ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG
NEW YORK OFFICE

NOT JUST A GAME

Champions for Justice in U.S. Sports

By Dave Zirin

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Level the Playing Field

When people think of U.S. sports culture, social justice is rarely the first thing that comes to mind. For some it's the drama of watching a big playoff game with friends. For others sports have been conquered by rampant commercialization. Still others see the realm of male professional sports as a bastion of racism and sexism.

But this tells only one side of the story. The passions invested by our culture transform the sporting world into a microcosm for much of what is bad, but also good, in society. As such, sports have acted as a political weathervane on many occasions, helping us to see which way the winds of justice are blowing. And while the athletes engaged in our sporting battles are placed on media pedestals as gladiators, they have at times used their public exposure to become real heroes, and even the avant-garde, in vital struggles for social justice.

The Civil Rights Movement gained a great warrior in Jackie Robinson, who broke baseball's color barrier and fought for racial justice decades before the major gains of the 1960s. The movement against the Vietnam War found a heroic fighter in Muhammad Ali, who more than any other brought anti-war and civil rights groups together into shared struggle. And let us not forget the brave work of tennis great Billie Jean King, who was instrumental in making sports a safe and fun terrain for millions of women across the country.

Nor are these battles for social justice simply relics of the past. It is no accident that the media suppressed the voice and true legacy of NFL-Pro-turned-soldier Pat Tillman when he came out against the U.S. war against Iraq. Earlier this summer, basketball player Jason Collins became the first active male professional athlete to come out of the closet, prompting a whirlwind of public conversation about the deep culture of homophobia coursing through the sports world. His decision was applauded by a majority of his colleagues, as well as the general public, and provided important momentum for the movement for equal rights for LGBT people in the United States.

In this study, Dave Zirin, professional sportswriter and author of *A People's History of Sports in the United States*, recounts these stories, exploring the intersections between sports and politics in United States history. Zirin finds much to criticize in the world of sports, but he also clearly loves the games he analyzes, and the stories he tells are both accessible and bursting with a generosity of spirit. Whether you love or hate sports, on the following pages you'll find something to give you pause, make you think, and perhaps even reassess your views—stories that tell the history of our culture, at its worst and also at its best.

Stefanie Ehmsen and Albert Scharenberg
Co-Directors of New York Office, October 2013

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Champions for Justice in U.S. Sports

By Dave Zirin

What do they know of cricket who only cricket know?
C.L.R. James

Sports makes up an integral part of our national history and the Left should be claiming it, but we do not. Far too often, we tend to view sports as an engine of backward ideas, as if drawing a straight line from the sports world to Sarah Palin's Alaska compound. "If only," you will often hear, "people spent as much time focused on society as they do on sports!" This presupposes that sports is not in fact part of society. This view is most famously articulated by the great Leftist and linguist Noam Chomsky:

> *Sports is a major factor in controlling people. Workers have minds; they have to be involved in something and it's important to make sure they're involved in things that have absolutely no significance. So professional sports is perfect. It instills total passivity.*

The problem with this view is that, while sports may have no significance in a vacuum, the passion we invest transforms it. Sports morph into something beyond simple escapism, much more than just a vessel for backward ideas; rather, it turns into a meaningful part of the fabric of our lives. This is how we come to understand these "games" as part of an arena in which ideas are not only presented for consumption but also challenged. Just as sports reflect our society, they also reflect our struggles. When we think about the Black Freedom Struggle, our mind's eye sees Jackie Robinson and Muhammad Ali. The story of the Women's Movement is incomplete without mention of Billie Jean King's match against Bobby Riggs. The story of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) liberation would be incomplete without discussion of Martina Navratilova and now of course Jason Collins.

While critics rightly reject the packaging of sports, they end up eschewing what is both human and remarkable about these physical feats of competition. We can admire the pyramids while understanding the slave labor and misery bound up in their construction. We can stir our soul to gospel even while understanding that its existence owes itself to pain as much as hope. Similarly, amid the politics and sorrows that engulf and sometimes threaten to smother professional sports, there is also an art that can take your breath away. As a good friend said to me long ago, "Magic Johnson always will be my Miles Davis."

Lester "Red" Rodney—editor of the *Daily Worker* sports section from 1934-1958 and a groundbreaking fighter in the battle to smash baseball's color line—puts it perfectly:

> *Of course there is exploitation, but there is fun and beauty too. I mean, what's more beautiful than a 6-4-3 double play perfectly executed where the shortstop fields a ground ball and flips it toward second base in one motion, the second baseman takes the throw in stride, pivots, avoids the base runner, and fires it to first on time. That's not a put on. That's not fake. That's beyond all the social analysis of the game. The idea of people coming together and amazing the rest of us.*

Sports is art, and it's culture, and it's a remarkable lens through which to understand our

world. History has taught us that sports is never something we just sit back and watch; it has always had an important social function. The history of American sports is no different.

As in the distant past, modern American sports culture shapes societal attitudes, norms, and power arrangements. It also serves to understand how these norms and power structures have been negotiated, resisted, and struggled with and against. Sports create the spaces where our children are often socialized. It's where they learn about gender, race, sexuality, and class. It's also a space in our largely apolitical society in which political debates, ideas, and concerns are actually expressed. Often the only times U.S. newspapers cover labor issues is when there is a sports lockout or strike. Often the only times we have a serious public conversation about the consequences of corporate welfare is when we are discussing the billions of dollars in public money that go to stadiums. Often the only times we talk about sexual assault and rape culture in the United States is when they are connected to the actions of a sports team, as in Steubenville, Ohio. Often the only times we talk about sweatshops in the Global South is when we are discussing sporting apparel and whether athletes have an obligation to speak out against these labor practices.

In this article, I will take an historical look at how sports has held a kind of "predictive power," indicating the direction in which our society is traveling. It's like a weather vane, helping us find out which way the wind is blowing. First I'll take a look at the story of Jackie Robinson, who desegregated Major League Baseball eight years before the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the start of the modern Civil Rights Movement in the United States. I'll then move to Muhammad Ali and how, and why, he came out against the war in Vietnam several years before the flowering of the Anti-War Movement. I will then turn to Billie Jean King and her connection to the Women's and LGBT Movements. Moving toward the present, I will examine the story of NFL player-turned-Navy Seal Pat Tillman and how he turned against the war. Finally, I am going to look at sports today to see which way the wind currently blows.

I'm not arguing something so crude as the assertion that sports figures sparked these movements. Indeed, they were all shaped by the cultural sea changes beginning to take place around them. Yet people living far from U.S. urban centers and other nodes of political activity were better able to grasp what was happening by watching these athletes, as they used their exalted platforms to support progressive causes. The great football player and activist Jim Brown once said, "A gladiator can never change Rome." These athletes helped to do just that by using their fame as a form of power.

Jackie Robinson: Breaking the Color Barrier

Today Jackie Robinson is an icon. His #42 jersey is retired in every major league ballpark. He is the subject of a 2013 Hollywood film starring Chadwick Boseman and featuring Harrison Ford as Dodgers General Manager Branch Rickey. His actual history, however, is far more complicated. He was, as Dr. Martin Luther King said, "a sit-inner before sit-ins, a freedom rider before freedom rides." But his path to becoming a weather vane of the most important U.S.

social movement of the 20th century was hardly smooth.

Jack Roosevelt Robinson's political outlook was deeply shaped by his birth circumstances: rural Georgia, 1919, to a family of sharecroppers. The local Democratic Party, known as the Dixiecrats, made the lives of most African American families as difficult as possible. Jackie's father left when he was a baby, and his mother moved the family to Pasadena, California, where she worked as a maid to support him and his four siblings. Her attempt to escape the oppressive racism of the South was not entirely successful. Jackie's sister, Willa Mae, described growing up in "a sort of slavery, with whites slowly, very slowly getting used to us." However, Pasadena did offer something different from rural Georgia: namely, the chance to escape poverty on the wings of athletic glory. The Robinson family had a number of gifted athletes, but the trail was blazed by Jackie's older brother Mack, who won a silver medal in the 200 meter race at the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin, finishing just 0.4 seconds behind the famous Jesse Owens.

Jackie excelled in both sports and school, and made it to UCLA on a general sports scholarship, where he played football and baseball. There, he established a reputation as a bit of a loner, who didn't drink or smoke and who was very religious. A deep intelligence also made him sensitive to any kind of disrespect, racial or otherwise. Teammate Woody Strode, who went on to desegregate the NFL and later act in several Hollywood movies, remembered, "Jackie was a very intelligent, good-looking man who had steely hard eyes that would flash angry in a heartbeat."

During World War II this fierce pride followed Jackie into the armed forces. At a military base ,he was brought up on court martial charges for refusing to give up his seat on the bus. On another occasion he heard a superior officer, who was white, call a private a racial slur, leading Jackie to a physical confrontation that would put him at risk of a long-term military jail sentence. It required the intervention of heavyweight champion Joe Louis on Jackie's behalf to secure his freedom. Following his discharge, Jackie and his wife Rachel had the goal of a middle-class existence in which Jackie would teach physical education. But first, he felt that he needed to at least attempt to satisfy an old dream: to play baseball at the professional level.

The founding of organized sports in the United States in the late 19th century was defined by three political imperatives: nationalism, homophobia, and segregation—both by gender and skin color. From the beginning, organized sports in this country have had to do with teaching men to be men, girls to be submissive, war to be good, and Blacks to stay in their place. A key component in the consolidation of a professional baseball league, which took place around 1870, was the exclusion of African Americans, who had previously been active in amateur circuits. Soon thereafter, a separate professional circuit was developed for Black players. Despite facing violent racist opposition, a torrid work schedule, and meager pay, the Negro Leagues were considered by many to be an escape from the dire, invisible poverty endemic to most African American communities. Indeed over the following decades, many players who are today regarded as all-time greats—from Rube Foster to Cool Papa Bell to Josh Gibson to Satchel Paige—would grace the Negro League with their considerable skills.

In 1945 Jackie Robinson joined the Negro Leagues as a 26-year-old rookie. In his first year, he hit an outstanding .387 and was selected for the All Star Game. In so doing, Robinson caught the eye of Brooklyn Dodgers General Manager and part owner Branch Rickey. Specifically, Rickey was looking for a specific type of player to break baseball's color barrier. He wanted someone educated. He wanted a veteran. He

wanted someone with a wife and strong family. And he saw all of this in Jackie Robinson. At the time this caused tumult in the ranks of the Negro Leagues, where it was widely thought that the first player should be a legend like Gibson or Paige. But Rickey wasn't looking to bestow honors. He was looking for someone who could survive the hell that would surely follow breaking the color line. Rickey knew there would be resistance on and off the field. In the winter of 1945 major league owners had voted 15-1 against integration, with Rickey as the lone dissenter.

When Rickey first spoke with Robinson, he said, "I know you have the skills. But do you have the guts?" In effect he was asking: Do you have what it takes to take torrents of abuse and not respond? A decade before the rise of Dr. Martin Luther King and his movement of non-violent resistance, Rickey was asking Robinson, a player with a seething hair-trigger temper, to turn the other cheek. Robinson agreed to the challenge.

Being Black in Major League Baseball

First playing in the minor leagues, Robinson began to see what his family would face in the Majors, as death threats haunted them throughout their time in Montreal. As Jackie remembered, "The toll these incidents took were greater than I realized. I was overestimating my stamina and underestimating the beating I was taking. I couldn't sleep or eat." After being called up to the Dodgers, the problems he faced in Montreal only intensified. Before he played a single game, teammates like "Dixie" Walker and others petitioned to get him off the squad. Other clubs ritualistically threw at his head or spiked his legs with eighty and ninety mile-per-hour baseballs, and on top of not being able to fight back, nobody even came to his defense. He was now a 28-year-old rookie who, as sportswriter Jimmy Cannon wrote, "is the loneliest man I've ever seen."

This began to shift on April 22, 1947, when the Philadelphia Phillies, riled up by their manager Ben Chapman, chanted racial slurs at Robinson throughout the game. First, Robinson ignored them and his teammates did nothing. As Jackie remembered:

> *I felt tortured and I tried to just play ball and ignore the insults but it was really getting to me. For one wild and rage crazed moment I thought, "To hell with Mr. Rickey's noble experiment. To hell with the image of the patient black freak I was supposed to create." I could throw down my bat, stride over to that Phillies dugout, grab one of those white sons of bitches, and smash his teeth in with my despised black fist. Then I could walk away from it all.*

But before Robinson's anger overwhelmed him, some of his teammates finally began to come to his defense. Team leader Eddie Stanky yelled into the Phillies dugout, "Listen you yellow bellied cowards! Why don't you pick on someone who can fight back!" The Dodgers then picked up bats and edged forward until the Phillies and Chapman backed down. As Rickey remembered, "The Phillies did more to unify the Dodgers than any manager could have."

The crowds beginning to gather in opposing ballparks might have also shifted support in Jackie's favor. Large African American crowds in cities across the country were showing up to root for the Dodgers, turning every game into something of a home game, or at least a deeply divided affair. As African American novelist John A. Williams remembered, "Many of us who went to the park to see Jackie did so to protect him, to defend him from harm, if necessary, as well as to cheer him on." By year's end, Jackie Robinson had won the first ever Rookie of the Year Award. He became an instant legend in Black America, and his reputation as a "patient black freak" made him a hero for large swaths of an emerging liberal white America. In a national poll, he was ranked as the "second most admired American," ahead of President Harry

S. Truman and General Dwight D. Eisenhower and behind only Bing Crosby.

For many whites, the image of Robinson as a veteran who "succeeded the right way," without noisy protest, served as a model for all African Americans. The U.S. government, at this point in the early stages of the Cold War, needed such a model to project itself as a color-blind society, as opposed to the burg of racism the Soviet Union claimed it was. As such, when singer, actor, and civil rights activist Paul Robeson—possibly the most famous Black American at the time—said, "Blacks would never pick up arms against the Soviet Union," the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) wanted to bury him. To legitimize their attack, they called on Robinson to testify. He could have fought the request, but Branch Rickey wanted him to take the stand, and Robinson also wanted the opportunity. It was a difficult position for Robinson, who was a die-hard anti-communist yet understood the importance of Robeson to the Black community. He thought he could use the HUAC hearing to speak out for racial justice and spare Robeson with only a mild rebuke. He was wrong. In his prepared statement, Robinson began:

> *Every single Negro who is worth his salt is going to resent slurs and discrimination because of his race, and he's going to use every bit of intelligence he has to stop it. This has got absolutely nothing to do with what Communists may or may not do. Just because it is a Communist who denounces injustice in the courts, police brutality, and lynching when it happens doesn't change the truth of the charges. Blacks were stirred up long before there was a CP and will be stirred up after unless Jim Crow has disappeared.*

Such a statement, both in the absence of a civil rights movement and directly in the face of a HUAC Committee dominated by Dixiecrat segregationists, should have shaken the entire edifice of nascent McCarthyism. However, it was Robinson's next remark that made the most waves and has ultimately stood the test of time: "I haven't any comment to make except that the statement [about Blacks refusing to fight the USSR]—if Mr. Robeson actually made it—sounds very silly to me [...] Negroes have too much invested in America to throw it away for a siren song sung in bass." With those words he had done HUAC's bidding—giving them license and cover to attack and persecute Robeson. Robinson later called it "the greatest regret of my life."

As the 1949 season began, Robinson felt even more secure in his place in the big leagues, affirming that "I am not going to be anyone's sitting duck. I know what's going on out there." He was also winning the undying friendship of white teammates, including future Hall of Fame shortstop Pee Wee Reese. Before one game in Cincinnati, when a local white supremacist group threatened to assassinate Robinson on the field, Reese laughed to reporters and said, "I think we will all wear 42 and have ourselves a shooting gallery."

Many sportswriters warned Robinson not to exercise his new confidence, but Jackie was more eager than ever to speak out against Jim Crow and racism. In these dark years of McCarthyism, "Only Jackie Robinson," as his biographer Arnold Rampersad wrote, "insisted day in day out on challenging America on questions of race and justice." His following in white America began to suffer because of this. Robinson's new voice earned him the scorn of previously friendly sportswriters like Jimmy Cannon: "The range of Jackie Robinson's hostility appears to have no frontiers. He is a juggler of sorts, flashily keeping feuds in motion, alienating even Brooklyn partisans with his undisciplined protests."

By 1955, a new generation of African American players had come into the league and established themselves as stars. By this point, only three teams didn't have a Black player in their minor league system. Willie Mays, Hank

Aaron, Ernie Banks, and Brooklyn catcher Roy Campanella wowed crowds across the country. 1955 was also the year of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and, with the blossoming of struggle, the first backlash against the emerging calls for greater civil rights. This was the year of 14-year-old Emmett Till's brutal murder. It was the year that the membership of the white supremacist White Citizens' Council swelled into the tens of thousands. It was the year that one hundred congressmen signed a document pledging to uphold segregation. Robinson bore the brunt of this like no other athlete. *Sport Magazine* called him "The most savagely booed, ruthlessly libeled player in the game, his every appearance greeted by a storm of cat calls and name calling."

Retire to Radicalism

Struggling under the weight of these attacks, increasingly troubled by the onset of diabetes, Jackie Robinson retired after the 1956 season, at the age of 38. But retirement didn't mean rest for Jackie, who began working as a spokesperson for the NAACP, quickly becoming their most requested speaker, even outpacing Dr. Martin Luther King himself. Robinson would end speeches by saying, "If I had to choose between baseball's Hall of Fame and first class citizenship I would say first class citizenship to all of my people." In 1958, he was the marshal and lead organizer of the Youth March for Integrated Schools, which initially sought to bring together 1,000 students to march on the Lincoln Memorial. With Robinson's help, they were able to draw 10,000.

During this time, and throughout the rest of his life, it has often been claimed that Robinson was a hardcore Republican. The point is typically to discredit his progressive credentials, or rather a queasy attempt by Republicans to claim him as one of their own. But once again, context is everything. Robinson, from his Georgia birth, had a hardened and quite justifiable view that the Democrats were the party of slavery, segregation, and Jim Crow. When John Kennedy gave his famous speech at the Democratic National Convention, Robinson saw sitting by his side none other than the Democratic Governor of Arkansas and notorious segregationist Orval Faubus. This confirmed his suspicion that there was nothing "new" about Kennedy's New Frontier. But Robinson would be disappointed time and again by the Republican "commitment" to civil rights. When Dr. King was sentenced to four months on a work gang in Georgia, Jackie asked his "friend" Richard Milhous Nixon to intervene and was ignored. Jackie was shocked.

Disillusioned with both political parties, Jackie never stopped going to the front lines of civil rights battles to encourage African Americans to vote. On a speaking tour to raise money for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee sit-ins, Robinson said: "We are going to get our share of this country—we are going to fight for it. We must take it step by step and us older folks should support the youngsters in their stand-ins and sit-ins."

As the Black Freedom Struggle grew and developed a revolutionary wing, people like Malcolm X propagated the idea of Robinson as a "White Man's Negro" due to his belief in electoral politics and integration. Yet despite being political opponents, Robinson and Malcolm shared something: a shift in their ideas during the struggles of the 1960s.

When HUAC opened investigations on the Nation of Islam—a Black nationalist religious movement founded in Detroit in 1930, and for a time the spiritual home of Malcolm X—Jackie published a column in response, asking: "What about an investigation of the White Citizens' Council?" Frustrated by Kennedy's snail's pace on civil rights, he wrote: "The revolution that is taking place in this country cannot be

squelched by police dogs or high power hoses." During the Birmingham campaign, he flew to join Martin Luther King. Robinson was a lead organizer for the great 1963 March on Washington. On September 16, 1963, after four young Black girls were killed by a bomb at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, he wrote: "God bless Dr. Martin Luther King [...]. But if my child had been killed, I'm afraid he would have lost me as a potential disciple of his credo of non-violence."

In 1964 the Black Freedom Struggle began to move north, and economic segregation proved just as intractable as Jim Crow, if not more so. Starting in Harlem, the era of the northern ghetto riots began. Gone was the ideal of patient suffering. Gone too was the underlying ideal of an integrated America in which justice would prevail for all. When Malcolm X was killed, Jackie wrote an obituary that, unlike most, didn't criticize but rather praised him. He quoted Malcolm as telling him, "Jackie, in the days to come your son and my son will not be willing to settle for things we are willing to settle for." Robinson's ideas further changed as the Vietnam War came crashing into his life. His son, Jackie Jr., saw combat in Southeast Asia and returned deeply frightened; carrying a gun, scared of shadows, and addicted to drugs.

This sentiment deepened in Robinson when King came out against the war, dividing the Civil Rights Movement. At first, Robinson vehemently disagreed. But King called him and they spoke for several hours, after which Robinson pledged never to criticize him again.

By the end of 1968, he also added his support to the much-criticized movement among Black athletes to boycott the Olympics, writing:

> *I do support the individuals who decided to make the sacrifice by giving up the chance to win an Olympic medal. I respect their courage. We need to understand the reason and frustration behind these protests [...]. It was different in my day. Perhaps we lacked courage.*

In 1969, this anticommunist war veteran and Republican wrote, "I wouldn't fly the flag on the 4th of July or any other day. When I see a car with a flag pasted on it, I figure the guy behind the wheel isn't my friend."

Robinson died far too young. He passed away in 1972, at the age of 52, of complications from diabetes. As Red Smith wrote upon his death, "The word for Jackie Robinson is 'unconquerable' [...]. He would not be defeated. Not by the other team and not by life."

I don't totally agree with Red Smith. Jackie Robinson was conquered at a young age because he had expended so much energy fighting his own myth: that the best path in fighting racism was individual effort and enduring abuse. Jackie Robinson the person, in great contrast to the myth, believed in movements. His greatest gift was helping to light a path for the Civil Rights Movement as a whole.

Muhammad Ali: Rebel with a Cause

The "best and brightest" minds in the United States believed that a war in Vietnam was in the best interests of humanity. A young boxer thought they were wrong. Muhammad Ali's journey from hated member of the Nation of Islam (NOI) to anti-war lightning rod is the most misunderstood part of his history. It is also the most dangerous part of his his-

tory, because it speaks most strongly to the issues of imperial war and principled resistance that mark our present as much as our past.

1964 was a momentous and controversial year for the young Cassius Clay. Only 22 years old, he won the world heavyweight championship in a massive upset over the supposedly undefeatable Sonny Liston. 1964 was also the year that Clay became close friends with Malcolm X, joined the Nation of Islam, and changed his name to Muhammad Ali. Soon after, it came out that Ali was ineligible for military service because he had scored in the 16th percentile of the Army I.Q. tests. One needed to score at least in the 30th percentile to qualify for service. This mark earned Ali much derision and he said sheepishly, "I always said I was the greatest. Not the smartest."

Then, in early 1966, the need for hundreds of thousands of ground troops in Southeast Asia became official foreign policy, and President Lyndon Johnson called for a massive expansion of the draft. To do this, the passing percentile in the army intelligence test was lowered from 30 to 15, making Ali barely eligible for service. He was talking to reporters when he first heard the news, and his first response was to blurt out one of the most famous phrases of the decade: "Man, I ain't got no quarrel with them Vietcong." Young *New York Times* reporter Robert Lipsyte was there, later telling me:

> *[W]hat I saw that afternoon wasn't particularly religious or political. That was a patina that came later. I saw a twenty-four-year-old scared of being drafted. It was, "How can they do this to me? I don't want my career ruined." He thought he'd put the draft behind, and now his life was about to be turned upside down. Someone had just told him he was going to Vietnam. Then the telephone started ringing and finally, after the tenth call—"What do you think about the Vietcong?"—and Ali exploded. "Man, I ain't got no quarrel with them Vietcong." And bang. There it was. That was the headline. That was what the media wanted.*

This was an astounding statement. There was little opposition to the war at the time. The anti-war movement was in its infancy and most of the country stood behind the conquest of Southeast Asia. Indeed, at the time the cover of *Life* magazine read: "Vietnam: The War Is Worth Winning." However, it's more complicated than simply painting Ali as an anti-war prophet. He was a young man, like so many, shocked that a war he didn't understand was about to take over his life. In Ali's words:

> *For two years the army told everyone I was a nut and I was ashamed. And now they decide I am a wise man [...]. Now, without ever testing me to see if I am wiser or worser than before, they decide I can go into the army [...]. I can't understand it, out of all the baseball players, all of the football players, all of the basketball players—why seek out me, the world's only heavyweight champion?*

His questions were condescendingly and brutally dismissed by the scribes of the sports page. Sportswriter Murray Robinson was darkly prescient when he wrote:

> *For his stomach-turning performance, boxing should throw Clay out on his inflated head. The adult brat, who has boasted ad nauseam of his fighting skill but who squealed like a cornered rat when tapped for the Army should be shorn of his title. And to the devil with the old cliché that a ring title can be won or lost only in the ring.*

Ali was given every opportunity to apologize and, like boxers in years past, accept a cushy United Service Organizations (USO) position doing boxing exhibitions in red, white, and blue trunks at military bases around the world. He refused. The stand he took was all the more electric because of what was bubbling over in U.S. society: Black revolution and anti-war protest. The two struggles hadn't mixed or come together much up to that moment, and now here was the heavyweight champion of the world, with one foot planted firmly in each.

An incredible groundswell built up in defense of Ali, often hand-in-hand with the movement

against the war. In the face of harassment, media attacks, and the prospects of a prolonged stay in prison, this support helped him stand firm. Later that year, at a press conference in which he was expected to apologize, Ali instead stood up and issued one of his famous witticisms: "Keep asking me, no matter how long, on the war in Vietnam, I sing this song, I ain't got no quarrel with the Vietcong." Shortly after, on March 29, 1966, the Kentucky State Senate passed a resolution condemning Ali. "His attitude," the resolution read, "brings discredit to all loyal Kentuckians and to the names of the thousands who gave their lives for this country during his lifetime."

Around that time, with promoters concerned that the heavyweight champ—who today is a beloved global icon—couldn't draw a crowd in the United States, Ali began to fight more of his bouts in Canada. Indeed, starting in March 1966, he defended his title seven times, four of them outside the United States. Jerry Izenberg—like Lipsyte a younger writer more willing to listen to Ali—was with the champ once in a Canadian gym and encouraged him to stay in the United States' neighbor to the north, as some conscientious objectors were beginning to do. But Ali didn't waver, telling Izenberg:

> *Of course I'm going home. The United States is my birth country. People can't chase me out of my birth country. I believe what I believe, and you know what that is. If I have to go to jail, I'll do it, but I'm not leaving my country to live in Canada.*

Even this level of support for Ali had its consequences. "I can't tell you what I went through for defending him," remembers Izenberg. "All the cancellations of my newspaper column, the smashed car windows, the bomb threats; the thousands of letters from Army war veterans talking about Jews like me and concentration camps."

"Watch out for them Whities"

In 1967, in another huge step for the anti-war movement, Martin Luther King, Jr. came out against the war. In the press conference in which King proclaimed his opposition, he referenced the boxing champ, saying, "Like Muhammad Ali puts it, we are all—Black and Brown and poor—victims of the same system of oppression." Ali and King, to the anger of the Nation of Islam, struck up a private friendship that we know about thanks to the good people at the FBI. Here is one short wire-tapped transcript with Martin Luther King, Jr., in which Muhammad Ali is referred to derisively as "C:"

> *MLK spoke to C, they exchanged greetings. C invited MLK to be his guest at the next championship fight. MLK said he would like to attend. C said he is keeping up with MLK and MLK is his brother and he's with him 100 percent but can't take any chances, and that MLK should take care of himself and should "watch out for them whities."*

The only time these private friends came together in public was later that year, when Ali joined King in Louisville, where a bitter and violent struggle was being waged for fair housing. Ali spoke to the protesters, saying:

> *In your struggle for freedom, justice, and equality I am with you. I came to Louisville because I could not remain silent while my own people, many I grew up with, many I went to school with, many my blood relatives, were being beaten, stomped and kicked in the streets simply because they want freedom and justice and equality in housing.*

Later that day he cemented his position as a lightning rod between the freedom struggle and the anti-war struggle. When a reporter refused to stop dogging him about the war, he finally turned around and said:

> *Why should they ask me to put on a uniform and go 10,000 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? No I'm not*

going 10,000 miles from home to help murder and burn another poor nation simply to continue the domination of white slave masters of the darker people the world over. This is the day when such evils must come to an end. I have been warned that to take such a stand would cost me millions of dollars. But I have said it once and I will say it again. The real enemy of my people is here. I will not disgrace my religion, my people, or myself by becoming a tool to enslave those who are fighting for their own justice, freedom and equality [...]. If I thought the war was going to bring freedom, and equality to 22 million of my people they wouldn't have to draft me, I'd join tomorrow. I have nothing to lose by standing up for my beliefs. So I'll go to jail, so what? We've been in jail for 400 years.

When it finally came time for Ali to attend the draft induction center in Texas, it was still unclear whether he would take that step forward when his name was called. Outside the building, twenty demonstrators walked in a circle, carrying placards reading, "Draft beer—not Ali." When the induction officer called the name "Cassius Clay" he did not move. Ali was informed that he was risking fine and imprisonment by refusing induction. He said he understood. Afterward in a statement, he made clear just how well he did:

I am proud of the title "World Heavyweight Champion" which I won in the ring in Miami on February 25, 1964. The holder of it should at all times have the courage of his convictions and carry out those convictions, not only in the ring but throughout all phases of his life. It is in light of my own personal convictions that I take my stand in rejecting the call to be inducted into the armed services. I do so with full realization of its implications and possible consequences. I have searched my conscience, and I find I cannot be true to my belief in my religion by accepting such a call. My decision is a private and individual one. In taking it I am dependent solely upon Allah as the final judge of these actions brought about by my own conscience. I strongly object to the fact that so many newspapers have given the American public and the world the impression that I have only two alternatives in this stand—either I go to jail or go to the Army. There is another alternative, and that alternative is justice. If justice prevails, if my constitutional rights are upheld, I will be forced to go neither to the Army nor jail. In the end, I am confident that justice will come my way, for the truth must eventually prevail.

A True Champion

A mere hour after Ali wouldn't "cross that line"—before he'd even been charged with draft evasion—the New York State Athletic Commission suspended his boxing license and withdrew recognition of him as champion. Other states followed suit and his title was effectively stripped. This was step one in what became a three-and-a-half-year exile from the ring. In the words of Howard Cosell, the famous sportscaster who was an early mainstream defender of Ali:

It was an outrage; an absolute disgrace. You know the truth about boxing commissions. They're nothing but a bunch of politically appointed hacks. Almost without exception, they're men of such meager talent that the only time you hear anything at all about them is when they're party to a mismatch that results in a fighter being maimed or killed. And what they did to Ali! Why? How could they? There'd been no grand jury empanelment, no arraignment. Due process of law hadn't even begun, yet they took away his livelihood because he failed the test of political and social conformity, and it took him seven years to get his title back. It's disgusting. To this day, I get furious when I think about it.

Ali's refusal to be drafted was a global news story. And indeed, he began to regard himself as someone with a responsibility to an international base that saw him as much more than just a boxer. "Boxing is nothing, just satisfying to some bloodthirsty people. I'm no longer a Cassius Clay, a Negro from Kentucky." Ali continued: "I belong to the world, the Black world. I'll always have a home in Pakistan, in Algeria, in Ethiopia. This is more than money."

This view that Ali was being made to pay too high a price gained greater currency when he received a five-year sentence for his refusal to go to war. One observer said, "What kind of

country do I live in that wants to put a man like this in jail?" The day of Ali's conviction, the U.S. Congress voted 337-29 to extend the draft four more years. They also voted 385-19 to make it a federal crime to desecrate the flag. At this time, 1,000 Vietnamese noncombatants were being killed each week by U.S. forces. One hundred soldiers were dying every day, the war was costing $2 billion a month, and the movement against the war was rapidly gaining momentum. As Kwame Ture, at that time known as Stokely Carmichael, described it:

> *Muhammad Ali had everything. Fame, glory, money, women, good looks, champion of the world. So when Muhammad would call me—we'd speak back and forth on the telephone—and he'd tell me, "I ain't going," I'd say, "Yeah; right on!" But I always wondered, when that final moment comes and he actually has to take that step, how will it come out? Because, no question, the FBI viewed Ali as more of a threat than H. Rap Brown and myself. Muhammad Ali had a broader base than we had. The government recognized that Muhammad Ali could cause a lot more trouble than all of us. That's why we understood that the weight of the blow would be hardest against Muhammad Ali. They were going to take his championship crown; no doubt about it. They were going to prosecute him; no doubt about it. They were going to do everything possible to bring him to his knees. And of all the people who opposed the war in Vietnam, I think that Muhammad Ali risked the most. Lots of people refused to go. Some went to jail. But no one risked as much from their decision not to go to war in Vietnam as Muhammad Ali. And his real greatness can be seen in the fact that, despite all that was done to him, he became even greater and more humane.*

The depths of Ali's isolation would reach new lows in April of 1969, when Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam officially distanced themselves from him. Why would Muhammad disavow someone who had sacrificed so much? The most obvious answer is that the NOI was in many ways a very conservative organization. Ali was too incendiary for a group that did not truly believe in the kind of active resistance he was practicing. But still, Ali did not waver.

Meanwhile, elimination bouts were held to fill Ali's vacant title. Protesters appeared outside with placards reading, "Hell No We Ain't Goin'" and, "Fight Racism, Free Muhammad Ali." The promoters didn't care, but Ali warned with the voice of truth: "Everybody knows I'm the champion. My ghost will haunt all the arenas. I'll be there, wearing a sheet and whispering, "Ali-e-e-e! Ali-e-e-e!" Outside the ring, Ali did more than just whisper, taking up an exhaustive schedule of speaking engagements at colleges across the country. Gradually, public opinion began to catch up with Ali's long-held views about the Vietnam War—and with it began a slow recuperation of Ali's public image. In 1971, the Supreme Court unanimously overturned Ali's ban, and the fighter returned to the ring to regain his rightful championship. Shortly thereafter, the United States began a gradual exit from Vietnam.

In recent years, there has been a revisionist argument that Muhammad Ali really wasn't as politically important as younger generations might think. The most notable such piece was Jack Cashill's "Sucker Punch: The Hard Left Hook That Dazed Ali and Killed King's Dream." The argument has less to do with the 1960s than the present day. The mere idea—that the best known professional athlete could also have been correct when so many experts were wrong—is in and of itself a stirring argument against war and empire. These revisionists blunt the example of Ali's past to secure the propaganda for the wars of the future. You can hold Ali up as a walking saint of reconciliation, trotted out for photo-ops with George W. Bush, who with a straight face can praise Ali as "a man of peace;" but you can only do so by sanding down his past. And facts are stubborn things. Ali was right in 1968 when he said, "The point of war is to kill, kill, kill, and continue murdering innocent people." In today's world of drone strikes and dirty wars, it's a statement that rings every bit as true.

Billie Jean King: Like a Girl

In sports culture, it's not only that a certain kind of manhood gets defined, privileged, and naturalized, but that this normalization in turn defines those who fall outside the dominant ideal, labeled as unathletic and somehow unworthy of sport's sacred grounds. Too often, this can make sports a hostile terrain for those who don't fit. It also makes the history of sports in the United States a sort of window into larger social struggles for equality and justice, particularly the fight for women's equality.

When schools began offering physical education in the late 1800s, the prevailing belief was that women were too fragile for such physical exertion. Respected scientists even argued that sports would make women infertile, sex-crazed, or just plain insane—pretty much everything short of growing a tail. Alternately, women interested in playing sports were accused of being lesbians. Many PE teachers explicitly posited themselves as the guardians against lesbianism as an outgrowth of play. One PE director promised that women's sports would not create "the loud masculinely dressed man-aping individual but the whole hearted rosy cheeked healthy girl." It became common for physical education programs to require that PE majors "have or possess the possibilities of an attractive personal appearance."

Then, along came the bicycle. As absurd as it now seems, the idea of women riding bicycles was seen a profound threat to the male social order, as it forced women to take off their corsets. The so-called expert scientists howled that riding a bike would implode a woman's uterus or give her what they called "the bicycle face," which was marked by "peculiarities" including "pale complexion" and an "anxious expression." This was all part of a larger attitude toward women and physical activity. For many, women's sports were considered unnatural and unsightly—even unfeminine and downright un-American.

Basketball is an example of this. The sport was invented in 1891, and women started playing it right away. They were rough and aggressive despite having to wear dresses on the court. Alarmed that these players were becoming too manly, organizers instituted new rules that actually prohibited physical contact and any effort to hinder the shooter. And just like that, what started as scrappy and fun was made dainty and dull—all in the name of keeping men manly and women womanly.

Even a sport like running was not immune to these kinds of sexist tropes. The women's 800-meter event debuted at the 1928 Olympics. At the finish line, some of the runners fell to the ground to catch their breath. Perfectly reasonable, right? They were winded. After all, we see men doing this all the time. But for some reason, these women's actions were considered so unladylike as to provoke an international scandal.

Deeming the sport too strenuous for the frail female form, Olympic officials promptly banned the women's 800 meters for thirty years. Thirty years! The idea stuck, so much so that one member of the International Olympic Committee would actually say, in 1952, that he hoped to eliminate the women's track and field competition altogether from the Olympics so that we all might be, as he put it, "spared the unaesthetic spectacle of women trying to look and act like men."

During World War II a shift occurred. The overwhelming majority of those deployed abroad were men. To ensure full wartime production, millions of women had to leave home, where

they most likely did piecework, to labor in factories. *Ladies Home Journal* put a female combat pilot on its cover. One well-known symbol of this transformation was the poster of "Rosie the Riveter." Another was the sudden rise of women's professional baseball, perhaps best known through the movie "A League of their Own."

The All-American Girls Baseball League (AAGBL), which lasted from 1943-1954, attempted to fill the void left by Major League Baseball, which had seen many of its stars leave for war duty. The AAGBL was started as a non-profit entity, with baseball kingpins like Charles Wrigley and Branch Rickey on its board. Teams played in and were supported by small working-class towns, finding homes in places like Kenosha, Washington; Peoria, Illinois; South Bend, Indiana; and Battle Creek, Michigan. As Jeanie Descombes Lesko, a pitcher for the Grand Rapids Chicks, remembered years later:

> *In that time, it gave the local communities a place to go to have a good time, be with people, and forget about the hard times; there was rationing of food, many people had to work in factories to make ends meet and replace the men in their families who were off at war. Many worked in defense plants making instruments of war just to be part of the fight for freedom for those who were being suppressed. People needed local heroes, like they do today, and we provided them with that.*

However, this rising standing amongst the general public did not guarantee equal treatment as their male counterparts. The all-white, overwhelmingly working-class women were required to attend charm school, where they were given manuals that stressed a vigorous, exhaustive beauty regimen, as well as tips on how to appear attractive to a male audience. The "girls" were also heavily chaperoned and monitored at all times. Meanwhile, any hint of lesbianism meant release. Josephine D'Angelo, who was a lesbian, was fired immediately after getting a bob haircut. She said years later: "I was old enough to understand what they were trying to do. They didn't want to bring a bunch of butchy people."

After World War II, the league proved that it was more than a wartime sideshow, with games routinely attracting 2,000-3,000 fans. In 1948 the league peaked, and its ten teams drew over 900,000 total paid fans. However, attendance declined in the following years and the league that gave 600 women the chance to play baseball was no more by 1954.

Supposedly no longer "needed" by the white male establishment, women were pushed off of the field and also out of the workplace. No coincidence that in 1953, Pulitzer Prize winning sportswriter Arthur Daley of the *New York Times* said that eliminating women from the Olympics was "a great idea," writing that: "There's nothing feminine or enchanting about a girl with beads of perspiration in her alabaster brow, the result of grotesque contortions in events totally unsuited to female architecture." He added that, "Any self-respecting schoolboy can achieve superior performances to a woman champion." Meanwhile, the homophobia experienced by D'Angelo a decade earlier turned far uglier. Before, it had been coded—a fear of "mannish" athletes or queers. Now it was explicit homophobia. At the national 1956 conference of collegiate women physical educators, guest speaker Dr. Josephine Renshaw gave a talk with the benign title "Activities for Mature Living." Sounds safe, right? But it was more of a rant; a warning against the "muscular Amazon with unkempt hair, clod hopper shoes, and dowdy clothing who would become disappointed in heterosexual attachments and see women's sports in a predatory fashion."

This kind of good-ole-boy wisdom only began to change in the 1960s under heavy pressure from women, who had begun to organize and spearhead a new chapter in women's rights struggles. More and more women pushed to break out of traditional gender roles and take

on responsibilities outside of the home. It was the dawn of the modern Women's Rights Movement, and the world hasn't been the same since. As often happens in history, it took people who were willing to break the rules to change them. And this struggle was reflected in electric fashion in the 1960s sporting world—in venues as unlikely as the Boston Marathon.

Common wisdom was that women simply couldn't handle the Boston Marathon's arduous distance. But in 1967, a woman by the name of Kathy Switzer registered as K.V. Switzer and entered the race. Five miles after the start, one of the marathon directors actually jumped off a truck to forcibly remove Switzer from the course, yelling: "Get the hell out of my race!" But the men running with her fought him off. For them, Kathy Switzer had every right to be there. For them, the Boston Marathon wasn't about proving male supremacy—pitting boys against girls—but rather simply about people running a race.

When the pictures from the marathon were transmitted across the globe, the world saw two opposing models of masculinity: the violence and paranoia of the marathon director versus the strength and solidarity of the other male runners. At the center of it all was the resolute focus of Kathy Switzer. In that moment, sports bridged the gender divide and gave the world a glimpse into what was possible.

King of Queens

But perhaps the most influential example of the fight for women's equality in American sports was embodied in the great Billie Jean King, who is widely regarded today as one the greatest female athletes of all time. King was likely the first athlete to put feminism right at the center of sports. More than just an athlete, or a symbol, she was an activist and participant in the Women's Movement for equal rights. In the words of Navratilova, she "embodied the crusader fighting a battle for all of us. She was carrying the flag; it was all right to be a jock."

King fought for a women's players union, helped create the Women's Tennis Association, and was elected its first president in 1973. King, who received $15,000 less than male champion Ilie Nastase for winning the U.S. Open in 1972, called for a strike by female players if the prize money wasn't made equal by the following year. In 1973, the U.S. Open became the first major tournament to offer an equal winner's purse for men and women. Soon after, she allowed her name be used on a newspaper ad that said simply, "I had an abortion."

However, when we think of politics and Billie Jean King, what comes first to most minds is her famous "Battle of the Sexes" tennis match against Bobby Riggs in 1973. Riggs was a 51-year-old retired tennis star, known for being both a showman and an unrepentant male chauvinist. He played tennis star Margaret Court, beating her handily, and then set about goading Billie Jean King into a match. This didn't prove too difficult, particularly with him saying things like, "The male is king. The male is supreme. I've said it over and over again. I still feel that way. Girls play a nice game of tennis for girls."

King took up his challenge, and the media grabbed onto the "Battle of the Sexes" storyline, which pitted two tennis titans with very different messages about what women could or couldn't do. The match, played in front of a sold-out crowd at the Astrodome in Houston, Texas, remains one of the most watched television programs in the history of sports. In front of what felt like the whole world, Billie Jean King beat Bobby Riggs convincingly in straight sets. Afterward, Frank Deford wrote in *Sports Illustrated*, "She has prominently affected the way 50 percent of society thinks and feels about itself in the vast area of physical exercise."

"All her life, King had been battling for equal rights for women, not only in tennis and in sports, but in society," wrote *Sportsline* historian Anthony Holden. "But all of her hard work and dedication were dwarfed by what she accomplished in the two hours and four minutes it took to dismantle Riggs." King also understood the importance: "On college campuses women were hanging out of their dorm windows celebrating. The match had enormous symbolic importance. It helped women stand taller [...]. Before that, women were chokers and spastics who couldn't take pressure. Except, of course, in childbirth."

While I don't doubt the tremendous symbolic importance of the event, I would argue that Billie Jean King's contributions to women's equality, both before and after, far transcend that one match. A working-class woman who would conquer a country-club sport, King grew up playing on public courts. When she finally got into the game, she fought for pay equity every step of the way. She was the first-ever president of the first ever women's sports union. She was also the first prominent woman to come out of the closet as gay. The revelation, which emerged in 1981 through a palimony suit from her former partner, had an immediate blowback—costing her prestige and an estimated $2 million in endorsements. It would take her years to win back her commercial standing, but she was somebody who never shied away from who she was and what she believed.

Through her many forms of activism, King led a new generation of women who refused to accept the restrictive roles assigned to them—based on gender, sexuality, or otherwise—sparking widespread resentment and backlash from the white male establishment, but also supporting a shift in public consciousness and planting the seeds for early reforms. Title IX, a section within the Education Amendments of 1972—passed shortly before the famous match against Riggs—prohibits any person from being discriminated against or excluded from any educational program (crucially including college sports) on the basis of sex. Before Title IX, roughly 1 out of 35 girls played some form of sports. In the years and decades that followed, that number has grown to 1 out of 3. It's a reform that has literally changed the lives of tens of millions of women.

However, you wouldn't necessarily know about these tremendous gains if your only source were the U.S. sports media. According to a series of studies recently conducted by sociologists Michael Messner and Cheryl Cooky, the major networks have pretty much stopped covering women's sports altogether. That's right; there's actually been a backslide in the coverage of women's sports on TV news and highlights shows in recent decades—from a high of 9% of airtime in 1999 to an unbelievable 1.6% in 2009. And as with so much else in sports culture, *ESPN The Magazine* might as well be a men's locker room. In the past five years, female athletes have appeared on six *ESPN The Magazine* covers, making up around 5% of total coverage. More broadly, the major networks are more likely to promote women as swimsuit models, cheerleaders, or props for a beer commercial than as serious athletes. This fixation on women's bodies is no different from *Playboy* magazine's "Women of the Olympics" issue, or NBC's primetime coverage of women's beach volleyball, a sport that just so happens to be played in tiny bikinis on synthetic beaches. In these cases, the sports themselves are not so much the focus as an excuse to sell women's bodies to male viewers.

So while Billie Jean King was incredibly important to the Women's Movement, playing a key role in very real gains, the battle for women's equality rages on. And while some might hope for a second coming of a young Billie Jean King, no one person alone is strong enough to stand up to the moneyed (and mostly male) interests that continue to dominate large-market sports. And nowhere is this more apparent than in the

bowels of the sports-media complex, which today brings to mind a variation of an old saying: If an activist, or a whole movement, cries out amongst a forest of media giants, and nobody reports on their cries for justice, did they really make a sound?

Pat Tillman: True American Hero

It's a question that would have interested former National Football League player Pat Tillman. In 2001 Tillman was coming off the best year of his career. He was picked for *Sports Illustrated*'s prestigious All-Pro Team, and he had just turned down a $9 million contract in order to stay with his team, the Arizona Cardinals. Pat Tillman was tough and loyal; in short, a coach's dream. Then came September 11. Out of respect for the unfolding tragedy, the NFL postponed a week of games. But Tillman went further than that. He joined the Army Rangers. This was the real deal; a professional football player giving up a lucrative career to serve his country in the field of battle, built up by the mass media and an adoring public as a true patriot and American hero. Twenty-two months after enlisting, Pat Tillman was dead. His memorial service was aired on national television. The Army awarded him a Silver Star for his "gallantry in action against an armed enemy." They said Tillman's convoy had been ambushed in Afghanistan. They said Tillman charged up a hill to protect his men but was shot down by the Taliban. That was the official story, but there was a problem: It was a lie. In reality, Pat Tillman had been felled by "friendly fire," shot by other U.S. Army Rangers. In reality, his clothes and military journal had been immediately burned on the scene. In reality, his family is still trying to discern the truth of what exactly took place and why the Bush Administration felt such a pressing need to cover it up.

Other than the deception of his loved ones, perhaps the worst part of the Tillman cover-up was how it hid what might be the most important part of his story: that while stationed in Iraq in 2003 he had turned against the war. As his biographer John Krakauer said in an interview with ABC News:

> *He thought the war was illegal. He thought it was a mistake. He thought it was going to be a disaster. And in the Army, you're not supposed to talk about that. You're not supposed to talk politics. And Pat didn't shut up. He told everyone he encountered, "This war is illegal as hell."*

In fact, when Tillman was redeployed to Afghanistan in 2004, he began reading the anti-war activist Noam Chomsky. Tillman told his mother he wanted to meet Chomsky in person after he returned to the United States. "What's interesting is the story itself seemed so contrived," said his mother Mary Tillman. "The soldier, you know, running up the ridgeline, firing at the enemy, saving his men. It did sound kind of like a John Wayne movie."

The reason this misrepresentation of Pat Tillman matters so much is because it vividly exposes a fault line in the political mythology of sport. It shows how the "real man" myth that gets reinforced in sports culture often works to marginalize actual men, whose true acts of courage—even if these take the form of standing up to the government—may be more admirable than the fictional half-truths assigned to them by the media-sports complex.

This is exactly what happened when Fox NFL Sunday, "America's #1 Pregame Show," commemorated Veteran's Day by broadcasting

from Bagram Airfield in Afghanistan and proceeded to pay tribute to Pat Tillman without even hinting at the more complicated facts of his story—even though his family has been fighting for years to make these facts known. Rather than bothering to mention that Tillman had turned against the war, the Fox commentators, dressed in full camouflage, used his life and death to promote war as they broadcast from the "Pat Tillman USO Base" at Bagram. They placed Pat Tillman's story in a whitewashed continuum of sports, war, and patriotism, while in the process obfuscating any sense of who Pat Tillman was, what he stood for, and how he died.

An implicit message was that being political is somehow antithetical to being an athlete or a sports fan—that caring about what goes on in the world, or questioning and thinking critically about the role sports plays in the wider culture is abnormal, uncool, and unmanly. More than anything else, the world of sports is best understood as a trillion-dollar business that is a distinctively male arena. To be a professional athlete is to define oneself as masculine, pumped-up, comfortable with violence, immune to pain, and against showing vulnerability of any kind. Sports culture offers up role models for what it means to be a man who will do whatever it takes to win. Whether that means taking steroids to hit more home runs or pitching on a bloody ankle, sports culture tells us that real men are willing to sacrifice their bodies for the team. They play with pain, they "man up," they "shake it off," they "get back in the game." Nothing embodies and reproduces this masculine ideal better or more effectively than NFL football. Being masculine means being able to inflict pain, and to endure it—no matter how violent, and without regard for the consequences. This warrior image moves beyond personal identity to link up with and reinforce larger elements of our culture—most notably militarism. Comedian George Carlin's words on the subject are apt:

> *In football, the object is for the quarterback, otherwise known as the field general, to be on target with his aerial assault, riddling the defense by hitting his receivers with deadly accuracy in spite of the blitz, even if he has to use the shotgun. With short bullet passes and long bombs, he marches his troops into enemy territory, balancing this aerial assault with a sustained ground attack which punches holes in the forward wall of the enemy's defensive line.*

Professional leagues actively promote this intersection between sport and war, making it so commonplace in our culture that we hardly even notice. But when you stop to think, it's actually downright bizarre how militarized sports culture has become. And while the National Football League is a prime example, it's not the only one. I went to a baseball game a few years back, and it turned out it was something called Military Appreciation Night. Before the opening pitch, with George W. Bush in attendance, a large group of marines was sworn in at home plate. Afterward, the P.A. announcer said: "For those of you in the audience who also want a career in the military, please visit the appropriate kiosk."

If war isn't political then nothing is. And yet this mixture of sports and politics seems perfectly natural to us. We're made to think it's not political at all, but rather just the way things are. And this is how ideology works, naturalizing ideas and images that deflect attention away from other realities. The dominant narrative in sports culture presents a narrow, glamorized view of militarism and violence that conceals many of the costs and consequences of this fictionalized ideal of male invulnerability.

Especially in the militarized spectacle of football, there seems to be no room for the statistical fact that this sport takes a terrible toll on the human body. The average NFL career is three-and-a-half years. And the average player will die twenty years sooner than the rest of the population. I've had players tell me that to play professional football is to skip middle

age. I've been to retirement dinners and seen players who aren't much older than me walking with canes. This cartoon version of violence we see in American sports culture also sanitizes the real-life consequences of violence and deceives us about the reality and tragedy of war.

Pat Tillman and his family have paid the ultimate price for this deception; now the responsibility is ours to fight that Tillman's courageous anti-war message be heard, and that his legacy not be coopted by those who would profit from the perpetuation of violence and death.

Winds of Equality

The remarkable part about the history of organized sports in the United States, with all of its flux and change, is that its power as a weather vane today is no less potent than when Jack Johnson signaled his opposition to white supremacy and lynching 100 years ago. We see this today in how sports both reflects and leads the way on the question of full citizenship for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. In social movement folklore, there is an old expression that sometimes it takes years to make days' worth of progress, but other times it takes only days to leap years ahead. In the fight for full citizenship for our LGBT friends and family, it currently seems like every day another year mercifully moves forward.

In the sports world, that longtime bulwark of homophobia, heteronormative socialization, and "no homo" jokes—in which a friendly comment to a member of the same sex is followed by the clarification that it wasn't meant as "homo"—we seem to be making decades of progress by the hour. Right now the weathervane is pointing decisively toward justice. We've seen NFL players stand up and organize for marriage equality. We've seen other players criticized by the league and media for what used to be accepted homophobic slurs. On May 6, 2013, 100 years of sports history was turned on its head when pro basketball player Jason Collins wrote in Sports Illustrated, "I'm a 34-year-old NBA center. I'm black. And I'm gay."

No active North American male athlete had ever come out of the closet. As stunning as it was, even more uplifting was the response. Collins received an avalanche of support from the sports world and beyond, as people from NBA star Kobe Bryant, to movie star and former pro football player Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, to President Barack Obama sent well wishes and messages of solidarity and support. Martina Navratilova, who came out all the way back in 1981, called it a "game-changer," writing:

> *Collins has led the way to freedom. Yes, freedom—because that closet is completely and utterly suffocating. It's only when you come out that you can breathe properly. It's only when you come out that you can be exactly who you are. Collins' action will save lives. This is no exaggeration: Fully one third of suicides among teenagers occur because of their sexuality. Collins will truly affect lives, too. Millions of kids will see that it is OK to be gay. No need for shame, no need for embarrassment, no need for hiding.*

Collins' decision to come out was certainly bolstered by a recent popular groundswell in broader society in favor of LGBT rights, which in recent years has begun to find an echo in the sports world. In the NFL, players like Brendon Ayanbadejo, Chris Kluwe, and Scott Fujita have become active public participants in the movement for full marriage equality and equal rights. We've also seen former George Washington University basketball player Kye Allums become the first trans athlete to be

public and proud. In April, the National Hockey League adopted an entire program in conjunction with the *You Can Play* organization aimed at making the locker room a "safe space" for LGBT players, including confidential counseling and support for players thinking of coming out.

This matters because it has taken place in the context of a sports world where homophobia still holds sway. Evangelical organizations that are explicitly homophobic thrive in locker rooms. NBA reporter Chris Broussard was put on ESPN the day of Jason Collins' announcement to rant that his decision set him (and perhaps us) off on an express lane to hell. This offseason, the NFL was found to have been asking rookies about their sexuality. Manti Te'o, the former Notre Dame linebacker with the imaginary girlfriend who died of cancer, had to go on television at the advice of advisors to publicly assert to television host Katie Couric that he wasn't gay. In his words, he is "far from it, FAR from it."

This all speaks to the enduring nature of homophobia in men's sports and why it's often been referred to as "the last closet." But by looking at sports, one can undoubtedly chart the change. In a 1999 *ESPN.com* article on the possibility of an "out" player in the locker room, players felt comfortable unleashing a torrent of invective, going so far as to say that a gay player would be physically brutalized for coming out.

What has changed, as Jason Collins made clear, is that now there is a movement gaining steam to fight this form of bigotry. Collins, in a conversation with NBA commentators Charles Barkley and Kenny Smith, explicitly linked his coming out to the Civil Rights Movement and not accepting second-class citizenship; meanwhile, Charles and Kenny nodded in agreement and support. He later reiterated that he was motivated by the growing movement as well as by those seeking to perpetuate second-class citizenship for LGBT people:

> *The strain of hiding my sexuality became almost unbearable in March, when the U.S. Supreme Court heard arguments for and against same-sex marriage. Less than three miles from my apartment, nine jurists argued about my happiness and my future. Here was my chance to be heard.*

While the actions of Collins and other established athletes have been important, the number one reason for the sea change on LGBT issues is generational. Every poll shows that the younger you are, the less homophobic you are likely to be. This was shown even more clearly when 22-year-old Brittney Griner, perhaps the best women's basketball player ever, came out two weeks before Jason Collins. She did so with such ease that sportswriters struggled to come to terms with the announcement, asking, "Is she really coming out if she was never really in?"

However, we're still waiting for the dinosaurs to catch up with the younger generations. Indeed, while Griner made her announcement with ease, the number of out-of-the-closet professional female athletes can be counted on two hands. In fact, I would argue that in women's sports, a McCarthyite anti-LGBT atmosphere exists that is uglier and more explicit than the "don't ask, don't tell" attitude that's been the historical norm in men's sports. As Sherry Wolf wrote in *The Nation*:

> *When current and former women's college basketball players were surveyed, 55 percent said that "sexual orientation is an underlying topic of conversation with college recruiters." The practice is known as "negative recruiting," and according to ESPN, "homophobic pitches are unique to women's games. They are an open secret in college hoops, almost as open as the fact that there are lesbians who play and coach."*

The most notorious example of this comes from Hall of Fame Penn State coach Rene Portland, whose slogan for player conduct during

her 27-year reign was, "no drinking, no drugs, no lesbians." That's what heightens the importance of Brittney Griner's coming out. But what also made it matter was Brittney Griner herself. In her *New York Times* op-ed she wrote:

> *Nobody should have to hear the types of things I did or to feel the way I have. The good news is that I do see change coming. It might be slow, but there are so many positive signs. After being drafted by the Phoenix Mercury and with more media acknowledging my sexuality, I've received more hugs, tweets, thank-yous and well-wishes in regard to being "out" than ever. Countless people have come up to me and thanked me for being proud of who I am. It's my job now to, I hope, be a light who inspires others.*

Then there is Kye Allums. The first transgender player in NCAA history, Kye has become an activist, speaking out about what it means to be a trans athlete. The decisions of Collins and Griner, as well as Kye Allums, will save lives. The fact that they are out is huge. The support they are receiving speaks volumes. By coming out in the world of sports, they are doing something truly radical. Sports—perhaps more than any other institution—is how gender is socialized. Indeed, I would argue that this persistence of equating manhood and potency with conquest, heterosexuality, and hero worship is why there has been and continues to be so much tragic connectivity between jock culture and rape culture. The ongoing stories—from places like Steubenville, Ohio, and Torrington, Connecticut, where groups of male teammates are collectively implicated in sexual assault—are not coincidences.

The hope today is that Jason Collins' visibility will lead to a greater visibility of lesbian athletes as well. The hope is also that the mere existence of public transgender athletes forces the sports world to re-examine binomial gender categorizations. But for now, we are in a position to rejoice. As Martina Navratilova exhorts: "Now that Collins has led this watershed moment, I think—and hope—there will be an avalanche. Come out, come out wherever and whoever you are. It is beautiful out here and I guarantee you this: You will never, ever want to go back. You will only wonder why it took so long."

Journalist Matt Taibbi famously described Wall Street firm Goldman Sachs as a "vampire squid" with tentacles reaching greedily into every aspect of our lives. There is an understandable temptation to look at sports as a vampire squid on steroids, if you'll pardon the expression. Sports today is about big business, gentrification, and corporate welfare. As I've aimed to show, it is also about race and gender socialization. But there is another side to this. Because sports holds such powerful sway in our culture, it also becomes an arena in which the injustices it perpetuates can be dramatically challenged.

There are two traditions that intertwine through the course of sports history. The first is that of greedy white male power, embodied for instance by the late New York Yankees owner George Steinbrenner. The second tradition is that of Jackie Robinson, Muhammad Ali, Billie Jean King, Pat Tillman, Jason Collins, and countless other true sports heroes. The powers that be typically seek to either whitewash this tradition from the record or make it so inoffensive that it becomes the nutritional equivalent of rice pudding. But no amount of revisionism can undo the social and political progress that these athletes have championed. Today's problems are real, but this does not negate or trivialize the successes of yesterday. Think of Jackie and his sharecropper family and on-field discrimination; of Muhammad and his boxing ban and the horrors of the Vietnam War; of Billie and Bobby Riggs and Title IX. Think of Pat Tillman and the international outrage against American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; of Jason Collins and the national groundswell in favor of equal rights for the LGBT community.

We have a stake, as I have attempted to demonstrate, in rescuing this tradition of progressive struggle from the memory hole. Through sports we can see past, present, and future with a startling clarity, and we can connect that vision to people who otherwise would not give a damn.

I argue that we can, and should, update C.L.R. James' famous maxim, "What do they know of cricket who only cricket know," and instead say, "What do we know of sports if we aren't looking at politics," or perhaps even, "what do we know of politics if we aren't looking at sports?"