October:  Black Power Salute at the 1968 Olympics

Mexico City had been chosen as the site of the 1968 Olympic Games.  In 1968, there was worldwide turmoil as countries were roiled with conflict and demonstrations over politics, culture, the economy, and war.  Mexico was no different.  Ten days before the start of the Olympics, social organizations and students were protesting in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas to show their anger at the ruling regime and what they considered the waste of millions of dollars to support the Olympics in a city in which hundreds of thousands of people were desperately poor.  Police opened fire, killing two hundred demonstrators—a figure that is still disputed today—and wounding hundreds of people.  The games began on October 12, however, as planned.

During the presentation of the medals for the 200-meter race, the crowds and television viewers all over the world were shocked when American gold medalist Tommie Smith and bronze medalist John Carlos raised black gloved fists in the black power salute during the playing of the national anthem.  Peter Norton, the silver medalist from Australia, did not join in the salute, but wore an Olympic Project for Human Rights badge on his jacket.  Carlos and Smith joined Norton in a display of solidarity and wore the badges, too.  Both Americans were shoeless in recognition of black poverty, and personalized their clothing in various ways to protest slavery, lynching, and racism.

Avery Brundage, the president of the International Olympic Committee, was livid.  In his mind the actions by the two Americans were political, and therefore, had no place at the Olympics.  They were suspended from the United States team and evicted from Olympic Village after Brundage threatened the banning of the entire U. S. track team.  The indignation of Brundage was ironic in that he had not objected to Nazi salutes during the 1936 Berlin Olympics.
All three men suffered the consequences of their actions for the rest of their lives. Carlos and Smith were strafed by the American media, and both men and their families were targeted by death threats. Smith played football for the Cincinnati Bengals. He also joined the faculty at Oberlin College as an assistant professor of physical education, and was an assistant coach for the U. S. team at the 1995 World Indoor Championships. In 2010 Smith put his track shoes and Olympic medal up for auction, and again the media excoriated him. When bids did not meet his expectations, however, he canceled the sale.

When an injury hampered his tryout with the Philadelphia Eagles, Carlos went to Canada and played in the Canadian Football League. In 1970 his life spiraled downward, and he struggled with depression. He worked as a liaison to the black community during the 1984 Summer Olympics, and as a track coach at Palm Springs High School.

Norman, who had protested against White Australia Policy, was also heavily criticized by the media in Australia and ostracized by the sports world. Although government officials denied Norman was punished for his actions, he was passed over for the 1972 Olympics; indeed, Australia failed to field a team of male sprinters that year. Norman qualified for the 1970 Commonwealth Games, but did not run; he never raced again. Norman also refused to apologize for the support he gave Smith and Carlos. He suffered from depression, heavy drinking and a dependency on painkillers. He died in October 2006. Smith and Carlos delivered eulogies and served as pall bearers at this funeral. In 2012 the Australian Parliament issued an official apology to Norman.
Further Reading:

