



**Digital Commons@**

Loyola Marymount University  
LMU Loyola Law School

---

Honors Thesis

Honors Program

---

5-3-2021

## Black Lives Matter. The NBA Strike and Its Effect

Chiara Armstrong  
ccrennaa@lion.lmu.edu

Julian Saint Clair  
Loyola Marymount University, julian.saintclear@lmu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/honors-thesis>



Part of the [Sports Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Armstrong, Chiara and Saint Clair, Julian, "Black Lives Matter. The NBA Strike and Its Effect" (2021).  
*Honors Thesis*. 359.  
<https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/honors-thesis/359>

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors Program at Digital Commons @ Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Thesis by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@lmu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@lmu.edu).



**Loyola Marymount University**  
**University Honors**  
**Program**

# **Black Lives Matter.**

## **The NBA Strike & Its Effect**

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements of the University Honors Program  
of Loyola Marymount University

by

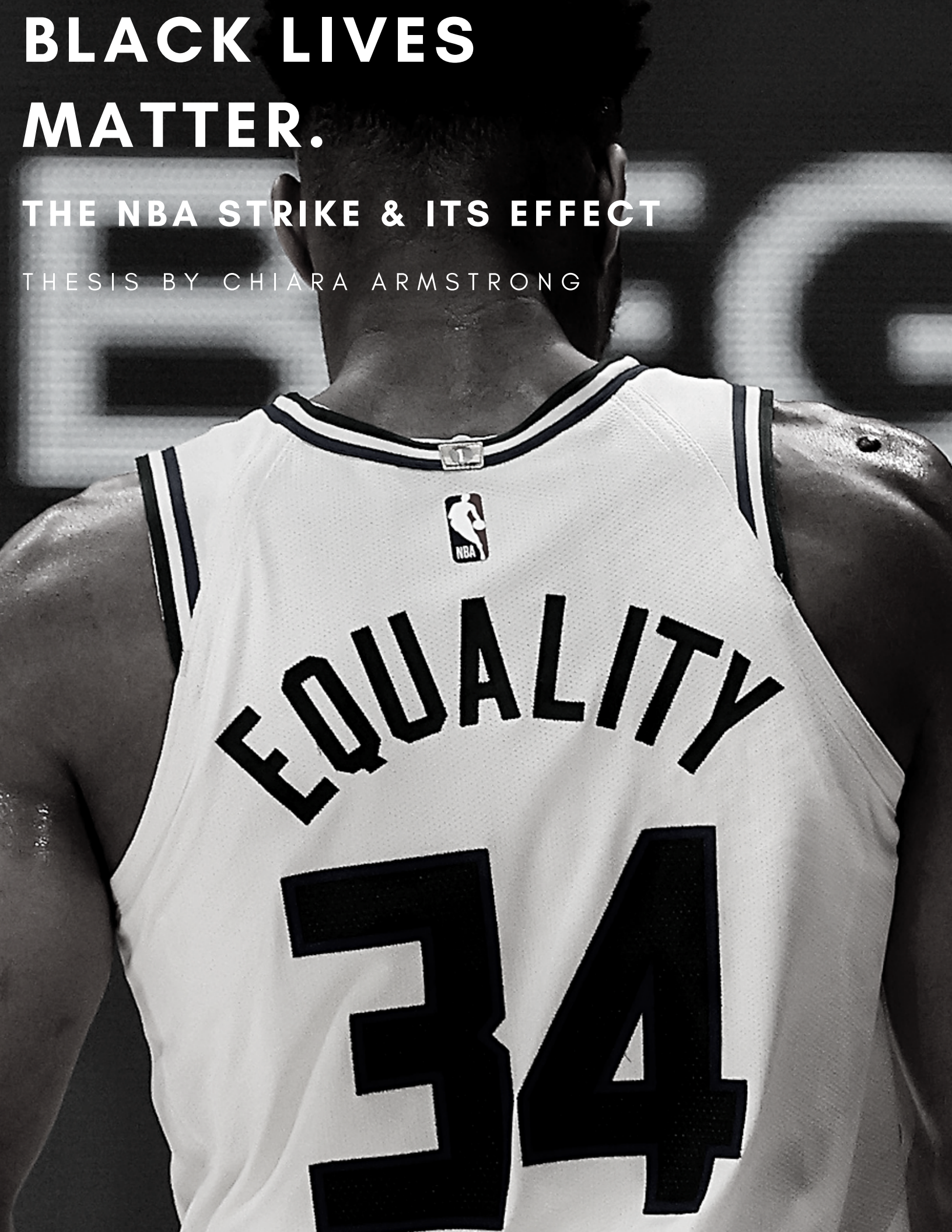
**Chiara Armstrong**

**5 May 2021**

# BLACK LIVES MATTER.

THE NBA STRIKE & ITS EFFECT

THESIS BY CHIARA ARMSTRONG





# ABSTRACT

The summer of 2020 marked an important turning point for the contemporary civil rights movement Black Lives Matter (BLM). The rest of the world started to take notice and protests happened around the globe following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020. Although there is a long history of sports activism, the National Basketball Association had previously been reluctant to take a stance on BLM as an organization. Following the murder of yet another unarmed Black man, Jacob Blake, every single NBA player refused to play in their playoff games from August 26th through the 28th. Previous research has been done in athlete activism, but virtually all prior contexts have been athlete's speaking up as individuals or small groups. My review of the literature suggests that prior to August 2020, league-wide strikes have

been used solely for labor disputes in all major sport leagues, making the BLM strike unprecedented and a critical point in the movement. In my thesis, I will use both a financial and marketing lens to examine what a league-wide player strike such as this means from different stakeholder perspectives: athletes, management, shareholders, fans, and society. I expect to find that while most fans are enthusiastic about athlete and organizational activism, management is still apprehensive in terms of the conflict it creates among NBA supporters. Additionally, my analyses suggest that the publicity gained from the strike and NBA involvement with BLM in general resulted in a significant boost in engagement with both the BLM movement and the NBA.



# STATEMENT OF BIAS

As an employee of the LA Clippers, I feel obligated to include a statement of bias. All of the interviews except one conducted for this study were of other employees of the Clippers, so other team's points of view may be underrepresented. My own lens of research may also be influenced by my experiences with the

Clippers. I do not suspect that this has much of an effect on my conclusions, but want to disclose that fact. Living in Los Angeles, CA may also have an effect on my perspective on this issue. It may not be representative of the point of view of other regions across the United States.



# BLM BACKGROUND



## BRIEF HISTORY

Black Lives Matter is a movement that originated in 2012, when George Zimmerman was acquitted for the murder of Black teenager Trayvon Martin (Agyemang). Several police shootings since then have fueled the movement, including the recent death of George Floyd. **2020 a tipping point** in the movement and caused a flurry of anger and a **call for change** within our communities. There were **protests** in all 50 states and a criticism of governmental policies for drastic changes in law enforcement and the law itself.

## SOCIAL MEDIA

### Visibility & Organization

Because of social media, many folks who have not personally been affected by police brutality or have never seen it in their daily lives are now given access to videos and personal stories from those who are affected around the world. Those who have experienced these horrific things are able to use their voices and break out of previous silencing (Agyemang). This raises a huge amount of both **awareness** and **outrage**. It also allows folks to more easily organize protests and petitions, as well as spread them to a much **larger audience**. The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter allows for information and voices from around the movement to be heard by others involved and passionate about the issue. This bringing together of activists around the nation is both empowering and strengthening.

### Twitter

Twitter in particular has been a form of social media that has had a great deal of influence in the Black Lives Matter movement.

- Studies have shown that Twitter allows celebrities a more **personal connection** with fans
- There is more potential for dialogue between multiple parties than many other social media sites such as Instagram or Snapchat (Hayat).

## CELEBRITY INFLUENCE

Celebrities, including athletes from multiple professional sports, have used platforms such as social media and their own arenas to speak out on issues such as Black Lives Matter.

One of the biggest moments in the movement came when Colin Kaepernick knelt on the field in recognition of the violence of police brutality. This was in 2016 and got a large amount of commentary and backlash in both directions. Since then, some athletes have taken a knee or shown their support in other ways, but there has not been much **collective effort** by celebrities in the movement.

# Sports Activism

## Waves of Activism

### Wave 1 1900-1945

Mainly characterized by individual Black athlete activists (Paul Robeson, Joe Louis, Jack Johnson). This wave pushed for **recognition** and **legitimacy**. The social environment at the time was one of open racism (Agyemang).

### Wave 2 1946-1960

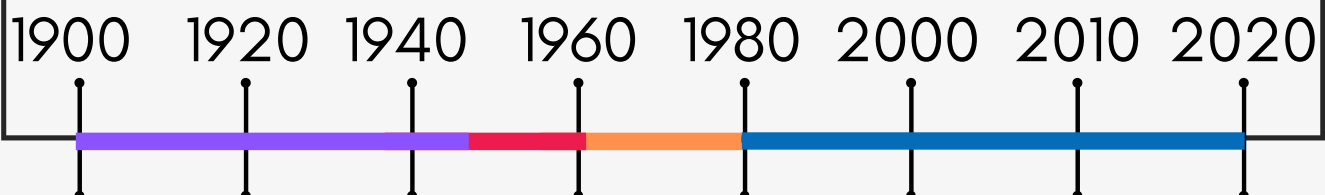
Following the second world war, athletes such as Jackie Robinson and Althea Gibson pushed for **desegregation** and **access**. This especially highlighted the negro leagues in baseball and the path to **integration** (Agyemang).

### Wave 3 1960-1970

During the **Civil Rights Movement** and the **black power movement**. This included athletes such as Muhammad Ali, Bill Russell, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, and Jim Brown. This wave was more assertive and demanded **dignity**, **respect**, and **social justice**. This included protests and boycotts to secure rights for Black and marginalized communities. The most significant moment came in the 1968 Olympic games, when athletes Tommie Edwards and John Carlos held up a black power salute when receiving their medals (Agyemang).

### Period of Stagnation 1970-Today

Unfortunately, following the civil rights movement, activism in the sports community decreased dramatically. Because of the progress made in the Civil rights movement, a false **façade** of racial equality was created. During this time, less controversial issues were the focus of athlete activism, such as childhood obesity (Cunningham). Recently, police brutality towards the black community has again sparked individual athletes speaking up, setting up an environment that enabled the strike.





A black and white photograph of Michael Jordan in a Chicago Bulls jersey, looking intensely at the camera. The jersey has "BULLS" and the number "23" visible. The background is dark.

" REPUBLICANS BUY  
SNEAKERS TOO "

–Jordan 1990

## CONTROVERSY

Career Over Activism

Two of the most iconic and influential basketball players of all time, **Michael Jordan** and **Kobe Bryant**, have largely stayed out of political issues. This was the attitude of most athletes during the 1990s–2000s, who tended to stay away from societal issues. This was largely due to **fear** of losing sponsor deals and other business dealings. Michael Jordan famously said "Republicans buy sneakers too" when asked if he would endorse a Democratic candidate. This, of course, was because Jordan did not want to lose any customers by saying something controversial. Kobe Bryant's most famous nonaction was his refusal to talk about genocide in Darfur during the 2008 Olympics (Agyemang).

Particularly during Bryant's time, President Obama's election again created a façade of racial equality. The election of a Black president was a big moment in the fight for civil rights, but after this occurred there was a huge drop off in activism (Towler). Looking at Jordan and Bryant, it is hard to blame either athlete for wanting to focus on their athletic careers rather than politics. However, it is disappointing to think about the amount of influence the two would have had as heroes speaking up for racial injustice. As icons, this **silence set the tone** for multiple years after of not speaking up (Agyemang). They believed that they had **too much to lose** compared to the benefits of speaking out.



# TYPES OF SPORTS ACTIVISM

## SYMBOLIC

Any actions taken in the NBA serve as a symbol to other groups and society itself. Setting an **example** for the rest of society is achievable in the NBA and important because of its **visibility** and **popularity** (Agyemang).

- The playoff strike would fit into this category of activism.

## SCHOLARLY

This consists of **amplifying** the voices of experts in their respective fields. If athletes are uniformly standing together on an issue and do not feel they have enough information to speak out, they can use their **platforms** to share the voices of experts to a wider audience (Agyemang).

## GRASSROOTS

Grassroots includes organizing **protests** and setting up **programs** to assist in the fight against injustice. Many athletes are wealthy and able to fund societal projects to do good (Agyemang).

- This particular kind of activism was largely influential in the recent protests .

## SPORT BASED

When teams win or are put on a national stage, they have more of an **opportunity** to make their **voices heard** (Agyemang).

- An example is the US Women's Soccer Team speaking up against the gender pay gap.

## ECONOMIC

Athletes who come from marginalized communities are able to **give back** to their hometowns by creating businesses and programs in their community to boost their local economy (Agyemang).

- An example is Damien Lillard setting up youth programs in Oakland.



# IS SPORTS THE RIGHT PLATFORM FOR ACTIVISM?

## Celebrity/Athlete Endorsements

- Celebrities are quickly becoming more **trusted** in political endorsements than even politicians themselves (Hayat). This is because politicians are assumed to always have an agenda in what they are pushing and appear **less authentic** (Agyemang).
- It is politicians' jobs to speak about issues and policies, but celebrities are not required to. Therefore, when they do speak out, it shows that they **care deeply** about the issue. However, it does mean that celebrities must enter the political scene carefully to avoid being perceived as fake or uninformed.
- Celebrities are typically more of a **role model** for the public and more easy to connect with than politicians. Fans often start to **mimic** similar mannerisms and beliefs to their beloved celebrities.
- **Social media** has aided this view. Celebrities have taken to Twitter more than politicians have, and as a form of personal social media, Twitter appears more real and **less scripted** than a speech made by a politician.
- Social media is an easier form of media to consume for many people compared with political news sources in that it is easier to understand and allows for more **emotion** and **personal anecdotes** to be added (Agyemang).



## THE ECHO CHAMBER

Our current political climate has been **polarized** in both parties. Democrats and Republicans alike tend to only listen to news sources and follow politicians on their side with similar points of view to them. Generally, people rarely hear points of view from the political party that is not their own. This causes ideas to "reverberate", and become more **radical** as they are not contested by the other point of view. Athletes are one of the only

ways that highly conservative folks are presented with a **liberal perspective**. This is because conservative people will follow athletes, particularly on social media, because they admire them in their career as an athlete. However, with more athletes speaking out against racial injustice on their social media pages, conservative folks who are following them will also see the political and social content that they normally would not (Hayat).





# MORE REASONS

## CONSERVATIVE IDEAS IN SPORTS

The environment of sports has conservative ideas embedded within it.

- Athletes' careers are almost solely dependent on their own hard work (Agyemang). Practice leads to success. This creates the **illusion** that the same thing is true in our society; that all you need is hard work to succeed, which is a false narrative that affects the Black community disproportionately.
- Sports can promote **violence** and **toxic masculinity** (Kaufman).
- Players are taught to follow their coaches direction and not break out of the **cooperative environment**. This makes sports all the more critical of a place to stand up and strive for equity.
- Racism is often disguised as **patriotism** and **traditionalism** in our society, which allows it to go **unnoticed** (Agyemang).

## RIGHT VS. PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

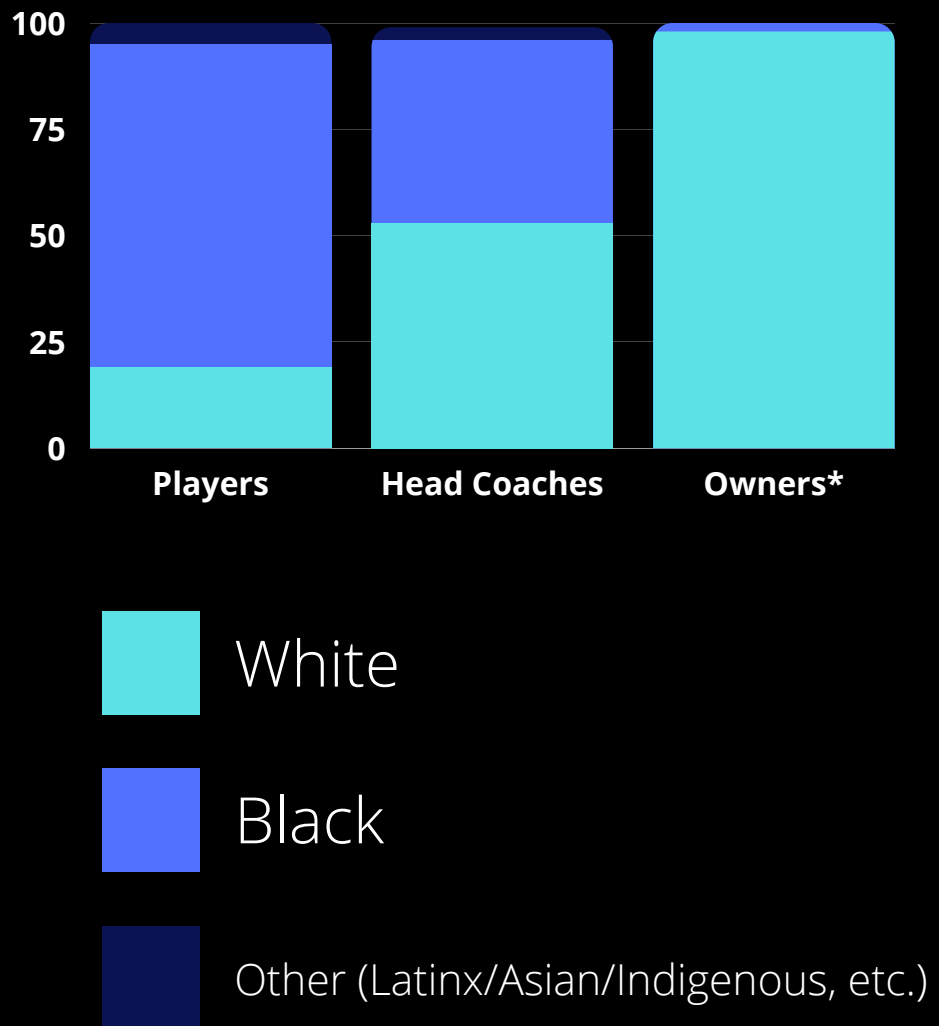
- One important thing to distinguish when discussing athletes speaking out is the relationship between right and personal responsibility. As citizens, they have the right to free speech. However, there is a question raised of whether they have a personal responsibility as celebrities in a spotlight with a large audience to speak up (Agyemang).
- A source inside one NBA team said that in today's environment it is important for organizations to be authentic to their values. This includes identifying those you stand with to make an impact, such as the Black Lives Matter movement (Teschke).




# IMBALANCE OF OWNERSHIP VS. PLAYERS

## Diversity in the NBA

- All but one NBA teams are owned by white males who manage teams with mostly Black players. This also applies to coaches and administrative staff, who are predominately white. This creates an inherent inequality in power and structure.
- Many sports stadiums are built in downtown areas filled with poor, minority dominated communities, often with no regard for the people that had to leave their homes in order for the arena to be built (Johnson).



\*Chalabi



# ***CITIZENSHIP IS TEAMWORK***

Being a good citizen means the same thing in society as being a good teammate means to a basketball team. This includes:

- Working hard to ensure the success and wellbeing of all team players.
- Treating every player with respect and recognition. This translates directly into being a good citizen who cares about rights for all people.
- Sports fosters traits that are required in activism such as goal setting, long term perspective, and a yearning to always be better.
- Most social change has come from working together as a team. Collaboration of protests, petitions, and contacting government officials is how change is made(Kaufman). This is also why the strike was so impactful, because teamwork creates a feeling of empowerment and togetherness.

## ATHLETES SHOULD NOT BE ACTIVISTS?

# "SHUT UP AND DRIBBLE"

**They are not the experts**

### Hong Kong & Rockets

A few months prior to the strike, the NBA got into trouble with Hong Kong. Daryl Morey, the general manager of the Houston Rockets, tweeted an image supporting protests in Hong Kong. This caused a large conflict between the NBA and Hong Kong officials, with the NBA eventually shrinking away from the comment rather than standing behind it. They also fined the GM for his tweet. This is a completely different response than the way that the strike was handled and sends a conflicting message.

### Risks Involved

In the past, athletes have previously faced severe consequences for speaking out, including banishment from sports, incarceration, or even death (Towler). In more recent times, professional careers have been damaged and even ended for outbursts of activism. The personal reputation of the players can also be affected even outside of their playing and professional careers.

### Lack of Knowledge

Even if athletes do have experience in the Black Lives Matter movement, they are typically not going to be experts on the issue and are oftentimes not well informed on what is going on. It is unfortunate that more people will listen to and hear a message from an NBA player rather than the more hands on activist or the experts who have dedicated their lives or careers to fighting for justice. They should not be the voice of reason or expertise in a situation as critical as this, nor should we expect them to be. This suggests that potentially athletes could be more helpful using a scholarly type of activism by amplifying the voices of experts rather than try to explain or comment on the situation themselves. If they are going to speak out, it is important for them to make sure that they are informed enough to make a valuable contribution to the movement and not one that could be counterproductive or misleading (Pan).



## 01 ICONS

Athletes go beyond just their celebrity status. To many young children and even some adults, athletes are **heroes** who have a significant impact on their fans. This includes the impact of:

- beliefs
- values
- opinions
- actions (Agyemang).

Mimicking those we look up to is a large part of **cognitive learning** and these patterns can become a part of who we are.

## 02 NATIONAL EXPERIENCE

From traveling to away games, most players are exposed to many different cities and locations around the United States (Kaufman). This allows them to see how people everywhere live and that systematic racism occurs all across the globe, giving them a unique **perspective** and allowing them to really recognize the scale of the problem.

## 04 COGNITIVE LINKING

**According to the associative learning** theory, concepts we

associate together become **linked** in our minds (Cunningham).

Now that the NBA strike for BLM has occurred, the **NBA** and **BLM** are linked in our minds, which is valuable because the NBA is prevalent in many sports fans' lives.

## 03 BACKGROUND

Many basketball players come from socially disadvantaged communities and therefore have an **up close** perspective on police brutality and systematic racism affecting those close to them (Kaufman).

## 05 LARGE AUDIENCE

The average per game attendance of an NBA playoff game is **7.5M fans**, which is a huge audience to reach. Everything athletes do is watched and has a **lasting impact**.



# WHY ATHLETES?

# RACIAL PREJUDICE

Even though athletes are held in such high regard as heroes or role models, **prejudice** still exists towards them because of the color of their skin. This creates a unique **juxtaposition** of both **racial suppression** and being put on a **pedestal** for their athletic achievement. They belong to multiple identity groups, facing racist attitudes and prejudice because of the **color of their skin** and their **male** identities.

# TOWARDS NBA PLAYERS

In contrast, as professional athletes and celebrities they are **admired** and **revered**. This is a unique **intersectionality** that is a very small group. This may suggest that they are typically able to almost live outside of political and social issues, making it all the more important for sports players to address these issues more overtly and **recognize** them even in the environment they live in as a professional athlete.

# WHY IS THE



## THE BEST PLACE TO ADVOCATE

### ATMOSPHERE

- According to sources both within and outside the NBA, the organization is the most **progressive** and **player driven** compared to other professional sports (Maiuri). Players feel more **empowered** to speak up and fight for what they think is right.
- Adam Silver, who became the commissioner of the NBA in 2014, has been especially progressive and looking to **advance** the NBA and foster an environment where players can feel comfortable sharing their beliefs.

### RETALIATION

- Compared to other organizations, players in the NBA face less retaliation for speaking up on the issues that they believe in. In recent times, there have not been any instances where a player has voiced their support for civil rights or Black Lives Matter and been **silenced** or **stifled** by the NBA as an organization.
- The NBA was quite **receptive** to the strike and emphasized that this is an issue that is core to both its players and the organization. Even though they were scrambling to get the playoffs back on track, the NBA was **respectful** to the decision and **supportive** of the cause.



# PLAYOFF STRIKE

## Unity

Prior to the strike, sports activism had mainly come from Black athletes. Only Black athletes were asked to speak on the issue or get involved politically. This was an inherent injustice because Black Lives Matter is a human rights issue and everyone needs to be involved. One of the integral aspects of being on a sports team is the concept that the team is a family (Agyemang). Family members would never let other family members go through what the Black community has been going through, so white teammates standing up finally showed that unity. Taking the pressure off of solely Black athletes to speak up was vital in the impact of the strike. The impact of all athletes standing together and many white athletes also speaking out was important, but needs to be sustained to continue to create change.

## Precedence

This was the first strike in the history of both the NBA and all professional sports that was in support of a social justice issue. All previous strikes have been for labor disputes.

- This was a huge milestone in the sports community and will hopefully open the door for further activism and chances to speak out for athletes and teams.
- The significance of being the first strike for any issue other than an internal labor disputes shows that this is something deeply important and integral to our society and expressed the seriousness of the matter.

## Financial

This strike had a big impact partially because it threatened a large financial impact for both the league and the owners. There are many sources of revenues for teams and the league than just game tickets, such as TV deals and sponsorship revenue.

- The loss in income to the league may have led to a decrease in the salary cap, which would have affected future players for years to come.
- If the playoffs had been cancelled entirely as the players were threatening, it would not only have affected the current players but the entire league for many years.
- For the owners, some are less wealthy than others and having the playoffs cancelled would be a significant hit to their personal finances. This affects the team side, where the first thing to be cut would be the salaries of administrative employees according to a source inside an NBA team. This hurts many people who are much less wealthy than the team owners or players and certainly would feel the effects of a lost job (Pan).

## Influence

With such a large audience and such influential players participating in the strike, the NBA was able to get both owners and citizens to take notice and pay attention to the issue at hand, causing an impact on a global scale. This is not something many organizations would be able to do with the same kind of attention given to the message the players wanted to send.

# MOVING FORWARD

## Financial Challenges

It is not easy to **sustain** a movement and continue to **cause change** even after a pivotal moment

- This is what happened after the election of President Obama with a drop off in Black voters.
- It is not cheap to enact change in these organizations. Increase costs in social efforts will affect the NBA organizations, and in order to make a difference teams must be willing to pay that cost.

## Team Effort

Several teams have their own charity organization is around or foundations set up to aid in **social causes** that they believe in.

- This is a good way that the NBA can help, as teams have the **resources** to help make an impact.
- The NBA does not want to take a side along party lines, but another way they can push for change in the future is to **promote voting** and **provide resources**.



## CONCLUSION

The strike for Black Lives Matter by the NBA during the playoffs in summer of 2020 was a **unprecedented, impactful** event that made people around the world **take notice** of the **injustice** that is occurring, with an average of **7.5M** fans watching each playoff game. However, teams must continue to use their **resources** and **influence** to support the Black Lives Matter movement, by continuing to stand together on this issue. Players that speak out should make sure to be **informed**, both on the issue at hand and the impact that they can potentially

have both on their fans and on the world around them. Sports is an integral part of our society, and in order for the fight against racism to advance **racist ideals** needs to be addressed within professional leagues. Ideas such as hard work being the only key needed for success and everyone being on an equal playing field must be put to rest. The strike brought us one step closer to doing so, and if athletes continue to step up for what is not right, I believe we can get to a point that sports works alongside activism in a **meaningful, concrete** way.

# Sources

- Agyemang, Kwame JA. "Black Male Athlete Activism and the Link to Michael Jordan: A Transformational Leadership and Social Cognitive Theory Analysis." *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, vol. 47, no. 4, Aug. 2012, pp. 433–445, doi:10.1177/1012690211399509.
- Agyemang, Kwame J. A., et al. "'Agitate! Agitate! Agitate!': Sport as a Site for Political Activism and Social Change." *Organization*, vol. 27, no. 6, Nov. 2020, pp. 952–968, doi:10.1177/1350508420928519.
- Armstrong, Chiara, and Evan Velastegui. "Black Lives Matter & the NBA Playoff Strike." 22 Oct. 2020.
- Armstrong, Chiara, and Thomas Maiuri. "Black Lives Matter & the NBA Playoff Strike." 26 Oct. 2020.
- Armstrong, Chiara, and Tracy Pan. "Black Lives Matter & the NBA Playoff Strike." 18 Nov. 2020.
- Armstrong, Chiara, and Tricia Teschke. "Black Lives Matter & the NBA Playoff Strike." 30 Oct. 2020.
- Chalabi, Mona. "Three Leagues, 92 Teams And One Black Principal Owner." *FiveThirtyEight*, 28 Apr. 2014, [fivethirtyeight.com/features/diversity-in-the-nba-the-nfl-and-mlb/](https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/diversity-in-the-nba-the-nfl-and-mlb/).
- Cunningham, George B., and Michael R. Regan. "Political Activism, Racial Identity and the Commercial Endorsement of Athletes." *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, vol. 47, no. 6, Dec. 2012, pp. 657–669, doi:10.1177/1012690211416358.
- Hayat, T., Galily, Y., & Samuel-Azran, T. (in press). Can celebrities burst the echo chamber bubble? The case of LeBron James and Lady Gaga. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690219855913>
- Johnson, Victoria E. "Sporting Community: Activism and Responsibility in Turbulent Times." *Television & New Media*, vol. 21, no. 6, Sept. 2020, pp. 590–595, doi:10.1177/1527476420919696.
- Kaufman, Peter, and Eli A. Wolff. "Playing and Protesting: Sport as a Vehicle for Social Change." *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, vol. 34, no. 2, May 2010, pp. 154–175, doi:10.1177/0193723509360218.
- Towler, Christopher C., et al. "Shut Up and Play: Black Athletes, Protest Politics, and Black Political Action." *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2020, pp. 111–127., doi:10.1017/S1537592719002597.
- Tyler Johnson , Lauren Reinke , Gloria Noble & Tyler Camarillo (2020): Shut up and dribble? How popularity, activism, and real-world events shape attitudes towards LeBron James and race, *The Social Science Journal*, DOI: 10.1080/03623319.2020.1768484