Athlete Activism: Social Change Through Sport

Athlete activism occurs when athletes use their platform (visibility, inherent social power, and wealth) to speak out or build awareness about a cause or issue. Current trends in athlete activism include focus on racism, gender discrimination, the rights of disabled individuals, and inequalities related to LGBTQ rights (Agyemang, Singer, DeLorme, 2010; Kauffman & Wolff, 2010; Smith, Bundon, & Best, 2016). Athletes demonstrate before games, make statements during press conferences, start foundations, and raise awareness.

Activism can have positive impacts on an athlete’s life, such as providing a greater sense of purpose and community (Hope et al., 2017). Activists are susceptible to burnout because they invest time and emotion into activism (Goodwin & Pfaff, 2001). Engaging in activism may have negative consequences, such as criticism and loss of playing time, endorsements, or contracts (Kaufman, 2008).

Potential Positive and Negative Impact of Athlete Activism

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<tr>
<th>Sense of purpose</th>
<th>Stress &amp; Anxiety</th>
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<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Burnout</td>
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<td>Greater social, academic, leadership, &amp; vocational skills</td>
<td>Depression</td>
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<td>Can help racial or ethnic minorities cope with the stress and isolation that may result from oppression or discrimination</td>
<td>Illness or poor physical health</td>
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<td>Substance use</td>
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<td>Exacerbate mental health issues</td>
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<td>Public criticism</td>
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“Sport is a microcosm of society” – Billie Jean King

Athletes navigate multiple environments within and outside of their sporting domains. When supporting athletes’ desire to engage in activism, it’s important to see them as people first.

Seeing athletic-identity as the only role for an athlete to develop can have negative implications for sport-performance and personal development. Supporting development of many different roles and participation in the community around those roles, can positively influence how an athlete navigates performance, relationships, organizations, & society.
How can I Support and Facilitate Athlete Activism?

Athletes as Whole People
• Acknowledge that athletes are whole people with multiple intersecting identities.
• Cultivating multiple identities is psychologically healthier than focusing on athletic identity alone.
• Allow opportunities for athletes & team to recognize, appreciate, & discuss their varied identities.

Something Greater Than Self
• Reinforce that it is Ok for athletes to care about something greater than themselves.
• Relate to what it means to be a part of a team - and thus, member of society - working together towards a greater purpose than each could reach on own.

Athlete Impact
• Reinforce the impact athletes and sport in general can have on wider society.
• Empower their power! Athletes are important people in society; give them a voice.
• Teach athletes and teams how to use that voice effectively.

Roadblocks and “Haters”
• Identify and discuss what roadblocks & challenges may occur in the process of activism.
• Help them devise strategies ahead of time to manage those challenges.
• Help athletes transfer mental skills & sports lessons to the situation, for example: dealing with distractions, taking criticism, communication, focus on process.

Activism Self-Care Plan
• Establish a plan to take care of self: time-outs, days off, having a support team.
• Utilize mental health/sport psychology services.

Where can I learn more about Athlete Activism?


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