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They Do More Than Dribble:  
How Professional Athletes Are Using Their Platform to Inspire Positive Change

Professional sports is one of the major components of American culture in 2017. Since the early 20th century, professional athletes have progressively grown into more significant roles in society. Individuals such as Jack Johnson, Muhammad Ali, Tommie Smith, and John Carlos, are known for their historic accomplishments in sports as well as social activism. The courageous acts of these men have opened up a window that has given the new generation of athletes a platform to publically speak on issues that need to be resolved amongst all humans. Today, individuals such as LeBron James and Colin Kaepernick are recognized for their continued efforts as activists and are slowly working towards joining the illustrious group of predecessors as some of the greatest athlete activists in America's History. Over the last decade, the role of athletes in America has slowly evolved into something much bigger than just entertainment and sports.

In a More Historical Context:

Prior to the rise of social media, without outlets such as Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat, athletes were not always given the opportunity to connect with their fans on a more personal basis like they are today. Before they could post pictures on Instagram or write a paragraph on Twitter, athletes had to send messages in other ways with hopes of inspiring the people to begin inspiring positive change in society. In 1936, the Summer Olympics were held in

Berlin, Germany in a time when Nazism was flourishing under Hitler's power. The USA track star, Jesse Owens, won four gold medals during this Olympic events.<sup>1</sup> As a black man in 1936, winning four gold medals in front of the most notorious Fascist dictators in the world's history. His accomplishment of winning multiple medals in an environment where he may not have been particularly welcome outside of the Olympics, he definitely made a statement in both the sports and activism world.

Before Owens was a man named Jack Johnson. He was a heavyweight boxing champion from 1908-1915, the first-ever black heavyweight champion. The fight that cemented his name in history, was the original "Fight of the Century" between Johnson and Jeffries. Before the fight, Jeffries told the media at the time, "I am going into this fight for the sole purpose of proving that a white man is better than a Negro." Johnson ended up winning the fight by technical knockout in the 15th round. The time period in which Johnson boxed is made him special. He fought in an era where black men were often beaten and lynched for talking to or even touching a white person. The amount of respect that he had earned through his accomplishments was unfathomable, as he won his titles and earned his name doing something that many thought they would never see. What Johnson did allow him to show that exactly what Jeffries said before the fight was wrong and that anybody was capable of being great at something despite the color of their skin.

Muhammad Ali is an individual known for much more than his athletic ability. Although he is known as the greatest boxer ever by many, his consistent efforts as an activist equally contribute to his greatness as his accomplishments in boxing. In 1964, Cassius Clay changed his name to Muhammad Ali after converting to Islam. As a result of this, many reporters at the time had refused to call him by his new name. A few years later in 1967, he had been called to

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<sup>1</sup> Warner, Ralph. "The Most Politically Outspoken Black Athletes of All Time Jesse Owens." *Complex*, Complex, 20 Oct. 2016,

enlist in the army which he had refused to do because of his religious beliefs. This was the source of most of Ali's problems outside of his boxing career, like the reporters not respecting his new identity. Because of this, he was stripped of his World Boxing Championship title and his boxing license which meant he could not fight - and sentenced to five years in prison. He never ended up serving the jail time because his case was appealed, but with that hindrance, he did lose three years of his boxing prime.<sup>2</sup> He would eventually win his title back and continue his activism for years to come until he was ready to retire.

His accomplishments as an activist had led to individuals such as Maya Angelou, a woman who many African Americans had looked up to during the mid-1900s, saying that "Muhammad Ali was not just Muhammad Ali the greatest, the African-American pugilist; he belonged to everyone". In 2005, Ali had earned the Presidential Medal of Freedom, for his continued sense of social activism. Muhammad Ali had a magical way with words. His continued success and quotes such as, "I know where I'm going and I know the truth and I don't have to be what you want me to be," and, "I'm free to be what I want.", continue to show people that literally no matter what background somebody has, that they are capable of being anything that you wanted to be, and in the mid-1900s, that was something that was hard for African Americans to believe and accept, as it was an extremely racially tense time in America's history. The impact that Ali had on the American people is like no other; his legacy as an activist and an athlete will live on forever.

What's Happening Today?:

From the time of Jesse Owens, Jack Johnson, etc. to 2018, there has been a lot of change. Today, there are many athletes who are doing things outside of their profession to contribute to the improvement of society. There are few comparable to Cleveland Cavaliers

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<sup>2</sup> Yellen, Erit. "Athletes Have More Power than Ever to Change the World." *The Undefeated*, The Undefeated, 29 July 2016

superstar and three-time NBA Champion LeBron James, and former 49ers quarterback, Colin Kaepernick. While LeBron James has been involved in social activism for years, his more recent efforts have been the most impactful. At the 2016 ESPYs, James along with his NBA colleagues Chris Paul, Carmelo Anthony, Dwyane Wade made a speech in the introduction of the award show, simply encouraging their African-American peers in the pro-sports world to speak out on social issues if they have something to say. One year before in 2015, LeBron James created a platform called UNINTERRUPTED, where athletes could post videos of anything, directly from them to the fans, although the site eventually developed a theme of videos regarding social issues in the United States. James constantly states that the media is often misinterpreting quotes and athletes are continuously getting frustrated with having to correct the press for their mistakes, in order to protect their image. He also created the platform so athletes could communicate with their fans on a more personal level. He feels that people often view athletes of his stature as superhuman and often overlook the facts that even though he's a freak athlete, he's still a human being just like everybody else. Athletes everywhere were posting videos of what they were doing, random thoughts, opinions, and eventually as more and more things kept happening in America and across the world, it became a place where the athletes were sharing their thoughts and encouragement regarding topics such as social injustice and racism. After the Golden State Warriors had won the finals this previous year, President Trump uninvited Stephen Curry to the White House for the team visit. Stephen Curry had said he was hesitant to go on the visit, and the President had responded with a tweet, stating "Going to the White House is considered a great honor for a championship team. Stephen Curry is hesitating, therefore his invitation is withdrawn!"<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Trump, Donald J. *Twitter*, Twitter, 23 Sept. 2017

Following the incident, James had posted a video on UNINTERRUPTED where he said that the president's recent actions "are just absurd and that people, all people not just minorities, must stick together and not let him use sports and politics to divide us."<sup>4</sup> This example alone, shows that everything that the athletes in the 20th century did to allow athletes - more specifically black athletes - to use their platform to speak out, has truly paid off, as more and more athletes are continuing to post on this site, that now has hundreds of videos from athletes, multiple podcasts, and a youtube channel with over 100,000 subscribers.

Colin Kaepernick was a football player turned activist, and, 2016 and 2017 were quite eventful for the former quarterback. It all started with the wave of police brutality cases that suddenly hit Americans in the face. Kaepernick would go on to eventually lose his job because he decided to kneel during the National Anthem before the game. He did not lose his job because of what he was doing, because of the amount of controversy that would come with signing Colin Kaepernick was something that many teams did not want to deal with. So, he remained unsigned. The Kaepernick controversy has made athletes aware that stepping into an activist role can often put their careers at risk. This made a lot of the younger athletes take a step back, but the majority kept their foot on the gas pedal, they weren't going to stop. Colin Kaepernick is recognized by many as more than just as an NFL player. Like Muhammad Ali, Colin Kaepernick will be equally remembered as an activist, as he will be remembered as an athlete. Earlier this year, Kaepernick was acknowledged for his courageous acts and was awarded the Muhammad Ali Legacy Award by Sports Illustrated. This award is given to individuals whose dedication to the ideals of sportsmanship, has spanned over time, and whose career in sports has directly or indirectly impacted the world. In February of 2017, he pledged to donate \$100,000 a month to businesses in oppressed communities. Some of those

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<sup>4</sup> James, LeBron. "LeBron James Wants To See More Unity." *UNINTERRUPTED*, 23 Sept. 2017

organizations are the Black Veterans for Social Justice in Brooklyn, The Somalia Famine Relief, and United We Dream, an organization helping immigrant youth become acclimated to their new homes. He donated to 24 organizations over ten months and ended up totaling \$1,000,000 in donations.<sup>5</sup>

As times have changed, professional athletes are continuing to use their platform in ways other than just addressing social injustice and other serious issues in society. Throughout his long career in the NBA, he has become an activist, a businessman, and a creator of opportunity. LeBron James grew up in Akron, Ohio. Akron is a city that struggles with poverty and lacks a successful education system. He is aware that it is a city that lacks opportunity for the youth, and in 2004, he created the LeBron James Family Foundation. Through his foundation, he has created a mentorship program for the children of Akron, called the “I PROMISE” Program. He described the foundation in an interview with Business Insider. The foundation is a mentorship program that works with kids from Akron, Ohio, LeBron’s hometown from 3rd-12th grade and the kids in the program are expected to maintain a 3.0 GPA through high school. The foundation has recently developed a relationship with the University of Akron where the mentorship program essentially continues completely through the schooling process and ensures that the student gets into a college.<sup>6</sup> His efforts to improve the quality of life for the children in his community and speaking out on social issues in hopes of inspiring others to make change in their communities has been outstanding. After becoming the 2016 Sportsman of the year, there is strong case for LeBron to be one of the most influential and inspiring athletes ever.

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<sup>5</sup> Willingham, AJ. “While You Were Arguing about the Anthem, Colin Kaepernick Just Finished Donating \$1 Million.” *CNN*, Cable News Network, 31 Jan. 2018

<sup>6</sup> Shontell, Alyson. “THE LEBRON JAMES INTERVIEW: The World's Best Athlete Reveals How His Team Pulled off the Greatest Comeback in NBA History.” *Business Insider*. Business Insider, 19 Aug. 2016. Web.

NFL Hall of Fame running back Jim Brown was utilizing his platform to create change through his own organizations before LeBron James is taking on a similar role. In 1988, Brown founded the “Amer-I-Can” program. This is a Los Angeles based program that was developed to help gang members and convicts learn basic life skills in an effort to change their lives for the better. The trainees quickly develop an understanding of the cause and effect relationship, behavior and outcome, and learn how to make better decisions in general.<sup>7</sup> The efforts of these gentlemen to improve certain communities are truly outstanding and shows that despite how popular these athletes get and how much money they make, they still use the platform that they have and put their money into more worthwhile endeavors that will create change in small communities and society as a whole.

In a time when athletes are being told to “shut up and dribble”, it is important for those people to remember that many of these athletes are role models outside of sports. Many kids wish they could shoot like LeBron or punch like Ali, but many also look up to them for guidance on societal issues. Whether that guidance is related to dealing with racial injustice or spreading a positive message hoping to inspire the youth, athletes play a much larger role in American society than just entertainment. In his book, “*Writings on the Wall*”, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar speaks on what it’s like to be a black role model, “To many folks, I’m only a former basketball player, someone whose business attire consisted of jockstraps and sweat socks. Successful, sure, but still just a pituitary freak who jammed an orange ball through a red hoop. Being a black role model is a double-edged sword of inspiration and frustration”.<sup>8</sup> This quote reflects the frustration that athletes can feel when people refuse to look past their athletic prowess, which is

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<sup>7</sup> Warner, Ralph. “The Most Politically Outspoken Black Athletes of All Time Jim Brown.” *Complex*, Complex, 20 Oct. 2016

<sup>8</sup> Abdul-Jabbar, Kareem, and Raymond Obstfeld. *Writings on the Wall: Searching for a New Equality beyond Black and White*. Liberty Street, an Imprint of Time, 2016. Print.

something that individuals such as LeBron James and Colin Kaepernick are still working towards changing in hopes of making more people understand how big of a role professional athletes have in society today. Though given their visibility and notoriety, athletes often have the power to become “agents of social change” and can use that status to become actively involved in social movements.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Sanderson, Jimmy, et al. “When Athlete Activism Clashes With Group Values: Social Identity Threat Management via Social Media.” *Mass Communication and Society*, vol. 19, no. 3, Oct. 2016, pp. 301–322., doi:10.1080/15205436.2015.1128549.

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