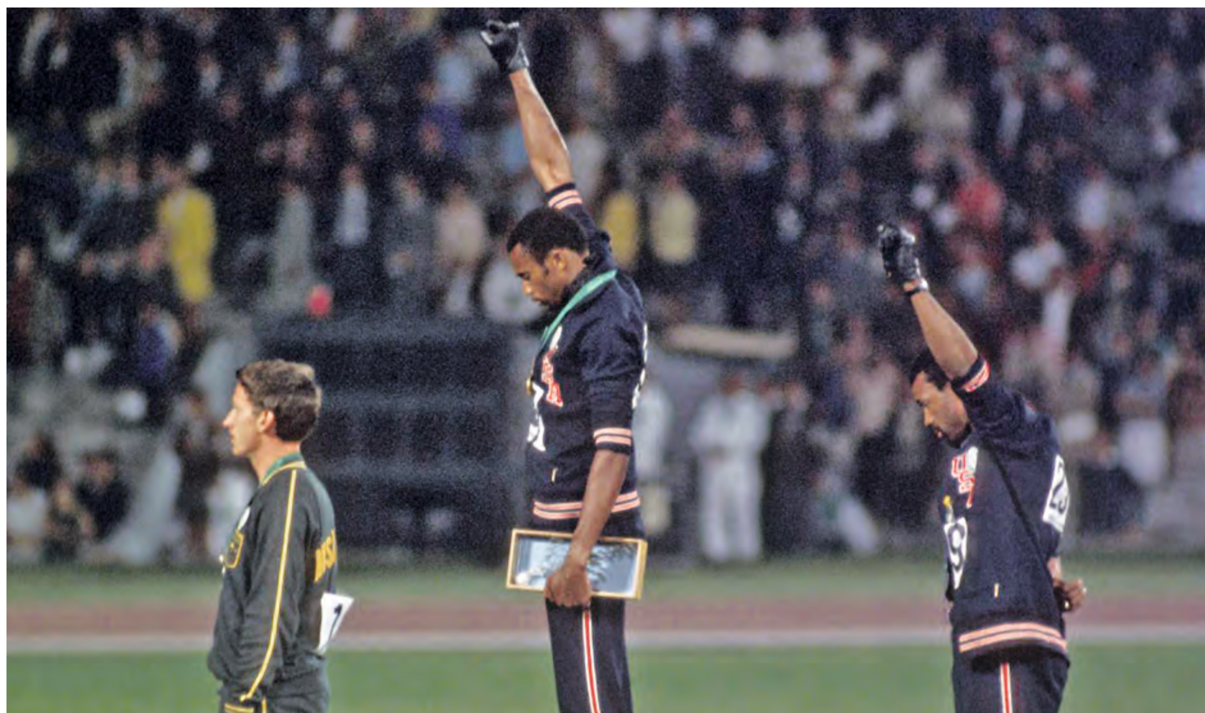
"That's my 15 minutes in the sun"

An Interview with John Carlos

By David Davis



Black Power demonstration after the 200 m race by Tommie Smith (middle) and John Carlos (right). Silver medallist Peter Norman stands at left. They were jeered by the crowd.

Editor's Note: As the 50th anniversary of the 1968 Mexico City Olympics approaches, the Journal of Olympic History is looking back at some of the key events, athletes, and images from those Games. This interview with sprinter John Carlos was originally published in The Los Angeles Review of Books in October of 2015. The text has been edited very slightly for clarity purposes.

John Carlos knows how his obituary will likely begin: "John Carlos, who along with teammate Tommie Smith shocked the world with their 'Black Power' salute on the victory stand at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics ..."

The oft-reproduced image of that moment created a powerful, complicated legacy that has evolved over the past 50 years. In the immediate aftermath, and for decades thereafter, Carlos struggled to find peace. His marriage dissolved, steady employment was a challenge, and he was rebuffed by the powers-that-be that ruled organised sports, despite his credentials as an elite sprinter.

He eventually found a healthy equilibrium. He remarried and worked and coached for many years at Palm Springs High School. Perhaps more importantly, he watched as media coverage and public opinion shifted in his favour. He and Smith are now respected and praised for their courage in using the Olympic platform to express outrage about racial inequality in America.

San Jose State University unveiled a statue of the podium moment in 2005; John Dominis's iconic photograph of the demonstration was included in the Life Books anthology *100 Photographs That Changed the World*. Smith and Carlos have been feted and honoured by several halls of fame. Meanwhile, the National Anthem at sporting events in the USA has become a controversial flashpoint for demonstrations and counter-demonstrations.

In 2011, with help from *The Nation* columnist Dave Zirin, Carlos wrote *The John Carlos Story*[1]. The memoir taps into the blunt loquaciousness that Carlos attributes to his upbringing in Harlem. Born in 1945, he attended Machine and Metal Trades High School and ran for the vaunted Pioneer Track Club (teammates included Bob Beamon and Vince Matthews). He eventually made his way to San Jose State, which in the 1960s was emerging as a sprint powerhouse (nicknamed "Speed City") as well as a hotbed for social protest among African-American athletes.

Under the leadership of Harry Edwards, a former athlete who had become a sociology professor, Carlos, Smith, and other athletes formed the Olympic Project for Human Rights. They threatened to boycott the 1968 Mexico City Olympics unless their central demands were addressed: restore the title of heavyweight champion to Muhammad Ali; remove Avery Brundage as the head of the International Olympic Committee; ban South Africa and Rhodesia from Olympic competition; boycott the New York Athletic Club over its racist admission policy; and hire more African-American coaches to national and collegiate teams.

Only one demand was actually met: South African and Rhodesian athletes were barred from participating in the 1968 Olympics. But the athletes decided to compete, realizing that a boycott would only have penalized them. (Lew Alcindor, later known as Kareem Abdul Jabbar, was playing college basketball for UCLA; he refused to compete for the United States in Mexico City.)

On 16th October 1968, Tommie Smith won the 200-metre sprint, clocking a world record time of 19.83 seconds. John Carlos took third as Peter Norman, a white runner from Australia, nipped him at the tape for the silver medal.

Later, the three mounted the podium inside the Estadio Olímpico Universitario and accepted their medals. Smith and Carlos each wore a single black glove; they stood without shoes, in black socks, with beads draped around their necks. Norman wore an Olympic Project for Human Rights button in solidarity. As the National Anthem began to play, Smith and Carlos bowed their heads and raised their black-gloved fists into the gloaming and immortality.

I first met John Carlos several years ago, when he was still living in Southern California. On the occasion of the anniversary of his and Smith's demonstration, I spoke to him by phone from his current home outside of Atlanta.

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DAVID DAVIS: We last spoke when you were living out here in Southern California. How are you enjoying life on the East Coast?

JOHN CARLOS: I'm extremely happy to be back here on the East Coast. I'm a New Yorker. You stay in California so long you almost forget that there's a God, in terms of the autumn leaves and the change of the seasons and so forth.

Do you have family nearby?

My youngest daughter is here in Georgia, and my son is in Virginia, and my oldest daughter is in Jersey. So, we're all pretty close right now.

You write that, growing up in Harlem, you became acquainted with Malcolm X and actually followed him around. How did that come to happen?

I hooked up with Malcolm X because the first time I heard Malcolm X on the radio I was intrigued with what he had to say and more so how he was saying it. He said it with so much dignity and so much strength. With the exception of my father, I didn't hear too many black people talk in that manner: somebody with a clear mind saying that I had the right to speak on these issues. I was compelled to go down there to fill some of these gaps in my mind. I was trying to find answers.

200 m final: Tommie Smith won in the world record time of 19.8 seconds (electronically 19.83), while John Carlos (left), winner at the US Olympic trials, only took bronze.

I asked my dad, could I go down to the mosque on 116th Street and hear this guy Malcolm X? My dad told me, "Son, you can go down there, but don't go down there and get in no trouble."

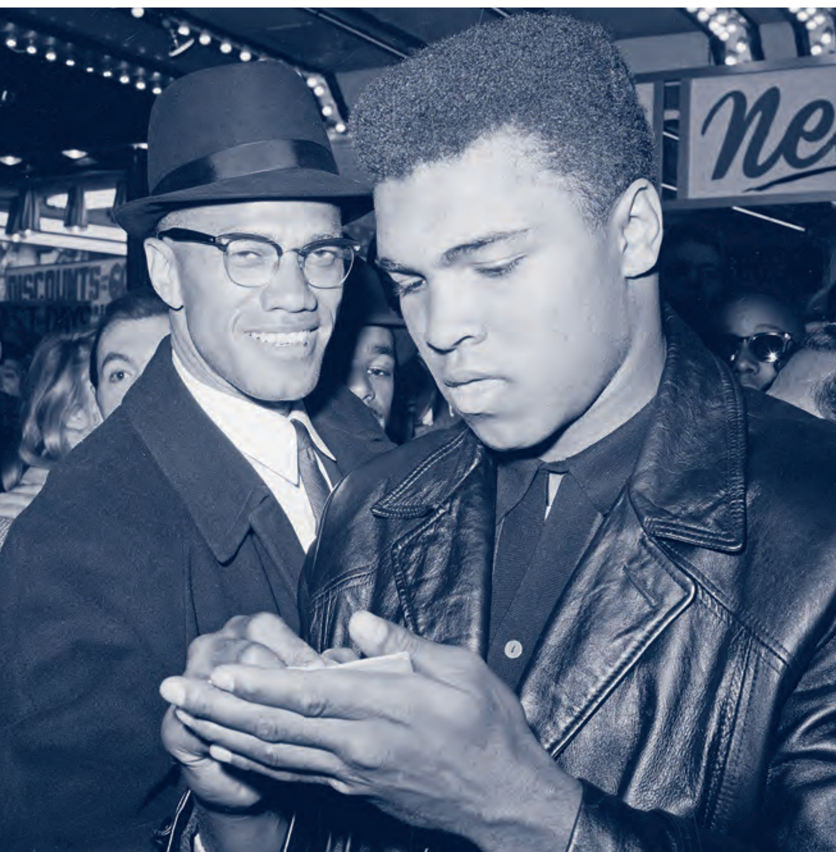
So I went down there and quite naturally when I got there I was in the blind. I didn't know who Malcolm was or what he looked like, anything. Someone had to point him out to me. I remember telling the guy, "Man, that can't be Malcolm X." He said, "That's him." I said, "Can't be." He said, "Why?" I said, "Man, 'cause he's too light-skinned. Malcolm X is a black guy. This guy is like the Black Jew, right?" He went to the podium and began to speak. It wasn't a matter of seconds before I realized that this is the guy.

Did you consider joining the Nation of Islam then or later?

No, I didn't consider joining the Nation of Islam. I didn't need to go with the Muslims. My upbringing was that every man's an island within himself. I've always carried myself that way. As a youngster I also went down to Adam Clayton Powell's church [in Harlem]. I didn't go to his church for religion as much as I went there to find answers to questions that when I asked adults at the time just couldn't give me the answers. I was trying to find answers to fill these voids in my mind.

In the run-up to the 1968 Olympics, you also met Martin Luther King Jr. What was his response to the idea of a boycott?

The boycott was in full swing. Our foundation [the Olympic Project for Human Rights] was developed



Heavyweight boxing world champion Muhammad Ali accompanied by Black Muslims leader Malcolm X. They had just watched the film of Ali's title fight against Sonny Liston in New York in the Trans-Lux News-reel Theater.

Photo: picture-alliance/AP

already. Dr. Harry Edwards was the orator of what was taking place. Dr. Ken Noel was the orchestrator, you might say. And, of course, the athletes – we were the body of the organisation.

What was important about this meeting was Dr. King wanted to make it very clear that he applauded what we were doing or what we were attempting to do. He applauded the fact that we were doing it with such vigor and not having fear, for knowing that we were doing the right thing. The greatest thing of all, he said, was the fact that it was a nonviolent entity.

I had a discussion with Dr. King as regards to why he would get involved in the boycott because he wasn't an Olympian. He wasn't an athlete. He told me,

"It's just like that pebble in the lake. You know, you can take a boat out to the centre of the lake and sit there until everything is serene, and then drop a pebble in the lake. It creates vibrations. It creates waves. That pebble is the Olympic boycott. Everything in the lake will know that there is something amiss. Everything on the shores of the lake will know that something's amiss. The greatest thing is that you will wake society up as to the ills of society and you don't have to harm anybody physically to do it."

You mentioned Dr. Harry Edwards as being the leader and spokesperson for the Olympic Project for Human Rights. Did you or any of the other athletes resent the fact that Edwards did not accompany you to Mexico City once you decided to compete?

Harry Edwards knew that he was in a life-threatening situation, just like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. did. A lot of things that happened to Professor Edwards leading up to this potential boycott people had no knowledge of. The fact that they grabbed a big black German Shepherd and stabbed the dog and left it in his doorway and left a note on the dog telling him, "Nigger, this is you and you're next." To try and intimidate him, to break him down in as many ways as they possibly could.

I felt that, I'm out there getting ready to run. I'm not concerned about my well-being because I'm committed. The government is supposed to protect me because I'm representing the government. [Edwards] was an outsider to the government. His commitment didn't have to be the same as mine in terms of going into a hostile situation. You know, who's going to protect him? What protection would he have? As time goes on, and you mature, then you begin to look at these things from a different perspective.

One of the demands of the Olympic Project for Human Rights was the removal of Avery Brundage as head of the International Olympic Committee. Did you ever meet or speak with Brundage?

No. I had no personal contact with him. I felt very close to him relative to the issues that were at hand. In other words, when he said certain things, I think it was directed to individuals such as myself and my group. He was in our face saying various things.

I think the only way you're going to come to an agreement is where you have some opportunities to sit down and have dialogue. We didn't have dialogue with nobody relative to the rights or wrongs about that boycott. They were telling us, "You better not do nothing," and we had our attitude: "We're gonna make you all make some changes."

Looking back, do you think Brundage was a racist or was this a generational divide that he did not understand where you were coming from?

I think he was a racist, a bigot. Without a doubt. You can't change history. History speaks for itself. I would have to add that, when Avery Brundage was at the Olympics in 1968, Avery Brundage was an old man. He might have been the head of the Olympics, but he was surrounded by people that had the same flavour, or the same attitude, as he had and that were actually supporting or encouraging him to make his stand or make his statement or do the things that he did. So, it wasn't just Avery Brundage himself. He was the figurehead. But that can never be taken away from his history because he's proven all along where he stood relative to race relations.

[Brundage] participated in 1912 against Jim Thorpe [at the Stockholm Olympics]. I don't think that he was too happy with the fact that Jim Thorpe, being a Native

Indian, was decorated the way he was from those Games. And when you strip a man of everything – to strip him of all his awards, to strip him of all his medals because he took two dollars and fifty cents to feed his family playing a game that didn't have anything to do with the Olympics at the time – it's like you're trying to take his existence away. It was a directive toward Jim Thorpe to send a signal to everyone else. Just like what they did with Tommie and I in 1968, saying to the world, "We took their medals away." Which was nonsense. It was out and out propaganda to intimidate anyone else for having a mind of their own.[2]

You have forceful words for another iconic figure, Jesse Owens, after he tried to persuade you and other black athletes not to stage a public protest at the Olympics. Why do you think Jesse Owens sided with the establishment?

Jesse Owens truly believed in the Olympic Movement, the ideals of the Olympics. I think Jesse Owens wanted the same end results as we wanted, but based on him being old-school, his attitude was that we should conform and talk and smile, and eventually by us being good guys and great athletes that things will just change, that they'll wake up one morning and say, "Oh, well, let's do the right thing."

I loved Jesse Owens like he was my grandfather. But I think Jesse Owens realized that he was used, in the sense that he realized that nothing changed. One time, Jesse Owens was in the Rose Bowl Parade [in the 1970s]. I got up around 4 o'clock to go out there, to be at the staging area early. It was cold, misting, raining. I see Jesse, and he's shaking, his nose running all over. I said, "Jesse, what's happening, man? You got no blanket? They didn't get you soup, coffee, anything?" And he said to me, "John, I keep asking them for it. They keep telling me they're going to bring it, but they never brought anything."

I looked at him and I could see tears in his eyes. He realized that, he didn't mean no more to them than he did when he went to give that speech after he got back from the '36 Olympics. Like, they put him on the freight elevator to bring him up to go give his speech, and then didn't even ask him if he would like to have a cup of coffee or a sandwich. It was the same situation when he was on that float.

I think that he felt like he had made the wrong move by encouraging us not to do certain things. I had to reassure him that he didn't do anything wrong. By my estimation, he did what he felt was right. But at the same time I told myself we all were trying to get to the same point at the end: to try and have some equality among all individuals.

You mentioned that many people believe you were stripped of your Olympic medals, when in fact that did not happen. What do people to this day misunderstand about your protest at the 1968 Olympics?

Well, I don't think they really understand because the story has never really been told from our perspective. Most of the books that you read, I would say that 88 percent or more [of the authors] have never sat down and interviewed John Carlos about what happened. They read Brent Musburger's columns and other individuals' columns and figured they could put a story together. But they never sat down and talked with me. I don't know how much they've talked with Tommie. But I know for a fact that they can't tell a story they know nothing about and not come and inquire from me as to what went down, why it went down, why it was necessary.

USOC President Douglas Roby stood on a table in the Olympic Village to announce to the press that Smith and Carlos had both been expelled from the US team. Below: both athletes left the Olympic Village before this decision.

Photos: picture-alliance/AP

Even when you came to my classroom [in Palm Springs] and we were talking about some books that were written at that time, I said to you then, "These individuals never sat down with me and talked to me." Most of them depicted me as being the villain, the bad guy, out of the whole situation.

Why do you think they painted you with that brush?

For the same reason as Muhammad Ali: because we were the most vocal.

In Mexico City, what were you thinking about just prior to climbing the victory podium?

It started a long time before Mexico. My thoughts were about why it would be necessary to bring about an Olympic boycott. I felt very strongly that it was the correct method. Things were not on an equal playing field. Things were distorted to the outside world – and when I say the "outside world," I'm talking about outside the United States. They had a different interpretation in terms of how blacks or people of colour were treated in the United States, that we ran around the world with the USA jersey on with the impression that all is well, we're happy, we're taken care of back at our homes. Where else better to say that this was not necessarily the truth other than the Olympic Games? I couldn't go to the Super Bowl and do it. I couldn't go out in front of the Apollo Theater and do it. *The New York Times* wouldn't give me the opportunity to do it. But God gave me the will and the power to be an athlete, an athlete that qualified to go to the Olympic Games and get to the podium. That's my 15 minutes in the sun.

If I chose to stand there, put my hands to my side and tears running down my face, that's my prerogative. But if I chose to take that 15 minutes in the sun and speak on the ills of society that people of my race and other races had to endure, and I chose to take that time to exploit those things, then that's what was necessary for me. That was my motivation for training and going to the Olympic Games. It wasn't about going there to win no medal.

How would you describe your relationship with Tommie Smith back then?

We were teammates. Tommie was a little ahead of me. When I got there [to San Jose State], I think Tommie was pretty much done running for the school. When he got done running for the school, and I wasn't eligible to run for the school the first year I got there, we ran for the Santa Clara Youth Village team. We got to be pretty tight. I'm an outgoing guy. Tommie's more like an introvert type guy. But we had respect for one another as men. We had more respect for one another as competitors. I didn't have no misgivings about Tommie.

When was the idea broached to do something on the podium, because there have been various and conflicting accounts about that?

There's been a lot of talk about how it came about, but I'm going to give you my version. My version is, after I ran that semifinal, I told Tommie that I wanted to make a statement. I was disenchanted with the fact that the Olympic boycott was called off. I said, "What's your take?" He said, "Well, man, I'm with you on that." I said to him, "Well, what do we have to bring to the table?" Artifacts, that is. He said he had some gloves. I said, "Bring 'em." I said I have beads. Bring 'em. He had a black scarf. Bring 'em. I had a black shirt to cover up over my USA uniform. Bring 'em.

We decided that the black socks that we had been running in all day, we would take our shoes off and roll our pants up so they could see the black socks. We would take the gloves to illustrate that we're talking about black people first and black problems first before we talk about the Olympics. The essence of the black gloves was that this was the first time the [Summer] Olympics were actually televised in colour. All of these things played a certain scenario to make the big picture.

I suggested that we take the Puma shoes out there because as a kid in high school I ran in Puma shoes. Not only did I run in Puma shoes, I used to work for the Puma shoe company. I felt I owed an allegiance to Puma. With Adidas, if you weren't a superstar athlete, a known athlete, you couldn't get their product. Puma would give their product to anybody that needed it and a lot of black athletes – girls and guys – needed that. I've never forgotten the fact that they supported those black kids. If you look at the way the shoes were placed on the victory stand, Mr. Smith took his shoes and placed them behind him. I took my shoes and put it where everybody could clearly see the Puma logo. I remember people after the Games said, "Well, the shoe company paid those guys $2 million to put it out there." Man, they didn't give us two cents.

You have stated that you slowed down the stretch in the 200-metre finals to allow Tommie Smith to pass you, something that he has refuted in his own memoir[3]*. Do you stand by your statement?*

The truth is the light. You can be upset all you want. The truth is the light.

Do you think that he would not have participated in the protest without winning the gold medal?

I don't know whether that would have happened. I think it was very important for Tommie to win that race for a lot of reasons. Bottom line is this: I think it was extremely important that two individuals be out there, as opposed to one, because had it been one they'd have wrote you off as being crazy. You'd have been the sacrificial lamb, buried under and forgotten. The fact that there were two individuals doing it was the most important thing. The race was secondary. The only thing essential about the race was that I had to win a medal to get on the victory stand.

Did you anticipate what would happen afterwards, in terms of the negative reaction by the United States

Olympic Committee and the media?

If you remember back in time, years ago when you came out to visit me in my classroom, I told you that I had an epiphany, a vision, when I was a kid. I was in a forum standing on a box. I'm on this box by myself. I didn't know what a stadium was, I didn't know what a podium was. And all the people in the stadium are excited – "Yippee-kayeah!" – and it dawned on my little brain that they must be applauding what I did. By the time I got my arm up there just about where you see it in the actual photo, all the good times and the "Yippee-kayeah" turned to anger and venom. In a split second they started hissing and throwing shit and name-calling.

It scared the shit out of me, to be honest with you. It scared me so much that at dinner that night my father could see that something was wrong. He asked me what's the matter. I said, "Daddy, I was in a movie. Daddy, everybody was happy about something I did, and then they got mad at me and they start throwing things at me and calling me names and spitting at me."

I never forgot this: my father brought me to his chest and said, "Son, no one's going to bother you. My job is to protect you, to love you, to feed you, to house you, to see that you get a good education." Then he said over my head to my mother, "Looks like God has something special in mind for this kid. We're gonna have to wait and see."

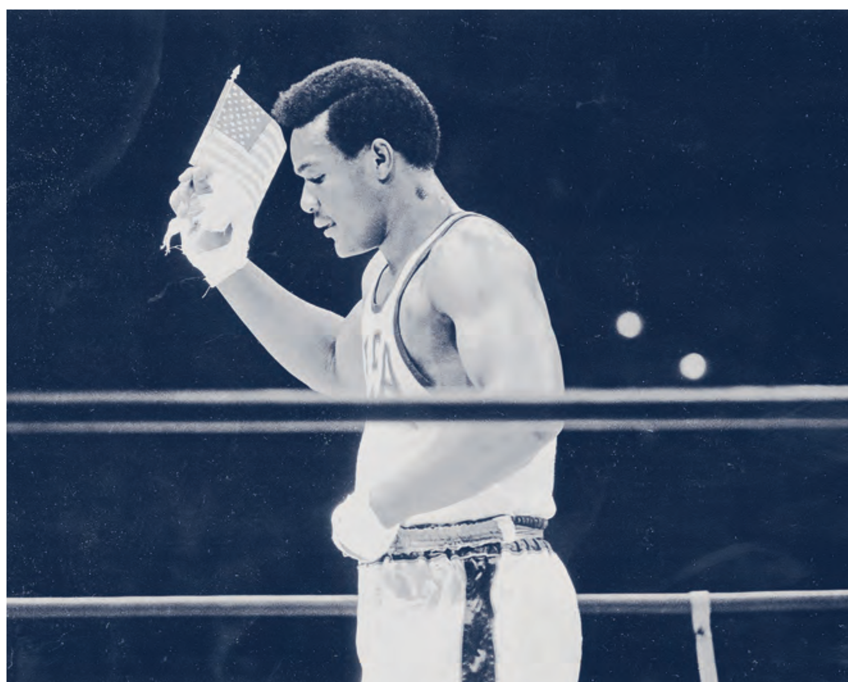
Fifteen years later, man, I'm on that victory stand. That's exactly what happened. So, in terms of the anguish and the attitude that people had, that was in that vision as well. I think the thing that carried me all these years is what my father said when he brought me into his chest. That he was there to protect me and that he loved me. I think that kept me strong through the whole scenario.

You didn't do many interviews in Mexico City right after. Why not?

The BBC interviewed us in Mexico City. We gave them like an exclusive. We didn't talk to anybody but the BBC at that time.

Howard Cosell [with ABC] didn't bring me into the studio. Years later I ran into him and he wanted to talk about the fact that he brought Tommie into the studio and had me sit out in the lobby. He said, "Let me tell you why. Because your mind is so sharp, before I could ask you a question, you've got the answer. You were just too sharp for us at that time and we were scared to bring you out there." I said, "It didn't matter, Howard, because it wasn't about what I said but what I did. That speaks volumes."

I think about this guy Brent Musburger[4]. He was no superstar sports commentator. But when he made that statement calling us "black-skinned storm troopers" – those individuals who had that same mentality were the ones controlling the media. They fanned the fires and made him their hero. He got his career based on the fact that he didn't give a shit about what the cause was for any minorities at that time. And the deep thing is, since that time he's been making his living [as a sports announcer] on the backs of minorities.



Counter-demonstration: heavyweight boxer George Foreman waves the US flag in the ring after his Olympic victory.

Photo: picture-alliance/AP

What about the reaction of some of your teammates, like George Foreman famously celebrating his boxing victory by waving an American flag. Did that surprise you?

I was supposed to go to the fight that night. Pappy Gault [the US Olympic boxing coach] gave me four tickets – two for me, two for Tommie. By the grace of God, we didn't go. Now, George and I were very good friends. Very good friends then, very good friends today. But what happened was, Pappy put the flag in George Foreman's hands and pushed George out there. George didn't even realize what he had until the people started going crazy when they saw the flag. And, that was to counteract the demonstration.

Like I always tell people, "I was at highest level in my career [in Mexico City], and George was at the bottom, and we passed along the way as I'm coming down and he's rising up." I have love for George as much then as now. George didn't have any ill feelings against us. I've never called George "Uncle Tom," like some of my teammates did. I've always had respect for George. He was just a young guy from Texas that didn't really have an understanding as to what the real issues were at that time. He was put in a situation, and it helped him immensely.

Sprinter Lee Evans won the 400 metres and wore a black beret on the victory stand. What did you think of that?

In 2016 a ticker tape parade at San Jose University celebrated the homecoming of Tommie Smith and John Carlos.

Photos: picture-alliance/AP

Lee Evans chose to try to straddle the fence. One foot in, one foot out. Like he was saying, "I understand what the black cause is, but I'm afraid to offend my oppressors." One minute you have the Black Panther beret on, and then the next minute you take it off and stand at attention with tears in your eyes. That kind of thing. Either you're with something or you're against it.

What about the African-American women athletes who expressed solidarity with your demonstration?

We were narrow-minded in not having the women have more input into what was taking place. I think that was the only flaw we might have had – the fact that women weren't involved. They should have been involved because the issues affected them, their kids, on down the line. I feel that they'd have been just as strong about what took place, because after the demonstration had taken place, although they might have felt slighted, they were in big support of what we did. They were probably more supportive than a lot of the men were.

The photograph of you and Tommie Smith on the podium has been reprinted so many times over the years that I wonder what goes through your mind when you look at it today?

It's part of our world history. We started out being concerned with black people in particular and people of colour in general. But then over time – almost 50 years, man – it's come full circle to the point where you realize that you don't have to be black or you don't have to be red or you don't have to be yellow: you can be white and still be a very depressed or oppressed race of people. In other words, that demonstration was like a giant mushroom. It just kept getting taller and wider. It just expanded. I think it's expanded to the point where it's encompassing everyone – even the people leaving Syria right now, the migrants. Everyone is under that mushroom, you might say.

You wrote about how difficult things were for you after the 1968 Olympics. What was the worst thing that happened?

The most devastating thing was that it broke up my first marriage. It drove my wife to lose her mental capacity, to the point where she took her life. So, that was the greatest pain in the whole scenario. Everyone who was involved – from Peter Norman to Tommie Smith as well as myself – the situation broke up all of our marriages.

It was difficult for my kids in school. It was hard on me to have to go out and hustle every day. If there's 30 days in a month, to have to hustle for 29 days to try to get your mortgage together – beg, borrow, or steal – it was exhausting. I might have one day to rest, and then the very next day I had to get back on it again. I just refused to lose my house.

I'll never forget a guy by the name of Ron Freeman, who used to run for Arizona State, came to my house one time. My wife and I were strong individuals, strong to the point where we would never go to anyone and ask them for any handout or anything. He went to get some water in the kitchen and he happened to look into the cabinets and the fridge and he didn't see no food. He went out and came back later on, like two–three hours later, with

bags of groceries for our kids. He brought my wife and I to tears. He stepped up to help his fellow man.

I'd say the first 35 years afterwards nobody came and gave me a nickel for milk for my kids. I'm talking about black people that had succeeded on what Tommie Smith, John Carlos, and Peter Norman did. They knew it was a tremendous sacrifice. They knew that we had kids. It never came.

My sister took her life – this was years ago – so I can relate to the challenges and the unique grief in the aftermath of suicide.

You question yourself and say, "Is there anything I could've done?" You know they're in pain. They're in so much pain. But the greatest pain you have is the fact that you can't do nothing to help them.

You mentioned the span of 35 years: What changed that brought people to respect what you had done? Was it the passage of time?

I think it was a combination of a lot of things. But the main thing is, it goes back to what I said earlier about my convictions. I never wavered. I knew in my soul then – and I know even more so today – what we did was right. I stood fast by what I believed to be right. I think a lot of people admired the fact that I stood by my convictions and, at the same time, they came to see that we were right. Tommie and I were ahead of society.

You write about working for Puma at the 1972 Olympics in Munich. When did you sense that some of the people getting Puma sneakers and warm-ups might not be athletes and, in fact, turned out to be the Palestinian terrorists?

I didn't sense it. I knew for a fact that they weren't the real deal. See, Puma had a shop there in the Athlete's Village and they were giving gear out. I saw all these guys coming in to get Puma gear. I went to people within Puma and told them, "Don't give these guys nothing. This guy's coming in saying he's so-and-so from such-and-such country. He's no athlete. I've never seen him nowhere representing any nation in track and field."

They said, "It's alright, give it to him." I gave it to him. The end result is, when you see the pictures [of the Palestinian terrorists in Munich], they're all decked out in Puma gear. Puma didn't have a clue.

We live in a different world today, where track stars like Usain Bolt and Michael Johnson are paid well and can compete in multiple Olympic Games. If that was the case when you competed, would you have kept running after Mexico City?

I love the sport of track and field. I think I could have run another 10 years and done exceedingly well. The reason why I left track and field is because I felt like I was at the top of the heap. Tommie had retired from track. I was dominating the sprints – the 100 and the 200. The other guys weren't running to beat me anymore. They were running to see who was going to be second. I felt like the only way I could enhance the sport was for me to step aside and take on another challenge. I thought that I would have a decent chance to go and play football [in the NFL, which Carlos did briefly].

If I had to pick a side – whether I would like to run today or run yesterday – I would choose yesterday all the time. I think it was more competitive. I think it was

All smiles from the "rebels" of Mexico: from right, Tommie Smith, John Carlos, Lee Evans, (all USA) and Peter Norman (Australia) smile during the unveiling of a statue at San Jose State University on 17 October 2005.

"No Regrets": at the victory ceremony John Carlos wore his tracksuit jacket open in solidarity with the blue collar workers. With the chain round his neck was a symbol of remembrance for those who had been victims of lynching. Behind him are Tommie Smith and Peter Norman.

Photo: Getty Images

even more competitive on the psychology side as well as the physical side. I see the athletics, but I don't see the psychology in this modern day.

We sit back and smile now and say, "Man, look at these guys making all this money, and they ain't running nowhere near what we ran back then." And, we know it's between their athletic ability and some sort of juice [i.e., steroids].

Did you see any steroid use back then?

There were no steroids among the sprinters at that time. Nobody really knew about them. The only guys that used anything like that – Dianabol or any of that shit – was the bodybuilders that used to lift weights on Randall's Island [in New York City]. At the same time, you can't say steroids were illegal because there were no rules about what you could take and what you couldn't take back then.

As you know, Los Angeles is positioned to host the 2028 Olympics. What do you think about that?

There's a lot of issues. You have a heartfelt concern for the people in the community. At the same time, you want the athletes to have the chance to expose the talents that God gave them. You also want the city to have a capital gain as well. My feeling is, with capital gain, there should be some sharing of the pie. The Olympics generate a tremendous amount of money. Billions of dollars every four years. Why do you think it takes them four years to put on the Olympics Games? Because it takes them that long to count the money.

What do you think about today's generation of African-American athletes? Are they as socially aware or active as previous generations?

It's about consistency. You can be socially active, such as the players from the St. Louis Rams coming out on the field with the "Hands Up" sign [in the wake of the fatal shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri]. People came and told them that it was wrong and that they didn't have the right to do that. I know a lot of them got silenced about it. They should never be silenced about what's right. They did the right thing. They had the right to step up because they have wives and daughters and sons that they have to be concerned about. They can't talk out of both sides of their mouths, like [former NBA-star-turned-TV-announcer] Charles Barkley.

Socially active? Yeah, we have some of them that's out there. But the difference between me and them is that for nearly 50 years I've been consistent. They're going to have to be consistent in order to try and make change. You can't do a fly-by-night. You can't be, "Well, because people were disenchanted by what I did or how I did it or what I said, I'm going to put my tail between my legs and run." You ain't throwing no firebombs, you ain't shooting nobody. You're just expressing your views on what's happening in your life and time.

Where do you keep your bronze medal from Mexico City?

My medal is with my kids. The medal has no significant value to me.

What are you doing these days now that you're retired?

Generally, I try to make my wife happy. Do a little traveling, go on a couple of cruises. I still go around the country and lecture. I always try and enlighten people as much as I can and at the same time pick up knowledge where I can.

How's your relationship with Tommie Smith? I understand that he lives near you.

Yeah, Tommie's in Georgia. But he's a separatist.

Do you still do appearances together?

Yeah, very occasionally. I let Tommie live his life. I do my thing and let him go and do his thing. My attitude is, we're one. Regardless of what you might think of me, we're joined at the hip for eternity. Long after we're dead and gone, they're not going to mention your name without mentioning mine, nor will they mention mine without yours. But he doesn't seem to understand that, and I guess after 45 years or more I just threw my hands up and said, "God, it's in your hands. I'm done. I can't deal with it no more." ■

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1 John Carlos, Dave Zirin, *The John Carlos Story*, Haymarket Books, 2011

2 Thorpe was stripped of the medals he won in Stockholm after it was discovered that he had received money for playing minor league baseball. That violated the amateur-only rules of the Olympics of that era. Later, after Brundage became head of the IOC in 1952, he rebuffed efforts to restore Thorpe's medals and records.

3 Tommie Smith, David Steele, *Silent Gesture: The Autobiography of Tommie Smith*, Temple University Press, 2007

4 At that time a reporter with the Chicago American newspaper.