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## Sport and politics must mix: sportspeople know it

By Greg Baum  
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Some of the cricketers from Australia, England, the West Indies and Sri Lanka who made so-called rebel tours of South Africa in the 1980s in defiance of a worldwide apartheid ban claimed they saw nothing awry in their time in the then pariah republic. The dark curtains drawn across their bus windows made sure of it.

Sport has long tried to partition itself off from politics. The standard position was that sport and politics don't mix. It was and is a feeble-minded stance. One broad definition of politics is that it is "the way people living in groups make decisions". It is what sportspeople do all the time. It's what those cricketers did. Some regret it, some don't, but none can pretend to remain in the carefully arranged dark.

In any case the jig is up. Sports by and large have come to accept that with their great social privilege comes commensurate responsibility. Look around. In the US, baseball's all-star game has been stripped from Atlanta in protest at newly-introduced voting restrictions in Georgia that critics say militate against black voters. One makes it a crime to provide food and water to those standing in a queue at a polling booth.]

Baseball is hardly a hotbed of radical protest. It is the whitest and most conservative of the major American sports, but now has decided that this is a standard it cannot walk past.

Also in the US, the State Department this week mooted a boycott of next year's Beijing Winter Olympics because of China's well-documented mistreatment of Uighur Muslims. Now for the first time since 1980, an American Olympic boycott is on the table and must be addressed.

It will have implications for Australia, too. When the idea of a boycott was first raised, the Australian Olympic Committee rejected it, saying "neutrality on global political issues" was a critical feature of the Olympic movement. That, of course, is so much ivory tower tosh. The Olympic movement cannot be a force for good in the world, as it constantly proclaims, by setting itself apart from that world. Otherwise, it is merely an athletics carnival.

All over the world, athletes continue to take to bended knees in support of Black Lives Matter. Last Saturday, North Melbourne AFLW captain Emma Kearney did before a final at Victoria Park. She was alone in her gesture. In 2016, American footballer Colin Kaepernick's lone kneeling stance caused him to be driven from the game. Now, if anything, Kearney was lauded for mindfulness greater than the moment.



*Truist Park in Atlanta, Georgia, which lost the 2021 All-Star Game when Major League Baseball decided to move the game elsewhere over the league's objection to Georgia's sweeping new election laws.*

On Wednesday, it emerged that re-convening Socceroos will contemplate how they might join an international demonstration against human rights violations in Qatar, venue for the 2022 World Cup, where 6500 migrant workers reportedly have died in the building of stadiums. Historically, the Socceroos have been the least militant of Australian teams, but at last they have come to an issue that cannot be swept under the carpet, however red and embossed it is.

There have always been sportspeople in instances prepared to stand up causes greater than themselves. Think Cathy Freeman at the 1994 Commonwealth Games, for instance, trailing Australian and Indigenous flags on a winning lap (and facing the threat of expulsion from the team for it), and St Kilda footballer Nicky Winmar's celebrated gesture at Victoria Park the previous year.

But these were individual stands in isolated moments. Now the sports themselves are finding their collective voices. In this country, there were arguably two recent catalysts. One was the way Adam Goodes was drummed out of AFL football in 2015, shaming all but the psychopathic.

The other was the gay marriage debate in 2017. Our major sporting bodies led the way, nailing rainbow colours to their mast. No longer did sport set itself sniffily apart from politics. Rather, it would shoulder a mission more in keeping with its centrality in Australian society. It would be an agent for progress.

It would not do to be too starry-eyed. It is naive to think that all sportspeople and sporting bodies share this newfound bent for activism. It is probable that in a time when an athlete is more likely to be tripped up by their tongue than their feet, dissenters think the safest way is to say nothing.

It's also true that just as money talks, so it silences. When in 2018 a US basketball club general manager expressed solidarity with democracy protesters in Hong Kong, the NBA came down on him like a ton of bricks. It had just launched a push into China; democracy would have to wait.

And it's true that sport's capacity to effect real societal change is limited. At most, it can set an example - which makes it all the more crucial that it does. It ought to be remembered that some of those rebel cricketers from 40 years ago now wish they had pulled back those curtains for one moment.