Introduction

Setting the Stage

It was the summer of ’68, and I wanted to beat the hell out of a white boy, any white boy.

Sorry if that offends anyone. That’s just how I felt back then, filled with rage just months before turning the innocent age of eight, all because two men rammed their fists through our family’s 13-inch black-and-white Zenith. They weren’t just any fists. They belonged to Tommie Smith and John Carlos, and though they were thrust into the smoggy Mexico City air, they were somehow clearly visible for all of black America to see thousands of miles away. Those fists were squeezed inside black gloves tighter than the ones O.J. Simpson later wore in an L.A. courtroom, gloves so tight the knuckles were aching to pop through the leather. Two black sprinters at the Summer Olympics stood on the medal podium during the national anthem and gave a four-knuckle salute to the white oppressors back home, and in my household, anyway, the hands on the clock just stopped cold.

You know how life sometimes brings moments that tingle and send a shiver? Like, right after you kiss your first love, or after a president gets shot, or after an earthquake hits? Well, Smith and Carlos in ’68 was a mother of a moment for dark-skinned people from San Diego to Maine, if any lived in Maine.

Someone in our living room, maybe it was my father or one of my uncles, finally broke the dead air by saying, with mock disbelief, “I know they didn’t.”

Then he said it again, slowly, with emphasis: “I . . . know . . . they . . . did-int.”

Oh, yes they did.

Plenty of whooping and hollering and shouts of “you damn right!” followed. And swept up in the emotional

whirlwind was a little boy who felt a bolt of black pride for the first time.

You had to understand the day and age. That was the year black folks finally woke up and rose up. This was the painful and exhausting stretch run of the Civil Rights era. The blood of Martin Luther King Jr. was still damp on the balcony of a Memphis hotel, and his assassination was followed by violence and anger from a fed-up race of people who had had enough. Some adults in my family were into the whole black power thing, going to marches, joining demonstrations, nodding their heads to the rhetoric from the street poets, taking leaflets and buying newspapers from the bow-tied robots of the Nation of Islam. Their view of the world turned radical; their view of the establishment turned suspicious. They cleared room in their closets for a more Afrocentric wardrobe, trimmed with kinte cloth, which they wore proudly.

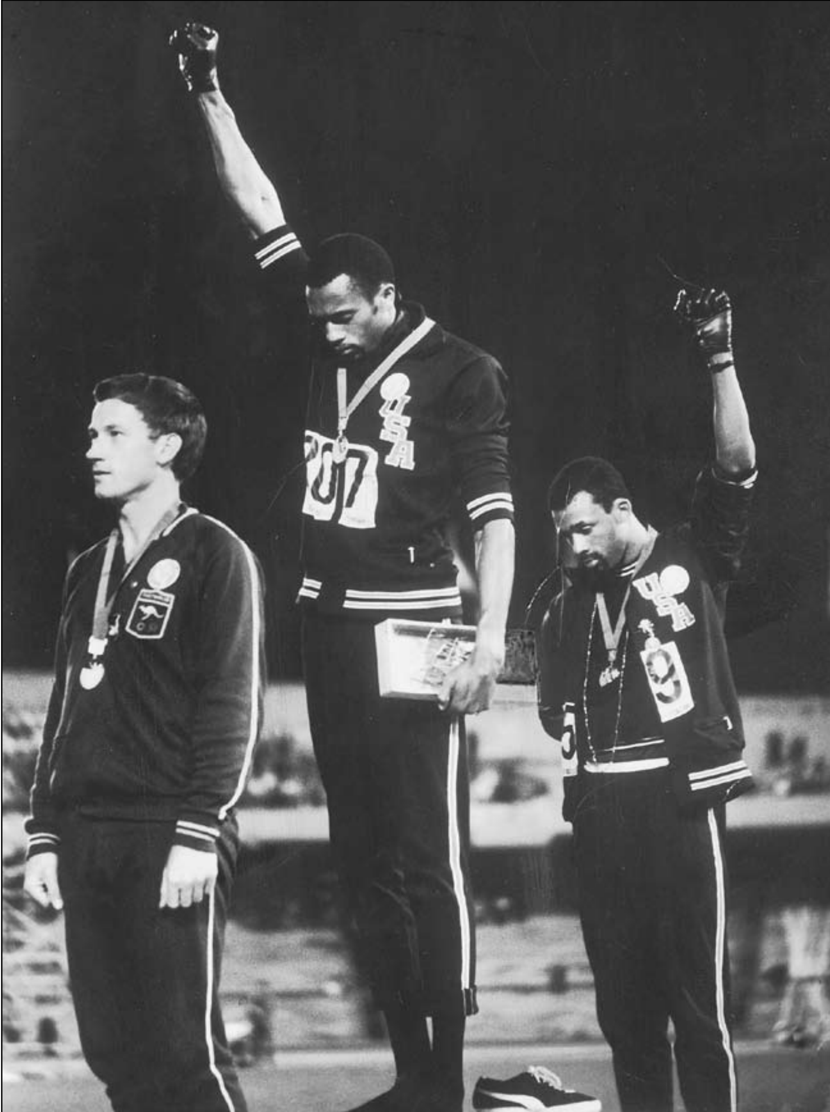
This was done in part because Smith and Carlos seized an opportunity and forevermore became synonymous with free speech and the most prestigious sporting event in the world. They used the international glare of the Olympics and the platform of sports to punctuate a Rosa Parks–like message that was far greater, and proved more valuable, than the Olympic awards that hung around their necks. This was a risk well worth taking, judging from the overwhelming response from the black community—including the rousing approval of a certain little boy who would soon devote his lifetime to watching and dissecting sports for a living.

Just before bedtime, I remember rummaging through my closet and finding one of my winter gloves and putting it on. It felt snug. I felt powerful. And after making a fist, I wanted to find a white kid and punch him right in the face, except none lived in my neighborhood.

Then to my surprise, only days later, I felt like hitting George Foreman instead.

Foreman won the gold medal in boxing, which in itself was a bigger deal in urban America than winning a race, because boxing was ruled by blacks and represented

strength and ferocity and fire and unapologetic violence, all the things that percolated inside black America in the searing summer of ’68. But what does Foreman do? He grabs a tiny American flag and waves it while grinning, walking around the ring and taking these obedient bows.



John Dominis/Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images

John Carlos and Tommie Smith, courageously taking a stand for equality, justice, and more.

Once again, stone silence fell in our living room. Then someone said, "I know he didn't." Oh, yes. He did.

With an uppercut that nobody saw coming, Foreman sucker-punched lots of black folks with that flag that day. He swiftly became, in the eyes of a good many, the definition of a sellout. In the wake of Carlos and Smith and the riots and the rage, he picked the absolute wrong time to smile and show his patriotic side. His attempt to heal the wounds caused by the strife of the '60s was viewed as brave by some in white society but cowardly by a good segment of black society, given the bold risk taken by Smith and Carlos. Foreman made a conscious decision to conform to society, quite the opposite of Smith and Carlos, who made it very evident on which side they stood. One Olympic winner embraced what the country stood for. Two others railed against it. One seemed to say everything was cool back home. Two wanted to distance themselves from a mainstream that discriminated against them and their people.

Over a span of several years, the image of blacks in sports was changing, and not just because of the 1968 Olympic Games. The all-black line-up of Texas Western conquered basketball king Kentucky for the 1966 national championship. Bruising USC fullback Sam "Bam" Cunningham ran roughshod over traditional football power Alabama in 1970. First, eyes opened, and soon thereafter minds and doors opened to the recruitment of black athletes in the South. The NBA was in its final seasons in which the league would be at least half white. And then there was Muhammad Ali, fresh off a boxing exile for refusing to serve in the war because "no Viet Cong never called me nigger," fighting his way back into the consciousness of a wary sporting America. Damn, as a growing black boy sucking in all the history and flavor, this was incredible to witness and feel and breathe.

It was easy to root for and identify with the rebels back then. They said something and stood for something, whereas O.J. just wanted people to rent cars. Jim Brown

made a bunch of really bad movies, the kind that would go straight to video, except he always played threatening black men who didn't take any lip and kicked plenty of ass. Hank Aaron saw letters in his mailbox that were a lot less inviting than bills, and he brought them to our attention while remaining classy and professional. And every now and then, somebody would say or do something profound that reeked of pride and freedom and made everyone, not just black people, know what's up.

Then the inevitable yet startling evolution arrived—for me, for the athletes, for the country. Integration and jobs and tolerance turned a hose on anger, defiance, and the most serious racial issues, and the face of blacks in sports was altered forever. White America began gravitating without hesitation toward large black men, at least those wearing jerseys. The level of fear and distrust between white and black society decreased significantly, though not entirely. Helped partly by the media spotlight and the unifying power of sports, Madison Avenue sold black culture to Nebraska. In certain circles, and in certain doses, black people and particularly black culture became chic and acceptable. It began to influence popular culture, music, fashion, television, and even speech. Quite obviously, the impact in sports became considerable. For those whites who didn't live next door to blacks or spend time around them, big-time sports were their only window into a strange and foreign world, and some drew their beliefs on race from how those athletes talked and walked.

The rebels were still around, but I felt a sudden disconnection from them. Our ideas no longer meshed, which gave me a terrible case of heartache.

On my end, age, maturity, wisdom, and the realization that I didn't need to fight the same battles as my parents and grandparents softened my view of the world. No question about that. As an adult, my neighborhood and circle of friends have changed drastically from what I knew at eight years old and now include people of all races and

backgrounds, giving me a healthier understanding and respect for all cultures. And I've since jumped to the other side of the generational line. Fair enough. But on their end, the rebels stopped having anything significant to say. Their words and actions weren't uplifting and positive anymore. Instead, the tone of their rebellion became more reckless, self-defeating, deflating, disturbing, and, dare I say, downright embarrassing. They began defying authority not necessarily because authority was unfair and discriminatory and deserved a black-gloved salute. This is where we are today. Some black athletes defy authority and reject the notion of proper behavior because they weren't raised properly, or because they lack social skills, or because they weren't educated, or because they don't subscribe to personal discipline. The only encouraging sign is that, thankfully, there seems to be change on the horizon.

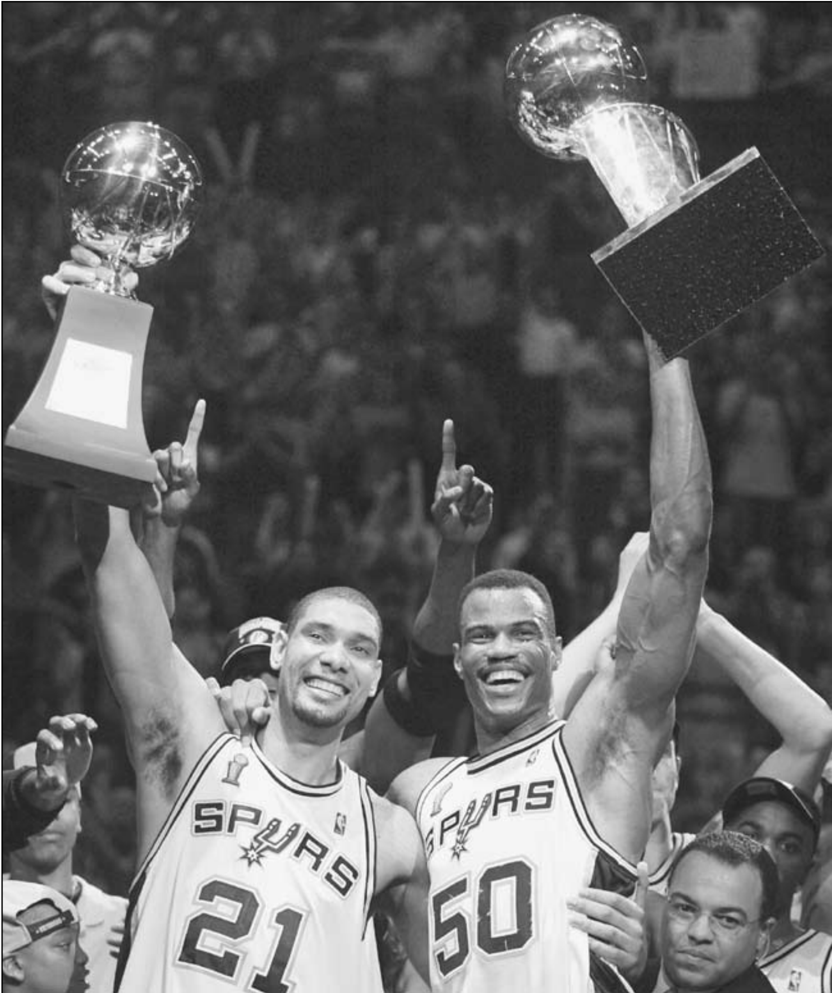
The reasons for this type of rebellion are obvious enough. Many black athletes are products of the worst places to live in America, and a fair share carry this baggage into college (for those who decide to go), onto the professional level (for those lucky enough to go), and even throughout their lives. It's not totally their fault. Plenty of forces are at work against them, both forces that they created themselves and forces that were created specifically for them, rooted in racism. The combination of some being raised by single mothers (and sometimes grandmothers), poverty, poor role models, laughable post–Civil Rights leadership, absentee fathers, impressionistic gangsta rap, crumbling city schools, and a sense of entitlement because of their athletic ability has managed to warp the character of the rebels. They're caught in this vicious cycle that keeps spinning and snatching the next unfortunate generation of ballplayers. Some recover before it's too late and assimilate fairly smoothly into society. Others don't. Given the enormous pub they get, sometimes for the wrong reasons, they're a burden for those of us who strive to present a balanced view of

black people to America. This is important because we're the only race on the planet that too often gets snapshots taken of our bad side instead of our good.

Here's what I mean. In the mid-1990s, the campaign to sell overpriced basketball sneakers became intense, with at least a half-dozen companies fighting among themselves for the right pro athlete to snatch a healthy slice of the market, which was mostly geared to teenagers. The competition included two very interesting pitchmen: David Robinson and Allen Iverson. They were both superstars, highly visible, and tremendously successful. But even Stevie Wonder could see they were about as different as possible in every way other than skin color.

Robinson was lucky enough to come from a two-parent household. He grew up middle class, was educated at the prestigious Naval Academy, and was about as hip as C-SPAN. Nike gave him a commercial, but Robinson wanted control of the content, and the two sides agreed on "Mr. Robinson's Neighborhood," playing off the "Mr. Rogers" children's show. Near the end of the commercial, which was mostly done tongue in cheek, Robinson turned serious. He said, "Mr. Robinson doesn't like garbage in his shoes. If you're into drugs, don't come into my neighborhood. Mr. Robinson doesn't like garbage in his neighborhood."

The ad didn't sell many shoes. No surprise there because neither Robinson nor his well-meaning message could resonate with an audience that craved the street credibility that Iverson exuded. Almost as soon as he signed his first pro contract, Iverson was blessed with the worship of fans who liked their ballplayers with attitude. And Iverson, who unveiled cornrowed hair a few years later at the All-Star Game and set off a mad rush to the salons, was the Tupac Shakur of the courts. He clearly met the insatiable demand for a hip-hop hoops messiah. He was born to a teenaged mother who raised him alone, was arrested for inciting a riot inside a bowling alley, left Georgetown University after his sophomore year, and



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David Robinson (right), with teammate Tim Duncan, was blessed with a stable household and a Naval Academy education, but he had zero street credibility.

then had a string of run-ins (though none serious) with the law and his coaches in the NBA.

This only made his popularity soar, of course, and his $100 sneakers also flew off the shelves.

Gregg Popovich, who coached Robinson with the San Antonio Spurs, once wondered aloud why Robinson didn't

connect, "since he's exactly the kind of example you'd want your kids to follow." But everyone knew the answer to that. Robinson's body didn't have a single tattoo, he spoke eloquently, he was a family man who embraced his religious faith, and he was strongly critical of certain lifestyle choices of kids. That didn't exactly endear him to the sneakers-buying public.

A touch of danger, a healthy dose of defiance, and anything else that frightens authority is exactly what strikes a nerve among those young black kids who reject any thoughts of joining the mainstream, along with those wanna-be-def white kids from the suburbs. And who better to deliver those goods than a rebellious black athlete with nothing constructive to say or do except, you know, keep it real?

Most disappointing about the rebel today is how he shows no interest in speaking out about the last stubborn remnant of racism in sports: hiring practices. The average sports fan couldn't care less, but anyone who subscribes to fairness should be appalled by what goes on outside the view of the spectators. On the fields and courts, it's all about talent and skill, and the best player reaps the rewards largely without regard to color. It's big business, with billions on the line, and money trumps all else. Owners have too much on the line to construct barriers, and if a multicolored martian could thread a football through a tire from 100 yards away, every team in the NFL would find a spot and a locker and a salary for him.

That's not the case behind the scenes. Not even close.

The percentage of blacks playing football and basketball should roughly be reflected by the numbers that coach and manage football and basketball teams. But it doesn't, because that's where politics and networking and connections come into play, and black folks are left out of the loop. Very few are groomed for jobs, or have the advantage of being blessed with a mentor, or get to rub shoulders with the owners and school presidents. Even

worse, black players don't bother to demand changes in the coaching and administrative ranks. Many of the black pro superstars, who at least have power and clout in their organizations to promote change, just shrug and collect their oversized paychecks on the 1st and 15th.

Trust me, after more than two decades of interviewing athletes from a number of pro, college, and amateur sports in my job as a newspaper reporter, I'm fully aware that ignorance and fools come in all colors. Nobody has a monopoly on this. Cheaters, drug addicts, woman beaters, criminal behavior, and good old idiocy aren't confined within a single racial boundary. Not as much as the media would like us to believe. But that's not entirely the issue here. This book isn't a multicultural examination of sports or a higher-than-thou morality play; I'll leave that to the critics who demand perfection from a portion of the human race that's relentlessly hyped yet hopelessly flawed. Nor is it just about the rebels and their silly and destructive idea of radicalism. This is about the fascinating modern-day American black athlete, the burden he carries, the racism he gets and the racism he imagines, the image he gives, the image the media gives him, his triumphs and failures, his friends and enemies, and why he's the only one dancing in the end zone. Basically, this is about how the black athlete has evolved since John Carlos and Tommie Smith, for better and for worse.

It is quite possible that everyone and everything around him has Souled Out. Yes, a few words about the title and the variety of definitions it assumes for this book. These are no longer the 1960s or '70s, when a stronger sense of unity and pride existed among a struggling race of people who, for the most part, followed a more positive culture, purpose, and leadership. A sizeable group of young athletes today, because they were born later, have no concept of history or the athletes who paved the way for them to make millions and enjoy a better lifestyle. That, in a sense, suggests modern-day black society has lost some soul in the process of switching from one generation to the next.

But it goes deeper. Those misguided black athletes who religiously follow a thug mentality and show no inclination to reform have Souled Out. Black people with athletic backgrounds are being Souled Out of good administrative jobs throughout sports by white power brokers. Young black male athletes from poor backgrounds are being Souled Out of a quality education by their teachers and coaches. Blacks are being systematically kept out and Souled Out of influential positions in the major media companies that, for the most part, control the sports leagues and the images we get on TV and in print. Title IX was supposed to be a boon to women in sports, and yet the system has Souled Out black women while white women benefit. Highly paid black athletes are too busy hiding behind their precious public profiles and endorsement deals to lend a voice to activism, which means they've Souled Out in their worship of the almighty dollar. We'd like to say blacks have Souled Out of golf, but blacks were never souled in, even with Tiger Woods. But given the steady decline of American black faces in our national pastime over the last three decades, isn't it clear by now that blacks have voluntarily Souled Out of baseball for good?

So the real reason for the question mark in *Souled Out?* isn't to express doubt. The real issue is whether we—blacks, whites, everyone—continue to support behaviors that undermine our movement from here. This book will explain the obstacles, both self-imposed and external, and present ways to overcome them.

Speaking of transformation, how 'bout that George Foreman? Vilified by a good number of black folks upon returning home from Mexico City, he initially retreated into a cantankerous shell. He turned sullen and moody and eventually got rope-a-doped by Ali in a fight that nobody outside Foreman's family wanted Foreman to win. He retired, saw his money vaporize, and then reinvented himself as a triple-cheeseburger-eating, G-rated man who struck a chord with a public that could relate. After winning the heavyweight title in what now amounts to

a bogus sport, Big George then cashed in big time with his own grilling machine. And he's still grinning like he did in '68.

Most amazingly, he's not the one I wanna punch anymore.

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