A Sociological Study of Sport
Racism in American Society

Kengo Fujiwara

1. Preface

Nobody can forget the shocking event that took place at the 1968 Mexico Olympic Games. When they were to receive their medals, two American black athletes climbed on to the victory stand shoeless, each wearing a black glove. When the U. S. National Anthem was played, they suddenly raised their gloved fists and bowed their heads.

At that time there were many interpretations of this event. Most of them, especially in Japan, were based on the nature of amateur sport itself and were, therefore, not derived from the conceptual point of view. (1)

However, this event had another problematic character behind it. It ignored the normal social function of sport, especially social integration or cohesion by sport.

It was symbolical of racism within American sports. It was not an accidental event, but inevitable in black athlete’s history. It, also, had its origin from the racism problem in American society. Therefore, this defiant attitude came from historical, political, and sociological backgrounds. In this paper, the author directed his concern to this event, and considered sport racism in American society.

2. Object and Methodology

The objects of this paper were to clarify (1) the defiant attitude in the black athlete’s history, mainly the two American black athlete’s defiant attitude in the 1968 Mexico Olympic Games, and
(2) the social backgrounds of sport racism in America nsociety.

There were to establish a basis for understanding the nature and the present conditions of racism in contemporary American sports, because this event showed intensively the deep problem of racism in the United States. Moreover, racism and prejudice are not only American social atomosphere, but also many other societies.

The methodologies of attaining the objects were as follows.

(1) Documentary:

(a) Newspaper's articles (The New York Times\(^2\) and The Asahi) that were available in the subject.
(b) Periodical's articles, books,\(^3\) and other materials that were generally available.

Table 1  Newspaper's articles that were generally available in the black athlete's defiance

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(b) The Asahi (1967-1968)

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(2) Interview:

(a) Prof. Harry Edwards—a architect of the Olympic Boycott Movement in 1968 Mexico Olympic Games, and prof. of sport sociology, University of California at Berkeley.

(b) Student athletes in U. C. Berkeley.

Table 2 Interviewed student athletes in U. C. Berkeley

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3. The Defiant Attitude in the Black Athlete’s History

(1) The cases of the black athlete’s revolt in their history

It was not long ago that the black athlete had been awakened to his self-knowledge and to the need for recognition of his equality. Until about 20 years ago, the author could not find any example of a black athlete resorting to defiance as a drastic step for demanding his recognition.

The author could see only two instances that the black athletes refused to play in order to protest racism. They were the American Football League’s East-West All-Star game in New Orleans (1965) and at San Jose State College Football game in San Jose, California (1967).

Especially, as a result of the protest of black athletes at San Jose State College, the protesters undertook to reform the discriminative attitude and in a short time, this became one big movement. That is to say, the black athletes had voted to compete in the Olympics in Mexico City. In Oct. 1967, they organized the Olympic Committee for Human Rights for boycotting the 1968 Mexico Olympics. Here, the American racial issue had invaded that quadrennial show of international good will. the Olympic Games. Prof. H. Edwards, in announcing the decision to boycott the Olympics, said United States oppression of blacks,
“is as bad as that of South Africa. America has to be exposed for what it is.”

In Nov. 1967, in addition, the Black Youth Conference was formed in San Francisco and took charge of the practical functions of the Olympic Committee For Human Rights.

As a result of a meeting between prof. H. Edwards and Louis Lomax (veteran civil rights activist), they succeeded in securing two powerful leaders: Dr. Martin Luther King (president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference) and Floyd Mckissick (director of the Congress of Racial Equality).

The Olympic Boycott Movement had entered a new phase. Top leaders changed from the athletes in the early stage to social and politically influential people. Prof. H. Edwards was a top leader from the early stage; but three consultants were Dr. Louis Lomax, Dr. Martin Luther King, and Floyd Mckissick, and Kenneth Noel was a chief organizer.

The action of black athletes

The first real action followed the meeting at New York on Dec. 15, 1967. When prof. H. Edwards announced a boycott of the New York Athletic Club’s 100th annual indoor track and field meet at Madison Square Garden scheduled on Feb. 15, 1968, the Olympic Boycott Movement was presented with its first real test. The reason for the boycott was to say that if black athletes were acceptable enough to attend its track meet every year, they were also due the human respect and consideration granted other athletes competing in the meet. It was true that the NYAC was a wealthy businessmen’s club that sponsors various athletic teams and events.

Consequently, this first actual movement for the Olympic Committee For Human Rights succeeded. Even though prof. H. Edwards insisted on this boycott succeeded completely, it was true that not all black athletes refused to attend the games; 9 black athletes attended.

Their next purpose was to organize the college athletes. The
common backgrounds of colleges that participated in the movement were similar to San Jose State's. For example, U. C. Berkeley began its movement and performed an important role for the Olympic Boycott Movement. Some of U. C. Berkeley's student athletes had already participated in the boycott of the NYAC on Feb. 15, 1968. The major leaders were Bob Smith and Bob Presley, both Golden Bear star basketball players. Prof. H. Edwards and K. Noel supported them, and most of their demands were accepted by the university: the resignation of Pete Newell, the athletic director, and Rene Herrerias, head basketball coach; reform in the position of black students; offering some courses in black studies; and hiring some black coaches. 15

Thirty-seven campuses 16 cooperated and started their own movements to boycott the games. Major campuses were: U. C. Berkeley, Western Michigan Univ., Princeton Univ., Michigan State Univ., Oklahoma City Univ., Univ. of Texas, San Francisco State College, Univ. of Kansas, Marquette, Univ. of Oklahoma, Univ. of Michigan, Univ. of Southern California.

As a result of their real actions, the Olympic Boycott Movement became powerful with the support of other non-white and anti-racist individuals, groups, organizations. Moreover, thirty-eight African nations declared that they would refuse to attend the 1968 Mexico Olympics, if the Republic of South Africa attended. They were seeking to ban the Republic of South Africa

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<th>Table 3 Mass media attitude for the “black boycott”</th>
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from the 1968 Olympics in order to protest discriminations. 17 By this time, this movement became a big social problem in
American society, and some mass media did not agree with this movement. Most mass media showed a neutral viewpoint (Table 3).

(3) The defiant attitude in the Mexico Olympics and the conclusion of the Olympic Boycott Movement

However, the Olympic boycott was not so easy. With the climax of the movement, one deep problem occurred. It came out of the feeling of black athletes themselves. Some black athletes feared that refusing to attend the games would somewhat defeat their purposes. The increasing of this fear decided the direction of the movement. The top leaders called a meeting, and decided that the Olympic Games' boycott would be carried out resolutely only if two-thirds of the black athletes would agree to boycott. The Olympic Committee For Human Rights investigated the attitude of 52 black Olympic athletes. As a result of that investigation, the committee faced severe problems: 26 black athletes hoped to attend the Olympic games, 13 black athletes refused a total boycott, 12 black athletes agreed with the boycott, and 1 black athlete was undecided. Therefore, the Olympic Committee For Human Rights made the following recommendations:

(i) Each black athlete was committed whether he attended the games or not.
(ii) Each black athlete would not take any medal on the victory stand.
(iii) Each black athlete would wear a black armband to protest racism.

In these situations, prof. H. Edwards said, "The reason why of the discontinuance of boycott is that we could not get whole support by black athletes".

Black athlete, however, attended the Mexico Olympics, and every black athlete who earned a medal stood on the victory stand and accepted his medal. In these situations, some other events, however, occurred on the victory stands—Tommie Smith
and John Carlos (the gold and bronze medalist of the 200-meter dash) climbed each wearing one black glove. Tommie Smith tied a black scarf around his neck. Peter Morman (the silver medalist of the 200-meter dash, from Australia), also wore the badge of the Olympic Committee For Human Rights, to support the black athlete's liberation struggle. When the U. S. National Anthem was played, Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their gloved hands and bowed their heads in suddenly. (23) Tommie Smith said, "Even black is human being", (24) and explained the meaning of their protest gestures (25), —his black right-hand glove stood for the power of black America; the black scarf stood for black pride, and the black socks stood for black poverty, and John Carlos' left-hand glove stood for the unity of black America. For this protest, they were asked to go out of Mexico City within 48 hours by the U. S. Olympic Committee and were also suspended from the Olympic team, but there were a sympathetic viewpoint, including even some white athletes. (26) This black power emerged among another athletes, too. For instance, four female athletes of the 400-meter relay (27) and a running broader (28) showed their protest against racism with another five players. (29)

The Olympic Committee For Human Rights issued a final statement during the course of the 1968 National Conference on Black Power in Philadelphia (39). This statement reviewed the whole process of the movement and also its results. With one more final press conference, the Olympic Committee For Human Rights practically came to pull down its poster that read: RATHER THAN RUN AND JUMP FOR MEDALS, WE ARE STANDING UP FOR HUMANITY. WON'T YOU JOIN US? It left a lot of results, both direct and indirect. As a direct result, the U. S. government adopted a positive attitude about job chance, educational, political, social problems, especially housing problems for blacks. As an indirect result, the Olympic Boycott Movement stimulated public opinion for desegregation at home and abroad. According to prof. H. Edwards, this movement was not a illegal
way because sport as a social institution is one of the most powerful politic powers. But, it was the illegal way. Because anyone must not confuse the end with the means.

4. The Social Backgrounds of Sport Racism in American Society

(1) The appearance of black athletes

Most black athletes appeared only after emancipation from slavery. Before that, they had only recreational activities as their pastime except some sports. Black athletes had been racially and economically discriminated against even after emancipation. They had to organize their own sport clubs by themselves. Sports were dominated by whites for long time in America.

Even though whites and blacks were playing together, the whites did not play with the blacks gladly. The fan, also, was displeased with a biracial team. At first, everyone believed that black athletes had limited ability.

Black athletes' superiority had been recognized since their own teams were formed and played with white teams in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. (3)

It was much the same in baseball. The black athletes got the better records in boxing, and in the beginning of the 1900's "Colored Boxing Champion" came into the world. Namely, the first black champion was Jack Johnson, who took the heavyweight championship from Tommy Burns, on Dec. 26, 1908. Other black athlete have shown their superiority in track and field, football, tennis, and so forth.

The reality of their definite superiority, however, had to wait until the establishment of Negro colleges, because racial and economic limitations prevented them from showing their superiority as athletes. As a result of opposition to segregation after World War II, the Supreme Court decided to stop the separate education between whites and blacks, and then many black students and athletes attended the white schools. This led to the
national appearance of black athletes, but they were not yet free from segregation in various fields.

More than for white athletes, the daily life of black athletes focused on playing in the field or court. The black athlete was expected just only training. White racist athletic directors and coaches did not hope their black athletes to get good academic records. Therefore, many black athletes in white colleges could not graduate.\(^{22}\) The black athlete, in short, utilized only his athletic power when he was staying at the white college.

The black athlete, as already indicated, has taken part in the sport world since emancipation from slavery, especially after World War II. In the 1960's, black athlete's superiorities have been considered on two levels; records\(^{23}\), and the racially specific character behind them.\(^{34}\) But the racially specific character of black athletes did not exceed their morale which comes from historical and sociological factors. That is to say, their morale came from coach-athlete relationship in general. Especially in the white racist coach-black athlete relationship, the black athlete promoted his power energetically. This was based on the intense emotion that came from discrimination. In these situations, Tommie Smith said to the press, "Winning gold medals for a country where I don't have my freedom is irrelevant. So far I have not won my freedom, I will not turn back from my decision."\(^{35}\) The black athlete, moreover, could escape from social pressures by becoming a good player. For pressured black athletes, a sport was and is a hungry sport. That is to say, a sport functions as a means for survival.

\(^{2}\) Sport racism in American society

Athletes contend for victory in the presence of the public by speed, technique, power, and stamina. Sometimes these were weakened by impediments. When the impediment combined with the race problem, the problems of racism in sport occurred. The problems of racism in sport existed and exist in America, because race was and is a very sensitive concern in this country.
(i) The roots of racism in American sports

The roots of racism in American sports began as early as the late 1800's. Senator Tillman of South Carolina advocated the slaughter of 30,000 blacks in his home state during that time.\(^{39}\) This shocking situation was reflected in the sports world. For instance, Charles Dana, a journalist for *The New York Sun*, warned about black supremacy in the sports world as a growing threat.\(^{97}\) This threat also existed even today.

In the days of slavery, playing opportunities for blacks were strictly limited. Several sports were open for blacks: boxing was generally open to them; horse racing had many black jockeys; and blacks had shown their superiority as baseball players in the 19th century. Black player and their clubs, however, were formally banned from playing with white teams.\(^{38}\) People in those days simply accepted it. That is to say, the concept of prejudice remained a social force because it existed in the emotional structure of individual Americans. Therefore, most citizens preferred to avoid the subject of the prejudice even in daily conversation. However, in these conditions one event occurred in the discriminated American sports: a written law of professional baseball barring blacks was introduced in 1888; and this law was effective until 1946 when Jackie Robinson contracted with the Brooklyn Dodgers.

The black Americans' efforts were closely connected with the civil rights movement during the 1950's and 1960's. Serious movements for the black Americans in political directions have come much later in the United States.

In short, the widespread existence and tremendous depth of racism in American sports can be seen before 1946—after that, sport interested persons were going to avoid racial tension in sports. However, although racism in sports was far worse than it is today, it was true that the major sports of baseball, football, and basketball were entirely segregated until after World War II. It is true that conditions become much better for the
black athletes, but they are still not good. This is based on the
discrimination in the daily life—especially in the emotional struc-
ture. It is true that how much conditions have improved in
these years, but prejudice is still one of the comtemporary major
unresolved social problems.

Even though sport has been symbolized—especially the socializa-
tional function of sportsmanship—, integration has been very
slow, and there were and are many forms of discrimination in
American sports. The author recognizes that the two American
blacks played a big role as black athlete began to fight systemat-
ically against these conflicts.

(ii) Racial attitude

Racism in American sports can recognize both on and off the
court or field.

(a) Discrimination in playing position

The problems of racism in American sports were seen in golf,
swimming, and even tennis.  This evident by the fact that no
black athlete can be seen in these sports until recently.  Even
in the integrated teams of whites and blacks, racism existed and
still exists, and racism in American sports is marked by the
evidence of segregation and discrimination in mainly professional
baseball and football.

The fact that few black athletes occupy infield or central
positions in professional baseball and football teams shows one
of the problems of segregation in American sports.  Since these
positions involve higher rates of interaction among players than
other peripheral positions, the black athletes can not take cen-
tral positions. For instance, the following quotation from Olsen
well explained this: “He (the linebacker) has to be able to read
plays well, everybody knows all the things the linebacker has
to do. It is one of the most responsible defensive positions.
Therefore, he can’t be a Negro.” According to L. Evans, a
gold medalist of 400 meter dash at All American Field Cham-
pionship Games, said that the black athletes had hard and fast discrimination for the separation into groups at the preliminary matches. The blacks were judged not only on their ability, but on their colour like the Japanese pressured people were judged on their birth.

(b) Discrimination in social-economic view point

The problems of discrimination from a social-economic view point were and are seen in various spheres in American sports. For instance, black athlete stars appeared less often in TV commercial, and fees were lower than white ones. That is to say, black athletes were being discriminated against in their use in TV sports commercials:

"The survey, by Lawrence Plotkin, acting director of the Social Dynamics Research Institute of the City College department of psychology, showed that Negroes appeared in 5 per cent of 351 commercials connected with the coverage of 47 sports programs in New York last fall."

At the beginning of 1967 season, major league rosters listed 167 black players out of 500 players.

Especially, black athletes have the difficult problems, sometimes, according to interviews with student athletes:

(1) The white athletes do not play with the black athletes gladly.
(2) The white athletes do not talk with the black athletes off the court or field.
(3) The black athletes are not expected to get as good academic records as their white teammates are.
(4) The black athletes find out how difficult it is to get jobs.
(5) Many black athletes are spending their lives in disappointment and frustration.
(6) Most black athletes never become famous in general.
(7) Most black athletes' white teammates belonged to fraternities, but black athletes do not, or can not.
(8) Many black athletes are thinking, "I am not a player as a
machine", but they do not say or can not say so.

(9) It is very difficult for blacks to pursue leadership, official, and entrepreneurial roles.

(10) Even if the black athletes were hired by a professional team, their economic position is not good.

As above mentioned, racism actually existed and exists in American sports, both on and off the court or field. Therefore, participation in sports did not and does not guarantee integration between whites and blacks. A lot of racial prejudices were seen in sport as a social institution in American society, and these phenomena are still seen as we pointed out, and the awakening against racism reached a climax in the late 1960's, especially 1968. This was the main backgrounds for the two American black athlete’s defiant attitude on the victory stand in the 1968 Mexico Olympic Games.

5. Conclusion

As the author has cited herein, sports in American society involved and still involve a great deal of prejudices. American sports were based on deep racism. The author discussed the two American black athlete’s defiant attitude on the victory stand in the 1968 Mexico Olympics as one of the most influential revolts of the black athletes against racism in sport. Thereby, the author hoped to find a basis for understanding the racism in contemporary American sports.

Race as a concept has lost its scientific value for a secularized pseudo-scientific biological mythology. Prof. H. Edwards points out that black athletes have more superiorities than white ones. This fact, according to him, based on racial and social factors of the blacks.

Though most educated Japanese add their voices to the harmony of the whites and the blacks in American society, some of them still continue to have the prejudice attitude in their country.
In America, according to the interviews with prof. H. Edwards, American sports have much racism even today, and many writers support his analysis. It is a question of degree. It is true that American sports have less racism since the 1968 Mexico Olympics than before. It is to be hoped that racism in sports and any kind of prejudices will continue to decrease, eventually be eliminated.

Notes & References

(1) Some opinion leaders such as R. Suzuki, K. Iwata, Y. Ikeda showed strong criticism against this event. The Asahi, Oct. 19, 1968.
(2) The author expresses his gratitude to the Ethnic Club and libraries, U.C. Berkeley.
(3) It was true that the author was influenced by prof. H. Edwards, The Revolt of the Black Athlete, Free Press, 1970. However, the author made clear his own viewpoints.
(4) The author has not words to thank prof. H. Edwards enough for studying the sociology of sport under his academic influence for April 1, 1977–March 31, 1978 at University of California at Berkeley.
(5) The direct cause was social prejudice. Some black athletes were refused admittance into a certain social club in New Orleans. After all, the game was not held at New Orleans, and it was held in another city.
(6) Sixty black students and athletes of seventy-two (total students, 24,000) refused the formal play to reform the educational prejudices. The whole plan of the protest was formed by H. Edwards and K. Noel, who was a graduate student with a master's degree and the chief assistant to prof. H. Edwards of San Jose State. The college authorities decided to stop the games, because they were afraid the collective behavior would be dangerous. The New York Times, Sep. 21, 1967.
(8) The participants were: George Washington (field worker for the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee); Tommie Smith (eleven world track records holder); Kenneth Noel (co-planner of the black student revolt at San Jose State College); Jimmy Garrett (organizer and chairman of the Black Student Union at San Francisco State College); Bob Hoover (black political activist and counselor at San Mateo Junior College); and H. Edwards.
(10) Members were: Tommie Smith; Otis Burrell; Lew Alcindor; Lee Evans; and many other international athletes who were interested in boycotting the Mexico Olympics.
1980. 3  A Sociological Study of Sport Racism in American Society (Fujiwara)

(11) It was held on Nov. 25, 1967.
(13) Ibid.
(14) Ibid.
(17) “Olympic boycott...”, America, 118:337-8, Mar. 16, 1968; One of the fundamental principles of the Olympic Charter (No.1) is “no discrimination is allowed against any country or person on grounds of race, religion or political affiliation”: The New York Times, May 1, 5, 7, 8, (1967) and Jan. 31; Fed. 9, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29; Mar. 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 10, 12, 13, 14, 20, 21, 24, 30; Apr. 3, 12, 15, 16, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25; May 3, 12; June 3, 8, 9, 23, 26. (1968). Also, the IOC decided to delay its decision on South African participation in the 1968 Olympics, because of its policy of separation of races. The New York Times, May 8, 1967.
(18) For instance, The New York Times reported, “Negro athletes will be making a mistake if they boycott the Olympic Games, as some threaten to do, in protest against racism in the United States. The Olympic races provide the ideal stage for dramatizing the situation they deplore, and the sensible course will be for them to seize it instead of turning their backs upon it.”
(20) Ibid.
(25) H. Edwards, op. cit., p.104, and The Asahi, Oct. 17, 1968. However, the author has to notice that most black athletes did not explain any protest gestures on and off the Olympic stadium. They were in striking contrast to these protesters.
(30) H. Edwards, op. cit.
(31) For instance, in 1928, the all-black “Renaissance Five” defeated the all-white “Celtics”, the leading white basketball team of the time.
(32) Between 1957 and 1967 only seven out of twenty black football players graduated from the University of Washington; at the Uni-
versity of Oregon between 1965 and 1967 only six out of eleven, similiary dismal statistics prevail at the University of California at Berkeley and many others. H. Edwards, op. cit. p. 11.


Prof. H. Edwards lectured this problem during the summer session, 1977, U.C. Berkeley.


Some black athletes began to play in these games recently.


According to Olsen a quarter of the players in the National Football League was black athletes, and the 1967 NEL team was 40 per cent black players. Nearly 25 per cent of all players in major league baseball are blacks. J. Olsen, The Black Athlete—A Shameful Story, Time Inc., 1968.


The Asahi, June 23, 1968.


For instances: Jack Scott, Bailey Harold, F. Elton, C. Ocania, A. Sparkling.