

Article

Athlete Activists, Sports Diplomats and Human Rights: Action versus Agency

Stuart Murray * and Gavin Price

Faculty of Society and Design, Bond University, Gold Coast 4229, Australia

* Correspondence: smurray@bond.edu.au

Abstract: A glance at the international sporting landscape suggests that more athletes are representing human rights causes and engaging in off-the-field activism. The 21st century athlete, apparently, does much more than “shutting up and just playing”. This article examines how, where, and why athletes represent, communicate and negotiate complex human rights issues. It finds, and argues, that both the theory and practice of athlete activism—as a means to achieving measurable, sustainable diplomatic and human rights outcomes—needs to be reviewed, re-imagined and re-branded, particularly in international relations. Currently, the practice is only open to the privileged few, occurs almost exclusively within Western societies, and its track record of affecting lasting policy change amongst those it targets is dubious. This paper prefers, and introduces, a new label for sportspeople wishing to affect change in human rights, politics, and diplomacy: the sports diplomat. This paper reviews the concept of the athlete activist and suggests how they differ from the sports diplomat. In terms of sportspeople using diplomacy to solve human rights issues, it asks is there a best practice model that can be identified? Furthermore, assuming the practice of sports diplomats representing human rights issues is good, how might scholars and practitioners better understand and promote the practice?

Keywords: athlete activism; sports diplomacy; human rights; international relations



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1. Introduction

Since Colin Kaepernick “took a knee” to call attention to oppression, racial inequality, and police brutality in America in 2016, many sports “people” have spoken out about human rights issues. At the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympic Games, for example, the superstar gymnast Simon Biles withdrew from the Squad to focus on her mental health, to show “we’re human . . . and not just athletes”, and to take on a new role: mental health advocate [1] (Bregman, 2021, para. 15). In 2019, at the height of the Hong Kong protests, Houston Rockets General Manager Adam Silver controversially tweeted “Fight for Freedom. Stand with Hong Kong”. In 2021, the seven-time Formula 1 World Champion Sir Lewis Hamilton donated USD 20 million to a new charity called Mission 44, which aims to empower and educate young people facing discrimination from underserved communities all over the world. In short, athlete activism is flourishing and, considering the long list of threats to human rights, international society needs its sporting heroes more than ever.

When it comes to achieving political and diplomatic impact, however, a more cynical view suggests that little or nothing has changed. Athlete activism has its limits. People in power do not like meeting or working with people who are actively, publicly, and noisily, pointing out how bad they, or their regime, are. Moreover, the path travelled by the sports activist is a difficult one and not open to all. Kaepernick has still not played a game since 2016, despite signalling his desire to do so. It takes power—wealth, networks, capacity, a team, and so on—to take on a big business or government and win. Not every sports person is fortunate to get paid USD 41.2 million a year (base salary), have 21.5 million followers on Twitter and can count Coca-Cola, Walmart and AT&T among their major sponsors (as LeBron James, Forbes Magazine’s most influential athlete activist in 2021, can).

Furthermore, the success of using sport for human rights activism depends on where the athlete comes from or on the nature of their political state system. Sports activism on human rights rarely works out well in authoritarian states. It proved far easier for the American tennis player Serena Williams to speak out about racial issues, gender inequality and equal pay, for example, than it was for Peng Shuai, her Chinese counterpart. Finally, little is also known about the diplomatic impact of sports activism, that is, its ability to affect change in the relationships *between* sovereign states on issues of human rights. So far, media, corporate and scholarly attention has focused on athlete activism *within* a state, that is, in a domestic, national, and political context. The role athlete activism plays in diplomacy, whether it works, and if it can be improved—all subjects under discussion in this paper—have attracted far less.

This paper argues that the theory and practice of athlete activism—as a means to achieving human rights outcomes—should be reviewed, re-imagined and re-branded, particularly in international relations. Currently, the practice is only open to the privileged few, occurs almost exclusively within Western societies, and its track record of affecting lasting policy change amongst those it targets is dubious. This paper prefers, and introduces, a new label for athletes wishing to affect change in human rights, politics, and diplomacy: the sports diplomat.

Three questions inform the narrative of this paper:

- What is an athlete activist and how do they differ from a sports diplomat?
- In terms of sportspeople using diplomacy to solve human rights issues, is there a best practice model that can be identified?
- Assuming the practice of sports diplomats representing human rights issues is good, how might scholars and practitioners better understand and promote the practice?

In the tumultuous twenty-first century, new labels, theories and epistemology are vital if sportspeople are to improve how they represent, communicate, and negotiate human rights issues. Until it is understood why only a few, Western sportspeople are better at human rights, politics, and diplomacy than most others, athlete activism will simply remain as a niche activity open only to a few, rich, Western athletes. Mandela’s mythical “power of sport” to change the world will remain just that—a myth [2] (Mandela, 2000).

The discussion in this paper is aimed at those with an interest in sports diplomacy, particularly athletes interested in championing human rights issues, and diplomats seeking to work such athletes. Theoretically, it aims to help sportspeople better understand and channel their power, agency, and talents to represent, communicate and solve international human rights issues. Second, it seeks to demonstrate and convince sportspeople that learning about and practising diplomacy can help them affect a lasting impact in policy, diplomacy or whatever off-field pursuits they decide to pursue during and after their careers. Third, by doing so, the paper hopes to create a flood of global sports diplomats as opposed to the trickle of wealthy, Western superstar athlete activists. From the rise of autocracy, tyranny, and dictatorships to the re-emergence of Great Power conflicts for hegemony, to climate change, gender insecurity, and extremism, the world needs the power, inspiration, and sports diplomacy potential of every sporting hero, not just a few. Besides being good at hitting a ball, or running around a track, sports people have huge diplomatic potential, as well as a number of unique skills that could be better employed. Diplomacy, as this paper argues, is key to unlocking and harnessing that off-field potential to use the power of sport to generate impact and change in human rights issues.

2. Athlete Activism and Human Rights

While a consistent definition remains elusive, the construct of athlete activism has evolved during the modern era of competitive sport. Cooper et al. [3] (2019, p. 172) describe it as the actions initiated by athletes intending to “alter and mitigate the hegemonic nature of structural arrangements, rules/policies/bylaws, and practices through sport organizations that serve to reinforce subordination, marginalization, and exploitation of certain groups”. Whereas [4] Magrath’s (2021, p. 1) ground-breaking *Athlete Activism*:

Contemporary perspectives simply refers to the term as the practice of “athletes campaigning for social justice”. Whether activism relates to fighting racism, sexism, and homophobia in or out of sport, or standing up for the employment conditions of workers, human rights via sports is an important practice.

Athlete activism demonstrates its rich and multifaceted heritage when considered in practice. At the 1968 Mexico Olympics, for example, U.S. sprint stars Tommie Smith and John Carlos took to the podium and raised a gloved “black power” fist during the playing of the U.S. national anthem. They were representing and protesting racial injustice, as well as the oppression of many people all over the world. Often credited as the most iconic moment of overt political dissent at an elite international sports event, the flashpoint remains an inspirational reference for today’s athlete activists who support the Black Lives Matter movement, such as Coco Gauff (Tennis), Tom Brady (NFL Football) or LeBron James (NBA Basketball). Amplified via today’s hyper-connected world, these sportspeople represent a new generation of human rights activists in professional sport. From football’s Marcus Rashford lobbying the British Government on homelessness and child food poverty to Basketball’s Brittany Griner and Layshia Clarendon speaking out on transgender rights, many athletes are representing human rights and progressive social and political issues off and on the court.

It is not just the athletes that engage in sports activism that represent human rights issues. Nations, states, international and domestic sports governance bodies, and professional sports teams are also associated with the practice, which is most readily demonstrated by via sporting boycotts. From the early 1960s, for example, Abdul Minty, a South African exile and leading member of the British Anti-Apartheid Movement, captures the reasons why the sporting boycott was so effective: [5]

We understood, as South Africans, the significance of sport for white South Africa. It was like a religion. And if you hit them hard, then you were really getting the message across that they were not welcome in the world as long as they practised racism in sport (South African History Online, n. d.).

South Africa was certainly “hit hard” for a long time. They were banned from competing at the Olympics from 1964 to 1988, and, similarly, excluded from participating in football, cricket, rugby union, chess, golf, and many other sports. The sporting sanctions eventually had the desired effect as the era of Apartheid began to unravel around 1990.

Boycotts are still employed today, and for much the same reason. Roughly twenty liberal democracies ranging from the USA to India and Latvia declared a “diplomatic boycott” of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics because of “genocide and crimes against humanity” in Xinjiang, a north-western region of China populated by Muslim ethnic minorities [6] (Mather, 2022). In January 2023, Cricket Australia boycotted all international matches against Afghanistan in response to the Taliban’s “unacceptable” treatment of women and girls [7] (Belot, 2023). The narrative around boycotts is likely to become more complex in a world increasingly beset by complex transnational challenges such as climate change, energy, humanitarian and food security concerns, or the threat of global pandemics [8] (Chadwick, 2022).

The narrative around the efficacy of athlete activism in human rights is equally complex. In its most positive form, it offers an authentic, powerful voice in a world where political dialogue is becoming polarised, ill-informed, and influenced by populist agendas. Athletes also promote public discourse on human rights by using social media, which amplifies their views and voices to a mass global audience in real time. Such tools are particularly effective when the athlete activist, or group of activists, ally with stakeholders such as law enforcement agencies, government policymakers, community groups, sports federations, INGOs and other pillars of civil society. For instance, as the covid pandemic tore through communities in 2019, Welsh (UK) football legends such as Gareth Bale, Jayne Ludlow, Aaron Ramsey and elite cyclist Geraint Thomas partnered with the Welsh Government and Public Health Wales to spread the vital message #StayHomeSaveLives to national and international audiences. On a more global level, numerous international sports legends

such as Lionel Messi (football), Serena Williams (Tennis), Sachin Tendulkar (cricket) and Jackie Chan (Martial Arts) have partnered with UNICEF as Goodwill Ambassadors to promote human rights causes, issues, and initiatives. The same might be said of elite football clubs Barcelona (Spain), Manchester Utd (England) and Rangers (Scotland), who champion the cause for vulnerable young people worldwide.

While activism is important for human rights, it is also controversial, particularly for those targeted by it—politicians, leaders, big business, media organisations, and others. This controversy leads to the first critical problem this paper has identified with sports activism—in a zero-sum world, athlete activists usually come off worse. Few emerge victorious, and those that do are often labelled as troublemakers in a realm where many would prefer they just “shut up and play”. Returning to Mexico, 1968, for example, Smith and Carlos were largely ostracised by the American sporting, corporate, and political establishments for the Black Power Salute. To this day, Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter prevents athletes from “advertising, demonstrations and propaganda” on the field of play and during ceremonies (IOC, 2020). Many athletes support Rule 50 too. According to the IOC, a quantitative survey that was started in June 2020 and involved more than 3,500 athletes representing 185 different nations and all 41 Olympic sports found that “a clear majority of athletes said that it is not appropriate to demonstrate or express their views on the field of play (70% of respondents), at official ceremonies (70% of respondents) or on the podium (67% of respondents)” [9] (Bruton, 2021).

Activism can also have the opposite effect the athlete intends. It can sometimes empower and embolden the target to double down on human rights abuses. Seen through a diplomatic lens, activism can cause further division, estrangement, and xenophobia—all preconditions for conflict, not resolution. Moreover, the targets are often powerful people or institutions with resources, capabilities, and experience in politics and power. NFL Team Owners, war veterans, and one U.S. President (Donald Trump), for example, used “politically motivated, racially coded speech to mobilize a nativist, reactionary response” to the Kaepernick-inspired protests [10] (Platt, 2018). As noted, the player still has not played a game (for six years, at the time of writing).

Despite being talented, hard-working, intelligent, loyal, and having power, a brand and, for some, money, it is not easy for a sportsperson to affect change in politics, diplomacy, or human rights. In addition, there are few pathways for sports activists—during and after their careers—to “get into” politics or diplomacy, the two professions where they might be able to “do something” about a country’s human rights attitudes or policies. Where, for example, can a sportsperson sign up to study, learn about, or train to become an athlete activist? Is the process effective? Why? Why not? Is there a body of data or evidence to better understand its efficacy? When it comes to athlete activism and its efficacy at achieving actual change in human rights, the observer is left with more questions than answers. In addition, not every sportsperson has the skills, compunction, opportunity, education, or financial security to take on a government, global mining conglomerate, or international sporting regime. Activism seems to be limited to a few, rather than a major global trend, or some sort of panacea to human rights.

What, also, should the activity be called? The term athlete activist is a polarising one that does not appeal to the majority of those in, and with, power. The pejorative political connotation that accompanies the label perhaps accounts for the volume of other, less offensive titles and labels: role models, sports ambassadors, celebrity sports diplomats, sports envoys, and diplomats in tracksuits. The trouble with this conceptual confusion is that it is difficult to develop or study a phenomenon if the researcher does not know what to research. The result? Intellectual, theoretical, and practical stagnation in a very positive and important area—and future profession—that should be considerably more powerful, effective, welcomed, normative and encouraged.

In certain countries, the practice is also fraught with danger. Regarded as one of the greatest Austrian footballers of all time, Matthias Sindelar refused to play for Germany after Anschluss in 1938, would not do the Hiel Hitler Salute, and often demonstrated

his contempt for the Nazis on and off the pitch [11] (Stummer, 2008). Ten months after humiliating the German team during a “reunification derby” in 1938—they won, when they were supposed to lose—Sinderlar and his girlfriend died in mysterious circumstances in their apartment. Activism can also be hurtful to many. Some players—such as the rugby player Israel Falou—abuse their fame, platform, and power to represent and amplify cruel, archaic, and, in his case, homophobic messages not worth repeating. Finally, if done poorly, activism can prove exorbitantly expensive, particularly if the activist has little understanding of international relations theory, history, or strategy. The 2019 “fight for freedom. Stand with Hong Kong” Tweet by Houston Rockets GM Daryl Morey, for example, cost the National Basketball Association USD 400 million in lost revenue from China [12] (Feldman, 2022). More recently, at the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics, the Belarussian sprinter Krystsina Tsimanouskaya refused to fly home. She feared for her life after participating in protests against Alexander Lukashenko, the country’s dictatorial president (his son, Viktor, is president of the Belarus Olympic Committee). Death, sanctions, suspensions, fines, contracts torn up, sponsorship deals cancelled for doing or saying the wrong thing are prevalent when the sportsperson decides to champion a human rights cause.

When it comes to successfully representing, communicating, and negotiating such issues, sportspeople quickly find themselves out of their depth in settings populated by shrewd, Machiavellian players. Time and time again, international sportspeople—as representatives of their country—are asked to compete amidst tense, bizarre political situations and told to keep quiet. The episode that saw the British Olympic Association (BOA) reword the 2008 Beijing Games athlete’s contracts to ban comments about China’s human rights record provides a case in point. A draft version of the contract, which sets out issues such as uniforms, travel and the behaviour expected from those representing Team GB, instructed athletes not to “comment on any politically sensitive issues” while in China [13] (Kelso, 2008). Simon Clegg, the then BOA chief executive, conceded at the time that: “I accept that the interpretation of one part of the draft BOA team members’ agreement appears to have gone beyond the provision of the Olympic Charter; this is not our intention, nor is it our desire to restrict athletes’ freedom of speech, and the final agreement will reflect this” (Kelso, 2008).

In such cases, it is clear who, or what, the athletes represent—the sending, sovereign state, its incumbent foreign policy, and most certainly not human rights issues. When athletes work with governments as “sports envoys”, they are “co-opted” to represent the sending state’s position, and not their own. Trapped between shrewd governments, businesses, or sporting regimes, it is little wonder that many sports people choose to avoid politics, diplomacy, or human rights altogether. Those that do can be easily and quickly overwhelmed, or used and abused as “political footballs” with no idea of how to survive, behave, or—at some point, one would hope—advance their human rights agenda and affect impactful, measurable and lasting change.

Considering the context human rights and athlete activism occurs in—the pitfalls, the nefarious worlds of politics, international relations and diplomacy, and the existential threat to an athlete’s livelihood or wellbeing—no wonder so few sports people consider using their extraordinary talents, skills and power raise awareness of, or change, a human rights issue. By default of their professional culture, few sports people seem to have the wherewithal, desire, or opportunity, to speak or act out. If they do, it usually does not end well. Even fewer still “go into politics” where they might be able to inspire others to follow, educate their colleagues, and—most importantly—translate their sporting activism into political agency, that is, the ability to design, implement and measure impactful change at a policy level. The question, or puzzle, the paper now turns to is: why do so few sportspeople become effective agents of change in human rights, politics and international relations and diplomacy?

3. Framing Sports Diplomacy and the ‘Gap’ of the Sports Diplomat

For those who believe in the “power of the sport to change the world” (Mandela, 2000), it is disappointing that the most important players, the athletes and their coaches, are largely muzzled, discouraged, and confused (as to pathways into education or work in activism, politics and diplomacy after their sporting careers have ended, for example). A person should be able to have the freedom to speak, represent and act on human rights regardless of what they do. Sports people are no different. They should be able to freely use their power, platform, and passion to represent, and solve, political issues and problems both domestically and internationally. As it stands, however, there are few pathways, short courses, or degree programmes for athletes to learn about politics, diplomacy, or activism. To borrow a phrase from negotiation parlance, when it comes to harnessing the power of sport to amplify positive human rights actions, programs or issues, there is so much “value left on the table”.

If, however, sportspeople representing such issues off the pitch is good for human rights, how can the hidden value be claimed? How can the trickle of rich, powerful, and untouchable megastar athlete activists be turned into a flood of sports diplomats, working on human rights issues all over the world? How can the practice be studied, normalized and welcomed by the activist’s typical foes—powerful governments, owners and tyrants alike? Using diplomacy, how can scholars create and add value to athlete activism, to widen the pie, so to speak? The solution, this paper argues, lies in diplomacy, or sports diplomacy to be more specific. Athlete activism would be more appealing, effective, and acceptable if a new label, theory and profession was introduced and reified—the sports diplomat.

Before such a personal specification can be created, however, the sports diplomacy field of studies must be briefly explained, and key concepts defined. Housed under International Relations and Diplomatic Studies, the “new” field of Sports Diplomacy Studies was born in 2011 at the International Symposium on Cultural Diplomacy in Berlin when the author presented the first paper in the new canon [14] (Murray, 2011). This “seminal” paper identified the gap in the field of study, reviewed existing definitions, literature, and theories, and ushered in a new era of innovative scholarship on sports diplomacy (Rofe, 2016, p. 214). In terms of referent objects, or “actorness”, scholars (Murray, 2020) have focused on how western, sovereign states such as Australia, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States of America (USA) strategically harness the power of sport for foreign policy and diplomatic outcomes. This approach has demonstrated both the utility of, and tension caused by, sub-states such as Wales and the Basque Country entering the field of play, and Kobierecki (2020), Dubinsky (2019) and Rofe (2021) have recently introduced perspectives on non-state actors, soft power, and sport for development. In the young but growing field of studies, few scholars have employed the athlete as a key referent object of inquiry. This is a clear gap in what we know, or do not know, in terms of sports diplomacy.

It is now easy to define the term. Sports diplomacy is a new term that describes an old practice: the power of sport to bring people, nations, and communities closer together via a shared love of physical pursuits. More specifically, it can be defined as

the conscious, strategic use of sportspeople and sporting events by state and non-state actors to engage, inform and create a favourable image among foreign publics and organisations, to shape their perceptions in a way that is (more) conducive to the sending group’s goals. [15] (Murray, 2018)

Note the plurality inherent in the definition—sports diplomacy is a whole-nation approach involving states, non-state actors, and anyone else that wants to study, train, and play in the game. Sports diplomacy is a grand, abstract, or meta-approach, in other words. It argues that the power of sport can indeed change of the world, but only if states, non-state actors and other powerful institutions work together via a common method in a collaborative, complementary and strategic fashion.

The practice of sports diplomacy has also recently grown. The U.S. Department of State began the new, practical era with *SportsUnited*, a series of sports diplomacy programmes

that were introduced after 9/11 to engage foreign publics that did not speak English, read *The Washington Post* or listen to Voice of America. The state sent sports envoys to the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, and provided grants, sports mentoring and coaching for overseas athletes, coaches and other sportspeople to visit, study and/or play in the U.S. The Australian government then took the baton, producing the world's first esoteric strategy on sports diplomacy in 2015 (*Sports Diplomacy 2015–2018*), followed by a second (*Sports Diplomacy 2030*) in 2019.

It is not just Western sovereign states that are investing in sports diplomacy, however. In the lead up to the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games, for example, the Chinese Communist Party hosted twenty-five high-level “sports diplomacy summits” (including a meeting between Presidents Xi and Putin, three hours before the opening ceremony) [16] (Tiezzi, 2022). Russia has a history of timing overseas incursions around or during MSEs, using the distraction of the tournament to invade Georgia on the first day of the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics. Just weeks after the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics closing ceremony, for example, Russia began meddling in Ukrainian politics, annexed Crimea, and supported the war waged by separatist rebels in Eastern Ukraine. In 2018, and despite then Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko arguing that “as long as there are Russian troops in Ukraine, I think a World Cup in that country is unthinkable” (Reuters, 2015), the Putin regime used the 2018 FIFA World Cup as a charm offensive before, as discussed, returning to form at the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympic Games. It should also be noted that it is not just large, sovereign states practising sports diplomacy. Sub-States such as Wales and the Basque country are also currently investigating how to design similar strategies, as is the European Union [17] (Parrish, 2022).

While some states such as the U.S. and Australia have employed sportspeople as envoys to represent them abroad, there is no manual, procedure or pathway for athletes wishing to work with Ministries of Foreign Affairs on human rights issues. Successful candidates seem to be randomly, or opportunistically, selected to represent their country off the pitch, depending on the foreign policy needs of the time. Athletes then go on to serve the state, rather than exist as independent, powerful, and diplomatic actors representing their own causes, in their own right. In this respect, the practice is no different from the state sending Jesse Owens to India, the Philippines and Malaysia in the 1960s, where he led running clinics, and promoted and represented American values abroad (Goldberg, 2000). The same might be said of the exhibition team The Harlem Globetrotters, who have been entertaining people all over the world while subtly spreading American values since 1926 [18] (Thomas, 2013).

The practice of sending sports envoys abroad has generated some scholarship in the small but growing field of sports diplomacy studies. In 2014, for example, Vanc published a fascinating study on the “public diplomacy value of celebrity athletes as anti-diplomats” [19] (Vanc, 2014). Using the controversial Romanian tennis player Ilie “Nasty” Nastase as a case study, she argued that “athletes can increase their country’s public diplomacy efforts, even when that athlete’s conduct is incongruent with that of the diplomatic culture” (Vanc, 2014). In 2018, the author wrote on sports envoys, old and new, and introduced the term Diplomats in Tracksuits, while in 2021, Zhao and Knijnik (2021) [20] examined the role that the superstar singles champion player Li Na played as a “Sports Celebrity diplomat” in Australia–China relations.

The trouble with the research around sports diplomats, as well as the practice of governments employing a current or former athlete as an envoy, is that there is no body of theory to describe, explain and understand why only a few sports people become human rights activists, and even fewer diplomats, or ambassadors for their sport. As such, both the theory and practice seem anachronistic, parochial, and out of touch, particularly when it comes to improving human rights. In the works described above, athletes are lumped under the banner of public diplomacy, which means the sportsperson is considered in the same vein as a movie star, famous artist, or singer; hence why they are described as a celebrity sports diplomat or superstar athlete activist.

4. Creating the Sports Diplomat

To harness the power of sport for human rights is to introduce, imagine and conceptualise a new label, a new body of theory and—eventually, and ideally—a new profession: the sports diplomat. Just as public diplomacy has its public diplomats, the growing field of sports diplomacy studies needs its sports diplomats. This section suggests a new framework, case studies and way of thinking about how sports people can use diplomacy to improve human rights problems on a much wider, international scale. In such a context, this article does not seek to provide a terminal theory on the sports diplomat, for such an intention would be anathema to the epistemological nature of academia. Rather, it seeks to begin the first sustained, theoretical discussion on the sports diplomat. It therefore “describes a range of possibilities” conducive to stimulating and directing the further development of knowledge by highlighting “gaps” in what we do, and do not, know about the myriad relationships among sport, human rights and diplomacy [21] (Hayek 1980, p. 32).

The sports diplomat, as this section proposes, is a different creature to the athlete activist. Instead of representing a social issue *within* a state, acting politically, and taking on (usually) more powerful interlocutors, the sports diplomat represents a human rights issue *between* states, acts diplomatically, and adopts a conciliatory, virtuous, and empathetic approach with more powerful agents, groups, or states. Instead of adopting fixed positions, claiming value, and engaging in distributive negotiations, the sports diplomat explores different parties’ needs, interests and fears, seeks to add or create value, and engages in integrative or problem-solving negotiation. Skills honed during careers in professional sport such as leadership, communication, teamwork, and emotional intelligence are fused with conventional diplomatic competencies such as negotiation and representation to give sports diplomats a powerful and dynamic skill set that is often more palatable to a wider raft of stakeholders.

For further context, an example of a sports diplomat—Craig Foster—might prove instructive. Foster, a former Australian football captain [22], was instrumental in the global #SaveHakeem campaign. Hakeem al-Araibi was born in Bahrain, grew up playing football for his country, and used his fame and power to speak out against the persecution and torture of other footballers who had demonstrated against the ruling regime during the Bahraini uprising of 2011 (which was mostly led by Bahrain’s majority Shia, which al-Araibi is, whilst the ruling family is Sunni). Quickly labelled as a dissident, he was imprisoned for 77 days, tortured, and falsely accused of vandalising a police station by Bahraini security forces based on the supposed confession of his brother Emad, who allegedly told them that Hakeem had been part of a crowd of protesters who set upon the building with Molotov cocktails.

International football then both saved and imperilled Hakeem. When out on bail and playing for the national team in Qatar, he fled first to Iran, then Malaysia, then Thailand, and eventually, nearly six months later, to Australia. There, he sought asylum in May 2014 and continued to speak out about the human rights abuses of the ruling elite in Bahrain. His activist past, as well as the Bahraini government, eventually caught up with Hakeem when he travelled to Thailand for a honeymoon in 2019. He was detained on arrival (the Bahrain government had a red Interpol alert put on him) and threatened with deportation back to Bahrain where he would have faced further imprisonment, torture and duress. As the footballer became a pawn between the Australian, Thai and Bahrain governments, the story went viral.

Enter Craig Foster, a former Australian international football player, television presenter and sports activist. His actions, diplomacy and agency provide a sound blueprint for the sports diplomat. On hearing news of al-Araibi’s detention, Foster fiercely campaigned and negotiated on the footballer’s behalf. He spent time in Thailand, wrestling his way to the front of the media throng to shout “Your wife sent her love, Australia is with you, buddy. Stay strong, Hakeem.” Foster then travelled to Zurich, Switzerland, to present a petition with more than 50,000 signatures demanding the release of the detained player and held talks with General Secretary Fatma Samoura [23]. The former captain of the

Australian men's football team represented the case to Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs (DFAT), their Ambassador to Thailand, and the Australian Federal Police. He Tweeted constantly on the topic and the Hashtag #SaveHakeem trended "in 81 countries and reached over 30 million people", as Foster noted at the time on ABC TV's Australian Story [24] (McDermott and Chenery, 2019, para. 8). In the end, and after months of frenetic diplomacy, a jubilant Foster emerged with Hakeem at Melbourne Airport to be greeted by a huge crowd of human rights and football supporters.

What then makes Foster's #SaveHakeem campaign a case of sports diplomacy as opposed to athlete activism? First, the footballer demonstrated several key diplomatic skills and functions. To paraphrase the great Hedley Bull (1977, pp. 163–166), Foster "represented" the issue, "communicated" the core messages, "negotiated" between governments, police authorities and sporting regimes, and "gathered and disseminated [a specific type] of information" while "minimizing friction" in order to realise his specific policy end—saving Hakeem. The issue he represented was, of course, a common human rights one, but the story was more than one footballer looking out for another (as Foster himself said). Foster's actions, behaviour and character also embody the ideal qualities of the diplomatist who, as Nicholson (1957, p. 68) noted, has "a moral obligation to humanity", high standards of "integrity", decency and virtue, and should refuse to obey instructions when they "run against the laws of god or justice".

To further aid the creation of the sports diplomat, the international sportsperson might realise and accept that they are already a diplomat. There are, in fact, many similarities between the two professions. To imagine the sports diplomat means teasing those similarities out and encouraging both professions to know, and learn, from the another. For example, diplomats and sportspeople are physical representatives of their state in the international relations system. Both epitomise an elite stratum of society, and it would be fair to say that both professions attract fiercely patriotic individuals. To serve the state is considered a great honour and, as such, most citizens want both the diplomat and the athlete to win for their country. Just as sportspeople compete with their opponents in dramatic stadiums around the world, diplomats also compete in great contests involving rules, secret plays, tactics, spectators, opponents, and large forums in exotic, far flung locales. Moreover, in "both vocations, mediocrity of performance is criticised while winning and success are rewarded with progress, increasing recognition and the ability to compete against the best in the world" (Murray and Pigman, 2014, p. 1103).

There are further similarities between the sportsperson and the diplomat. Both, for example, purport to embody ideal human qualities. Ministries of Foreign Affairs recruit people that exhibit certain diplomatic personality traits—intelligence, obedience, charm, calmness, stamina, etc.—and possess certain useful skills, in languages, negotiation, or international law, for example. Nicholson (1952, p. 126) adds a few other desirable personal qualities of the ideal diplomatist.

Truth, accuracy, calm, patience, good temper, modesty, loyalty ... "but", the reader may object, 'you have forgotten intelligence, knowledge, discernment, prudence, hospitality, charm, industry, courage and even tact'. I have not forgotten them. I have taken them for granted. (Nicholson, 1952, p. 126)

Many other scholars write of the diplomat in glowing, noble terms. For Sofer (2001, p. 108), the diplomat is in the service of grand things, but is never on heroic tracks. His sword is never drawn from its sheath. The diplomat's creed is that of obedience; he seeks to cope not conquer. Diplomats are the last to man barricades.

The similarities between the two professions are both eerie and encouraging. The observer only needs to think of both diplomats and sports people "doing their jobs" throughout global pandemics, wars and climate disasters. Ideal diplomatic behavioural traits are also found in well-respected sportspeople, as demonstrated earlier by the example of Craig Foster. Other natural-born diplomats include luminaries such as Mia Hamm, Yao Ming, Usain Bolt, Alex Scott, Siya Kolisi, Martina Navratilova, Raheem Sterling (football's first branded social activist who recently partnered with Nike) and Antoine Griezmann,

the FC Barcelona striker, who ended his sponsorship contract with Chinese giant Huawei following media reports that the company had taken part in the repression and surveillance of Uighurs, a Muslim minority ethnic group in China. Such superstars are often referred to as ambassadors of their respective sports because they embody diplomatic qualities: geniality, stamina, charm, virtue, humility, discipline, openness, civility, courage in times of adversity, and so on. Like the diplomat, many international sportspeople are globalists, polyglots, enjoy international travel, and highly value sport and wider culture's unique ability to bring together diverse cities, regions and nations in friendly competition and a celebration of common values.

Establishing similarities between diplomats and sports diplomats is important when it comes to human rights. The exercise establishes that both sports people and diplomats perform diplomatic functions, the one profession consciously, and almost in a custodial sense, and the other subliminally, and in an almost accidental manner. Imagine what the sportsperson could do for the 2030 human rights agenda with a spot of formal diplomatic training? The comparison also shows that, in a complex, anarchic twenty-first century world, both have a vital role to play in representing human rights issues and fostering dialogue, exchange and interaction between different peoples, cultures and states.

To solve human rights issues, the world needs more sports diplomats. They break down barriers built by states. They encourage "intergroup contact" and play an important role in "civilizing" processes [25] (Dunning, 1990, p. 66). This idea relates to the psychologist Gordon W. Allport's famous Contact Hypothesis, or Intergroup Contact Theory, which "states that under appropriate conditions interpersonal contact is one of the most effective ways to reduce prejudice between majority and minority group members" [26] (Schiappa et al., 2005, p. 92).

As historic, social institutions, both sport and diplomacy were created by humans to encourage contact between separate individuals and groups, which, in turn, reduced tension, division, xenophobia, and the sort of misunderstandings that often lead to intergroup violence, estrangement, and human rights abuses [27] (Allport, 1954, pp. 30–45). The question for diplomacy and human rights scholars and practitioners is how to create more of them; an army of Craig Fosters, competing, winning, and making a difference in the Great Game of international relations.

5. How, and Why, Sports Diplomats can Affect Change in Human Rights

This section argues that sports diplomats play a significant role in amplifying, representing, and—working with other actors such as states, multinational corporations, or armed forces, for example—solving international human rights issues. It explores the "why", as well as the "how". Four factors are discussed.

The first step for sports diplomats seeking change in human rights is to know the power of sport. One of the success stories of globalisation [28], sport is immensely powerful. While it may not be the language of the elite, it is certainly the opiate of the masses, and it is fair to say that the global public is more interested in international sport than international affairs. As representatives of the "international society of sport" (the system that works 24/7/365 to produce and re-produce international sport), sportspeople represent that success, power, and language. They are men and women that have earned acclaim, success and riches through sweat, skill, determination, sacrifice, pain, and hard work, as well as, obviously, talent. Outside the seven-figure salaries, most humans can relate to these qualities, which makes them highly effective representatives of human rights issues. Relatability equals credibility. Sports diplomats are more relatable, likeable, believable and, in terms of communicating positive social messages, far more credible. In a world saturated by fake news, social media, and virtual, augmented, and aggregated reality, credible, authentic messages on human rights delivered by sports people take on new power.

Second, such power, authenticity and credibility are generated from sports diplomats' heroic qualities, which can be changed to take on human rights causes. Sports diplomats are to be respected, listened to, and admired; they are heroic characters, in other words. A hero is a person with great strength, courage, nobility, or exploits (a person whose

characteristics are admired by others, in other words). However, such an understanding of a hero is too prosaic, clichéd, and ill-fitting when draped on a sports person. The great mythologist, writer and lecturer Joseph [29] Campbell (1949, p. 7) does a far better job, writing that “a hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself”. Campbell’s understanding certainly applies to most professional, devoted sportspeople who have sacrificed many “normal” human activities (good food, alcohol, loving relationships and so on) in the pursuit of sporting excellence; for their, and the watching public’s, pleasure, it might be added. In a human rights context they are powerful figures; empathetic, good listeners, and with integrity in both their jobs and their daily lives. Compared to politicians, who are arguably masters of both charm and duplicity, or movie stars, who are paid small fortunes to pretend to be someone they are not, sportspeople seem much more real, heroic and trustworthy when it comes to delivering messages on human rights. This is because, as Paul Roos [30] (P. Roos and T. Roos, 2009, p. 91), a champion Aussie Rules football player, noted, “there is nowhere to hide in sport”.

Third, sports diplomats generate power via genuine acts of kindness, philanthropy and decency; that is, offering their time, money or wisdom to human rights causes, or to help those less fortunate than themselves, and to be civil, kind, and to try and help domestic or international society. Many sportspeople have foundations or charities, which, in a clichéd sense, suggests they want to “give something back” to the world that is both their stage and workplace. The list of good, human deeds sportspeople do off the pitch is endless. After the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, for example, Yao Ming donated USD 2 million to relief work, regularly visited the worst-hit areas, and created a foundation to help rebuild schools. Cristiano Ronaldo is one of the most charitable sports stars on the planet, the Serena Williams Foundation builds schools in impoverished areas all over the world, and, after a young, delirious fan ran onto the pitch after the New Zealand All Blacks won the 2015 World Cup final and was tackled by a security guard, superstar-nice-guy Sonny Bill Williams gave the kid his winners medal. Not that they are looking for it, but such acts of kindness generate a huge amount of admiration, respect, and power, among all levels of society. If harnessed, such power can dramatically amplify human rights causes, issues and campaigns.

Failure is a fourth and final factor that contributes to the power of sports diplomats to affect change in international affairs, human rights and politics. As noted above, failure is something that ordinary sporting people constantly experience. This shared experience builds empathy, trust, and—again—relatability; vital if the messenger is to be heard and, more importantly, believed when delivering messages relating to human rights. Sportspeople fail all the time, in very public places, while being watched on television by millions of people. Failure is common for every sportsperson, good or bad, professional or amateur. Even the greatest fail. International football players Gareth Southgate, Roberto Baggio, Leo Messi, David Beckham, Sam Kerr, and Steph Houghton, for example, all missed penalty kicks that put their teams out of major international football tournaments. In the 2008 Wimbledon Final, after four hours and forty-eight minutes of inspired tennis, drama and suffering, even the great Federer ultimately fell to Nadal. The All Blacks “choked” in several rugby world cup finals, Greg Norman threw away a six-stroke lead in the final round of the 1996 US Masters, and the Yankees lost the 2004 ALCS despite leading archrivals Boston Red Sox 3–0 in the series. Losing is simply part of sport, from the bleak yin to the ecstatic yang of winning. It is also part of the philosophy and psychology of sport, for without defeat, who can savour the taste of victory [31] (Mallett and Côté, 2006).

Failure is characteristic of the true hero. The ancient Greeks provide inspiration. To them, heroes such as Perseus, Herakles or Meleager are not boastful, vain, proud individuals. As Buxton writes

what characterises the heroic mortals of Greek mythology is not any virtue which they may have . . . but rather the conspicuousness and sometimes outrageousness of what they do and suffer. They test the limits of human potential, attaining the

heights of success, and plumbing the depths of disaster. This is what makes them worth remembering, worth singing about. [32] (Buxton, 2004, p. 104)

Further, we might add to this wonderful quote, worth watching, reading about, or listening to. Heroes fail constantly, as do sportspeople, and normal human beings. Federer cries, just as ordinary people do. The humanity of our sporting heroes is what generates empathy and relatability. We trust sportspeople as communicators, for they represent us; they are us. Their authenticity makes them highly effective representatives of human rights causes.

A huge amount of diplomatic credibility and power is generated from heroic performances in the sporting arena, as well as genuine words or human rights deeds and messages outside. Combine talent, heroism, failure, and genuine acts of humility and kindness, and the result is an incredibly authentic sports diplomat, one that many ordinary sporting plebeians will happily worship; one that millions of people listen to, respect, and believe. When it comes to human rights, authenticity means that sportspeople are more effective communicators than their celebrity peers, disingenuous politicians, or corporate titans of industry. In terms of diplomatic communicative ability, sportspeople are force multipliers when it comes to human rights, development, or environmental, social or ethical issues.

6. Conclusions

The sporting elephant on the pitch, so to speak, is that not all sportspeople are good, kind, decent and make for wonderful, natural diplomats. Of course, many sport stars transgress from the “code”, but this can be written off to many factors—the folly of youth, poor judgement, peer group pressure, hubris, too much money, or, in the case of this paper, absolutely no awareness or training of their diplomacy (or, in the case of Ryan Lochte, the U.S. Swimmer who lied about being held up at gunpoint in Rio, 2016, in order to cover up for vandalising a gas station, all of the above). For the most part, however, international sportspeople represent a rare, elite, and privileged section of national and international society. Most of them graciously represent their country. Being selected for a national team or squad is something that is seen as a great honour, which is usually enough to guarantee good diplomatic behaviour.

We know all of this, however. The question this paper posed is how can that behaviour be better framed, understood, and harnessed to achieve impactful, measureable and lasting change in the human rights agenda? It argued that sports diplomats have more functionality, skills and power—and therefore, ability to represent and solve human rights issues—than athlete activists. International influence, agency, and diplomacy for sportspeople, particularly when seeking change in human rights in the behaviours between states, is more important to study and understand than activism.

From a security perspective, the twenty-first century is particularly dangerous, challenging and Gordian, because of the mixing of the old agenda with the new, or the classical politico-military agenda trying to come to terms with how to solve a host of human rights and security issues ranging from gender inequality to cultural oppression and climate change. The first twenty years of the century have demonstrated that people, states, and international institutions cannot cope with an agenda wherein human rights in Myanmar matter as much as securitising Ukraine. They need help, particularly in delivering and amplifying key messages on human rights, and international sports people can help.

Thinking this way about the power of sport to affect change in international human rights issues is important. The first change is not to move away from athlete activism as a general label, but to complement and challenge it with new ideas from other fields of study, such as sports diplomacy. Introducing the label “sports diplomat” begins this journey, and—at the same time—asks diplomatic theorists and practitioners to change the way they think about athletes and how they might add value to a mission, message, or security situation. Ideally, the argument presented in this paper changes the way athletes might think about their power, brand and agency off the pitch, so to speak. For those that do not

wish to travel the difficult, challenging path of domestic, political athlete activism, there is another way to channel their power into helping others; the way of the sports diplomat, before, during and—most importantly, during the hardest games they ever play—after their careers. This path—the way of the sports diplomat—is less dangerous, more effective, and more likely to help the athletes “win friends and influence people” in high office.

More than any other international actors, sports diplomats possess sublime skills to represent, amplify and solve twenty-first century human rights issues. Unlike states and their diplomats, international sportspeople are not hamstrung by national interests, classical political–military agendas and the stiff, boring “waltz” of the haute politique. As such, and to realise the Mandela-esque power of sport “to change the world” and “unite people in a way that little else does”, the power to affect change in human rights lies with international sportspeople embracing diplomacy (Mandela 2000). They are already halfway there. They just do not fully realise it yet. In an anarchic, confusing and dangerous international relations epoch for human rights, sports people have a far greater role to play than simply playing games to earn money, or to entertain (Friedman, 2007, p. 51). This capacity, nay, obligation, is exactly what Mandela (2000) meant when he said that sport is “more powerful than government”.

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