



Iranian players line up for the national anthem prior to the FIFA World Cup Group B match with England at the Khalifa International Stadium on 21 November 2022 in Doha, Qatar. In a rare act of defiance, the Iranian team refused to sing their national anthem in solidarity with anti-hijab, pro-freedom protesters in Iran, who are facing a brutal government crackdown

Photos: Getty Images

# Rebels with a Cause

Sports and politics should be kept apart, you'll often hear. But when our sports icons make a political point at a showpiece world event, it can focus attention like few other acts of defiance

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It's not very common for sports icons to make a political statement. If you are an Indian cricket fan, you know that only too well. You'll often hear sports establishment folk holding forth on why it's not a good idea to mix sports and politics. With all the big money at stake these days, it's possibly even harder to risk going against the establishment. Even more so when you risk antagonising an oppressive regime that passes death sentences at the drop of a hat.

It was, therefore, a stunning act of defiance and courage when members of the Iranian national team refused to sing the national anthem before their World Cup match against England, described as the 'old fox' by the Iranian regime. The United States, the 'Great Satan' for Iranian clerics, is also in the same Group as Iran.

The national team had come under attack even before it left Iran for Doha. Small acts of defiance had marked Iranian football during the last few months amidst snowballing protests, spectacularly by women, against moral policing.

Chaotic and violent protests have rocked the Islamic country after a 22-year-old woman, Mahsa Amini, died in custody in September after being hauled up for not wearing the hijab in conformity with Iranian morality laws. Unofficial reports speak of several hundred Iranians, among them women and children, killed by security

forces. The national players were called upon by protesters to show their solidarity by not playing for the country. Several footballers changed their social media profiles to black in solidarity. A footballer, Sardar Azmoun, refused to celebrate after scoring the equaliser against Senegal in a friendly game.

But when 'Team Melli', as the Iranian national team is called, lined up for the national anthem, the eleven players placing their arms across shoulders, the players stood motionless without moving their lips. Their silence was eloquent and invited both admiration and condemnation.

Earlier, defender Ehsan Hajsafi had told *Reuters*. "They should know that we are with them. And we support them. And we sympathise with them regarding the conditions... We have to accept that the conditions in our country are not right and our people are not happy. We are here but it does not mean we should not be their voice or we should not respect them."

The players' act of defiance in front of over a billion spectators across the world left the footballing world stunned.

They had conformed to the FIFA guidelines that require that players do not display any 'political, religious, or personal slogans, statements or images'. The players displayed none. Yet the symbolic protest stood out. Opinion on social media was predictably mixed with some lauding the 'gutsy act' and others condemning the 'insult' to the national anthem. The footballers seem to have taken a

collective decision to register their solidarity with protesters back home. But it remains to be seen at the time of writing whether they repeat the act in their next match on Friday, 25 November against Wales.

In their media interactions, the players have been candid though. Hajsafi opened his remarks with "in the name of the God of rainbows", a phrase uttered by a 10-year-old boy, Kian Pirfalk, killed by Iranian security forces. Hajsafi said he stood by Iranian people and offered condolences to the grieving families back home.

Sardar Azmoun, the forward who plies his trade for Bayer Leverkusen, wrote on Instagram on the eve of selection of the World Cup squad: "At worst, I'll be kicked out of the national team, which is a small price to pay for even a single strand of Iranian women's hair. Shame on you for killing the people." Ali Daei, one of the prolific scorers in Iranian football, has publicly supported the protesters as he refused selection for the World Cup in solidarity with protesters.

Meanwhile, Iranian beach-soccer player Saeed Piramoon imitated cutting his hair, signalling his support for the protesters after he scored the winning goal in the final of the Intercontinental Beach Soccer Cup—while his team too did not sing the Iranian national anthem before the match.

Protests at sporting events are, however, not new. Even Olympic Games have not been immune and Rule 50 of the Olympic



Demonstrators in Berlin, some holding banners with the image of Mahsa Amini and Shah-era flags, march in solidarity with protesters in Iran. Over 200 people have been killed in clashes with police during widespread protests in Iran following the death of Mahsa Amini in mid-September

Charter was changed as recently as in 2021 to allow for token protests 'before the event'. The rule had laid down that 'no kind of demonstration or political, religious and racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic sites, venues or other areas'.

In 1906, however, Peter O'Connor, an Irish track and field athlete representing Great Britain, protested by climbing up the flag pole and displaying the Irish flag instead—a decade before the Irish War of Independence would lead to the creation of Ireland as a free state.

Since then there have been several instances of athletes speaking out on public issues like human rights violations, against war, police brutality, racism and climate change. Some have been lucky to get away with little or no consequence. Others have been less lucky. Baseball player Carlos Delgado refused to sing 'God bless America' as he didn't endorse the US government's deployment of the Army in Iraq and was roundly condemned by 'partisans and patriots'.

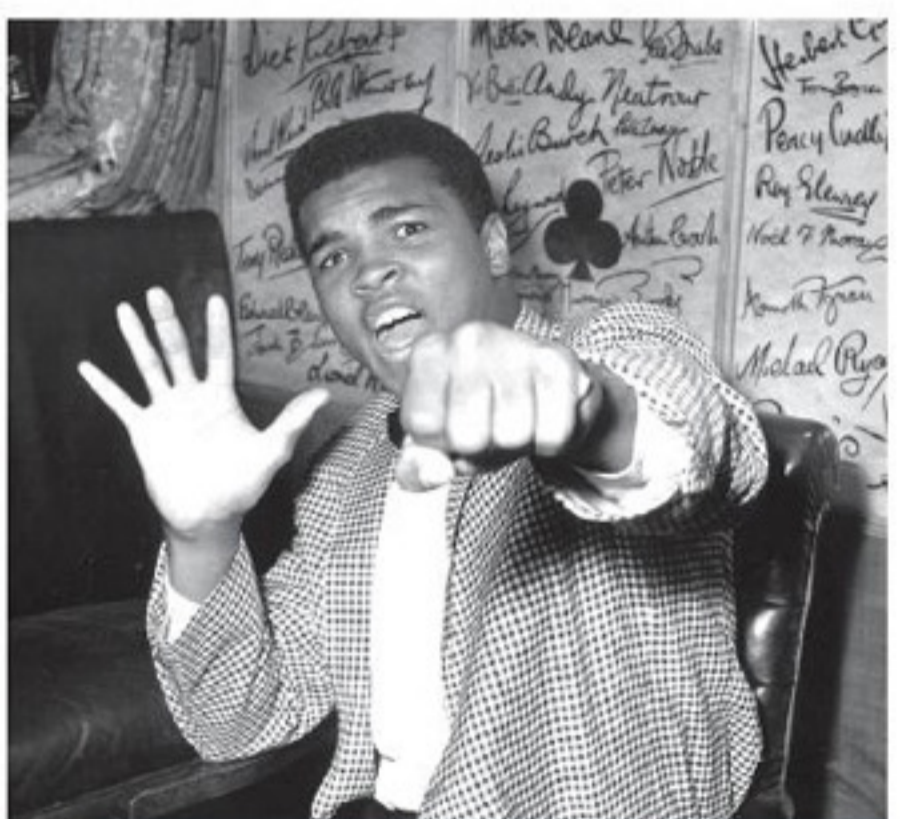
The 'Black Lives Matter' (BLM) movement in 2020 after the brutal murder of George Floyd—mobilised some of the biggest sporting icons—from seven-time F1 world champion Lewis Hamilton to NBA legend LeBron James to tennis star Naomi Osaka rallying to support the cause.

The history of American sports, in particular, is replete with crusaders against racism. Muhammad Ali stood out for the political position he took way back in 1967. Ali, drafted by the US military, refused to answer to his name or take the oath. This led to his arrest and conviction.

The 1936 Olympic Games were awarded to Berlin in 1931, before the Nazis took power in Germany. Once under Nazi control, however, the Olympics were presented as an explicit statement of Nazi racial supremacy. Efforts to pressurise Germany not to discriminate against Jewish athletes or to force the IOC to move the Games elsewhere or convince American athletes to boycott the Games did not quite succeed.

The 1980 Olympics in Moscow, the first awarded to a Communist country, was boycotted by 65 countries, partly due to US initiative to protest Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Others like Great Britain, France and Australia sent athletes but protested by boycotting the opening ceremonies or competing under a flag other than their national flag. The Soviets retaliated four years later by organising an Eastern Bloc boycott of the 1984 Games in Los Angeles.

Sports is meant to unite but it increasingly seems impossible not to mix sports and politics (India refuses to play in Pakistan). It is all the more courageous for individual athletes to swim against the tide and invite reprisals from the state. ■



## Not Black Man's War

In the 1960 Rome Olympics, boxer Muhammad Ali won all his bouts and bagged a gold medal. He was barely 21 years old. But after denied entry into a 'Whites Only' restaurant, he turned against the establishment and when he was drafted into the military to fight in Vietnam, he refused. He was then stripped of his title, his boxing licence was revoked, he was sentenced to five years imprisonment and fined \$10,000. The US Supreme Court overturned the sentence unanimously in 1971. But by then his 'prime' boxing days were over.

Ali, of the 'dance like a butterfly and sting like a bee' fame, was quoted as saying defiantly, "Why should they ask me to put on a uniform and go ten thousand miles from home to drop bombs and bullets on brown people in Vietnam while so-called Negro people in Louisville are treated like dogs and denied simple human rights?"

## Black Power Salute

In 1968, Mexico City. Smith and Carlos, the two Black American athletes, had won the gold and bronze medals respectively in the 200-metre sprint event at the Olympic Games. During the medal ceremony in the Olympic Stadium, when the US national anthem, *Star Spangled Banner*, was being played, both the athletes turned to face the US flag lowered their heads and kept their clenched fists raised till the anthem was played. They also wore human rights badges on their jackets. The gesture came to be known as 'Black Power Salute' but in an autobiography published 30 years later and titled *Silent Gesture*, Smith called it a 'human rights salute'. They had put on black socks and black gloves in solidarity but appeared on the podium with no shoes in a symbolic gesture to indicate poverty among African-Americans. They were thrown out of the Olympic village, suspended from the team and their athletic career came to an abrupt end as a consequence.



## Death of Democracy

Zimbabwe were to play their first match in the 2003 cricket World Cup against Namibia. Andy Flower, captaining the team and his teammate Henry Olonga, read out a statement to the media an hour before the match started.

"We are deeply distressed about what is taking place in Zimbabwe in the midst of the World Cup and do not feel that we can take the field without indicating our feelings in a dignified manner and in keeping with the spirit of cricket." The statement criticised various human rights violations that were taking place under the government and pledged to make the world aware of what was going on in the country by wearing black armbands.

Despite pressure from the Cricket Board, Flower and Olonga walked into the field with black armbands to mourn the 'death of democracy'. Olonga was never allowed to play for Zimbabwe again and migrated to Australia. Flower too was dropped after the World Cup and migrated to England.

## Taking the Knee

American footballer Colin Kaepernick took the knee during the national anthem before a match in 2016. He said he could not stand to show pride in the flag of a country that oppressed black people. "To me, this is bigger than football, and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way," said the quarterback. The NFL player paid a heavy price as the Donald Trump administration took a dim view of the protest. His career ended abruptly though he sued the franchise and reached a settlement a few years later.

But the practice of taking the knee before football matches became widespread in 2020, following the murder of an unarmed African-American, George Floyd, who died when a White policeman, Derek Chauvin, put his knees on Floyd's neck and choked him to death. His last words, "I cannot breathe", were recorded by a bystander and led to conviction of the policeman.

