

A close-up photograph of a WNBA player, likely a Black woman, holding a basketball with both hands above her head. She is wearing a black t-shirt with white text and a WNBA logo. The basketball is orange and black with a red star logo. The background is blurred, suggesting a basketball court.

USC Race and
Equity Center

Let Us Speak

**Pro Athletes'
Views on Social
Justice and
Activism**

**Pay Us
What You
Owe Us**



**BY SHAUN HARPER
AND JUSTIN MORROW**

February 2026

Let Us Speak

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This report is being released during the 2026 Winter Olympics and Paralympic Games in Milan and Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy. But it is based on data that we have been collecting from professional athletes across the United States of America since 2022.

“It brings up mixed emotions to represent the U.S. right now,” freestyle skier Hunter Hess said in an interview during this year’s Olympics. “There’s obviously a lot going on that I’m not the biggest fan of and I think a lot of people aren’t.” He added, “just because I’m wearing the flag doesn’t mean I represent everything that’s going on in the U.S.”

President Donald Trump responded by referring to Hess as a “real loser” in a social media post. “Very hard to root for someone like this,” Trump wrote. The Olympian was exercising his freedom of speech, a right that the U.S. constitution supposedly affords him. Trump’s Vice President JD Vance subsequently insisted, “You’re there to play a sport, and you’re there to represent your country and hopefully win a medal. You’re not there to pop off about politics.”

This is just one of numerous examples of how professional athletes have been criticized and penalized for using their voices to speak out on social injustices.

Presented in this report are data collected from players across three pro sports leagues: the WNBA, Major League Soccer, and National Women’s Soccer League. Highlighting athletes’ engagement in and feelings about various forms of activism is the aim of this report. Our survey results make clear that players want to leverage their platforms to speak out, inspire others, and ultimately make a difference. We hope the research and recommendations offered on the pages that follow are helpful.

One of us is a former collegiate and professional soccer player. The other is a long-time scholar of race, gender, and sport. We both love athletic competitions. We understand that professional athletes are hired to do a job and to win games. However, we also recognize that they are people who have perspectives on politics and matters pertaining to social justice. Mischaracterizing them as “too woke” or “the radical left” is offensive. Likewise, insisting that they just “shut up and dribble” (or swim, ski, kick the ball, score touchdowns and home runs, etc.) seeks to silence athletes and reduce them to one-dimensional commodities for spectatorship.

Through this research report and in other ways, we honor athletes’ voices and defend their freedoms of speech and expression. Our sincerest gratitude belongs to the 407 WNBA, MLS, and NWSL players who took time to complete our survey. We also thank the various league headquarters and players association partners who helped us recruit research participants. Lastly, we will forever appreciate the Harvard University Weatherhead Center for International Affairs for creating the opportunity that first brought the two of us together to collaboratively study athlete activism.

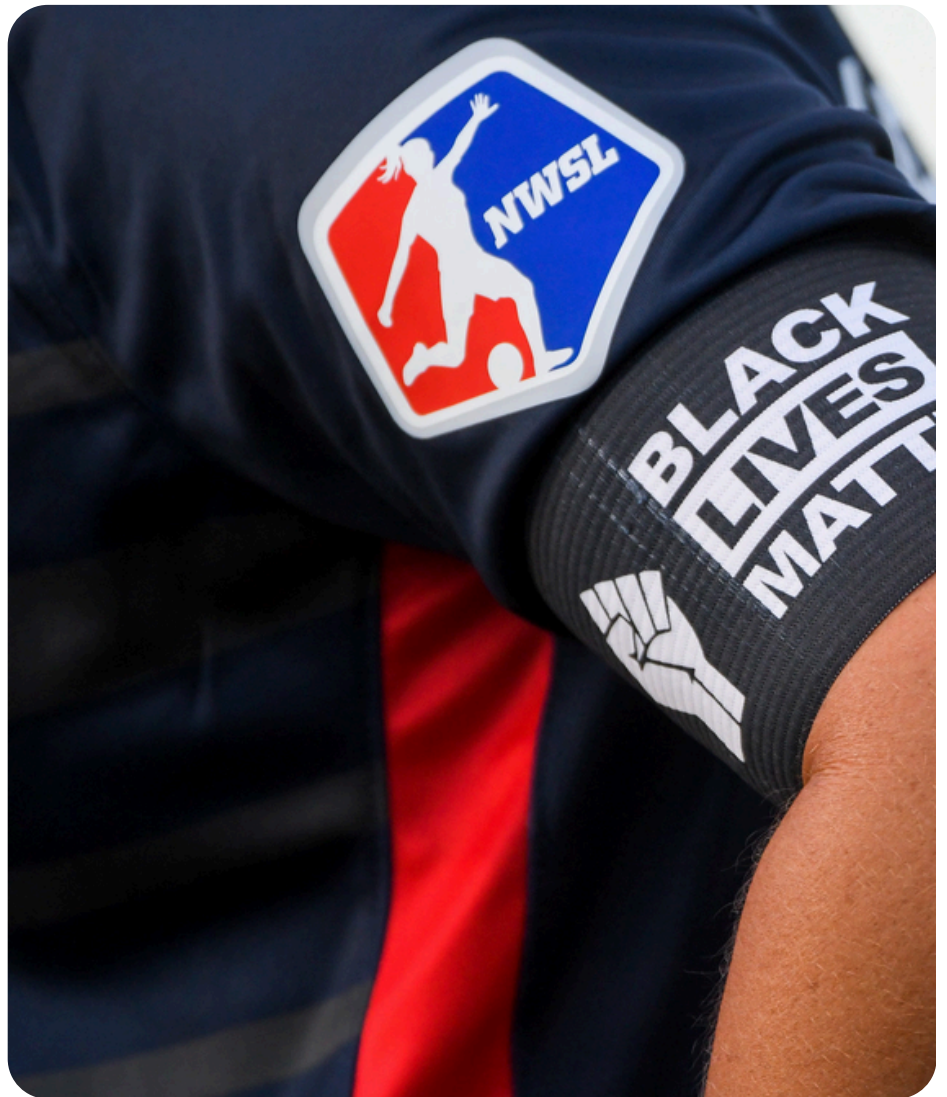


Shaun Harper, Ph.D.
Founder, Chief Research Scientist
and Professor



Justin Morrow
Head of Sports Partnerships
and Programs

Research Overview



End racism was spray painted in endzones. Breonna Taylor stickers were affixed to players' helmets. George Floyd's name was sewn onto jerseys. Professional sports teams and leagues made financial pledges to Black Lives Matter, black community organizations, and assorted racial justice initiatives. Athletes were allowed to kneel without penalty during the national anthem. League-sponsored commercials calling for Americans to work together to dismantle systemic racism aired on television networks across the country, often during games. These are just some of the many activities in which professional sports teams and leagues engaged during and immediately following the 2020 summer of racial reckoning.

It was the summer that George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery were murdered, and uprisings erupted across the U.S. and around the world.

That August, the Milwaukee Bucks protested the officer-involved shooting of Jacob Blake, an unarmed Black man in Kenosha, Wisconsin, by opting out of their NBA playoff game. All other NBA games that day were postponed.

Throughout that summer, some National Hockey League teams flashed “Black Lives Matter” on jumbotrons throughout their arenas. The NHL released a racial justice statement in which it publicly committed to increasing awareness, allyship, and advocacy. It began with the famous Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King quote, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” Additionally, several NHL players proudly wore Black Lives Matter t-shirts to games and press conferences, knelt together on the ice before games, locked arms and hockey sticks to show solidarity with Black Americans, and gestured a shared commitment to racial justice in other ways. The League was left with no choice but to postpone four Stanley Cup Playoff games in August 2020, as NHL players also united in protest against the shooting of Jacob Blake.

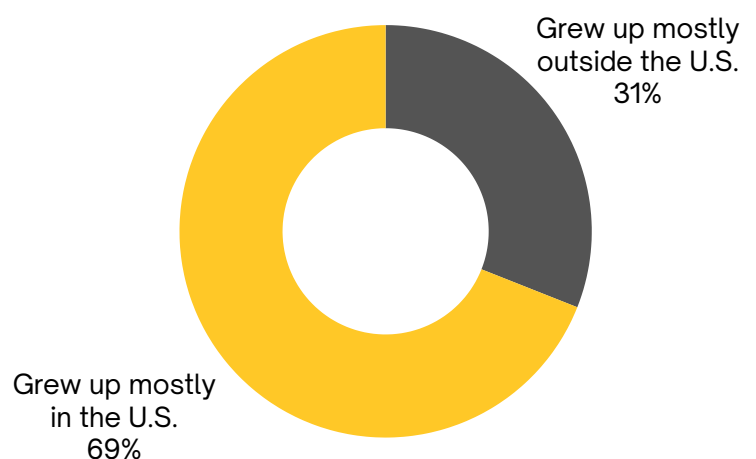
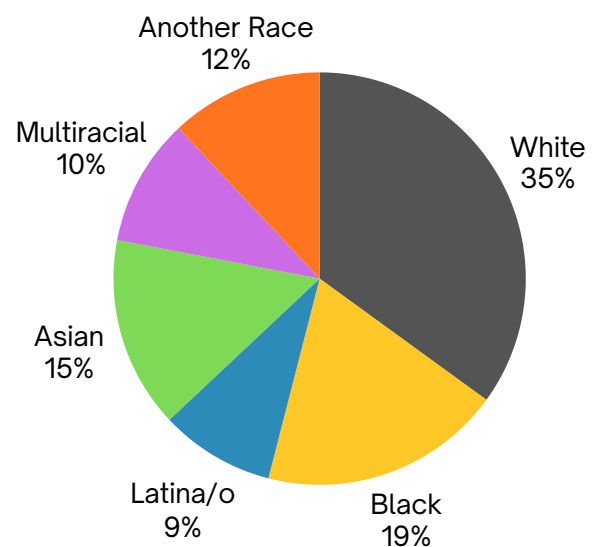
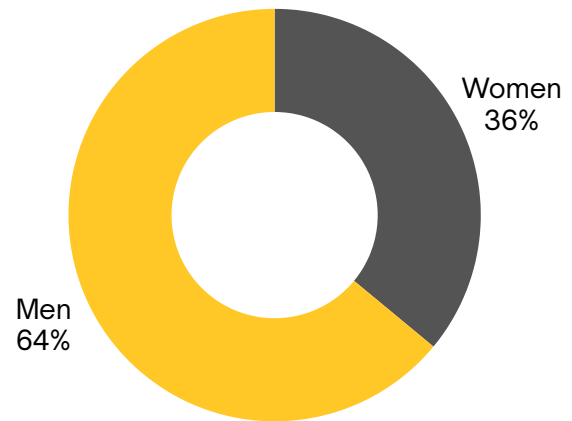
Beyond what we saw on television, in what other ways were professional athletes engaged in protest efforts during that time? In what specific activism activities did they participate? How many of them now feel it is appropriate for players, teams, and leagues to engage in protests and other forms of public activism? Does this differ by league, race, gender, nationality, or player tenure? After summer 2020, which was a very particular moment in our nation’s history, how did players imagine leveraging their platforms to call attention to future social injustices? What do they anticipate might get in their way? These questions brought us to this research study.

To explore all this, we constructed a quantitative survey that was sent to all active players across three leagues: the WNBA, Major League Soccer, and National Women’s Soccer League. Partners in the various league headquarters as well as players associations assisted us in distributing the survey to athletes. All players were made aware that their participation was optional.

Across the three leagues, 407 professional athletes submitted fully completed surveys.

At the time, they had played an average of 4.85 years in their respective leagues.

Survey Respondent Demographics



Let Us Speak



Pre-Instagram

U.S. gold and bronze medalists Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their fists in protest of racism during the playing of The Star-Spangled Banner during the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. Their powerful message reached the world in a way that today's athletes can achieve instantly via social and digital media.

Survey Results

Presented in this section are results from 407 athletes across three professional sports leagues



Views on Activism

Across the WNBA, MLS, and NWSL, professional athletes expressed overwhelming support for the right of individual players to speak out on racial justice issues. In each league, more than nine in ten respondents agreed that players should be allowed to use their platforms for activism, with support highest in the WNBA and only slightly lower in the NWSL and MLS. This near-consensus indicates that athletes broadly view activism as a legitimate and appropriate use of their public visibility. Even in leagues where players expressed some hesitation about personal participation elsewhere in the survey, support for the right to engage remained extremely high.

Athletes also expressed strong support for collective action at the team and league levels. Large majorities in all three leagues agreed that teams should join together in league-wide activism, with the strongest agreement again coming from the WNBA, followed by the NWSL and MLS. This indicates that players not only endorse individual expression but also see value in coordinated institutional efforts. Support for league-wide activism also shows that many athletes believe racial justice engagement should be embedded within league culture rather than left solely to individual efforts.

Finally, athletes conveyed broad approval for cross-league collaboration in activism activities. Large majorities agreed that their leagues and players associations should join with other professional sports leagues in these efforts, with agreement exceeding four out of five respondents in the WNBA and MLS, and even more in the NWSL. These responses reveal a consistent and multi-level endorsement of activism (individual, team-based, league-wide, and cross-league) among professional athletes.

Percentages of athletes in each league who agreed that **individual players** should be allowed to use their platforms to engage in activism for racial justice:



Percentages of athletes in each league who agreed that teams should join together in **league-wide** activism activities for racial justice:



Percentages of athletes in each league who agreed that their leagues should join together **with other professional sports leagues** in activism for racial justice



94% of athletes agreed that individual players should be allowed to use their platforms to engage in activism for racial justice

Summer 2020 Activism

Across the WNBA, MLS, and NWSL, we found differences in both the overall intensity and types of activist activities in which players engaged between June and September 2020.

WNBA athletes reported the highest levels of engagement across nearly every activist activity measured.

Posting on social media was the most common form of activism, but it was most prevalent among WNBA players and least common among MLS players.

Participation in marches and protests was fairly similar across leagues, though MLS players were slightly less involved.

Donations to racial justice organizations were more common among athletes in the women's leagues than in MLS.

Media advocacy followed a similar pattern, with WNBA players most likely to speak about racial justice in interviews, followed by NWSL athletes, and then MLS players.

More formal political engagement, such as donating to political campaigns, showed only modest differences across leagues. Activities involving visible leadership such as giving speeches or organizing within local communities were uncommon, but still appeared somewhat more frequently among WNBA players.

MLS athletes were most likely to report not participating in any of the listed activities.

Overall, the evidence confirms that athletes in the women's professional leagues, especially the WNBA, demonstrated more consistent and widespread activist participation during this period than did their MLS counterparts.

Posted about racial injustice on social media	74.8%
Participated in a march, rally, or in-person protest	8.4%
Donated to a racial justice organization	6.5%
Talked about racial justice in a media interview	5.5%
Donated to a political party or campaign	2.3%
Called or sent a letter to an elected official	1.9%
Gave a speech about racial justice	1.6%
Organized people in my local community	1.6%
None of these	12.3%

Only 12.3% of athletes reported doing nothing in the 4 months following Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin's murder of George Floyd

Anticipated Future Activism

Recognizing that summer 2020 was a very specific moment in American history, we invited professional athletes to forecast their participation in future activist activities. We asked them to limit their anticipatory scope to their remaining playing years, not after they retired from their respective leagues.

Expected future activism differed substantially across the three leagues, with the WNBA and MLS generally expressing plans for more assorted engagements than the NWSL.

While posting on social media was the most commonly anticipated activity across all three leagues, NWSL players reported especially strong intentions in this area compared to the others. In contrast, WNBA athletes expressed the highest anticipated participation across nearly every other form of activism, including marches, donations, public speaking, community organizing, and direct political engagement.

WNBA players appear particularly willing to engage in more visible and time-intensive activities, such as protesting, organizing locally, and giving speeches. MLS athletes indicated moderate anticipated participation, typically falling between the WNBA and NWSL in most categories. However, MLS players were more likely than WNBA players to anticipate not participating in any listed activities.

Aside from social media engagement, NWSL athletes reported relatively low anticipated involvement in activities such as donating, protesting, or engaging directly with political institutions. Formal political engagement, including donating to campaigns or contacting officials, was comparatively limited across all three leagues but was most common among WNBA players.

Overall, our data show that WNBA athletes anticipate the most diversified and active future engagement, MLS players anticipate moderate involvement, and NWSL athletes anticipate more concentrated activism via social media.

Post about racial injustice on social media	71.6%
Participate in a march, rally, or in-person protest	11.3%
Donate to a racial justice organization	10.0%
Talk about racial justice in a media interview	6.8%
Organize people in my local community	5.5%
Donate to a political party or campaign	4.5%
Call or send a letter to an elected official	4.2%
Give a speech about racial justice	2.6%
None of these	6.8%

**More than 7 out
of 10 pro athletes
anticipate using
their social media
platforms to call
attention to
racial injustice
in the future**

Expected Suppressants of Future Activism

Most athletes indicated that nothing would prevent them from engaging in future racial justice activism, but the strength of that commitment varied. WNBA players expressed the greatest confidence in their future actions, while athletes in the NWSL and MLS conveyed comparatively more hesitation. Overall, the WNBA stands out as the league where players reported the fewest perceived barriers to future activism.

Fear of saying “the wrong thing” emerged as the clearest difference across leagues. This concern was especially pronounced among NWSL players and it showed up a bit in MLS, but was much less

common in the WNBA. Similarly, athletes in the NWSL and MLS were more likely to say they want to stay out of politics. Outside the WNBA, these patterns suggest greater caution and uncertainty about public engagement.

There were differences in backlash concerns. NWSL athletes more frequently cited fears of negative media consequences, while MLS players were more likely to reference potential repercussions from league execs and sponsors. WNBA athletes reported fewer institutional or reputational worries. Not having time was a relatively minor concern across all leagues.

Nothing	50.3%
I am afraid I will say the wrong thing	28.7%
I want to stay out of politics	18.4%
I fear negative consequences from the media	8.4%
I don’t have time	4.2%
I don’t believe my activism will make a difference	3.6%
I don’t want to upset our fans	2.9%
I fear negative consequences from corporate sponsors	2.6%
I fear negative consequences from league executives	2.6%
I don’t want to upset my teammates	2.3%
I don’t care	1.6%
I feel too much attention is placed on racial issues	1.3%
Other unspecified reasons	12.3%

Fewer than 2% of players expressed no care about racial injustice. It was 0% among WNBA athletes.

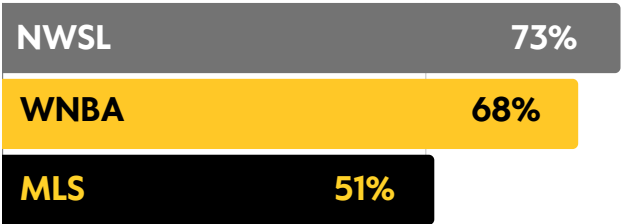
Views on Future League Actions

One question asked athletes where they felt their leagues should invest attention and resources into future efforts to advance racial justice.

Noteworthy is that only 8% of MLS and 3% of NWSL athletes chose the “None of these” option. Zero WNBA athletes chose “None of these.”

Representation

Increasing the number of people of color in leadership and decision-making roles



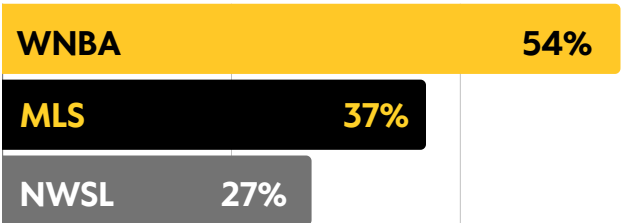
Public Advocacy

Generating awareness or public support for racial justice issues



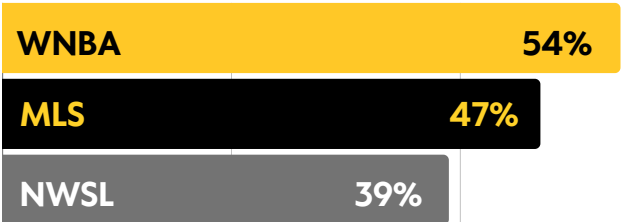
Political Advocacy

Directly challenging oppressive structures, systems, and laws



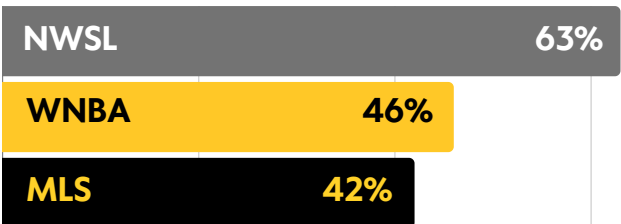
Financial Influence

Investing money into racial justice initiatives



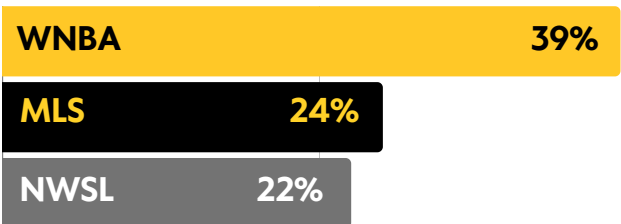
Programming

Hosting or sponsoring racial justice events or initiatives



Protesting

Allowing or encouraging peaceful protest actions



Demographic Differences

Throughout this section, we have highlighted differences between the two women's and one men's sports leagues that participated in our study. We conclude with summaries of how the survey results varied by race and ethnicity, as well as respondents' countries of origin and number of years as professional athletes.

Racial and Ethnic Differences

Across all three leagues, clear racial and ethnic differences emerged in athletes' levels of engagement, anticipated activism, and perceptions of barriers. Black athletes consistently reported the highest levels of past participation in racial justice activism, particularly in highly visible activities like protesting, speaking publicly, and engaging in political advocacy. They were also the most likely to indicate that "nothing" would prevent them from participating in future activism. In contrast, white athletes were more likely to report lower levels of direct engagement and were more likely to cite concerns such as wanting to stay out of politics or fearing negative consequences. Latina/o athletes generally fell between Black and white athletes in reported participation but more closely resembled white athletes in expressing concerns about backlash or professional risk.

Differences were also apparent in anticipated future activism. Black athletes showed the strongest commitment to sustained engagement in activist activities across multiple domains, including political advocacy, financial influence, and representation efforts. White athletes, while broadly supportive of allowing activism, were more likely to anticipate limiting their involvement to lower-risk activities such as posting to social media. Latina/o athletes expressed moderate anticipated participation but reported comparatively higher concern about institutional or media backlash than did Black athletes.

Across leagues, fear of saying "the wrong thing" was more prevalent among non-Black athletes, which suggests differing levels of confidence in engaging publicly on racial injustice.

When considering where leagues should direct future resources, Black athletes were more likely to prioritize structural strategies such as political advocacy, financial investment, and leadership representation. White athletes more frequently emphasized public awareness efforts and programming initiatives, indicating a preference for less confrontational approaches. Latina/o athletes again tended to fall in between, but often expressed relatively stronger support for representation-focused reforms.

Across the three leagues, white athletes generally expressed strong abstract support for racial justice activism (for example, over 90% agreed that players should be allowed to use their platforms), but reported lower rates of direct participation compared to Black athletes.

Black athletes consistently reported the highest levels of past participation in racial justice activism, particularly in highly visible activities like protesting, speaking publicly, and engaging in political advocacy

White athlete engagement was most concentrated in lower-risk activities such as posting on social media, which exceeded 60% in most league samples, while participation in protests, political advocacy, or financial contributions was notably lower. White athletes were also more likely to cite potential barriers to activism, including fear of saying “the wrong thing” (reaching over 40% in the NWSL sample), wanting to stay out of politics, and concerns about media or institutional backlash.

When asked where leagues should focus future efforts, white respondents more often prioritized public awareness campaigns and programming initiatives rather than direct political advocacy. Overall, white athletes were broadly supportive of racial justice efforts but tended to favor less confrontational forms of engagement and reported greater hesitation about personal involvement.

These patterns suggest that lived experiences and racial identity meaningfully shape how professional athletes understand both the urgency of racial justice activism and the risks associated with participating in it.

Differences by Home Country

Across the three leagues, athletes who lived most of their lives in the United States reported higher levels of direct engagement in racial justice activism than did those who spent most of their lives outside the U.S.

Specifically, players born and raised in the U.S. were more likely to report participating in marches, donating to racial justice organizations, speaking publicly about racial issues, and engaging in political advocacy. They were also more likely to indicate that “nothing” would prevent them from participating in future activism.

In contrast, athletes raised abroad reported comparatively lower participation in protest-oriented and political activities, though many still reported engagement through social media. Fear of saying “the wrong thing” and uncertainty about how to engage were more commonly expressed among players who grew up outside the U.S., which suggests differences in familiarity with the U.S. racial and political context.

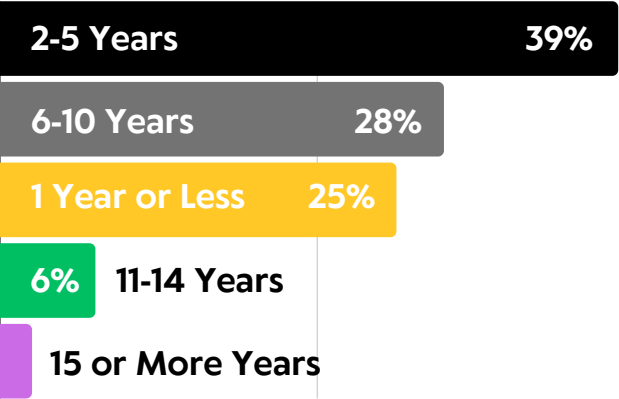
Differences also emerged in anticipated future activism and preferred league strategies. Athletes raised in the U.S. were more likely to support structural approaches such as political advocacy, financial investment, and representation reforms within league leadership. International players tended to favor public awareness efforts and programming initiatives over direct political confrontation. They were also somewhat more likely to cite concerns about media backlash, institutional consequences, or staying out of politics.

**Across the three leagues,
athletes who lived most
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than those who spent most
of their lives outside the U.S.**

Overall, these patterns show that lived experience within the U.S., including exposure to its racial history and social movements, shapes both the intensity of engagement and comfort with overtly political forms of activism, while internationally raised athletes often adopt more cautious or awareness-oriented approaches.

Differences by Player Tenure in Leagues

As previously noted, at the time they were surveyed, respondents had played an average of 4.85 years in their respective leagues. Here are specific percentages by tenure:



There were rare, extremely minor survey response differences between early career players and those with longer tenures.

Seasoned players were slightly more likely to report past participation in higher-visibility activities such as protests, public speaking, and political advocacy, and more likely to say that “nothing” would prevent them from engaging in the future. Players with fewer years in their leagues were somewhat more likely to express concerns about saying “the wrong thing,” staying out of politics, or facing potential professional consequences.

This suggests that veteran players feel more secure in their positions and are therefore more comfortable taking public stances, while newer players may perceive greater career risks.

Study Limitations

Our research has at least four noteworthy limitations. First, there are many more professional sports leagues in the U.S. beyond the three we surveyed. Second, our study does not include Olympic athletes, many of whom are unaffiliated with organized sports teams and leagues. They are professional athletes, too.

Third, our survey focused explicitly on activism for racial justice. We framed it this way because of the wave of activist activities in summer 2020. Knowing what athletes did at that time and how they were thinking about racial justice activism in the years that followed was most interesting to us. We fully acknowledge that some other issues resonate more personally and powerfully with many athletes. Notwithstanding, several items on our survey captured their perspectives on activism beyond issue specificity.

Finally, men are overrepresented in our sample. Because Justin played 12 seasons in MLS, then transitioned to a team front office role and now works in several capacities throughout the league, male soccer players are surely more familiar with him and completed our survey in higher numbers. Despite this, nearly one-third of all WNBA and NWSL athletes participated in our study.

Let Us Speak



Free Brittney

10-time WNBA All-Star Brittney Griner was sentenced to 9 years in a Russian penal colony. The 3-time Olympic gold medalist received extraordinary support from players across the WNBA who engaged in numerous protest activities, including during the 2022 All-Star Game in which all players wore jerseys with Griner's name and number for the second half.

Recommendations

Practical guidance for professional athletes, sports executives, players associations, and fans is presented in this section



Recommendations for Pro Athletes

Develop a Clear Personal Mission

Just over 94% of survey respondents agreed that players should be allowed to use their platforms to speak on justice-related topics. Clearly, they viewed activism as necessary and appropriate within the context of professional sports. Athletes should recognize that visibility is influence, and that opportunities to make a difference accompany the influence that their careers afford them. Developing a clear personal mission can help guide consistent and credible advocacy. Although our survey was focused on racial justice, professional athletes may determine that they are most passionate about another issue – poverty, gun violence, educational equity, sexual harassment, voting rights, climate change, antisemitism, transphobia, disability rights, deadly wars in other countries, or domestic violence, to name a few. Regardless of the topic, players should consider how their brand partnerships, interviews, and social media presence align with their stances on those issues. Thoughtful engagement is more sustainable than is quick, reactive social media posting. A clear sense of purpose can evolve visibility into meaningful spokespersonship in one or more social justice opportunity areas.

Leverage, But Move Beyond Social Media

We found that social media posting was the most common form of activism in summer 2020 and the most anticipated future form of engagement among pro athletes. While digital platforms are powerful, they are just one of many activism tools. Players who want to deepen their impact should consider accompanying online advocacy with other meaningful actions. This may include donating to racial justice organizations, attending community events, speaking on podcasts and television shows, writing articles and books, and participating on panels. Visible leadership activities such as public speaking or organizing were less common but are potentially more

transformative. Expanding beyond social media can also signal authenticity and long-term commitment. It demonstrates that advocacy is not limited to trending moments. Even small but tangible actions will strengthen athletes' credibility. A diversified approach to activism will increase both influence and effectiveness.

Collaborate Within and Beyond Individual Leagues

Strong majorities of survey respondents supported team-wide and league-wide activism efforts. Collective engagement distributes responsibility and reduces individual exposure to backlash. Working together also sends a stronger message than do isolated actions. Athletes ought to initiate conversations with teammates within and beyond locker rooms about their shared social justice concerns. These dialogues can also occur at events where large numbers of players from across the league are in attendance (for example, annual all-star week festivities). Coordinated efforts such as joint statements, apparel printed with powerful messages, uniformed social media campaigns, and community initiatives can amplify impact. When activism becomes normalized at the team and league levels, individual players who choose to speak out are much likelier to feel safer and more empowered.

Also noteworthy is that significant numbers of survey respondents supported collaboration across professional leagues. Cross-league efforts increase national visibility and political leverage. Athletes in different sports can share strategies and amplify each other's initiatives. Collective advocacy demonstrates unity and cross-league partnerships can multiply influence. Such collaborations also can be localized – for example, The Atlanta Dream, Braves, Hawks, Falcons, Vibe, Atlanta United FC, Georgia Swarm, LOVB Atlanta, Atlanta Drive Club, and other pro teams forming a coalition to address social injustices impacting citizens and immigrants in their city.

Draw Inspiration From Prior Generations of Athlete-Activists

Today's athletes stand on a firm foundation built by courageous predecessors who leveraged their sports platforms, sometimes at tremendous personal and professional costs. When Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised gloved fists on the Olympic podium in 1968, they were fully aware that such global visibility would invite backlash. Colin Kaepernick knelt during the national anthem to call attention to police violence – in so doing, he sacrificed his NFL career. Muhammad Ali refused military induction during the Vietnam War. Consequently, he was stripped of his heavyweight title, fined \$10,000, banned from boxing for more than three years, and convicted of draft evasion. Billie Jean King fought for gender equity in tennis, using her power to repeatedly challenge institutional sexism. Maya Moore stepped away from the WNBA at the height of her career to advocate for criminal justice reform, which helped secure the release of a wrongfully incarcerated man. And Serena Williams has consistently used her voice to expose racial and gender disparities in sport and beyond. Contemporary players ought to study the preparation, sacrifice, and strategic clarity behind these and other pioneering leaders' social justice actions. Collectively, these legends confirm that sports platforms are most powerful when brave athletes are willing to take risks in pursuit of causes about which they are most passionate.

Seek Guidance from Veteran Players

We found that seasoned players were slightly more likely than were their newer teammates to report past participation in high-profile activism activities. Also, more of the veteran survey respondents indicated that nothing would thwart their future engagement. It is plausible that longtime athletes feel more secure in their careers, which translates into greater willingness to take public stances. Early career players may perceive higher professional risks. Hence, seeking advice from experienced teammates and league peers can provide much-needed guidance and reassurance. Veterans can share strategies for handling criticism, media scrutiny, and internal

organizational dynamics. They can also help newcomers wisely evaluate timing, tone, and activism approaches. In addition, cross-generational conversations will strengthen team cohesion and solidarity on social justice issues.

Learn from the WNBA

Professional athletes across leagues would greatly benefit from studying and adapting the best of the WNBA's extraordinary example. For years, WNBA players have demonstrated what sustained, collective activism looks like when it is deeply and sustainably embedded within league culture rather than activated only during moments of national crisis. These courageous women have organized internally, spoken publicly with clarity, coordinated messaging across teams, and aligned their advocacy with tangible actions. Importantly, they have acted together, which has reduced individual susceptibility to public scrutiny and league-enforced penalties. Athletes in other leagues ought to recognize that consistency, unity, and moral conviction carry more weight than do sporadic performative gestures. The WNBA's impressive track record powerfully illustrates that activism does not have to undermine competitive excellence, but indeed can occur alongside breathtaking on-court performances. Players in other leagues should examine what organizational norms, leadership dynamics, and collective expectations made such brave engagement possible and sustainable for the WNBA.

Invest in Voice Coaching

Nearly 29% of survey respondents reported fear of saying "the wrong thing" as a potential barrier to activism. One of us has worked with current and former NFL players on determining which social justice issues they care about; developing language to articulate their stances; and creating rigorous rehearsal opportunities to talk about these topics on television, in podcasts, at community events, and in other settings that would benefit from their influence. This type of coaching reduces the likelihood of missteps and helps athletes become more confident, less clumsy, and more effective at having their messages persuade others to take the actions required to eradicate social injustice.

Anticipate and Strategically Prepare for Backlash

Some survey respondents reported fears of negative consequences from media, sponsors, and league executives. While the percentages were relatively low, we acknowledge that their concerns are valid. Instead of reacting defensively, athletes should preemptively consider a range of protective strategies. This includes aligning with agents, communications partners, and players associations before making major public statements. Understanding contractual obligations can also reduce uncertainty and exposure to legal risks. Moreover, developing clear talking points in advance of media interviews and public speaking opportunities can minimize the danger of being misunderstood. Crisis planning is an essential part of personal and professional brand management. Therefore, athletes who anticipate criticism are better equipped to respond calmly and effectively. Strategic preparation turns potential backlash into manageable risk.

Advocate for Structural and Systemic Change

When asked where their leagues should invest resources, many survey respondents (especially Black players) prioritized systemic change and structural reforms through leadership diversification, political advocacy, and other levers. Statements and awareness campaigns are important, but systemic change often requires policy influence and deep organizational transformation. Athletes can advocate for diversity in executive roles and decision-making positions. They can also insist that their teams and leagues make significant financial investments into high-impact social justice organizations. Structural approaches address root causes rather than symptoms. Engaging in policy discussions may feel intimidating or too complex, but can yield bigger and more long-term results. Individual athletes and players associations can partner with credible organizations that specialize in legislative advocacy. Thinking structurally and systemically will surely widen athletes' scopes of influence.

Resist Performative Activism

Only 12.3% of survey respondents reported doing none of the listed activism activities in summer 2020, and fewer than 2% expressed indifference toward racial injustice. These findings show widespread concern and willingness to engage. Despite this, athlete activism has not been anywhere close to what the world saw in response to the murder of George Floyd. Players do not always have to begin with high-profile protests. Posting thoughtfully, donating modestly, or attending local events are meaningful starting points. Small actions can build confidence for larger commitments. Consistency over time matters more than isolated, performative gestures. Sustained engagement will reinforce credibility with teammates and fans. Athletes should view activism as a long-term practice rather than a one-time response. What matters most is reliable, proven, and unwavering commitment to action on social justice issues.

Continue to Pursue Justice for George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and Jacob Blake

Our survey results show how professional athletes raised their voices in response to specific names, specific lives, and specific tragedies six years ago. Athletes cannot allow those names to become historical footnotes. They should not wait for the next killing of an unarmed Black person, the next murder of a trans woman of color, the next shootings of protesters like Renée Good and Alex Pretti, or other highly publicized catastrophes. The circumstances that led to these horrific fatalities remain unaddressed. They are still in urgent need of advocacy, accountability, and policy reform. For instance, to date, Congress still has not passed the *George Floyd Justice in Policing Act* that former California congresswoman Karen Bass introduced in 2021. Honoring George Floyd's life and protecting others from police brutality requires follow-through consistent with the commitments that athletes themselves expressed in our survey. The work remains incomplete, justice remains unfulfilled.

Recommendations for Executives and Coaches

Publicly and Unequivocally Affirm Players' Free Speech Rights

Our survey results reveal overwhelming support among professional athletes for the protection of their free speech rights. The level of near-consensus is culturally significant and cannot be dismissed as a fringe appetite for protest among only a few so-called “woke” or “radical left” players. Executives and coaches must respond with clear, proactive affirmations of athletes’ rights to speak out on injustices about which they are passionate. Public statements, written internal policies, and consistent leadership messaging should explicitly protect players’ speech rights. Silence from executives and coaches creates ambiguity. It also upholds cultures of fear that encourage self-censorship. Athlete uncertainty about how activism might affect their contracts, playing time, or roster status is one serious indicator that the organizational climate feels silencing and unsafe.

Offer All-Employee Professional Learning Opportunities

As noted in our bios on page 26, we work with professional sports teams and leagues in a multitude of capacities. Designing and delivering high quality, practically useful professional learning experiences is what we do most often. Our workshops are never divisive – they are instead grounded in evidence and best practices, focused on building skills, and aimed at bringing people together across differences. On average, 94% of participants rate our trainings excellent and 95% rate them practically useful. Athletes, coaches, executives, and employees across all other levels often engage with us on organization-wide conversations about racism, antisemitism, gender inequities, homophobia, transphobia, and a wide array of other topics. They always go well. Survey results furnished in this report make clear that professional athletes would welcome and benefit greatly from such opportunities to learn about social justice in sports and society.

Align Espoused and Enacted Values

Our survey findings show that many athletes prioritize leadership and coaching diversification, financial investments, and institutional reforms. Executives and coaches must understand that symbolic gestures are insufficient without structural follow-through. The budget reveals what an organization truly values. Therefore, dedicated funding for social justice initiatives should be embedded in annual financial plans and sustained beyond moments of crisis. Leadership development pipelines for diverse coaches and executives must be intentional, measurable, and transparent. They also should result in actual hires and retention. Players observe who holds power within their team and league offices. Organizational credibility is compromised when public messaging about social justice is misaligned with what leaders do, as well as with how the workplace looks, feels, and functions.

Ask Players What They Want

Our survey results indicate that most pro athletes support activism, yet many also report hesitation rooted in fear of political consequences. Executives and coaches must resist mistaking player silence on social injustices as carelessness, indifference, or consensus. Silence may signal fear. Leaders should create structured spaces for honest dialogues with players. Those conversations have to be facilitated with seriousness and openness. The aim should be to listen, hear, and feel what players say. Ask how they want to leverage their individual platforms, what their expectations are for the team, and how they would like to collaborate with other athletes within and beyond their respective leagues. An anonymous national survey from a research center at the University of Southern California ought not be the only data source about pro athletes’ views on social justice and activism. The best data come from local sources – it is even better when it is both quantitative (via surveys) and qualitative (via individual interviews, focus groups, and all-employee forums).

Recommendations for Players Associations

Codify Explicit Protections for Player Activism in Collective Bargaining Agreements

Our survey results reveal overwhelming support among athletes for the right to engage in activism, yet they also show that some players fear consequences from team and league executives. That tension must be addressed structurally. Within collective bargaining agreements, players associations should negotiate explicit, enforceable protections for peaceful civic engagement. Language must clearly prohibit retaliation in the form of fines, suspensions, reduced playing time, contract penalties, and informal blacklisting. Ambiguity benefits owners and execs. Clarity protects players. If activism is part of how athletes understand and desire to exercise their professional identities, then those identities must be contractually safeguarded. Freedom of expression is inseparable from the rights that players associations exist to protect.

Fund Comprehensive Education and Voice Development Activities

Many pro athletes identified fear of saying “the wrong thing” as a barrier to future activism. That admission signals both willingness and vulnerability. Players associations must respond by supporting sustained educational opportunities rather than facilitating sporadic conversations only during moments of crisis. Structured programming on social justice topics, public policy, media framing, strategic communication, and coalition-building should be offered and funded. Veteran players who have navigated public advocacy ought to mentor newer members who are fearful of risks. Also, leadership development pipelines for player-activists should be intentional and well-resourced. Lastly, players associations should fund research on athlete activism and players’ corresponding voice development needs.

Leverage Collective Labor Power to Advance Structural Reforms

Players associations are uniquely positioned to coordinate the collaboration that our survey respondents called for at scale. Collective bargaining leverage can be used to press for structural reforms, including coaching and leadership diversification, equitable workplace policies and practices, and sustained financial commitments to social justice initiatives. Coordinated campaigns across teams and leagues would amplify influence and reduce fragmentation, as we have seen repeatedly across the WNBA. Collective labor power is one of the most formidable tools that athletes possess. By organizing strategically in pursuit of social justice, players associations can harness their power to transform moral conviction and free speech ideals into enforceable progress.

One Recommendation for Sports Fans

Respect Players’ Right to Speak

Great fans must confront an uncomfortable contradiction: It is unfair and inconsistent to celebrate players on game day, then condemn them for speaking about injustice after the contest ends. Our survey results make clear that most athletes view activism as legitimate and appropriate, not as distractions from their performances on courts and fields, in swimming pools, etc. Fans who benefit from player labor and loyalty ought to extend respect and loyalty in return. Demanding silence in exchange for entertainment reduces players to commodities rather than acknowledging them as full human beings. Even fans whose perspectives and political views clash with those being expressed by their favorite athletes should respect those players’ free speech rights.

The Washington Post

There would be no NFL without black players. They can resist the anthem policy.

By [Shaun R. Harper](#)



The New York Times

‘It was shocking to the system’: How racism drove Justin Morrow toward activism



By [Joshua Kloeke](#)

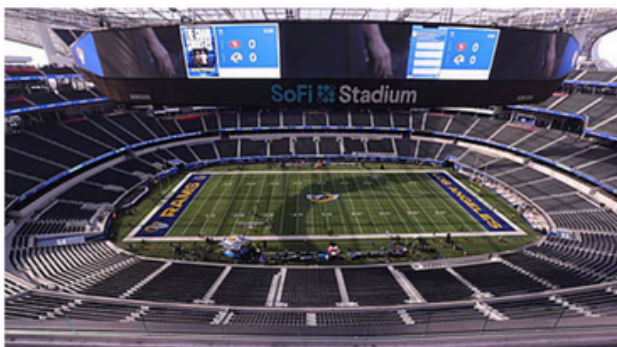


the **grio**

We ain't playing

Imagine a world where Black athletes force the NFL to hire more Black coaches.

By [SHAUN HARPER](#)



The Washington Post

Black college football and basketball players are the most powerful people of color on campus

The protests at the University of Missouri show what can happen when they wield it.

By [Shaun R. Harper](#)



Let Us Speak

Kap Stood

Before earning a global reputation for being a civil rights activist, Colin Kaepernick was an NFL quarterback. During the 2016 preseason, he sat during the playing of The Star-Spangled Banner. In subsequent weeks, Kaepernick famously knelt during the national anthem. By sitting and kneeling, he courageously stood in protest of racial injustice and police brutality.

About Us

Shaun Harper, Ph.D. is one of America's most highly respected experts on racial and gender equity. He is University Professor and Provost Professor in the Rossier School of Education, Marshall School of Business, and Price School of Public Policy at the University of Southern California. He also is the Clifford and Betty Allen Chair in Urban Leadership, the USC Race and Equity Center's founder and Chief Research Scientist, and an *Inside Higher Ed* columnist. Harper has worked with more than 400 organizations, businesses, sports teams and leagues, and educational institutions. Executives often seek and benefit from his expertise in moments of racial crisis. Harper is author of over 100 peer-reviewed journal articles and other academic publications. His 14 books include *Scandals in College Sports*. His 2022 report, *Advancing and Sustaining Racial Justice in Pro Sports*, was released at an NFL event during Super Bowl LVI week. He has procured more than \$52 million to fund his research and initiatives. *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Bleacher Report*, HBO Sports, and hundreds of other media outlets have quoted or featured him. He also has been interviewed on ESPN, CNN, MSNBC, and NPR and featured in two sports documentaries. Harper has taught courses on sports at three universities and chaired the USC Oversight Committee for Athletic Academic Affairs.



sharper@usc.edu

Strategy Advising
Crisis Recovery
Professional Learning
Workplace Climate Assessment
Research and Policy Analysis
Leadership Coaching



justin.morrow@usc.edu

Strategy Advising
Coalition Building and Support
Conflict Resolution
Player Development
Professional Learning
Policy Analysis

Justin Morrow was a highly-accomplished Major League Soccer player for 12 seasons. He is now the USC Race and Equity Center's inaugural Head of Sports Partnerships and Programs. Strategy advising, workplace climate assessments, and high-quality professional learning experiences are offered to sports organizations through the portfolio that Morrow leads. He received the 2021 MLS Humanitarian of the Year Award for his central role in founding *Black Players for Change*, a nonprofit organization comprised of more than 170 players, coaches, and staff working to advance racial justice in athletics. Prior to his current position, Morrow managed player engagement, as well as diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives in the Toronto Football Club front office. *The New York Times*, *Sports Illustrated*, ESPN, and several other media outlets have featured Morrow and showcased his sports-focused DEI work. In 2025, Morrow received the Frazier Thompson Award from the University of Notre Dame, his alma mater, for his outstanding contributions to inclusion and belonging. His on-field achievements include MLS All-Star and MLS Cup Champion. In addition to competing in over 300 MLS games, Morrow played on the U.S. Men's National Team that won the Concacaf Gold Cup in 2017.

The University of Southern California is home to a dynamic research, professional learning, and organizational improvement center that serves educational institutions, corporations, nonprofits, government agencies, sports teams and leagues, and other organizations that span a multitude of industries across the United States and in other countries.

The mission of the USC Race and Equity

Center is to illuminate, disrupt, and dismantle racism in all its forms.

We do this through rigorous interdisciplinary research, high-quality professional learning experiences, the production and wide dissemination of useful tools, trustworthy consultations and strategy advising, leadership coaching, and substantive partnerships.

While race and ethnicity are at the epicenter of our work, we also value their intersectionality with other identities, and therefore aim to advance equity for all persons experiencing marginalization. We also work to bridge racial, political, ideological, religious, and other divides.

Our center experts have worked with the NFL, Major League Baseball, WNBA, Major League Soccer, National Women's Soccer League, FIFA, the United States Soccer Federation, the NBA Players Association, and dozens of intercollegiate athletics departments. In June 2024, LA28 announced our center as its inclusion strategy architect and implementation partner for the 2028 Olympics and Paralympic Games. Together, we are committed to ensuring that the experience in Los Angeles is maximally inclusive for athletes, coaches, trainers, fans, media organizations, and others who will join us here from around the world in summer 2028.



USC Race and Equity Center



University of Southern California
Verna and Peter Dauterive Hall
635 Downey Way, Suite 214
Los Angeles, CA 90089

(213) 740-0385
race@usc.edu

race.usc.edu