robinson wasn't allowed to speak out, it meant so much to him to fight racism that eventually he and Rickey agreed to speak out against injustice.

Dicker, Ron. "Students Singing National Anthem Kneel At MLB Game." The Huffington Post. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 02 Apr. 2018. Web. 16 Apr. 2018.

This source talks about the new generation continuing on Colin Kaepernick's protest. The author discusses that this is a promising sign for those aligned with Colin because it shows that his has support from younger people. This also shows that Kaepernick may in fact be starting a new revolution of sorts and getting younger people to follow his lead. I am going to use this source to show that Colin is indeed starting a new Civil Rights Movement, and that in turn, he is our generation's Muhammad Ali.

"Education." Ali Childhood Museum. N.p., n.d. Web. 24 Mar. 2018.

This source provided me insight into Ali's childhood and his education levels. I also used it to see what kinds of discrimination and racism Ali was enduring as a child. The source mentioned how he was forced to only use the playground at a certain time and it was the same with the local

amusement park. I will use this source to display to the readers the troubles Ali faced during his childhood and get more information about Ali's early life.

Entine, Jon. *Taboo: Why Black Athletes Dominate Sports and Why We're Afraid to Talk about It*. New York: Public Affairs, 2007. Print.

This source provides information about the impact that both Jesse Owens and Jackie Robinson had on their respective sports after their career was over and impacted the way black athletes were seen at the time they played. The source, like many others, also discusses more adversity that both athletes faced as pioneers of black Americans playing their respective sports on a national level. I plan on using this source as a way to highlight the ways that both of these athletes impacted both the Civil Rights Movement and sports today, and to hopefully drive home my argument that they were just as important during their time as people such as Martin Luther King Jr and Malcolm X.

Ezra, Michael. "How Muhammad Ali Influenced the Civil Rights Movement." *TCA Regional News*, Jun 05 2016, ProQuest. Web. 10 Apr. 2018 .

This source is a lot about the aftermath of Ali's death and the laudatory things that people had to say about him. It has quotes from many civil rights legends such as Malcolm X and Arthur Ashe. It also provides a little information about his anti-vietnam stance and the critics of Muhammad Ali. The value of this source is that it provides many quotes from other civil rights people or organizations that applaud the efforts of Muhammad Ali and better helps me understand the way that other civil rights leaders viewed his efforts.

Graf, Christine. "Breaking the Color Barrier: Jackie Robinson and the Integration of Major League Baseball." *Faces*. 01 Apr. 2015: 20. eLibrary. Web. 09 Oct. 2017.

This source provides a good overview of the events that lead to Jackie Robinson breaking down the color barrier in baseball. It discusses how Branch Rickey wanted to make a splash, how Jackie was selected to be the player to integrate baseball, and the reaction among the league when Jackie began to play in the MLB. The source shows that originally people in the MLB were very much against the integration of baseball, but soon enough he began to win over the fans of Brooklyn and his teammates. Finally, the source discusses the legacy that Robinson left behind. This source will prove to be helpful because it gives insight into why Rickey picked Robinson, and the struggles that Robinson faced originally when playing professional baseball. It also hits the main point of my thesis, which is that the legacy that these players left behind not only opened up sports to blacks, but also aided in the civil rights movement.

Graham, Bryan Armen, and Martin Pengelly. "NFL Players Kneel for Anthem in Unprecedented Defiance of Trump." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 24 Sept. 2017. Web. 09 Oct. 2017.

This source is about the most recent development in kneeling for the national anthem. It discusses how the Sunday after President Trump told fans to leave football games if the players knelt on the sidelines. The majority of the players responded by kneeling in unity, while the others would stand behind them with their hands on the kneeling players' shoulders. The value this source has to my research is it provides the consequences to the current social injustice movement and displays the unity that the NFL players had, similar to the unity of the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Hauser, Thomas. "Muhammad Ali." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 22 Feb. 2018. Web. 26 Mar. 2018.

I used this source to learn about Ali's boxing career before his license was revoked. I mentioned his fights against Sonny Liston and how these fights allowed him to become recognized in the boxing world as one of the best fighters of the time. I will use this source to show the readers that Ali was so influential because of his top dog status when it came to fighting and how he reached this status.

"Historical Timeline ★ And In This Corner...Cassius Clay." *And In This Corner...Cassius Clay*. N.p., n.d. Web. 24 Mar. 2018.

This source provided me information about social events outside of the life of Muhammad Ali that occurred during his career. These events ranged from the death of Martin Luther King Jr to the Montgomery Bus Boycott. I used this source to provide insight for the readers as to the other events going on during Ali's career and to provide background as to why he would push so hard against white supremacy.

"'I Have a Dream' Speech." *History.com*. A&E Television Networks, 2017. Web. 24 Apr. 2018.

This speech provided insight into the March on Washington and what was said in the "I Have A Dream" speech. It also provided insight on both the predecessors of King and those who followed. I am going to be using this source to talk about the impact of the speech and set the stage for the thesis as a whole.

"Jackie Robinson Stats." *Baseball Reference*. N.p., n.d. Web. 22 Jan. 2018.

This source provides the reader with career stats and accolades for Jackie Robinson. Thus, I will be using this source to help the reader better understand how dynamic of a baseball player he was (through his stats), how well respected he was (through accolades), and show that he was just as important to the movement on the field as he was off of it.

"Jesse Owens." *Britannica School, Encyclopædia Britannica*, 6 Oct. 2017. Accessed 7 Nov. 2017.

This source is the main source of information that doesn't have to do with Jesse Owens and the civil rights movement. By this, I mean that this source is the primary information about Owens' background and his accomplishments before he reached the status of international racing legend. It also discusses Owens' legacy in the sport. I will use this source to provide the vast majority of the background information for Jesse Owens. For each athlete, I will be providing brief background into their childhood and career before professional sports, and this source will help me do so.

"Jesse Owens Biography." Encyclopedia of World Biography. N.p., n.d. Web. 22 Jan. 2018.

This source gives an overview of Jesse Owens, starting from his childhood and working through the remainder of his life. I have used this source just to fill in some patches that I was not able to find in other research, mainly about his childhood. This source contained a lot of information about his childhood, and through this information I hope to show the reader why Owens was so invested in bettering lives for blacks.

King, Martin Luther. "I Have A Dream." March on Washington, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 28 August 1963, Lincoln Memorial, Washington, DC. Keynote Address.

This was the "I Have A Dream" speech that was given on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial during the March on Washington in 1963. I am going to use the speech as a quote at the end of the paper to tie up my thesis. I am going to use the quote to say that we are closer to reaching Dr. King's dream, but we still have a lot of work to do.

"LeBron James on Social Activism: 'We All Have to Do Better'." ESPN. ESPN Internet Ventures, 14 July 2016. Web. 18 Apr. 2018.

This source discusses other athlete activists today. It goes into depth about how Dwayne Wade, LeBron James, Carmelo Anthony, and Chris Paul are all calling for an end to senseless gun violence. They are pleading whites to end racist actions towards minorities, but also begging minorities to understand that violent revenge isn't going to change anything. I am going to use this source to discuss what allies Kaepernick has in his push for racial equality today.

Lederman, Marty. "Muhammad Ali, Conscientious Objection, and the Supreme Court's Struggle to Understand "jihad" and "holy War": The Story of Cassius Clay v. United States." SCOTUSblog. N.p., 23 Aug. 2016. Web. 27 Mar. 2018.

This source discusses Ali's Supreme Court Case that resulted from him having his boxing license revoked after refusing to be inducted into the military. The source discusses the racism Ali dealt with in the process, mainly stemming from the fact that the DOJ refused to reinstate his boxing license despite the fact their own appeal attorney recommend that they do. This source will be used to provide almost all of the information about the court case and the repercussions of not accepting his induction for the Vietnam War.

Moore, Louis. "Jesse Owens Ran the Wrong Race: Athletes, Activism, and the 1960s."

Sport in American History. N.p., 20 Aug. 2017. Web. 09 Oct. 2017.

This source provides more information into the idea that Owens was on the “wrong” side of the Civil Rights movement in the sense that he was not as outspoken as other athletes when it came to social injustice. It also states that eventually Owens changed his mind about his stance and supported the civil rights movement in the end, but it took him far too long to do so. Furthermore, this source discusses the stance that some NBA players took at the ESPYs a few years ago, when they spoke out against racial discrimination. I will use this source to further drive home the point to the reader that although Owens wasn’t outspoken against racism, he wasn’t necessarily on the wrong side of the battle, but instead just had another means of reaching an end goal. Also, I will use the anecdote of the recent social injustice stance to tie into kneeling for the anthem and showing the readers that athletes are still using their platforms to fight racism.

Moore, Louis. *We Will Win the Day: The Civil Rights Movement, the Black Athlete, and the Quest for Equality*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2017. Print.

This source provides two very helpful pieces of information to my thesis. The first is it discusses more the hatred that Ali received from the public, blacks and whites alike. It also discusses more about Ali’s views against Vietnam. The second important piece of information it provides is it discusses Owens as being against outspoken barrier-breakers like Jackie Robinson. It gives a good amount of examples of disagreement between the two athletes, and shows that Owens preferred to let his performance do the talking when it came to racism. This is going to be most useful because I will use the source to show that Owens had a different approach to addressing racism than the other two athletes I am studying, yet still in the end had the same effect.

"Muhammad Ali." History.com. A&E Television Networks, 2009. Web. 02 Apr. 2018.

This source discusses Ali’s return to boxing after getting his boxing license back. It talks mainly about Rumble in the Jungle and Thrilla in Manilla. I am going to use this source to show how Ali remained on top of the boxing world despite taking so much time off and how that makes him the best boxer of all time.

"NAACP." History.com. A&E Television Networks, 2009. Web. 22 Jan. 2018.

This source is very similar to the one about the ACLU in the sense that it just provides a brief history of the founding of the NAACP. Along with this, it also provides a brief purpose for the organization and an overview of some of the more important events that they influenced. This source will be used to give my reader an overview of who the NAACP was and why they were so important to the Civil Rights Movement.

"Robinson and the Civil Rights Movement." Georgia Historical Society. N.p., n.d. Web. 5 Mar. 2018.

This source discusses the societal impact that Robinson had on the Civil Rights Movement. It talks about how Robinson testified in front of Congress and how he spoke at rallies to raise funding to rebuild black churches in Albany, Georgia. I will use this source as one of my main sources for explaining the impact socially that Robinson had on civil rights, along with using it to prove that athletes used their national media spotlight to their advantage. Robinson did this by using his media spotlight to raise enough money for the churches that were burned down in Albany to not only rebuild them, but also build three new ones.

Rowbottom, Mike. "Great Olympic Friendships: Jesse Owens, Luz Long and a Beacon of Brotherly Love at the Nazi Games." *The Independent*. Independent Digital News and Media, 04 Aug. 2016. Web. 27 Apr. 2018.

This source discusses the friendship that was formed between Jesse Owens and Luz Long. It also talks about how this friendship proved to be the watershed moment for the Civil Rights Movement during the 1936 Berlin Olympics. Luz Long had helped Owens during his third long jump attempt, and a friendship was born. I will use this source to discuss the immense impact that the Berlin Olympics had on the Civil Rights Movement.

Schaap, Jeremy. *Triumph: The Untold Story of Jesse Owens and Hitler's Olympics*. Boston: Mariner, 2008. Print.

This source discusses Owens' journey to the Berlin Olympics of 1936. It describes the discrimination that Owens faced in Germany and the fact that he became a hero when he dominated in the Olympics. It also discusses the discrimination that Owens faced before he went to Germany and when he came back. I will be using this source to show the reader more about the discrimination he faced when he was in Germany but also the effect he had by dominating in Germany.

Schefter, Adam. "Seahawks Postpone Visit after Colin Kaepernick Won't Say If He'll Stop Kneeling during Anthem." *ESPN*. ESPN Internet Ventures, 13 Apr. 2018. Web. 16 Apr. 2018.

This source discusses the fact that the Seattle Seahawks have postponed their tryout with Kaepernick because he refused to decide whether or not he would be continuing his protest. The source claims that the Seahawks will still try him out, but just at a later date. However, I will be using this source to show that Kaepernick is suffering from his protest but at the same time he is standing up for what he believes to be right.

Staufenberg, Jess. "Muhammad Ali: Symbol of the Civil Rights Movement." *The Independent*, Independent Digital News and Media, 4 June 2016. Web. 09 Oct. 2017.

This source is another that has many of Ali's influential quotes, mostly in regard to his stance against going to war in Vietnam. Furthermore, it provides more in depth information about his stance against Vietnam and Racism and the consequences he faced because of these stances. Also, something I found to be interesting was that the source provides information about his

stance against Martin Luther King Jr., who many know to be the most legendary civil rights person. This source will be valuable because it gives some very in depth information about Ali's stance against Vietnam, which I will be able to use when discussing his stance against both racism and religious discrimination.

Urofsky, Melvin I. "Jim Crow Law." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 19 July 2017. Web. 22 Jan. 2018.

This source describes what Jim Crow Laws are and the impact they had in the South during the Civil Rights Movement. It describes the fact that Jim Crow laws kept the blacks in the South from their rights. I will use this source to show the impact that Jim Crow Laws had on blacks in the South and show why athletes were so invested in changing the fortunes of the blacks in the South.

Wallenfeldt, Jeffrey H. *Black American Biographies: The Journey of Achievement*. New York, NY: Britannica Educational Pub. in Association with Rosen Educational Services, 2011. Print.

This source begins by discussing Ali's introduction to boxing and his early success in the sport, and ends by discussing his boxing legacy. It also discusses the public opinion of Ali at the time that he boxed, and once again discusses his stance against Vietnam and the consequences of it. Finally, it discusses the other stances that Ali had, but doesn't discuss the consequences of the stance. The value of this source is it provides background information to his boxing career, and gives the legacy of his boxing career, which I will use for providing background information about Muhammad Ali. Also, this source is valuable because it discusses the public opinion of Ali at the time, which will give an insight into how he was treated at the time of his boxing career.

"Who Is Jackie Robinson? Everything You Need to Know." *Childhood, Life Achievements & Timeline*. N.p., n.d. Web. 22 Jan. 2018.

This source is essentially a biography about Jackie Robinson. It starts in his childhood and its way through his college and professional career. It also talks about the impact that Robinson had both socially and athletically throughout his career. I am going to use this source to help the reader better understand Jackie Robinson and hopefully prove my point about his impact in the Civil Rights Movement.

Wyche, Steve. "Colin Kaepernick Explains Why He Sat during National Anthem." *NFL.com*. National Football League, 27 Aug. 2016. Web. 09 Oct. 2017.

This source discusses the beginning of the current social injustice movement, and it gives quotes from Colin Kaepernick after he kneeled for the first time. The source says that Kaepernick had no intention of telling his coaches or anyone else in the organization about his decision to kneel,

and gives his reasoning for wanting to kneel and protest social injustice in the United States. This source will prove to be valuable because it will provide background for the current civil rights movement, which I will be able to use in introduction of the issue and when tying it into athletes in the past.

### Image Bibliography

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