

In History: How Tommie Smith and John Carlos's protest at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics shook the world

US athlete Tommie Smith attained international fame when he gave the Black Power salute at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics, 55 years ago. But as the exclusive BBC Archive clips in this new series reveal, that protest came at a heavy cost.

On 16 October 1968, two black US athletes – Tommie Smith and John Carlos – stood on the podium at the Mexico City Olympics, heads bowed. They wore black socks with no shoes; Smith wore a black scarf around his neck. As the US national anthem played, they each raised a black-gloved hand in silent protest. Although no words were spoken, the moment was full of meaning. Smith, who had won gold in the 200m, setting a new world record, raised his right fist to represent Black Power. Bronze medallist Carlos, wearing a bead necklace to symbolise the lynchings of black Americans, raised his left fist to represent black unity. The scarf stood for black pride and the socks with no shoes represented African-American poverty.

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In the wake of the protest, Smith and Carlos were **vilified** by much of the media and **shunned** by the US sporting establishment. In the years that followed, they were subjected to abuse and death threats. Smith attributed the break-up of his marriage to the stress of dealing with the fallout. When he should have been at the peak of his career, the US Olympic committee banned him from national and international competitions. By 1972, instead of preparing for the Munich Olympics, Smith, who was still the fastest man in the world, was reduced to training schoolchildren in Wakefield in northern England to earn a living.

Sport was one of the few areas where the ability of the individual could triumph over the barriers faced by black Americans, Smith explains in this BBC archive video. "The black athlete... has grown to know that the body could be a **springboard** to success. I think he works doubly hard at that as he would at anything else. Because in athletics, especially track and field, nobody can say you are no good. The only person who can say that is that clock," he says.

Despite the hardships he endured, Smith continued to speak out for social justice and equality. He completed a master's degree in sociology in 1974 and moved into teaching and athletics coaching, becoming a **prominent** advocate for racial equality in sport and society.

In 2008, Smith and Carlos were honoured with the Arthur Ashe Courage Award, which is presented annually to individuals whose contributions "transcend sports". US President Barack Obama said of the pair: "Their powerful silent protest in the 1968 Games was controversial, but it woke folks up and created greater opportunity for those that followed."

When asked by BBC Newsnight in 2012 if he regretted the salute, Smith said: "The only regret was that it had to be done".

Myles Burke, 16 October 2023, BBC

bead necklace: A necklace made of small round pieces (beads) joined together on a string.

turmoil: A situation with a lot of confusion, problems, or strong emotions.

widespread: Existing or happening in many places or among many people.

unrest: A period of anger, protests, or disorder among people.

vilified: Strongly criticised or described as a very bad person.

shunned: Avoided or rejected by other people.

springboard: Something that helps you start or achieve something bigger.

prominent: Important, well-known, or easy to notice.