

Athletes and Activism

Compelling Question: Do professional athletes have a responsibility and is it their place to take stands on political and social issues?

Grade Level		Time	Common Core Standards
K-2	3-5	90 Minutes	Reading: R1 Writing: W4 Speaking & Listening: SL1, SL3
MS	HS		



Web Related Connections

Lessons

[Believe in Something: Nike, Kaepernick and Social Change](#)

[Responses to Bias: Donald Sterling of the L.A. Clippers Should Washington's NFL Team Change Their Name?](#)

Other Resources

[Teaching about Racism, Violence, Inequity and the Criminal Justice System](#)

[10 Ways Youth Can Engage in Activism](#)

Key Words

(See ADL's [Education Glossary Terms](#).)

activism
boycott
chokehold
condemned
conscientious objector
disclosure
epiphany
hunger strike
outspoken
platform
protest
reticent
status
workplaces

LESSON OVERVIEW

After the grand jury in Cleveland, Ohio failed to indict the police officers who shot twelve-year old Tamir Rice (who was shot while carrying a pellet gun in November 2014), activists and followers on social media urged Cleveland Cavaliers icon LeBron James to sit out games in protest. This incident and many others have moved athletes to speak out, protest and call for justice.

In August 2016, NFL San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick decided to take a stand about racial injustice by refusing to stand for the national anthem at football games. Kaepernick said, "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color." His protest spread to other players in the NFL, other professional athletes and some high school players also joined in. At the University of Missouri ("Mizzou"), students protested—including a weeklong hunger strike—because of their perception that Tim Wolfe, the college's President, was not addressing the racial issues on campus. After the football team threatened to stop playing until Wolfe resigned, the President left his position. In December 2015, Everytown for Gun Violence partnered with the National Basketball Association (N.B.A.) in an advertising campaign about gun violence and several basketball players were featured in the television ad. In January 2020, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) announced that during the Summer 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo, athletes will be banned from demonstrating or protesting at the Games. The Olympic Charter already prohibits athletes from protesting at the Games, but this recent announcement gave specific examples of what counts as "protest." This is especially significant since political protest among athletes has surged in recent years. These situations are examples of how athletes (from college to professional) can use their power and influence to stand up for social justice issues.

This high school lesson provides an opportunity for students to learn more about and reflect upon athletes who have taken stands on political issues.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will explore different opinions about the role that professional athletes should play in politics and activism.
- Students will learn about athletes throughout history who have taken stands in different ways on political issues.
- Students will reflect on issues that are important to them and produce a written piece in order to urge an athlete or famous person to do something about it.

MATERIALS & PREPARATION

- [#NoJusticeNoLebron Tweet](#) (prepare to be projected on board/smart board)
- Five individual signs (prepared in advance) that read: “Strongly Agree,” “Agree,” “In between/not sure,” “Disagree,” and “Strongly Disagree”
- *End Gun Violence* video (30 sec., Everytown for Gun Violence, 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPcZo-f6Fhc)
- “50 years ago this week Muhammad Ali refused the draft in Houston” (*Houston Chronicle*, April 24, 2017, www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/article/48-years-ago-today-Muhammad-Ali-refused-the-5435356.php)
- “Missouri football players to boycott until president Tim Wolfe resigns” (*USA Today*, November 8, 2015, www.usatoday.com/story/sports/ncaaf/2015/11/07/missouri-tigers-football-players-boycott-tim-wolfe-president-resigns/75399504/)
- “Billie Jean King: Tennis star least of her important roles” (*USA Today*, May 23, 2013, www.usatoday.com/story/sports/2013/05/22/billie-jean-king-icons-innovators-world-team-tennis-womens-rights/2159071/)
- “New York Giants Voice Support For LGBT Athletes In New Ad” (*The Huffington Post*, October 27, 2015, www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/new-york-giants-video-you-can-play-project_562fbffe4b06317990faf26)
- “1968: Black athletes make silent protest” (BBC, http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/october/17/newsid_3535000/3535348.stm)
- “Derrick Rose wears protest shirt” (ESPN, December 7, 2014, http://espn.go.com/chicago/nba/story/_id/11990119/derrick-rose-chicago-bulls-wears-breathe-shirt-reference-eric-garner)
- “This Time, Colin Kaepernick Takes a Stand by Kneeling” (*The New York Times*, September 1, 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/09/02/sports/football/colin-kaepernick-kneels-national-anthem-protest.html)
- “Olympic gold medalists, the Lamoureux twins, join Global Citizen’s fight for women” (NBC News’ Know Your Value, September 25, 2018, www.nbcnews.com/know-your-value/feature/olympic-gold-medalists-lamoureux-twins-join-global-citizen-s-fight-ncna912816)
- “At 16, Coco Gauff’s voice is already as strong as her serve” (The Undefeated, June 23, 2020, <https://theundefeated.com/features/coco-gauff-voice-is-already-as-strong-as-her-serve/>)

PROCEDURES

Introduction

1. Post the [#NoJusticeNoLebron Tweet](#) on the board/smart board. Ask students: *Do you know what this tweet is about? What is going on?*
2. If students need more information or are misinformed about it, explain that recently a grand jury decided not to indict two police officers involved in the shooting death of an African-American twelve-year-old boy named Tamir Rice of Cleveland, Ohio. Tamir Rice was shot in November 2014 by police officers while holding a realistic looking pellet gun. Activists, concerned and disappointed by the lack of indictment, took to social media and urged LeBron James (who is a star basketball player for the Cleveland Cavaliers) to sit out the rest of the basketball season until the Federal Department of Justice (DOJ) “imprisons the murderers of Tamir Rice.”
3. Engage students in a brief discussing by asking: *Why do you think activists were asking LeBron James to get involved in this issue? What do you think they were hoping his sitting out games would do?*

Here I Stand Activity

1. Explain to students that they will listen to some statements about athletes and activism and decide to what extent they agree or disagree with the statement. They will be indicating their opinion about each topic by

positioning themselves along an imaginary line, depending upon how strongly they agree or disagree with a statement.

2. Select a large open space and indicate the position of an imaginary line with the farthest right point representing a STRONGLY AGREE response and the farthest left point a STRONGLY DISAGREE response. In between, place AGREE, IN BETWEEN/NOT SURE, and DISAGREE along the continuum. Post the signs you created with these words and hang them up on the wall (in advance of the lesson).
3. Read each statement below, requesting students to take some time to decide where they stand in the continuum, walk silently to that place and observe where others choose to stand.
 - Professional athletes have a responsibility to be positive role models to young people.
 - Famous people, including professional athletes, shouldn't have more power just because they are famous.
 - As a society, we should not mix politics and sports.
 - Athletes should "give back" to the communities in which they play and earn a living.
 - Athletes should stand up for political causes they believe in because their voice can reach a lot of people.
 - Having professional athletes take a stand about issues has no impact on that issue.
4. After finding their places, have one or two students from each group share their reason for standing where they did.
5. After the activity, engage students in a class discussion by asking the following questions:
 - Was it easy or difficult to decide where to stand?
 - Were some statements easier to decide and some more difficult?
 - How did it feel when most people had the same response as you?
 - How about when most people were standing somewhere else?
 - Did you ever feel you needed to explain where you chose to stand but you didn't feel you had the opportunity to do so? If so, why did you feel this way?
 - What did you learn from this activity?



Information Sharing

1. Remind students about the tweet you shared at the beginning of the lesson (you can project it on the board again). Then, if possible, show the 30-second [End Gun Violence](#) public service announcement by Everytown for Gun Violence.
2. Ask students: *What is going on here? Why are professional athletes doing this? Do you know about any similar situations where athletes have gotten involved in political issues or causes?*



Jigsaw Reading Activity

1. Explain to students that they will read and discuss different articles about athletes and activism using a "jigsaw" strategy. Tell students that the jigsaw strategy provides an opportunity for small groups of students to learn about different aspects of a topic and then teach each other.
2. To manage the jigsaw, have students count off by 9s (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and so on). Distribute these nine articles below according to the groups. Give students 10 minutes to read their articles silently. You can have all of the students sit in groups to read their article but it is not necessary.

Group #1: [50 years ago this week Muhammad Ali refused the draft in Houston](#)

Group #2: [Missouri football players to boycott until President Tim Wolfe resigns](#)

Group #3: [Billie Jean King: Tennis star least of her important roles](#)

Group #4: [New York Giants Voice Support For LGBT Athletes In New Ad](#)

Group #5: [1968: Black athletes make silent protest](#)

Group #6: [Derrick Rose wears protest shirt](#)

Group #7: [This Time, Colin Kaepernick Takes a Stand by Kneeling](#)

Group #8: [Olympic gold medalists, the Lamoureux twins, join Global Citizen's fight for women](#)

Group #9: [At 16, Coco Gauff's voice is already as strong as her serve](#)

Note: You can adapt this activity and not use all nine articles, but choose among them, and then adjust the jigsaw accordingly.

3. After reading their assigned articles, divide students into new small groups so that each group has someone who read a different article (i.e., each group will have a person that read articles 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8). When the groups are formed, give each student 2–3 minutes to summarize the article and share information about the person they read about. At the minimum, they should share (1) the athlete(s) involved, (2) what issue were they taking a stand on and (3) what they did to demonstrate their position (their strategy).
4. After the small group sharing and discussion, reconvene the class and engage all students in a class discussion by asking the following questions:
 - Was it easy or difficult to summarize the information in your article and share with others?
 - What new information did you learn by reading your article and hearing about other similar stories?
 - What makes each of these stories unique and what do they all have in common?
 - Reflecting on the questions from the “Here I Stand Activity,” have any of your opinions shifted as a result of the reading and discussion?
 - Why do you think we ask professional athletes to take stands on social issues?



Writing Activity

1. Have students brainstorm issues that are important to them by asking: *What political or social issues are you concerned about? What social change would you like to see in society or the world?* Brainstorm a list of ideas and record them on the board.
2. Explain to students that they are going to consider an issue that is important to them—something in society they think should change. They will then produce a piece of writing (a letter, blog post or social media post) in which they request that a specific professional athlete (or another famous person) take a stand on that issue. In the letter, blog or social media posting (series of Tweets, Facebook or Instagram post), they should include information about the issue: (1) why they think the issue is important, (2) why they chose the person they did and (3) what they are asking the person to do (i.e. their strategy) to bring about social change.
3. Give students time in class to select their topic and person. If time permits, they can produce a first draft in class or complete the writing assignment for homework.

Closing

Have students share their ideas of an issue and an athlete/famous person. If they completed their writing during class, they can share that as a closing.

ADDITIONAL READING

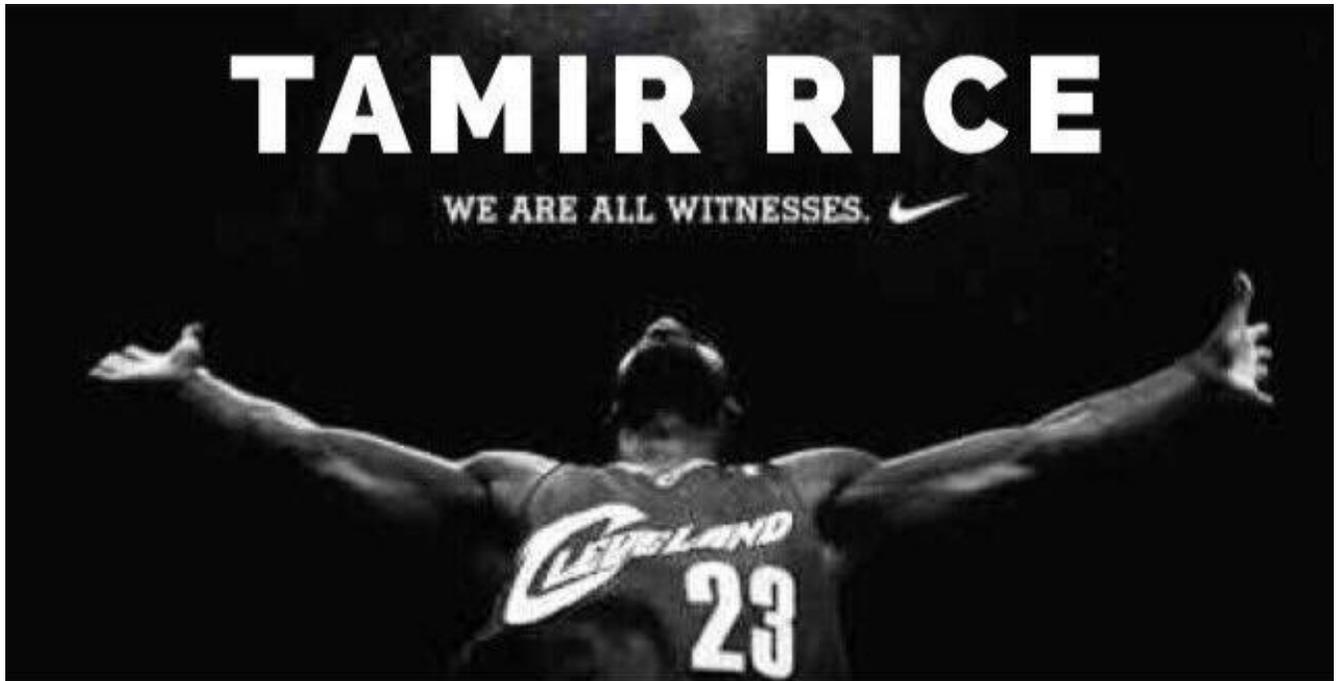
- [“2014: The Year of the Activist Athlete”](#) (Vice Sports, December 19, 2014)
- [“Athletes finally speaking up? It's about time”](#) (CNN, December 2, 2014)
- [“Athletes Making Political and Social Statements”](#) (Bleacher Report, December 17, 2014)

- “Athletes rising to the occasion on issues of social justice” (*Sports Business Journal*, June 15, 2015)
- “Derrick Rose and the New Dawn of Athlete Activism” (Vice Sports, December 8, 2014)
- “The Enduring Importance of the Activist Athlete” (Edge of Sports)
- “Where Did All The Activist Athletes Go?” (Think Progress, January 7, 2014)
- “Carmelo Anthony on the Rise of Athlete Activism” (Vice Sports, March 28, 2017)
- “Athletes and activism: The long, defiant history of sports protests” (The Undeclared, January 30, 2019)
- “Athletes Will Be Banned From Protesting at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. But the Games Have a Long History of Political Demonstrations” (*TIME*, January 14, 2020)

Common Core Standards

CONTENT AREA/STANDARD
Reading
R1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
Writing
W4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.
Speaking and Listening
SL1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
SL2: Evaluate a speaker’s point of view, reasoning and use of evidence and rhetoric.

#NoJusticeNoLebron Tweet



#NoJusticeNoLebron

**"Calling on Lebron James
to lead a collective sit out
until The DOJ imprisons
the murderers
of Tamir Rice."**