Sports, Politics and Race: From South Africa to South Carolina

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"Sports and politics shouldn't be mixed."

I hear that from sports officials desperately trying to hold onto their events in South Carolina just as I heard it for 20 years during the sports boycott of South Africa over apartheid.

South Carolinians have been battling the issue of flying the Confederate flag on the Statehouse dome ever since it was raised in 1962. Like other racial protests, not much changed until the heat got turned up.

That began when the NAACP called for a tourism boycott in January. That boycott got real teeth when the National Association of Basketball Coaches (NABC) and the Black Coaches Association (BCA) called on the NCAA to rescind its decision that the 2002 NCAA Division I Men's basketball Tournament first and second round games would take place in Greenville, SC. That brought the story to both the front pages and the sports pages.

From 1960 until the fall of apartheid, there were a number of boycotts vs. the apartheid regime in South Africa. I was a leader of the American boycott of South Africa in sports for 25 years. There were economic and then oil sanctions, and an end of most bank loans among others. But as in South Carolina now, most of the attention was paid to the sports boycott of South Africa.

Nelson Mandela was a prisoner on Robben Island for most of his 27 years of incarceration. Mandela and the others prisoners first heard of international protest against apartheid when the news of a demonstration against a South African team leaked onto the maximum security island. He said his fellow prisoners were jubilant in the yard, shouting for joy as the baffled guards watched.

Immediately after he was inaugurated as President in 1994, Mandela disregarded the dozens of diplomatic parties in Pretoria and took a helicopter to Johanesburg to witness a soccer match between South Africa and Zambia. It was his own acknowledgement of the importance that sport had played in dismantling apartheid. I was with him in the box as he talked about his admiration for sports people who risked and in some cases sacrificed careers to take a stand for what is right.

The NAACP tourism boycott has led for calls for an end to sports events in South Carolina. First, there were mild protests by athletes wearing ribbons during matches in women's trials for the Olympic Marathon in February. The New York Knicks made the first pull-out in February when they decided to cancel their 2000 training camp at the College of Charleston. In all my years of being involved in the issue of race and sport, I never before saw what happened next. The most famous coaches in the state -- Football coaches Lou Holtz and Tommy Bowden and basketball coaches Eddie Fogler and Larry Shyatt joined a 100 plus mile protest march from Charleston to the site of the flying flag at the Statehouse.

As the son of a coach (Joe Lapchick) who was a pivotal figure in the integration of basketball with the Knicks 50 years ago, I was proud of these four men and what the Knicks, the NABC and BCA did to advance the issue. This boycott is still in its infancy.

It took decades for the debate in South Africa to clearly crystalize for athletes. Here it took four months and the opening of the Family Circle Cup tennis tournament in Hilton Head, South Carolina.

In the past two years, African-American women have finally regained prominence in tennis, none more

than Serena Williams, the incumbent US Open champion. Williams decided to honor the boycott and pulled out.

But Alexandra Stevenson, also African American, chose to play. She told USA Today that "I decided to stand up because I'm coming in to do my job and have a voice." Stevenson said she opposes the flying of the flag. I don't doubt her words even if I disagree with her decision.

Bart McGuire, head of the WTA Tour, noted that "We view the staging of such an event as evidence that people of all walks of life can work and live far better together than they can apart." His remarks mirrored the dozens of sports officials who rationalized competing with South Africa until the total success of the boycott finally sealed their lips.

Ms. Stevenson reminded me of Arthur Ashe going to South Africa in the early 1970s because he thought his presence would help white South Africans see what people of color could achieve while inspiring the oppressed masses of that nation. Although I tried to convince him not to go, I knew in my heart that he really believed that such competition would help and that he would have a voice there.

Six years later Arthur Ashe further demonstrated his own greatness by admitting he was mistaken. He subsequently assumed a leadership position in the sports boycott of South Africa. The apartheid regime offered all kinds of compromises during the years of the boycott, all short of the ultimate goal of the dismantling of aparthied. The protestors never bent in their resolve to wait them out for the ultimate prize.

Now the South Carolina State Senate has voted to move the flag from the dome to a flag pole sitting in back of the Confederate Soldier Monument. The House may do the same but the NAACP says it won't accept this because the monument is in an even more prominent location.

The compromises don't take into account the pain that the very sight of the Confederate flag brings into the hearts of all those Americans who despise racism.

For them the flag is a silent rendering of chants of the "N-word," a cloth representation of the hoods of those hateful men and women who tried everything to make white power the only power in America.

The power of protests inside and outside of South Africa finally led to the crushing of aparthied and to Nelson Mandela becoming President of what had been the most racist nation on the face of the planet in the second half of the 20th Century.

I have no doubt that the same power, manifested both inside and outside of South Carolina, will finally put the flag where the NAACP and, hopefully, most Americans want it -- in a museum, duly noted for what it was.

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