



<https://www.history.com/news/1968-mexico-city-olympics-black-power-protest-backlash>

UPDATED: OCT 19, 2018

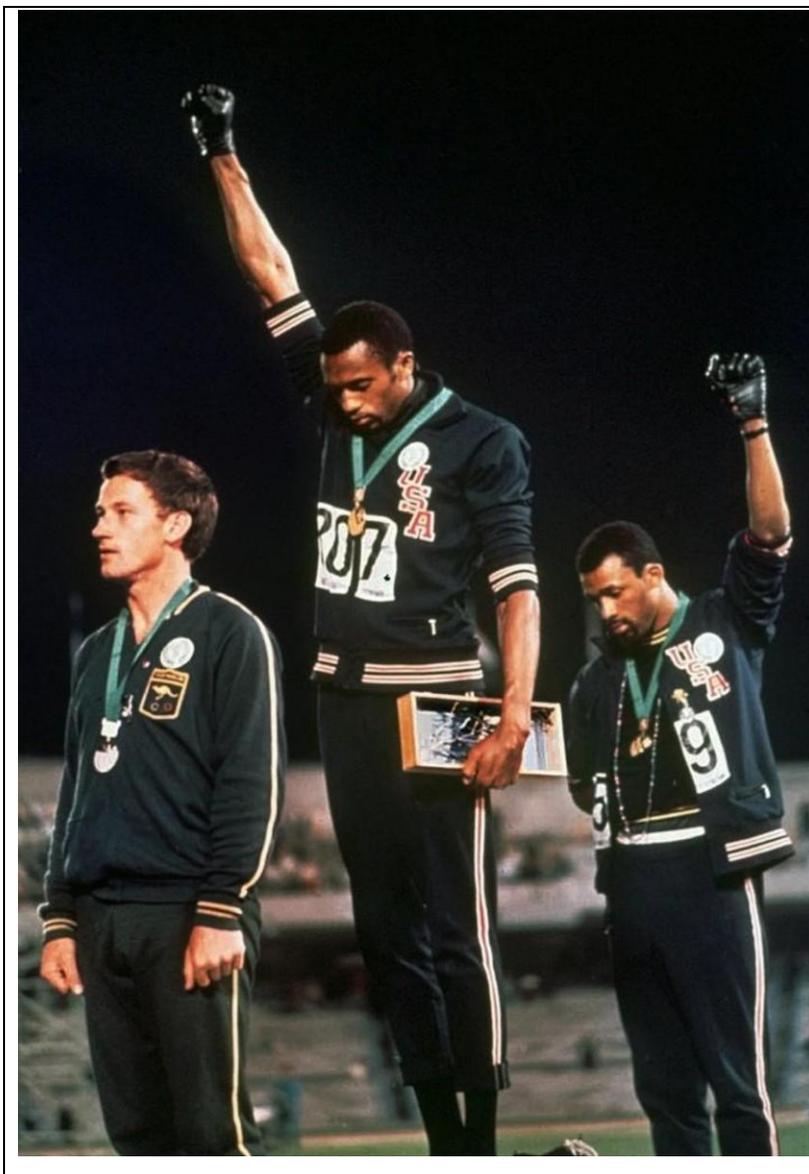
ORIGINAL: FEB 22, 2018

How the Black Power Protest at the 1968 Olympics Killed Careers

ERIN BLAKEMORE

It's an iconic image: Two athletes raise their fists on the Olympic podium. The photograph, taken after the 200 meter race at the 1968 [Summer Olympics](#) in Mexico City, turned African-American athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos from track-and-field stars into the center of a roiling controversy over their raised-fist salute, a symbol of black power and the human rights movement at large.

But look in the photo and you'll see another man as well: silver medalist Peter Norman, a white Australian runner. Norman didn't raise his fist that day, but he stood with Smith and Carlos. Though his show of solidarity ended up destroying Norman's career, the three athletes' actions that day would be just one in a line of protests on the athletic stage.



U.S. athletes Tommie Smith, center, and John Carlos raise gloved hands skyward during the playing of the Star Spangled Banner after Smith received the gold and Carlos the bronze for the 200 meter run at the Summer Olympic Games in Mexico City, 1968.

AP Photo

Smith and Carlos, who had won gold and bronze, respectively, agreed to use their medal wins as an opportunity to highlight the social issues roiling the United States at the time. Racial tensions were at a height, and the [Civil Rights](#) movement had given way to the Black Power movement. African-Americans like Smith and Carlos were frustrated by what they saw as the passive nature of the Civil Rights movement. They sought out active forms of protests and advocated for racial pride, black nationalism and dramatic action rather than incremental change.

It was only months after the assassination of [Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.](#), and protests against the Vietnam War were gaining steam as well. In the lead-up to the Olympics, Smith and Carlos helped organize the Olympic Project for Human Rights, a group that reflected their black pride and social consciousness. The group saw the Olympic Games as an opportunity to agitate for better treatment of black athletes and black people around the world. Its [demands](#) included hiring more black coaches and rescinding Olympic invitations to Rhodesia and South Africa, both of which practiced [apartheid](#). Though the project initially proposed a boycott of the Olympics altogether, Smith and Carlos decided to compete in the hopes they could use their achievements as a platform for broader change.



Mexico City police beating a protester during a student march days before the military gunned down hundreds of students during a similar peaceful march at Tlatelolco Plaza in Mexico City. (Credit: AP Photo)

Then, just 10 days before the opening of the Summer Games, an unarmed group of protesters assembled in Mexico City's Three Cultures Square to plan the next move of the growing Mexican students' movement. The Mexican government sent in bulldozers to disperse the thousands gathered, and troops

fired into the crowd, massacring between four (the government's official count) and 3,000 students.

Carlos and Smith were deeply affected by these events and the plight of marginalized people around the world. "It was a cry for freedom and for human rights," Smith told *Smithsonian* magazine in 2008. "We had to be seen because we couldn't be heard."

The third man on the podium became part of the protest, too, albeit in a less direct way. Before winning silver, Norman was a working-class boy from Melbourne, Australia, born in 1942. His family members were devout members of the Salvation Army, an evangelical group connected with the charitable group better known to Americans. Part of that faith was the belief that all men were equal.

Though he was poor growing up, Norman was an extraordinarily fast runner, and learned to race on spikes that his father, a butcher, borrowed due to lack of funds. In 1960, the teenager burst onto the national running scene as a junior, winning his first major title in Victoria. From then on, he became a major contender in Australian track and field. A powerful sprinter, his specialty was his finishes—an area in which some short-course runners falter.



The final of the Men's 200 meter event at the 1968 Summer Games. From left to right: Peter Norman of Australia, and Larry Questad, John Carlos and Tommie Smith of the United States. (Credit: Rolls Press/Popperfoto/Getty Images)

He displayed that skill during the 200 meter final on October 16, 1968, at Mexico City's Olympic Stadium. Though Norman had finished strong in the qualifying rounds, he was underestimated by the other runners—until, at the very end of the medal race, he edged in front of John Carlos at the finish line. “Out of nowhere, Norman stormed down the last 50 meters, taking the line before a shocked Carlos,” [writes](#) CNN's James Montague. Norman finished his sprint second with a time of 20.06 seconds and qualified for a silver medal.

At the time, Australia was experiencing racial tensions of its own. For years, it had been governed by its “White Australia Policy,” which dramatically limited immigration to the country by non-white people. While the Australian government welcomed new residents from predominantly white areas like the Baltics, it regularly turned down non-European migrants. In 1966, the government [made](#) the first steps toward abolishing the policy, but its effects reverberated throughout Australia. Non-Australians weren't the only people discriminated against: Aboriginal Australians, too, were historically oppressed

in the country, which forced Aboriginal children into boarding schools, while removing others from their families and placing them with white households.

Norman supported his fellow Olympians' protest, in part because of the intolerance he had witnessed in Australia. "Australia was not a crucible of tolerance," [notes](#) Steve Georgakis, a sports studies specialist from Australia. "Norman, a teacher and guided by his Salvation Army faith, took part in the Black Power salute because of this opposition to racism and the White Australia Policy."



Peter Norman, Tommie Smith and John Carlos after receiving their medals. (Credit: Patrice Habans/Paris Match/Getty Images)

As the athletes waited to go to the podium, Carlos and Smith told Norman that they planned to use their win as an opportunity to protest. Smith and Carlos decided to appear on the podium bearing symbols of protest and strength: black-socked feet without shoes to bring attention to black poverty, beads to

protest lynchings, and raised, black-gloved fists to represent their solidarity and support with black people and oppressed people around the world.

“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 later [wrote](#).

Carlos realized he had forgotten his gloves, and Norman suggested the American athletes share a pair. The Australian also asked how he could support his fellow medalists. They suggested he wear a badge for the Olympic Project for Human Rights. Norman didn’t raise his fist, but by wearing the badge he made his stance clear.

As the American athletes raised their fists, the stadium hushed, then burst into racist sneers and angry insults. Smith and Carlos were rushed from the stadium, suspended by the U.S. team, and kicked out of the Olympic Village for turning their medal ceremony into a political statement. They went home to the United States, only to face serious backlash, including death threats.

However, Carlos and Smith were both gradually re-accepted into the Olympic fold, and went on to careers in professional football before retiring. Norman, meanwhile, was punished severely by the Australian sports establishment. Though he qualified for the Olympic team over and over again, posting the fastest times by far in Australia, he was snubbed by the team in 1972. Rather than allow Norman to compete, the Australians did not send a sprinter at all.



Peter Norman at Williamstown Beach, Australia, 2000. (Credit: Fairfax Media/Fairfax Media/Getty Images)

Norman immediately retired from the sport and began to suffer from depression, alcoholism and a painkiller addiction. “During that time,” writes Caroline Frost for the BBC, “he used his silver medal as a doorstep.”

Norman died without being acknowledged for his contributions to the sport. Though he kept his silver medal, he was regularly excluded from events related to the sport. Even when the Olympics came to Sydney in 2000, he was not recognized. When Norman died in 2006, Carlos and Smith, who had [kept in touch](#) with Norman for years, were pallbearers at the Australian’s funeral.

It took until 2012 for the Australian government to apologize for the treatment Norman received in his home country. But even though it cost him his career and much of his happiness, Norman would have done it over again. “I won a silver medal,” he [told](#) the *New York Times* in 2000. “But really, I ended up running the fastest race of my life to become part of something that transcended the Games.”

Carlos and Smith are still in touch today—and have been publicly supportive of other protesting athletes, including the NFL’s Colin Kaepernick. “What I did was right 48 years ago, and 48 years later it has proven to be right,” Carlos told *The Telegraph* in 2016. “In 1968 we were on a program for humanity—we are still on the same program today.”