A Perfect Storm: Black Feminism and Women’s National Basketball Association Black Athlete Activism

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This article pays homage to Black Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) players and their activist efforts. Such players are often-overlooked activists who are always “holdin it down” while simultaneously keeping activism at the forefront of their agenda. When the 2020 Women’s National Basketball Association season opened, the athletes in this league took the opportunity to highlight social injustice in the United States; not surprising given the history of Black feminism and athlete activism in this league. Using underwater waves as a metaphor, we examine how the intersectionality of Black feminism and Black athlete activism has largely gone unnoticed. Feminism and women’s rights movements have largely been associated with White women while Black activism has been associated with Black men. This manuscript aims to highlight the efforts of Black women and nonbinary athletes whose work has been instrumental in societal progression.

March 12, 2020 created the perfect storm. The COVID-19 pandemic forced the shutdown of all sports leagues across the world, and people were forced to stay home in an attempt to stop the spread of the virus. In the early months of the pandemic, news updates regarding the virus occupied a bulk of airtime for many outlets until May 25th, when George Floyd was murdered and the global resurgence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement ensued and there was a demand for the reckoning of perpetual mistreatment of Black people as mere bodies (as opposed to holistic humans with minds, thoughts, and feelings) in America (Buchanan et al., 2020). With the closure of leagues across the country, professional athletes joined their community members in the streets as protesters demanding racial reckoning—and human rights (Suddler, 2021).

The resumption of the National Basketball Association (NBA) season in the “bubble” featured a concerted effort to intertwine the importance of the BLM movement by not only the Black players on the teams, but the league as a whole (Williams, 2022). The Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) also opened their “wubble” and dedicated their 2020 season in honor of Breonna Taylor; a Black woman and emergency medical technician who was murdered by police in her bed while she slept (West, 2020). The move was not surprising given the long history of WNBA athletes (who are predominantly Black women) and their engagement in activism. These players have historically been some of the primary activists for social issues, oftentimes without much support, job security, and/or proper credit given (Cooky & Antunovic, 2020; McClearen & Fischer, 2021). Unfortunately, this lack of acknowledgement is nothing new for Black women and nonbinary folks in sport (or, at large). The history of women’s sport has typically focused on White women and the history of racialized sport and athlete activism has focused on Black men (Brown, 2018). The current body of work aims to centralize the efforts of Black women and nonbinary athletes along the lines of activism to explain why they have been historically erased, and to ensure that their erasure is no longer allowed.

White men have largely controlled access to women’s sport throughout all levels (local to international) and have historically determined what types of sports women are permitted to participate in. As such, women and nonbinary folks have negotiated and fought for access to the same opportunities as their male counterparts (Cahn, 2015; Hall, 2016; Hargreaves, 2002). Women’s sporting opportunities were largely contingent on culturally acceptable activities, shown at the turn of the 20th century when sport focused on the inclusion of middle to upper class White women (Cahn, 2015). This is not to suggest that working class women, women of color, or nonbinary folks did not participate in sport. In fact, there were numerous leagues throughout the United States and Canada for these athletes—but not all were fully accepting or inviting of Black women.

Aside from a few key figures (e.g., Wilma Rudolph), little has been published on the history of Black women’s sport (Lansbury, 2014; Tyus & Terzakis, 2018) or the ways Black women have navigated a sporting landscape that was seemingly not designed and curated for their inclusion (Brown, 2023; Lansbury, 2014). Furthermore, Black women and nonbinary folks have faced the additional barrier of racism in and outside of sport that has impacted their experiences by making it clear that many people adamantly do not want their participation. Bailey and Trudy (2018) have argued that the term “misogynoir” is used specifically to explain these experiences of Black women:

The term is used to describe the unique ways in which Black women are pathologized in popular culture. What happens to Black women in public space isn’t about them being any woman of color. It is particular and has to do with the ways that anti-Blackness and misogyny combine to malign Black women in our world. (p. 763)

Part of the misogynoir that Black women and nonbinary athletes face relates to their exclusion from historical records. Despite mountainous achievements on and off the playing field,
“the most striking feature of the historical record on Black women athletes is neglect” (Rhoden, 2006, p. 198).

Historical records have largely excluded the important roles that Black women and nonbinary folks have played as [athlete] activists, and there remains a critical need to address these “blind spots” (see Mirza, 1997) in literature and to ensure that Black and nonbinary athletes receive the credit they are due. Using Edwards’ “waves” metaphor of athlete activism (Williams, 2021) as a foundation, we argue that the impact of Black women and nonbinary athlete activists has actually changed the sociopolitical climate worldwide by existing as internal waves that are barely visible from the surface. Drawing from the internal waves as a metaphor, this article will critically examine the ways that Black women and nonbinary athlete activists have been major contributors/leaders of human rights movements yet because of misogynoir, and their efforts have largely gone unnoticed. Specifically, we center the activism by Black WNBA players that has largely gone unnoticed, and how the COVID-19 pandemic created the perfect storm that forced people to finally recognize their profound impact. To do so, we engage Black feminist thought as theory in order to place Black women and nonbinary folks at the center of discussion. We are not simply attempting to “add” Black women and nonbinary activists into Edwards’ waves. Rather, we are focusing on the root of their historical exclusion; why have they continually been largely unnoticed (as the internal waves) in regard to athlete activism and movements? In this manuscript, we seek to provide rationale for this very inquiry.

Water and the Black Diaspora

Despite the racist belief/stereotype that “Black people don’t swim,” there is a deep cultural/spiritual connection between people of the African diaspora and the water. Dawson (2018) indicates, “From the fifteenth through the late nineteenth century, the swimming and underwater diving abilities of African-descended peoples regularly surpassed those of Westerners. Most white people could not swim” (p. 11). However, the relationship between Black peoples and the water is long and complicated. As noted by López Pombo (2021),

... between Africa and America there exists a mass of water, the Atlantic Ocean, which can be read from different positions: is it a wall that separates past and present, roots and routes? Or rather a bridge that connects routes and roots? If the former is embraced, it connotes the notion of enslavement; the latter, however, would carry the positive sense of liberation. (p. 26)

Colonization led to the water becoming a place for fear and loss; the final resting place for lynched bodies and the site where stolen family members crossed the ocean never to return again (Hartman, 2008). Conversely, water also served as a site of resistance and opportunity in antebellum South, where enslaved people used waterways to escape plantations, evade dogs, and elude people who hunted them (Gaines & Walker, 2003). Water allowed Black people to challenge colonized terrestrial space, serving as a space of emancipation and self-actualization. As such, water serves as an ideal metaphor for Black activism and resistance. Like the internal waves of the ocean, Black feminists and scholars have participated in activism efforts that exist largely “under the surface” due to misogynoir, lack of proper recognition, and overlooked efforts. Black feminist activists have continually challenged societal norms and battled for racial equity/realization and though their historical work has had great impact, their work is barely recognized from the surface due to existing as an internal wave. Without the internal waves, the storms would never take place and the dreams of racial reckoning might still be just a dream. Put differently, the major movements of racial reckoning would not have been possible without Black women and nonbinary folks—though they don’t get the credit they deserve because of their sociopolitical standing.

To begin the hydrodynamic conceptualization of waves, consider how internal gravity waves are created by the differences in water density and topographical changes of the floor of the ocean. Water closer to the surface is less dense and warmer, while deeper water is more dense and colder. When these waters of different densities meet against a topographical feature, this causes internal waves (Cazenave, 2008). The interaction between the dense cold water and the shallow warmer water results in waves that have enormous amounts of energy and can reach underwater heights of up to 150 m (Zirker, 2013). Yet despite their amplitude, internal waves are often barely visible from the surface. This does not mean that their impact is any less significant. In fact, internal waves influence ocean circulation, currents, generating the jet stream, cyclonic weather fronts, water temperature, and ultimately the climate of the planet. These waves are so powerful that their propagation triggers sea surface temperature changes that cause the switch between La Nina and El Nino. The warm water carried by the internal wave rises up in the eastern Pacific and breaks through the cold temperature associated with La Nina which triggers the El Nino:

El Niño can affect our weather significantly. The warmer waters cause the Pacific jet stream to move south of its neutral position. With this shift, areas in the northern U.S. and Canada are dryer and warmer than usual. But in the U.S. Gulf Coast and Southeast, these periods are wetter than usual and have increased flooding. (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, n.d., para. 4 and 5)

Despite their size and energy, internal waves move very slowly, taking “months or years to cross the full width of the Pacific” (Zirker, 2013, p. 161). As such, their impact differs from that of the high-amplitude destructive surface waves that crash against the shore. The destruction caused by surface waves is visible and attributed to the wave itself. However, with internal waves, their impact is often attributed to the byproducts these waves create. For example, flooding is attributed to rain, not the internal waves which caused El Niño and brought about the climate change that resulted in rain. NOAA n.d.

We use internal water waves as a metaphor for Black women and nonbinary athlete activists because the efforts and work of these people are largely unrecognized despite the energy that these activists bring to human and civil rights movements. Furthermore, when the movements that Black women and nonbinary folks champion have an impact or instigate change, their names are largely absent from overall sport media discussions (see Mertens, 2020). Rather, more “acceptable” people (i.e., White women or Black men) who have stood on the shoulders of Black women and nonbinary activists are given credit (see Rankin-Wright et al., 2020). Black feminists who speak out are perceived as uncivil (especially by White men) and those are the people who largely control and/or moderate the media narrative (Hawkins et al., 2023). The time has now come to center the efforts of Black women. Their erasure from the narrative must no longer be ignored, especially given the way that many contemporary activist movements have largely been driven by Black women and nonbinary athletes (Williams, 2021).

Theoretical Framework: Black Feminist Thought

Black feminist thought as a theoretical and practical movement, emerged out of a need to understand the unique position of Black
women in a society in which it is largely believed that “all the women are White, and all the Blacks are men” (Hull et al., 1982). This message by Hull et al. (1982) continues to be a driving force within the Black feminist movement. Black women and their work matter and they deserve to be centered within sports scholarship and society writ large. Black feminist intellectuals, scholars, activists, artists, and everyday Black women during the 1960s were beyond clear about the ways that the Black Power and Civil Rights movements centered the experiences of Black men, while the feminist movement was driven largely by the concerns of (middle-class) White women. In the edited book, Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941–1965 (see Crawford et al., 1993), we see the stories of Black women who, while largely absent from the broader narrative of the Civil Rights Movement, led and sustained the movement in local communities throughout the Southern United States. Without the work of these women at the local level, the movement itself would not have had the same impact. Thus, in order to combat beliefs that all Black activists are men (and portrayals of Black activists as predominantly men) and the anti-Black racism rife within the belief that all feminists are White women, Black feminists spoke truth to power as part of a larger legacy of Black women’s activism. As the Combahee River Collective, one of the earliest recognized Black feminist organizations, argues in their seminal statement:

There have always been Black women activists—some known, like Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frances E. W. Harper, Ida B. Wells Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell, and thousands upon thousands unknown—who have had a shared awareness of how their sexual identity combined with their racial identity to make their whole life situation and the focus of their political struggles unique. Contemporary Black feminism is the outgrowth of countless generations of personal sacrifice, militancy, and work by our mothers and sisters. (Taylor, 2018, p. 16)

Along these lines, Black feminists have consistently called for the necessity of critiquing and challenging the “White supremacist, imperialist, capitalist, patriarchy” that is foundational to Western society (Hooks, 1984). Imperialism, White supremacy, racism, sexism, capitalism, and patriarchy continue to inform the experiences of Black women and nonbinary folks within our society, and Black feminist thought offers necessary tools to challenge its dominance on multiple fronts—including within the social institution of sport. Though there are many forms of Black feminist thought and inquiry (after all Black feminism is a global project), there are core themes that run throughout. Black feminist scholars recognize Black women as creators of knowledge whose lived experiences inform research (Collins, 2000). Black feminist scholars also recognize the interlocking nature of systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991) as existing within the context of a “matrix of domination” (Collins, 2000) that is often shaped by controlling images of Blackness that can and should be challenged via the processes of self-definition and self-valuation (Collins, 2000; Davis, 1983). Self-definition refers to the ways that Black women and girls challenge the persisting controlling images like the “jezebel,” “mammy,” and “Angry Black woman” (Collins, 2005) via the process of self-valuation wherein Black women and girls have the agency to create authentic representations of Black girl/womanhood to replace the negative tropes created during colonization, and the plantation slave system within the Americas, and are continuously reproduced to fit the current moment. Their efforts to dismantle the intersectionality of their oppression includes combatting controlling imagery and sociopsychological representations, including colonial roots of Black women being fetishized/sexualized and subsequently reduced to exclusively operating in the private (or, reserved) space of family and procreation (see Holmes, 2016). In alignment with their efforts, Black feminist scholars are showing the ways that Black women are far more than society has granted credit for—and the sporting landscape is proving to be an amicable space where progress can be made.

Black feminist scholarship in sport is crucial, especially as connected to what Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) coined “intersectionality.” Crenshaw (1991) recognized the ways in which the experiences of Black women within discourse and policies on domestic violence were not fully recognized, as consideration was thought of as either/or—that is, either race mattered or gender did. For Black women, and women of color in general, however, race cannot be separated from gender, as both exist as subordinate categories within the racial/sexual hierarchy of the West. In sports, we can see this in the ways in which Title IX, now over 50 years old, has had different consequences for women who are not racialized as White. While Title IX, in the context of sports, provided a means of advancement for White women (and White men) particularly within “growth sports” like soccer, lacrosse, and volleyball, Black women and nonbinary folks remain underrepresented and/or absent from such spaces (Carter-Francique & Richardson, 2016). We cannot then understand the existence/lived realities of Black women by emphasizing either race or gender, because as Audre Lorde has taught us, we do not lead single-issue lives (see Bennett, 2023).

The history and continued legacy of Black feminism is one that emphasizes an activism meant to free us all. After all, the Combahee River Collective (1977) said it best that the freeing of Black women would mean the freedom of everybody else because it would require the dismantling of all systems of oppression including racism, sexism, capitalism, patriarchy, and heterosexism. That Black women athletes are often left out of the larger discourse as change agents is unsurprising considering the history of Black women writ large. Nevertheless, as indicated earlier, Black women as activists have always existed, whether or not we are able to Say Her Name. This includes the Say Her Name movement which sheds light on the intersectionality of race and gender related to police violence (Crenshaw et al., 2015). Many people know the names of the Black men and boys who have been murdered at the hands of the police, but Black women typically do not receive the same attention and as such—Say Her Name became an avenue to ensure that those involved received due attention. Furthermore, as Crawford et al. (1993) note, Black women have “organized and led struggles for suffrage, fair housing, temperance, antilynching laws, as well as to abolish poll taxes, White primaries, Jim Crow laws, and to obtain full employment for themselves and their men, and for equal educational facilities for their children” (p. xvii). What matters now is that those who care about the future of social change pay closer attention to Black women and nonbinary athletes work as part of a larger legacy of Black women activism both on and off the court. Black feminist sports scholars are especially crucial to the changing narratives on athlete activism because they (see Brown, 2018, 2023; Carter-Francique et al., 2017) like their foremothers, have long recognized what is at stake—the freedom of all, and a true movement toward social justice and change.

Black women in sport, including Alice Coachman, who became the first African American woman to win an Olympic gold medal when she won the high jump in 1948, should be
remembered, and their names said. For instance, Wyomia Tyus who became the first American to win consecutive Olympic gold medals in the 100 m during the 1968 Olympic Games (her first win just years earlier in Rome) should have her name and legacy remarked upon just as the men who competed during those same Olympic Games. Those same Games are often only spoken about with reference to Tommie Smith and John Carlos for their sock-clad, black-gloved protest on the podium following the men’s 200-m dash in solidarity with the Olympic Project for Human Rights. Yet, Tyus had run her race (and won) 2 days earlier while wearing black shorts in solidarity with the protests against global anti-Black oppression, and in line with the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR), Tyus later dedicated her gold to Smith and Carlos in solidarity. Unfortunately, her name is one that remains largely absent from the books, articles, and discussions on athlete activism (Brown, 2023; Tyus & Terzakis, 2018). Nevertheless, Tyus recognized that her accomplishments and their diminishment were part of a larger system within sport and society. Tyus wrote in her memoir Tigerbelle, “It was bigger than that. At the time, they were not about to bathe a black woman in glory. It would be too much power, wouldn’t it?” (p. 175). Tyus’s words point to a continued issue within conversations on sport, society, and activism, no one really wants to say the names of Black women, beyond Black women themselves, and while they may never receive the recognition they deserve, they continue to do the work anyway, because it is necessary.

Black women and nonbinary folks in sport have actively engaged in athlete activism throughout history, and though they may not have not always been fully acknowledged historically, they have always carved out space for their own participation. Moreover, such athletes have often showcased strategies for change that have been adopted by their male counterparts (who are more often than not credited at their expense). For instance, an announcer erroneously declared Carl Lewis as the first American to win consecutive Olympic gold in the 100-m dash during the 1988 Games; though Tyus had accomplished that feat 20 years earlier in black running shorts in solidarity with the Olympic Project for Human Rights (Wilson, 2022), it was reflective of a larger social phenomenon—the obfuscation and/or total erasure of Black women. It is beyond time that scholars, fans, and sports media alike did better in terms of recognizing Black women and nonbinary folks as active members in the fight for social justice and change within sport and beyond. We must look beyond the traditional waves of Black athlete activism and see the power of the internal waves of Black feminist activism below the surface of the water as Black feminism in practice.

The Internal Wave of Black Athlete Activism

In the 1960s, renowned sport sociologist and activist Harry Edwards began his work on studying what he coined the “waves” of Black athlete activism in an effort to provide a framework for the various iterations of activism that have coincided with large social movements throughout history. Edwards (Edwards, 2017) argued that athlete activism predominantly dates back to the late 19th century (post-Civil-War era) when Black athletes began to participate in more mainstream sports and subsequently used sport as a vehicle to fight for social change and justice. While Edwards’ work is foundational with regard to Black athlete activism, his analysis (in its original conception) largely overlooks the work of Black women and nonbinary folks. More recently, he proposed that a sixth wave of Black athlete activism emerged since the overturning of Roe v Wade in the summer of 2022. He argues that in this wave, Black women athlete activists are at the forefront of the movement for gender equality. Edwards notes that as we look forward along the precipice of the next wave of athlete activism, the primary focus will be within the crosshairs of gender equity and equality for women’s sports. However, we argue that this is not a new wave, but is the realization of “El Nino” of Black women and nonbinary folks’ athlete activism. The longstanding efforts of Black feminist activists, like an internal wave, have finally broken through the cold water of the Pacific Ocean and now people across the world are reckoning with their power.

While Black women and nonbinary folks have been activists throughout Edwards’ waves of Black athlete activism, we challenge the mere injection of them into this historical narrative as their work does not fit neatly into his framework. As Lerner (1975) indicates, you cannot simply place women into the current historical narratives about men, as “women’s history presents a challenge to the periodization of traditional history” (p. 10). Furthermore, there is a need to address intersectionality and misogyny in order to fully conceptualize Black women and nonbinary athlete activism throughout history. Put differently, they have been a consistent internal wave (or, driving force) of sociopolitical change, taking place mostly under the surface and just now breaking into contemporary attention. They do not exist as individual waves as conceptualized by Edwards, they are more of a consistent force that are just now receiving their credit.

Rather than a destructive wave crashing against the shore, Black feminist activism is causing global sociopolitical climatic change and Black athletes from the WNBA are currently at the forefront. Unlike many of their NBA counterparts, WNBA athletes have embraced activism efforts as part of their general makeup. Being that the WNBA is composed of 74.5% Black women and nonbinary folks (Migdon, 2021), their battle for equality and recognition could be congruent with their historical positionality as a group of people who have seemingly had to live by the words of fictional character “Sofia” (played by Oprah Winfrey) from The Color Purple: “All my life I had to fight” (Kimble, 2020). Put differently, Black women have suffered the woes of being placed at the bottom of the social ladder. Not only are women in general paid less than men and Blacks typically paid less than Whites (Branch, 2007), Black women have historically been marginalized more than any other group and oftentimes left to bear the burden of hypersexualization without the slightest credence given to their intellectual abilities. This factor becomes most sobering when considering that Black women have suffered some of the greatest crimes against physical bodies, being forced to serve as the historic “testing subjects” for medical experimentation (without anesthesia or general humanistic consideration) in fields such as gynecology (Washington, 2006) or forced to be mothers of children reared by unwanted engagements with slave owners (see Young, 2012). As such, Black women have always been tasked with “resisting” and fighting for their right to freely exist—and this is another way that sport has shown to mirror society.

The overturning of Roe v Wade (1973) in 2022 not only has extensive implications that impact contemporary society and politics, but it will be Black women who bear the brunt of this decision. The ban could also lead to higher rates of maternal mortality, which already exists as a primary concern for Black women, whose rates of pregnancy-related deaths are three times higher (41.4 per 100,000 live births) than the rate for White women (13.7 per 100,000 live births) (Hill et al., 2022). Furthermore, Washington (2006) provides evidence of the racial health divide with regard to
Black infant death rates that are twice that of Whites infants. Historically, Black women are those that are most likely to live in disparate conditions such as: (a) a lack of education and opportunity, (b) medical challenges and lack of access to quality health care, and/or (c) lack of support and financial stability to provide for a child (among other issues) (Chinn et al., 2021). This sobering acknowledgment, along with the aforementioned pregnancy-related challenges (and death percentages) for Black women, has been a primary point of attack for the WNBA’s Players Association in stating, “this decision shows a branch of government that is so out of touch with the country and any sense of human dignity” (ESPN News Services, 2022, para. 2).

Yet, Roe v Wade was not the first major movement that athlete activists in the WNBA took on in the 21st century. During the 2020 season in the “wubble,” the players (as a united front) took action against former owner Kelly Loeffler (Deb & Draper, 2021; Hill, 2021; Kim, 2021; Moore & White, 2021). Loeffler, who at the time was a sitting U.S. Senator and co-owner of the Atlanta Dream, openly criticized players in the WNBA for supporting the BLM movement. In a letter to the WNBA Commissioner Cathey Engelbert, Loeffler wrote:

The truth is, we need less—not more politics in sports. In a time when polarizing politics is as divisive as ever, sports have the power to be a unifying antidote. And now more than ever, we should be united in our goal to remove politics from sports. The lives of each and every African American matter, and there’s no debating the fact that there is no place for racism in our country. However, I adamantly oppose the Black Lives Matter political movement, which has advocated for the defining of police, called for the removal of Jesus from churches and the disruption of the nuclear family structure, harbored anti-Semitic views, and promoted violence and destruction across the country. I believe it is totally misaligned with the values and goals of the WNBA and the Atlanta Dream, where we support tolerance and inclusion. (Bluestein & Felicien, 2020)

This condemnation overtly disregards the livelihoods, identities, and lived experiences of the Black athletes within the organization. The WNBA players’ constituency showed the true extent of their power and purpose in their efforts against Loeffler. Loeffler’s conflict with the Dream’s (and more broadly, the players’ activism) initiated a campaign supporting her opponent, Reverend Raphael Warnock, in the 2020 Georgia Senate election. The Atlanta Dream’s (and Phoenix Mercury’s) endorsement was articulated through the usage of apparel, specifically a black t-shirt with “VOTE WARNOCK” printed in white text (Deb & Draper, 2021; Hill, 2021; Moore & White, 2021). In the 48 hr after the WNBA players donned the “VOTE WARNOCK” t-shirts, his campaign raised $183,000 and attracted 3,500 new grass-root donors (Delevoye, 2022). Researchers dug into the influence the WNBA players’ activism had on the Warnock campaign and found that their impact came at a crucial point in the campaign and changed the financial dynamics with over 50% of the new grassroots donations being attributed to the WNBA players’ actions on August 4, 2020 (Delevoye, 2022 2). This silent protest spoke volumes, resulting in the selection of Georgia’s first Black Senator (Hill, 2021; Moore & White, 2021) and Loeffler’s withdrawal as co-owner (Deb & Draper, 2021; Kim, 2021). Alongside this achievement, the organization’s succeeding investor and management group included Renee Montgomery, a Black woman who is a current social activist and former Dream player (Deb & Draper, 2021; Kim, 2021; Zirin, 2021). Her entrance into WNBA ownership and leadership normalized the existence of Blackness, queerness, womanliness, and their intersections in upper management. The Atlanta Dream continues to challenge boundaries with their influential advocacy efforts.

On a personal/player level, let’s consider the social justice efforts (and inadvertent sacrifice) of Maya Moore, who was on sabbatical from the WNBA between 2019 and 2022 in order to focus on criminal justice reform as part of her “Win with Justice” project (Selak, 2021). Moore, a recent retiree in 2022, is a premier player in the history of basketball and has earned every accolade that signifies success, including Rookie of the Year, four WBNA championships, WNBA MVP, Finals MVP, and four All-Star team selections (Selak, 2021). One of her most prolific successes in this space has come as the result of working with Jonathan Irons, who was wrongfully convicted and imprisoned at the age of 16 (50-year sentence). Because of Moore’s efforts and support, Irons was released from prison in 2021 (Dye, 2022). Moore’s efforts speak to the importance of social justice at the root of WNBA principles, as she stepped away from the game (seemingly at her best) in 2019 to fight both against wrongful convictions and for more equitable criminal justice policies and behaviors (see McClearen & Fischer, 2021).

Another notable player whose work deserves ample consideration is that of Natasha Cloud and her efforts against gun violence. Cloud, who is a WNBA Champion with the Washington Mystics basketball team, has been particularly vocal about her frustrations with gun violence and the way that the lack of gun control is inadvertently tearing communities apart. For example, consider Cloud’s response in the wake of the mass shooting that took place at Robb Elementary School in 2022 that left 21 dead, 19 of which were children:

“It’s at a point now where after my career, I will go into politics because I’m tired of it,” Cloud said. “I’m tired of it being a political game. These are people’s lives. We’re constantly worrying about power, money and all this other s—that doesn’t matter. It shouldn’t matter. We’re talking about lives. We’re talking about 10-, nine-, eight-, seven-, six-, five-year-old kids. We’re talking about elderly folks just trying to go grab groceries in the only grocery store in their community because why? It’s a lower economic community. It’s a Black community. This was a minority school, for the most part.” (Williams, 2022, para. 7)

Cloud’s allure to pursue politics and institutional change is another way in which Black women continue to be a force on the forefront of the myriad of issues facing society. Unfortunately, resistance has always been a part of their existence and WNBA athletes (along with others) are choosing to face those issues head on.

More recently, the pressing issue that led to activism from the WNBA was when one of their own, Brittney Griner, was detained and imprisoned in Russia on February 17, 2022, for possession of cannabinol oils in her luggage while traveling. Her high-profile, minoritized identity presented the optimal conditions for Russia to target her as a political prisoner (Zirin, 2022). This geopolitical controversy garnered little attention from the State Department and sports media (Zirin, 2022), displaying America’s indifference toward Black queer women. And yet arguably more important is the reason why Griner was in Russia in the first place: many players in the WNBA travel overseas during the offseason to play for other leagues because of the enormous pay disparities that exist. The average salary per game for NBA players is $91,463,
while WNBA players garner an average of $102,751 for the entire season. At the time of her arrest, Griner’s salary in the WNBA was just over $220,000, yet her salary for the Russian league was over a million dollars (Jackson, 2022). Griner’s affiliation with an overseas organization accentuates a prominent phenomenon within the WNBA—the pay disparity with their NBA counterparts.

Some have argued that women’s sports (and the WNBA) are not as popular as men’s sports, primarily due to arguments of male athletes being bigger, stronger, and faster playing their sports (Travis, 2018). In actuality, the argument falls quite flat when considering the additional dynamics related to sexism and lack of promotion for women’s sports that undergird the world of sport as a male-dominant space. And when mainstream media does cover the WNBA, researchers found that Black WNBA players receive less media attention than White WNBA players (Isard & Melton, 2021). Additionally, the study which looked at online articles from ESPN, CBS, and Sports Illustrated during the 2020 WNBA season also found that Black WNBA players who do not present in traditionally feminine ways receive the least amount of media attention, while White athletes have the freedom to express their gender in a variety of ways and still be featured in media stories (Isard & Melton, 2021). The fact that Black athletes in women’s sport are minimized and often erased by White sports media has been established in previous research (see Carter-Francique, 2014; Carter-Francique & Richardson, 2016), and with this trend continuing, the activist work is often erased right along with Black WNBA players themselves. For this reason, critical research must continually interrogate disparities in media promotion, exposure, and representation for Black and nonbinary folks to ensure that their athletic talents and sociopolitical activism no longer go unnoticed.

**Discussion**

Time and time again, the efforts of Black women “to speak, break silence, and engage in radical progressive political debates,” is met with opposition (Hooks, 1994, p. 68). Nevertheless, Black women have historically been major drivers for activism and social justice over the years, even as their efforts continue to be largely overlooked by sport fans, sport media, and even researchers (see Crawford et al., 1993; Hanson, 2003; Yee, 1992). It is only recently that the efforts of Black women and nonbinary athletes as activists are starting to receive due mainstream attention from historians and media outlets—but what took so long?

Some contemporary scholars have been intentional in highlighting women’s advancement, primarily when discussing White women like Billie Jean King, Becky Hammon, and Megan Rapinoe. Granted, the work of these women, along with those representing the U.S. Women’s National Soccer Team and the U.S. Women’s Hockey Team, deserves recognition for the advancement of women’s equality and equitable pay—but what about the efforts of Black women and nonbinary folks? How is it that people can still largely ignore the contributions of athletes like Maya Moore and instead predominantly highlight advancements led by White women? Much like the outcome of affirmative action and the way it primarily benefited White women (by way of attention and accolades), the conversation of athlete activism (and even women’s rights) has continued to ignore the efforts of Black women and has instead focused on the advancements of all but Black women and nonbinary athletes (Wise, 1998). Furthermore, when Black women do present counter-speech, it is “perceived as uncivil” (Hawkins et al., 2023, p. 8), perceivably because it seemingly disrupts the social order of how most think a Black woman “should” behave.

Consider athletes like Margaret and Matilda Roumania Peters (also known as Pete and Re-Pete), who were the first pair of Black sisters to reach prominence in tennis and were ultimately erased from discussions of athlete contributions due to being overshadowed by segregation (Corbet, 2015). Long before the world was introduced to the Williams sisters in tennis (Venus and Serena), the Peters sisters laid the groundwork and secured their positions as shoulders for the Williams sisters to stand on. Thankfully the Williams sisters have received far more attention (see Allen, 2021; Ridley, 2023) and credit for their contributions to the unearthing of conversations of Black womanhood, Black motherhood, and Black sexuality (see Martin, 2018), though they have also been largely missing from conversations of athlete activism—even given their competition in one of the most historically-White, patriarchal sports in history (Whiteside, 2022).

Athletes like Rudolph, who won three gold medals at the 1960 Olympics, have been the subject of majoritarian exclusion from the narrative of athlete activism while others such as Robinson and Ali are the primary headlines in discussions about racial advocacy and athlete activism in the United States. Athletes like Smith and Carlos remain firmly planted among the figurative “Mount Rushmore” of activist athletes, but few have given equal credit of contribution for the black-beret-wearing Tyus who also stood on that podium in solidarity after previously winning a gold medal in the 100 m dash. As Tyus and Terzakis (2018) wrote of the 1968 Olympics:

> It was also because I’m not only Black, but a woman. Because you’ll notice that no one—except Howard Cosell—was trying to notice me or give me a flag even when I had done something that no one else in the world had ever done—before Tommie and Carlos even ran their race and before I dedicated my medal to them. It was bigger than that. At the time, they were not about to bathe a Black woman in glory. It would give us too much power, wouldn’t it? Because it would’ve been a moment, if you think about it . . . . Because the one thing the Olympics is not about is giving power to the powerless. (pp. 175–176).

As Tyus indicates, the world was simply not ready to give a Black woman the credit that they would eventually give to Smith and Carlos. Perhaps it would give Black women too much power (and ultimately disrupt social order), which history has taught us is a feature that has never been afforded to Black women because the colonial roots of their oppression are entrenched in the social hierarchy of society. Instead, Black women and nonbinary folks have continued to serve as the internal waves with limited assistance/support and though they do not receive social recognition for their efforts, they remain a major component of every wave of athlete activism. Future research could extend this sociological perspective and investigate various other “internal waves” of athletes (e.g., paralympic athlete activism) who have played major roles in activism and have not received their due credit of inclusion in the narrative. Recently, Edwards’ fifth wave of athlete activism (in conjunction with the BLM movement), included yet another prominent contribution by Black women and nonbinary athletes but too had been overshadowed by the NBA Bubble and activism of athletes such as Chris Paul and LeBron James. Though many have granted well-deserved praise to NBA athletes for placing BLM at the center of their campaign for racial justice during the 2020 Bubble playoffs, few place the efforts of WNBA athletes alongside the NBA efforts—as they too dedicated their season to social justice issues and did so prior to the NBA’s identical focus. Black women and nonbinary
athletes in the WNBA had already dedicated their season to address issues of racial inequality and voting rights, but it was not until the NBA followed suit that the world took notice (see Williams, 2022). This speaks directly to the lack of support and acknowledgment that Black women and nonbinary folks receive for their efforts of sociopolitical change—and the ways that they are the internal waves (or, driving force) for many of the movements that they rarely receive credit for leading.

Conclusion

We have reached a time in which Black women and nonbinary athletes’ efforts must be placed at the forefront of athlete activism literature; these athletes have long been part of the sociopolitical and human rights movements as internal waves with limited credit being given. Black women and nonbinary athletes have been historically instrumental in challenging social norms, fighting for equal pay, promoting civil rights, supporting other groups, and continually pushing for equality and advancement. Though not given the same magnitude of platform as their male counterparts, Black women and nonbinary athletes have continually risked everything to speak out against injustice and inspire future generations of women and nonbinary folks to (continue to) do the same. Though much of their work is “under the surface” and not publicly known (for reasons such as misogyny, lack of representation, etc.), the internal waves that they create are what allows for the destructive “waves” that their male counterparts receive credit for. This is not to say that “all” Black women/athletes/activists and nonbinary athletes/activist’s efforts have gone unnoticed by “everyone,” as there has always been a complimentary “undercurrent” of support from loyal WNBA and women’s sports fans that have noticed the impact of the athletes they view and appreciate—but their efforts are far too important to simply exist underneath the surface. In fact, their contributions extend far beyond the courts and fields, and just as before, their impact will be the waves that develop the perfect storm.

Black women and nonbinary, genderfluid folks remain among the most marginalized within our society. Their lack of inclusion and continued marginalization can be attributed both to longstanding colonial roots of social order and subsequent single-axis view of their existence. Put differently, Black women and nonbinary, genderfluid folks exercise their superpower of resistance in a way that does not conform to social norms—but disrupts them. That is why the names most spoken with respect to social change in activism in sport remain those of Black men and White women, even when much of the labor being done is led by Black women (past and present); social order, positionality, and colonial roots of oppression. Instead, their bravery to fight for equality and equity must be continually included in mainstream literature and media related to athlete activism (and beyond), and it begins with acknowledging why they were largely left out to begin with. As Hull et al (1982) urged us to consider, all the women are not in fact White, all the Blacks are not men, and yes indeed some of us (Black women) are in fact brave!

References


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