

**Scott Myers-Lipton, 2021**  
**“Tommie Smith, John Carlos, and the Statues”**



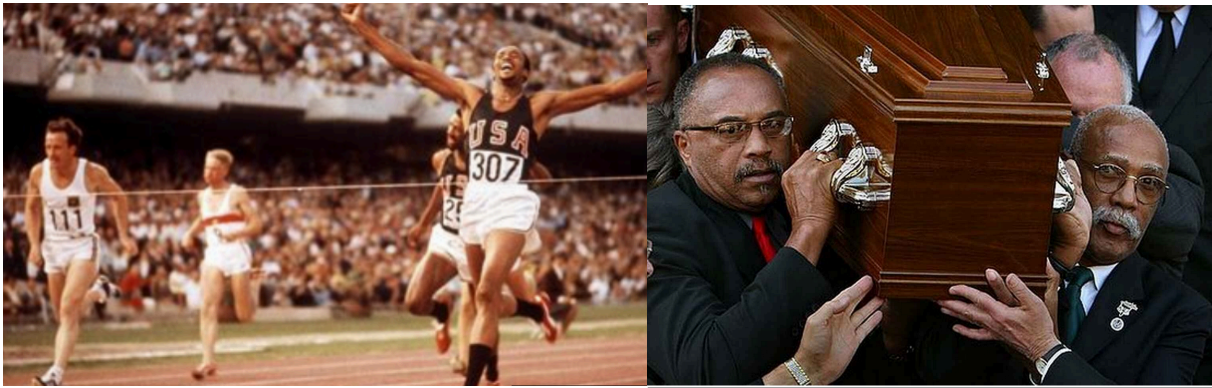
**Historical Background:**

In 1966, Tommie Smith and John Carlos were students at San José State, recruited here by the legendary track coach Bud Winters. Tommie Smith was from rural Texas and California, and he was studious, religious, and not initially interested in the Black protest movement. John Carlos was from Harlem, and he was talkative, loud, and was immediately drawn to the protest movement. Both would eventually become connected to Harry Edwards, a Sociology instructor, who taught a class on racism, and who had decided to call for a boycott of the Olympic Games.<sup>1</sup>

At that time, San José State had a student population of 24,000 students, with 72 African American students on campus (.3% of the population), 60 of which were athletes. The reality of the situation for these students were harsh. When the African American students attempted to find housing off-campus, they experienced racism, as most owners would not rent to them. In addition, the black and white athletes were recruited differently, with white recruits being treated to large fraternity parties and dates, while black recruits were matched with a “negro” faculty and given \$20 for dinner. Harry Edwards and Ken Noel, who was a graduate student and former track star, began talking—very close to where the Smith and Carlos statues are today—about the need to change this for the next generation of students. Their conversations led to a "Rally on Racism at San José State" on September 18, 1967, which was attended by hundreds, including President Robert Clark. At the rally, the United Black Students for Action made nine demands to end racism at SJSU, including punishment for students and landlords who discriminated against blacks, and equal treatment of prospective athletic recruits. If the demands were not met, the students were going to stop the home opening football game “by any means necessary.” When a bomb threat was made, President Clark cancelled the football game.<sup>2</sup>

It was in this intense atmosphere, that Edwards put forward the Olympic Project for Human Rights, which called on athletes to boycott the 1968 Summer Olympic Games in Mexico City unless their five demands for racial equality were met. And while the boycott didn't transpire, as many athletes did not want to give up the opportunity to compete, the black athletes did decide to protest individually, but what form the protest would take was left up to the individual athletes.<sup>3</sup>

### The Events



The athletes arrived in Mexico City in a frenzied atmosphere, as the Mexican military and police had killed over 300 students who were protesting for more democracy in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas on October 2, 1968, just 10 days before the opening Olympic ceremonies. The final heat for the 200-meter was on October 16, and in preparation, Tommie had asked his wife to bring him some Black gloves, because he knew what ever he was going to do, it had to be visual. In the 200-meter final, Tommie Smith ran a world record time of 19.83 seconds and took first place, with Peter Norman from Australia finishing second, and John Carlos finishing third. Now, it was time to protest. During the playing of the national anthem, while standing on the Olympic podium, Tommie and John raised their black-gloved fists, which represented power and human rights, bowed their heads to demonstrate that their action was non-violent and prayerful, and took off their shoes to represent the poverty African Americans experienced as a result of racism. In addition, John wore beads, which represented the lynching that blacks had experienced. Both men wore the button of the Olympic Project for Human Rights. Before walking out for the podium ceremony, Peter Norman asked to wear a button, as he wanted to stand in solidarity with Tommie and John.

The backlash was immediate. Smith and Carlos were suspended from the Olympic team, expelled from the Olympic Village, and banned for life from the Olympics. When they returned to the USA, they received death threats and were denied jobs. Tommie had applied to be a San José police officer and was told by the police that they didn't take "traitors". Additionally, Tommie and John were followed by the FBI. Peter Norman also suffered, as he was not given the opportunity to compete in the 1972 Summer Olympics, even though his qualifying times were good enough to make the team. And even though Peter is considered one of the greatest sprinters in the history of Australia, he was not even invited to take part in the festivities for the 2000

Sydney Olympics. However, Tommie and John never forgot about Peter's decision to stand in solidarity with them on the Olympic podium, and when Peter died suddenly of a heart attack in 2006, they flew to Australia and carried his casket.<sup>4</sup>

Thirty-five years after the actions in Mexico City, Eric Grotz, a white student at SJSU was in Dr. Coby Harris' Political Science class. In the class, Eric learned about how African Americans are not recognized in the same way that whites are recognized. After learning about the story of Tommie and John, Eric became so motivated that he led an effort by the Associated Students to build a statue so that students would know the true history of these two students. Eric's effort led to the Associated Students providing most of the \$300,000 for the statue.

The students wanted a statue that looked like Tommie and John, while a University committee in charge of art on campus pushed for a statue that could take any form. The students' position won out. Then, the students wanted the statues to be placed in front of the office of the Associated Students, which was then on Paseo de San Carlos, since the statues focused on student activism. The Administration said that they didn't want to have the statues on Paseo de San Carlos since it would block fire trucks, and they preferred the statues to be placed off campus in front of the Spartan sports complex by the football stadium, arguing that this was an appropriate place because Tommie and John were athletes. The students fought against this idea, so a compromise was struck. The statues would be on the grassy area in front of Clark Hall. Not only was this a central spot on campus, it was somehow appropriate since Robert Clark, the President of SJSU in 1968, was one of the few white voices who strongly defended the actions of Tommie and John. The place picked for the statue is also the area where Harry Edwards and Ken Noel, a Master's student in Sociology, came up with the idea for the Olympic Project for Human Rights.<sup>5</sup>

On October 16, 2005, on the 37<sup>th</sup> anniversary of when Smith and Carlos' raised their fists in Mexico City, the statues were dedicated in front of several thousand people, including Tommie, John, Peter Norman (the Australian sprinter who finished 2<sup>nd</sup>), Harry Edwards, and Ken Noel. Ethel Pitts Walker, a theater art's professor, gave the keynote address, where she stated:

Wherever there is discrimination and injustice, someone must raise a fist, for Martin said, 'Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.' Wherever there is indignity and hatred, someone must stand up straight; for on another occasion Martin said, 'When evil men shout ugly words of hatred, good men must commit themselves to the stories of love.' Wherever there is poverty and ill-treatment, someone must go without shoes, for the old ancestors sang, 'I got shoes, you got shoes, all God's chillun got shoes.' Whenever there is cruelty and suffering, someone must bow their head.<sup>6</sup>

Today, the Tommie Smith and John Carlos Sculpture Garden continues to inspire its students, staff, faculty, and the larger community to take a stand for social justice. Importantly, they provide a "public space" for current student social justice activities.

## **Resources:**

- Bonk, “San Jose Statement”: <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2005-jun-26-sp-statue26-story.html> (accessed September 3, 2021).
- Gazzaniga, “The White Man in That Photo”, *Griot*, October 3, 2015, <http://griotmag.com/en/white-man-in-that-photo/> (accessed February 4, 2018).
- Leonard, “What Happened to the Revolt of the Black Athlete”, <https://gato-docs.its.txstate.edu/jcr:acdd73b8-5fe1-4aca-b7c7-fa5047c79b81/2006-09-14-revolt.pdf> (accessed September 3, 2021).
- Ethel Pitts Walker, “It is Finished”, October 17, 2005, keynote speech at unveiling of statues.
- *Fists of Freedom, The Story Behind the '68 Summer Games*, Dir. George Roy, HBO Sports, 1999.
- *Salute: The Story Behind the Image*, Dir. Matt Norman, Matt Norman Films, 2008.

## **FOOTNOTES**

<sup>1</sup> *Fists of Freedom, The Story Behind the '68 Summer Games*, Dir. George Roy, HBO Sports, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Saqib Rahim, “The Agitator: Harry Edwards on the Revolt of Today’s Black Athlete”, *Vice Sports*, May 4, 2016, [https://sports.vice.com/en\\_us/article/8qyqxv/harry-edwards-revolt-of-todays-black-athlete](https://sports.vice.com/en_us/article/8qyqxv/harry-edwards-revolt-of-todays-black-athlete) (accessed October 15, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> David Leonard, “What Happened to the Revolt of the Black Athlete”, *Color Lines*, June 10, 1998, <https://gato-docs.its.txstate.edu/jcr:acdd73b8-5fe1-4aca-b7c7-fa5047c79b81/2006-09-14-revolt.pdf> (accessed September 3, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> *Fists of Freedom*, Dir. George Roy.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Bonk, “San Jose Statement”, *Los Angeles Times*, June 26, 2005, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2005-jun-26-sp-statue26-story.html> (accessed September 3, 2021); Richard Gazzaniga, “The White Man in That Photo”, *Griot*, October 3, 2015, <http://griotmag.com/en/white-man-in-that-photo/> (accessed February 4, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Ethel Pitts Walker: “Keynote Speech at the Smith & Carlos Statue Unveiling”, October 16, 2005 (pdf).