

THE NBA'S INSPIRATIONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH SOCIAL EQUALITY, EXPLAINED

By: Chloe Le



NBA players wear jerseys with social justice messages during games. Source: The Undefeated

Throughout history, professional sports leagues have voiced their concerns about social inequality, though none as firmly as the National Basketball Association (NBA). Following recent tragedies, such as the murders of George Floyd and Jacob Blake, the players of the NBA decided that enough was enough. The organization itself, although lead by white executives and commissioners, immediately decided to support its athletes in their battle against social injustice. Together, the NBA and its players altered their platform, constituted of over 7.5 million viewers (Gough, 2020, para. 1), to spread awareness about police brutality, racial injustice, and gender inequality. Instead of purely existing for entertainment purposes, the NBA has gone above and beyond to establish a committed relationship with social equality. In the following explainer, we will identify which social issues the NBA has focused on over time, analyze how they combatted these problems, and discuss how they inspired other organizations to do the same.

HOW DID THE NBA INITIALLY RESPOND TO POLICE BRUTALITY?

After the insensible murder of George Floyd, the sports world responded, “though none as loudly as the NBA” (Mannix, 2020, para. 3). In a league with over 80 percent players of color, this tragedy hit home for the entire organization (Mannix, 2020, para. 3). On the NBA News website, Commissioner Adam Silver, the National Basketball Coaches Association, and all of the teams described the incident as “frustrating”, “traumatic”, and “outraging” (NBA News, 2020). To spread more awareness about social inequality, the NBA decided to allow players to wear personalized jerseys. These jerseys, which had various messages like “Black Lives Matter” and “Say Their Names”, forced the audience to think about these issues during games (The Undefeated, 2020, para. 2). Additionally, all game-worn, customized jerseys from the opening weekend of the 2019-2020 season were placed up for auction (Spears, 2020, para.1). The proceeds went to the Players’ Justice Fund, which supports organizations that advance social justice and civic engagement (NBPA Foundation).

Substantial Donations

Following the killing of George Floyd, the players of the NBA made personal sacrifices to bring attention to social injustice issues off the court as well. First, a majority of these individuals made generous donations to organizations that promote social equality. For example, the Spurs point guard, Patty Mills, pledged to donate “every cent” of his \$1,017,818.54 salary to Black Lives Matter Australia, Black Deaths in Custody, and The We Got You campaign (Villarreal, 2020, para. 1-2).

Participating in Protests

Second, although some of the protests were violent and many demonstrators were not maintaining social distancing protocols, the players were willing to risk their careers to participate. Jaylen Brown, for instance, took time off practice and drove 15 hours from Boston to his hometown in Atlanta to partake in his community’s protests. Additionally, Brown called on his fans to join him and stated on Twitter, “Atlanta don’t meet me there beat me there come walk with me bring your own signs” (Deb, 2020, para. 4-5).

Social Media Platforms

Lastly, instead of highlighting their personal achievements, the players used their large social media platforms to discuss their opinions on police brutality. For example, All-Star Stephen Curry posted a picture of Officer Derek Shaven with his knee pressing on George Floyd’s neck and said, “If this image doesn’t disturb you and piss you off, then idk. I’ve seen a lot of people speak up and try to articulate how fed up and angry they are. All good and well but it’s the same same same reality we live in” (Instagram).

WHEN DID SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUES BECOME OVERPOWERING TO THE NBA?

Through the examples of personalized jerseys, generous donations, protest participation, and social media use, it is evident that issues of police brutality and racial inequality have always been important to NBA players. However, when was the turning point that caused the NBA to completely focus their image around these problems? For many, it was the inexcusable police shooting of Jacob Blake in Wisconsin (Li and Stelloh, 2020, para. 1). Following this tragedy, the Milwaukee Bucks led a league-wide protest against racial injustice and refused to take the floor in their playoff game (Gardner, 2020, para. 1). Although forfeiting a game could result in a \$5 million fine, these athletes were willing to personally sacrifice in order to set an example (ESPN, 2020, para. 11). In their statement, the players explained, “Despite the overwhelming pleas for change, there has been no action, so our focus today cannot be on basketball” (Gardner, 2020, para. 3). Additionally, they demanded that the Wisconsin State Legislature reconvene to address issues of police accountability and criminal justice reform (Gardner, 2020, para. 5).

Wisconsin’s Commitments to Social Justice

These protests and demands immediately captured the attention of the NBA’s extensive, liberal fanbase. Because these individuals have previously supported the players’ commitment to racial justice, many would have felt compelled to push for change in Wisconsin (Paine and Herring, 2020, para. 11). Therefore, it is safe to assume that the athletes of the NBA played a role in bringing forth the recent 24 legislative proposals in Wisconsin (Kowles, 2020, para. 1). These motions, which address a range of policing reforms, were released exactly one week after the playoff boycotts.

The NBA’s Commitments to Social Justice

In addition to raising awareness regarding the gravity of social issues to the public, the protests also captivated the attention of the NBA’s directors. These individuals were especially motivated to address the players’ concerns about police brutality because the postponing of games could cost the organization millions in revenue. As a result, NBPA Executive Director Michele Roberts and NBA Commissioner Adam Silver agreed to several conditions, in exchange for the resumption of the playoffs (2020 NBA Playoffs, 2020, para. 1). Their commitments included promoting civic engagement through advertising, establishing a social justice association, and converting local facilities into voting locations (2020 NBA Playoffs, 2020, para. 2-5).

HOW HAS THE NBA INFLUENCED THE 2020 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION?

In today's world, it is nearly impossible to discuss social justice issues without addressing its correspondence with politics. Over the last four years of "The Age of Trump", these social problems were exacerbated by a leader who blatantly discriminated against women, minorities, and other disadvantaged individuals. For example, material problems for marginalized groups were heightened, organized hate groups became empowered, and ordinary citizens encountered obstacles to democratic participation (Robinson, 2018, para 1). Especially succeeding the tragedy of Jacob Blake, the players of the NBA realized the significance of introducing a new president into office that could set the precedent for a more equivalent nation. In order to influence the 2020 Presidential Election, this organization spread awareness about the importance of voting and made voting more accessible during COVID-19.

More Than a Vote

One way that the NBA and its players impacted the 2020 Presidential Election was by establishing a project called "More Than a Vote". This coalition, spearheaded by LeBron James and other NBA stars, focused on educating the public about the urgency of voting. Specifically, the objective of this program was to get more African Americans to the polls to ensure their representation in office (Spears, 2020, para. 5). To accomplish this goal, "More Than a Vote" educated potential voters about voter suppression, voter intimidation, and social-distanced voting options (More Than a Vote).



Logo for LeBron James' "More Than a Vote" project. Source: More Than a Vote

Increased Voting Locations

Due to the pandemic, many African Americans were nervous to enter voting centers because their communities “are overwhelmingly more vulnerable [to COVID-19] than white communities (More Than a Vote). The NBA addressed this issue and decreased suppression by opening up 23 arenas to use as social-distanced polling locations (Cochran, 2020, para. 12). Some of these centers, including Atlanta’s State Farm Arena, Philadelphia’s Wells Fargo Center, and Detroit’s Henry Ford Performance Center were the largest in their respective states. Therefore, opening these locations assisted Joe Biden in his electoral college victories over Georgia, Pennsylvania, and Michigan (Cochran, 2020, para. 12).

HOW HAS THE NBA BEEN A LEADER IN RACIAL AND GENDER HIRING?

According to the annual report card from The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sports, the NBA has always been ahead in racial and gender hiring practices (Beard, 2019, para. 1). In 2019, the NBA’s overall grade was an A, which was significantly higher than the MLS’s B-plus, the NFL’s B, and the MLB’s B-minus (Beard, 2020, para. 2). Specifically, the NBA has excelled in racial hiring for its headquarters, head coaches, assistant coaches, team management, and team professional staff (Beard, 2020, para. 6). In addition, Commissioner Adam Silver has made it his mission to avoid The Rooney Rule, a policy that has been implemented in other professional sports organizations and requires league teams to interview ethnic-minority candidates (Capello, 2020, para. 4). Because Silver is committed to standing for social justice, he does not “want to operate a league where the commissioner is dictating to a team who they should or shouldn’t hire” (Capello, 2020, para. 7).

Acknowledging Shortcomings

Although the NBA has made substantial movements towards equality in hiring preferences, there is still much to be improved upon. For instance, the league received an “F” for hiring practices of team presidents and until the current season, had no female head coaches (Medina, 2020, para. 3). However, the NBA is still a leader in racial and gender hiring because they are willing to admit their failures and make adjustments. According to Silver, “There is no doubt there is more we can do internally, the league and our teams and in terms of our hiring practices” (Medina, 2020, para. 3). As a result, the NBA has been able to consistently improve their strategies in minority hiring and remain ahead of other organizations.

G-League Opportunities

In order to promote social equality in their hiring practices, Silver and NBA officials have begun to collaborate with the G-League, the NBA's official minor league. This organization has previously been utilized to prepare coaches, players, and trainers for more difficult tasks in the NBA (NBA G-League). Therefore, Silver and his associates want to create more opportunities for women and people of color in the G-League. These entry-level positions will "sharpen their skills, increase their exposure, improve their job-interviewing presentations", and ultimately make it easier for minority groups to acquire jobs in the NBA (Medina, 2020, para. 8).

WHAT ARE THE LARGER IMPLICATIONS OF THE NBA'S RELATIONSHIP WITH SOCIAL JUSTICE?

Throughout the preceding explainer, it is apparent that the NBA's relationship with social equality has been extremely important to fighting these issues. From getting their fans involved to influencing politics, the NBA and its players have been leaders in combatting social injustice. But why has this been valuable in the grand scheme of things? Well, the NBA has provided a remarkable example of how an organization has the power to go beyond their initial purpose and make a positive change in society. As a result, this has begun to inspire other professional sports leagues to join the battle against social inequality and spread the message to their fanbases. For instance, when the NBA opened more polling centers, Major League Baseball also decided to make Dodger Stadium a location (Spears, 2020, para. 5). After the Milwaukee Bucks refused to take the floor in solidarity of Jacob Blake, Major League Soccer wanted to do the same (Li and Stelloh, 2020, para. 9). By publicly displaying their support of social justice, the NBA has set the precedent for civic engagement and motivated others to join their cause.

Works Cited

Publications:

- “Adam Silver, NBA Teams Express Outrage after George Floyd's Death.” NBA.com, NBA.com, www.nba.com/news/nba-teams-respond-tragic-death-george-floyd.
- Beard, Aaron. “Study: NBA, WNBA Earn High Grades in Diversity Hiring.” NBA.com, NBA.com, 10 Oct. 2020, www.nba.com/news/wnba-nba-earn-high-grades-diversity-hiring.
- Capello, Jilly. “NBA Commissioner Adam Silver Wants to Avoid Copying the NFL If Possible - Sportscasting: Pure Sports.” Sportscasting, 22 Oct. 2020, www.sportscasting.com/nba-commissioner-adam-silver-wants-to-avoid-copying-the-nfl-if-possible/.
- Cochran, Craig. “All the President's Men: How the NBA Swung the Presidential Election.” Hoops Habit, FanSided, 12 Nov. 2020, hoopshabit.com/2020/11/12/nba-swung-presidential-election/.
- Deb, Sopan. “As Protests Spur Posts From Athletes, N.B.A. Players Take to the Streets.” The New York Times, The New York Times, 1 June 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/06/01/sports/basketball/george-floyd-nba-protests.html.
- Gardner, Steve. “Bucks Players Explain Their Decision Not to Play: 'Our Focus Today Cannot Be on Basketball'.” USA Today, Gannett Satellite Information Network, 27 Aug. 2020, www.usatoday.com/story/sports/nba/bucks/2020/08/26/bucks-players-explain-decision-boycott-after-jacob-blake-shooting/5639896002/.
- Gough, Christina. “NBA Finals Average US TV Viewership 2002-2020.” Statista, 3 Nov. 2020, www.statista.com/statistics/240377/nba-finals-tv-viewership-in-the-united-states/.
- Instagram, 27 May 2020, www.instagram.com/p/CAs5rhSF_ZJ/?hl=en. Kowles, Naomi. “Wisconsin Police Union Unveils 24 Police Reform Legislative Proposals.” WSAW-TV, 2 Sept. 2020, www.wsaw.com/2020/09/02/wisconsin-police-union-unveils-24-police-reform-legislative-proposals/.
- Li, David, and Tim Stelloh. “Pro Sports Teams Delay Games after Milwaukee Bucks Refuse to Play in Protest of Jacob Blake Shooting.” NBCNews.com, NBCUniversal News Group, 27 Aug. 2020, www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/milwaukee-bucks-don-t-take-floor-nba-playoff-game-apparently-n1238250.
- Mannix, Chris. “'This Is a Moment': George Floyd Protests Hit Home for NBA Players.” Sports Illustrated, Sports Illustrated, 1 June 2020, www.si.com/nba/2020/06/01/nba-players-protest-george-floyd-death.

- Medina, Mark. “Adam Silver, Chris Paul Call on NBA to Improve Its Diversity in Front Office, Coaching Hiring.” USA Today, Gannett Satellite Information Network, 28 June 2020, www.usatoday.com/story/sports/nba/2020/06/26/adam-silver-chris-paul-call-nba-improve-diversity-hiring/3267390001. Medina, Mark. “NBA Has Been a Leader in Racial and Gender Hiring. But Here's Where the Teams Fall Short.” USA Today, Gannett Satellite Information Network, 23 July 2020, www.usatoday.com/story/sports/nba/2020/07/23/nba-racial-hiring-practices-leadership-fall-short/5495248002/.
- “NBA, NBPA Issue Joint Statement on Social Justice and Racial Equality.” NBA.com, NBA.com, 10 Oct. 2020, www.nba.com/news/nba-nbpa-joint-statement-social-justice.
- NBPA Foundation, www.playersjustice.com/.
- “An Open Letter to Our Fans: More Than A Vote.” More Than a Vote , www.morethanavote.org/letter-to-fans/.
- Paine, Neil, and Chris Herring. “Why A Strike For Racial Justice Started With The Milwaukee Bucks And The NBA.” FiveThirtyEight, FiveThirtyEight, 27 Aug. 2020, fivethirtyeight.com/features/why-a-strike-for-racial-justice-started-with-the-milwaukee-bucks-and-the-nba/.
- Robinson, Christine M. “Special Issue ‘Social Justice in the Age of Trump: Contemporary Challenges in Confronting Oppression.’” MDPI Social Sciences, 2020, www.mdpi.com/journal/socsci/special_issues/social_justice_age_of_trump.
- “Social Justice Messages Each NBA Player Is Wearing on His Jersey.” The Undeclared, The Undeclared, 3 Aug. 2020, theundeclared.com/features/social-justice-messages-each-nba-player-is-wearing-on-his-jersey/.
- Spears , Marc J. “LeBron James, Patrick Mahomes and Other Stars Sign Letter to Fight Voter Suppression.” The Undeclared, The Undeclared, 17 Aug. 2020, theundeclared.com/features/more-than-a-vote-lebron-james-patrick-mahomes-stars-sign-letter-to-fight-voter-suppression/.
- Spears, Marc J. “Source: NBA Restart Game-Worn Jerseys to Be Auctioned with Proceeds Going to Players' Justice Fund.” ESPN, ESPN Internet Ventures, 12 Aug. 2020, www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/29645699/source-nba-restart-game-worn-jerseys-auctioned-proceeds-going-player-justice-fund.
- “Study: NBA Earns High Marks for Diversity Hiring Practices.” The Washington Post, WP Company, 23 July 2020, www.washingtonpost.com/sports/nba/study-nba-earns-high-marks-for-diversity-hiring-practices/2020/07/23/460ab7e0-cd12-11ea-99b0-8426e26d203b_story.html.

- Villarreal, Daniel. "NBA Player to Donate 'Every Cent' of His Salary to Social Justice Issues." Newsweek, Newsweek, 9 July 2020, www.newsweek.com/nba-player-donate-every-cent-his-salary-social-justice-issues-1516440.
- "What We Know and Don't Know about the Boycotts That Stopped Sports." ESPN, ESPN Internet Ventures, 27 Aug. 2020, www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/29749540/what-know-know-boycotts-stopped-sports.
- "What You Need to Know About the NBA G League." NBA G League, 3 Nov. 2020, gleague.nba.com/about/.

Images:

- <https://images.app.goo.gl/52Lb5Rv4C5ngv8Su7>
- <https://images.app.goo.gl/htQJoKSKPPgQfB2v8>