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Boycotts postpone games, raise questions about political activism

As social turmoil and protests continues around the country, athletes' social justice demonstrations have morphed into team boycotts disrupting game schedules across multiple leagues — with unprecedented support from the leagues. At the same time, a handful of Black sports figures have resisted calls to boycott their sport in favor of making their own statements.

What these new developments mean for the future of athlete activism and its impact on sports is complicated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the heightened tensions of a presidential election year. The unparalleled combination raises numerous questions, including whether “boycott” is the right word to use.

The boycotts started in late August, when the Milwaukee Bucks refused to leave their locker room before Game 5 of their first-round playoff series against the Orlando Magic in the NBA's self-contained “bubble” at the ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex in Orlando, Fla. The team decided not to play in response to the police shooting of Jacob Blake in Kenosha, Wis., a few days earlier. The players then issued a statement, calling for immediate action on criminal justice reform. The team's owners and Wisconsin's governor released statements in support of the players as well.

Other teams quickly joined the boycott to express support for the Bucks, forcing the NBA to announce the postponement of two other playoff games — the Houston Rockets vs. Oklahoma City Thunder and Los Angeles Lakers vs. Portland Trail Blazers.

Other teams in other sports leagues took up the boycott, resulting in the cancellation of three WNBA games, three Major League Baseball games and five Major League Soccer matches. Two members of MLB's St. Louis Cardinals sat out their team's game against the Kansas City Royals as well.

The idea of athletes using their platforms



SPORTS MARKETING PLAYBOOK

**DOUGLAS N. MASTERS and
SETH A. ROSE**

DOUGLAS N. MASTERS is a partner at Loeb & Loeb LLP, where he litigates and counsels clients primarily in intellectual property, advertising and unfair competition. He is co-chair of the firm's intellectual property protection group. dmasters@loeb.com
SETH A. ROSE is a partner at the firm, where he counsels clients on programs and initiatives in advertising, marketing, promotions, media, sponsorships, entertainment, branded and integrated marketing, and social media. srose@loeb.com

to protest social injustice has come a long way since 2016, when then-San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick took a knee during the playing of the “Star-Spangled Banner” before NFL games to protest racism, police brutality and social injustice. At the time, Kaepernick's actions drew a storm of both criticism and support and sparked debate over how the NFL should handle athlete protests.

Fast forward to September, when NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell confirmed the league would stencil the phrases “It Takes All of Us” and “End Racism” in NFL end zones this season. The league also clarified its stance on athlete protests, stating that players have the “individual choice and right to either sit out or protest.” The league also launched NFL Votes, an initiative to encourage voter registration.

Given the current support from team owners and leagues, the idea of a boycott raises a number of questions, including whether “boycott” is even the correct term

for the players' actions.

While players and teams have referred to the refusal to play in order to make a social justice statement as a boycott, there's one important piece missing from the traditional definition of the word: the intent to financially damage an entity to raise awareness or cause change, according to the Los Angeles Times. Here, players aren't trying to cost their employers or related parties, such as sponsors, money.

In fact, the NBA has at different times described its athletes' actions as a postponement and a joint decision between the players and the league. At least one legal expert has said the athletes' refusal to play could be considered a “wildcat strike” — a work stoppage staged during the term of a collective bargaining agreement without union approval, as the Los Angeles Times notes.

The collective bargaining agreement between the NBA and the players' union, for example, prohibits players from striking. Does that matter when players and management all appear to be on the same page in taking a stand against racism and police brutality? Maybe not, but it's a legal loose end that might need to be considered during the next collective bargaining negotiations.

Another issue is that not everyone is on board with the idea of sitting out an event. Some Black athletes and other sports figures have decided not to boycott their sports, and instead took their own stands.

For example, civil rights activists urged Greg Harbut, one of horse racing's few Black owners, to pull his horse out of the Kentucky Derby in September to protest the police killing of Breonna Taylor in Louisville, Ky., where the iconic horse race is run. Harbut refused, saying that he supports the Black Lives Matters movement but felt he needed to participate in his sport's most visible event to raise awareness of Black peoples' contributions to horse racing, reported CNN and other outlets.

Bubba Wallace, the only full-time Black NASCAR driver, said he and other drivers would not boycott a race at Daytona International Speedway in August to protest the shooting of Blake and the killing of others by police. Wallace said he would continue his activism with fellow drivers' support to raise awareness of social and racial injustices, according to the Associated Press.

In addition, it can be difficult to know which actions speak loudest. In late August, Black tennis star Naomi Osaka announced she was boycotting the Western & Southern Open semifinals in the wake of Blake's shooting. Osaka then changed her mind after talking with tournament representatives, who offered to postpone the semifinals a day, reported the Tennis Channel Network. Osaka said she felt the postponement brought more attention to the social justice movement than her not playing, it said. She also wore a Black Lives Matter T-shirt onto the court for her rescheduled match.

On the brand sponsor side, several sports apparel giants jumped in to support the NBA boycott. No surprise, Nike immediately issued a statement backing the NBA and WNBA players and other athletes who refused to play. Under Armour not only

released a similar statement, but postponed the launch of its new sneaker venture with actor and retired pro wrestler Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, according to Reuters. In addition, Adidas tweeted its support for the Black Lives Matter movement, as did Gatorade, when it retweeted a statement by the Milwaukee Bucks.

Nike has proven that the biggest sports-related sponsors may be able to take sides on social justice issues, but for many smaller brands, the prospect of angering a segment of its customer base may continue to be risky. A study conducted in August 2019, called "The 2020 Survival Guide: How Brands Can Navigate the New Era of Politics," by research technology firm Morning Consult and industry platform Advertising Week, indicates brands may be right to be cautious. The study found that 29% of consumers stopped purchasing from a brand because of its political stance, while just 15% made the effort to support a brand because of its politics.

Finally, in a year already rocked by the COVID-19 pandemic, forcing leagues to postpone or suspend and restart seasons with no fans in the stands, another important question remains — will player boycotts affect viewership?

After the pandemic halted sports around the world for several months, viewership hasn't rebounded quite as much as the leagues hoped, according to Forbes. For example, ratings for the NBA playoffs were down, possibly because the postseason was played in August, traditionally a down time for television viewership because late-summer outdoor activities tend to draw people away from their screens. Games played without fans in the stands also lacks the energy and spontaneity that makes watching a live event fun, even from home.

In a contentious presidential election year, viewers want entertainment to distract themselves from weighty issues and sports fill that need for many. However, player protests and boycotts are increasingly inserting politics into sports, which may turn off some viewers, Forbes says. For example, a recent Harris Poll cited by Forbes found that 38% of NBA fans are watching less basketball because the league has become too political.

For athletes and other sports figures, the pressure of navigating the demands of both their jobs and their consciences will likely only increase. How sports organizations, fans and others respond could reveal the way forward for political activism in sports.