



The Black Power protest salute that shook the world in 1968

U.S. Olympians Tommie Smith and John Carlos — who'd won gold and bronze respectively in the 200-meter sprint — raising black-gloved fists during the medal ceremony at the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City became one of the most iconic sports images of the 20th century.

The protest had been something the two athletes carefully planned. As Smith and Carlos walked to the podium, they took off their shoes to protest poverty. They wore beads and a scarf to protest lynchings. And when the national anthem was played, they lowered their heads in defiance and raised their fists in a Black Power salute that rocked the world.

Before the anthem started to play, Carlos recalled later that he thought about the symbols that had been chosen for that moment on the world stage. They knew it would become “a moment of truth.” And that by protesting they might lose everything.

“I looked at my feet in my high socks and thought about all the black poverty I'd seen from Harlem to East Texas. I fingered my beads and thought about the pictures I'd seen of the ‘strange fruit’ swinging from the poplar trees of the South,” Carlos wrote in his 2011 book written with Dave Zirin, [“The John Carlos Story: The Sports Moment That Changed the World.”](#)

He had decided to unzip his Olympic jacket, in defiance of Olympic etiquette, but in support of “all the working-class people — black and white — in Harlem who had to struggle and work with their hands all day.”

He had deliberately covered up the “USA” on his uniform with a black T-shirt to “reflect the shame I felt that my country was traveling at a snail's pace toward something that should be obvious to all people of good will. Then the anthem started and we raised our fists into the air.”

They had one pair of gloves between them. Smith put a black glove on his right fist; Carlos covered his left fist. Smith raised his right fist; Carlos his left.

“As the anthem began and the crowd saw us raise our fists, the stadium became eerily quiet,” Carlos wrote. “For a few seconds, you honestly could have heard a frog piss on cotton. There's something awful about hearing fifty thousand people go silent, like being in the eye of a hurricane.”

As the national anthem played the crowd began to boo them. Then some people in the crowd began to scream the national anthem.

“It was like they were saying, ‘Oh, you anti-American sons of bitches. We're going to shove the s-t down your throat!’ ” Carlos wrote. “They screamed it to the point where it seemed less a national anthem than a barbaric call to arms.”

The punishment for defying Olympic rules was swift. Smith and Carlos were ordered to leave the Olympic Stadium.