

Sports icon Dr. Harry Edwards reflects on current protests and how East St. Louis shaped his activism

The sociologist, activist and East St. Louis native remembers the first time he met Muhammad Ali while the boxer was training for the Olympics. He remembers meetings scheduled with civil rights leaders Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. that were ultimately canceled because of their assassinations. He remembers a conversation with NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick prior to his protest during the national anthem. He also remembers his journey to San Jose State University, the breeding ground for his activism work. In 1967, while a visiting professor at the university, Edwards founded the Olympic Project for Human Rights, which advocated for a boycott of the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City by demanding an end to racial inequality. Consequently, John Carlos and Tommie Smith, track and field athletes at San Jose State and members of the Olympic Project for Human Rights, raised their fists in a Black Power salute as they received their Olympic medals during the games in Mexico City. The photo of Carlos and Smith on the podium has become a famous symbol of their time. Edwards' seminal work with the Olympic Project for Human Rights led him to become a leading voice on the intersection of race, sports and culture for the past 50 years as he continues to consult teams and athletes on social justice issues. Now, at the age of 77, he remembers all of those things as younger generations of athletes follow in his footsteps. Last week, the Milwaukee Bucks decided not to play a playoff game in protest of the police shooting of Jacob Blake, a Black man, in Kenosha, Wisconsin. The decision by the team created a domino effect around the sports world as other leagues and athletes followed suit. In the wake of these protests, Edwards agreed to a one-on-one interview with the Belleville News-Democrat to discuss his sports activism legacy and his humble beginnings in East St. Louis. Here are excerpts from that interview:

WHAT WAS IT LIKE GROWING UP IN EAST ST. LOUIS IN THE 1940S AND 1950S? "East St. Louis has always been a challenging place for a family to evolve and develop and stay on track. The difficulties that we had living in the south end down on 17th Street — which has been totally obliterated now — were tough. My father was an individual who worked hard all his life. I remember him working and getting his pay in cash in an envelope and that's tough when you're trying to support a wife and eight children on \$65 a week. But that was the experience I had. "It was a tough situation. My family broke up early. My siblings were about 11 to 13 months apart because there was no Roe V. Wade back then or any of that. The main thing to me was not that they had broke up shortly after that eighth child was born, but that they managed to stay together long enough to have eight children. They did the best that they could. My dad was an ex-convict and my mom dropped out of school in middle school and so there were very limited options and opportunities for both of them. In the end, there was no one left in the house except me and my old man, and I saw him maybe once or twice a week. Everybody has gone to live with various people. My mother moved out on her own. I don't know about the educational experiences of all of them, but I do know that they all were very bright. We just didn't have a lot of opportunities. "People talk about broken families and single-parent families. We were no-parent families for the most part. By the time I was at East Side High School (currently East St. Louis Senior High School) there was nobody at home but the old man and me and I saw him maybe twice a week. There are kids who were raised in single-parent households, but then there are kids who raise themselves, but we all came out well, and I think that's a remarkable record given the history of what we went through."

HOW DID THAT UPBRINGING CREATE THE FOUNDATION FOR THE SEMINAL WORK YOU'RE KNOWN FOR? "I was among the first group of Black students that went to East Side High. They always had one or two or three or four or some small number (of Black students) going there because of the desegregation edict, but in 1957 there was a large group of Black athletes, including me, in particular who found themselves on the field representing East St. Louis Flyers really for the first time, and that experience was defining for me because my father had

always believed in this old saying that it's not the color of your skin or your circumstances, but it was how well you played the game. "He believed in the efforts or the models of Joe Louis or Jesse Owens and Jackie Robinson, and I found that that old saying did not apply. I found at East Side that there were no Black coaches, there were no Black support staff around athletics even as the great stars on those teams were Black. Going to East Side, which was essentially the same East Side that it was when it was an all-white school, we weren't enthused about what was going on in the classroom, so we played football in the fall, basketball in the winter and track and field in the spring. That was really the focus of much of Black male life at East Side. "Even when we got into that situation, I found out early on that it was about the color of your skin, it was your circumstances and conditions. The teachers didn't know anything about what was going on in the south end of East St. Louis. They had no idea. I mean, they weren't part of that culture. They didn't understand the values and sentiments and struggles and so forth [of people from that area], so anything that I learned at East Side during school hours I forgot on the way back to the south end because it didn't apply [to me]. And that experience stayed with me. "When I left East Side, I came to the West Coast and attended Fresno City College for one semester before taking a scholarship to attend San Jose State University. There was a guy who was over the Olympic boxing team by the name of Julie Menendez who was from East St. Louis and also the boxing coach at San Jose State, so that was another reason why I visited the school and decided to go there. "Julie was from East St. Louis. He was the Olympic boxing coach at that time and he told me to come over to the gym for practice to meet someone who was around the same age as me, but he said that this person just wouldn't stop talking. I went over and he introduced me to Cassius Clay, and that was first time I met Muhammad Ali. I thought he was nuts. I thought he was insane. But of course I came to know him through the movement and we were able to develop a relationship with him and came to have such tremendous respect for him. It's been a heck of a sojourn from East St. Louis, but it all revolved around sports and race."

BECAUSE OF YOUR ATHLETIC BACKGROUND, WHAT MADE YOU TAKE A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO IMPACTING THE SPORTS REALM? "When I left San Jose State, I was an honors student and received a fellowship from Cornell University. I was also on the draft board in football by the Minnesota Vikings and the San Diego Chargers. I was approached by the Lakers. I mean I was 260 pounds and had a 39-and-a-half inch vertical, but I walked away from that. I took the Woodrow Wilson fellowship [at Cornell] principally because it paid more. The money from those teams wasn't like what it is today, and the fellowship was four years and I didn't have to live in the same area. Plus, I had become a student, and not just a student, but a scholar. "I came to college not being able to understand the college admissions test. It made no sense to me. And that really wasn't anyone's fault. You know the teachers at East Side didn't really know our situation because we were among the first batch of students to desegregate the school. They didn't know our culture or background, and so even though I struggled with academics, I wanted to major in sociology. I had to petition for that because there was a limited number of majors that Black scholarship athletes could take. They agreed that I could do it but only provisionally so I had to have all of my instructors sign off on my work every Friday and turn that in to the athletic department to show that I was doing the work. I did that for three and half years just to maintain a major in sociology even though I had an A minus average. So taking the fellowship was easy for me. "I had gotten into a habit of approaching my academic work in a certain way. Not only would I read all of the books that were assigned in a particular that I was taking before the semester even started. I loved to read. After games would be won, when everyone else was going to parties, I was going to the library to read those books. Not only would I read them, but I'd read the books in the footnotes. Dr. Harry Edwards sitting on a sculpture dedicated to Tommie Smith and John Carlos at his alma mater, San Jose State University

Contributed DID THOSE AROUND YOU SUPPORT YOUR DECISION TO PURSUE THAT ROUTE? “Three of my professors nominated me for the Woodrow Wilson fellowship at Cornell, and I accepted it. Those things made it possible for me to have a broader vision of what the potentialities were. I remember my basketball coach asking why I didn’t want to try out for the Lakers. And it was because I thought the greatest contribution I can offer is not being another Black athlete out there on the field, but being someone with a PhD who can influence the sports institution and the rest of society the way WEB DuBois did. “My father was very upset, by the way. This was a man who was afraid to fly but when I told him just before graduating from San Jose State that I wasn’t interested in entering the draft, wasn’t interested in playing for the Lakers, wasn’t interested in competing in the Olympic Trials, he actually got on a plane and flew to California from East St. Louis to talk to me about my decision. He wanted to have bragging rights (about his son), so when I told him I wasn’t interested in those things, he didn’t understand why I wanted to go to school to become a sociologist. But I was doing what I felt I needed to do.” EAST ST. LOUIS IS A FORGOTTEN CITY IN THE SAME WAY THAT BLACK PEOPLE IN THE COUNTRY ARE OFTEN FORGOTTEN. WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON THE CHALLENGES FACING YOUR HOMETOWN? “East St. Louis never really recovered from the white riots in 1917, and as people fled the area, white Americans clamped down and shut down every resource path for Black East St. Louis, and ultimately whites fled to places like Granite City, Dupon and Belleville. Black people were left there without resources, without the necessary economic or even political base to meet their needs, and over time the population has decreased. And that’s where we are: an overwhelming preponderance of people are dependent upon government support in order to survive. “There’s that history of East St. Louis that has to be taken into account when you evaluate the circumstances there. East St. Louis is still a great sports city. It also has a rich legacy of everybody from Katherine Dunham and Josephine Baker to Miles Davis. You have U.S. ambassadors who have come out of there. You have people such as myself and pro sports figures who have come out of there. And most of the people who leave there and have a successful experience somewhere else don’t come back because there’s no institutional structure for them to come back to that would allow them to function in a way that they are accustomed to.” CONSIDERING EAST ST. LOUIS HAS A STRONG SPORTS FOUNDATION AND YOUR FOUNDATIONAL WORK WITH ATHLETE ACTIVISM, WHAT WAS YOUR IMMEDIATE REACTION WHEN THE BUCKS WALKED OUT LAST WEEK AND HOW THAT ACTION CREATED A DOMINO EFFECT IN OTHER SPORTS LEAGUES? “There was no reaction because I knew what was going on. I talk to Carmelo Anthony and those athletes all the time. I had just talked to the Clippers and the owner and Jerry West and Doc Rivers. I had talked to Billy Donovan, the head coach of the Oklahoma City Thunder, and the players on his team, including Chris Paul, who leads the player’s association, so I knew what was going on that time. “In fact, in 2016 when Colin Kaepernick first sat on the cooler (during the national anthem) in that preseason game I went into the locker room, because I had been consulting for the 49ers since the 1980s, afterwards. I had been talking to him a lot, and he asked me what books he should be reading, so I told him about James Baldwin’s “The Fire Next Time,” “The Autobiography of Malcolm X,” Maya Angelou’s “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.” I got his jersey and shoes that he wore and sent them to the curator of the National Museum of African-American History and Culture, and I told them that they should put them on display right between Muhammad Ali and Tommie Smith and John Carlos’ kiosks. “So what’s happening now is what’s indicative of a wave of athlete activism that’s already been in existence. When you look for the next big social action and protests and who is leading it, look for somebody wearing sneakers or cleats. Don’t look for someone wearing a clergyman’s collar or somebody in a political position or the head of some civil rights organization. And that’s exactly what I’ve been saying to these guys in the NBA before they

had the bubble established. The focus now is how do we get from protest to progress.” DO YOU SEE ANY PARALLELS BETWEEN TACTICS USED FOR THE OLYMPIC PROJECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND WHAT YOU’RE SEEING RIGHT NOW? “This is just a different wave of athlete activism. Every wave is different. The first wave was Jesse Owens and Joe Louis and Jack Johnson and Paul Robeson who demonstrated in foreign arenas for their legitimacy to play. The second wave that came after World War II with Jackie Robinson was about access. They struggled for access. The third wave was Bill Russell and Arthur Ashe and Jim Brown and Curt Flood was about getting respect. Then the fourth wave came along with Colin Kaepernick it was about definitional authority. “What Colin was saying was when you shoot us down on the cover of the badge, it’s murder. It’s not justifiable homicide where nobody is charged and prosecuted. And people said no you’re not talking about a new definition, you’re about dishonoring our flag and soldiers, so it was a definitional struggle with that. “This fifth wave of athlete activism is about exercising the power of that position. They’re saying we not only are going to get your attention. We’re going to change your behavior by leveraging the power that we have to change the way you approach social inequality in society. So they’re all connected, but they are framed by different ideological realities. “Segregation framed up the first wave. Desegregation and civil rights framed up the second wave. Black power framed up the third wave. Black Lives Matter framed up the fourth wave. And this fifth wave is being framed up by the ideological definitions having to do with the exercise of power born largely as a consequence of a combination of the legacy of the Black Lives Matter movement and the power that these athletes have because of social media. So this fifth wave is distinctively different from the single athletes who were involved in the fourth wave. These are entire teams that are reacting to this situation and leveraging their power to demand change. It’s not just a Colin Kaepernick or Eric Reid or Michael Bennett or Maya Moore. This one is about an entire organization, and I could see this coming from the time The University of Missouri football team protested. WHAT’S THE POWER OF THOSE ATHLETES STRIKING? AND DO YOU THINK IT WAS ENOUGH? “I’m happy that they went back to playing because it keeps them all in Orlando. It keeps them together to focus on an agenda for going forward as opposed to boycotting basketball and sending them out to 31 cities to do what? So I’m not disappointed at all. In fact, I’m in full support of them going back. They were sending a message and that came through clear as other leagues followed suit. This is not about boycotting sports just like my proposal to boycott the 1968 Olympics wasn’t against the Olympics. It was to send a message and to make a statement. The [Black Power Salute] protest movement on the podium wasn’t against the sport of track and field. Once you get people’s attention now what do you do? Well, what I did was look at the dynamics of race and sports in society and why it was important and worked with the NFL and the NBA to bring about the kinds of changes that I envision for American society.” HOW CAN ATHLETES BETTER LEVERAGE THE POWER AND PRIVILEGE THEY HAVE TO ADVOCATE FOR BLACK LIVES? “Our problem is not about participation. Our problem is the lack of respect beyond the arenas and realms where we have participatory access. We have to leverage that to get more access, and if we’re not involved, we can’t leverage it. Activism divorced from strategic analysis is conducive to nothing so much as chaos, confusion and contradiction. We have to be more strategic.” WHAT DO YOU ENVISION THE FUTURE OF BLACK ATHLETES TO BE? “Since the turn of the twentieth century it is now clear that we’re not going anywhere that women do not go as fully respected and involved partners and leaders. I look at Maya Moore who walked away from a career in the WNBA to seek justice for one person because she realizes that it’s not just about numbers. It’s about justice. If LeBron James, who’s her equivalent, had done the same thing, it would’ve made more headlines. We do not see women’s athletics in proper respect. Sports, for the most part, have historically been choreographed around the physical capabilities and potential of men. But

that doesn't mean that women are not great athletes. "I also think social media has changed everything in sports. It gives a lever of power to athletes and their celebrity that they can go online and change everything. And this is a weapon that athletes have in adjunct to their already powerful platform. Then when you look at the impact of the pandemic in terms of them inviting literally millions of people into their lives, this is a tremendously powerful lever. This you cannot reverse, and the players now realize it and their exploiting and using it, and this is the trajectory of the development in terms of sports, race and society." HOW DOES IT FEEL TO SEE THAT YOUR WORK ISN'T GOING IN VAIN, AND WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FORWARD TO NOW? "Early on I realized that while protest movements are necessary and imperative, it comes down to what are the next steps. I think that my pioneering of the sociology of sports had laid out the dynamics and logic of sports and society. I think that long after I'm gone, people will be looking at that and saying 'yea, that was a contribution'. I think that my work as a scholar activist will be looked up generations from now as a pioneering contribution. I don't think it would just be my work with the Olympic Project for Human Rights or my consulting with different sports teams and players throughout the years. I don't think even that will outweigh the contributions that I made in terms of our understanding of sports and society more generally. "I'm 77 years old. What I look forward to now is seeing my grandchildren and talking to them via FaceTime. That's what Grandpa Edwards looks forward to. The only thing I can say with some degree of assurance about what's next for me is that when I'm on my deathbed my last words will be, 'I protest'." Help us cover your community through BND's partnership with Report For America. Contribute now to help fund reporting of East St. Louis and nearby communities and metro-east education, and to support new reporters.

This story was originally published September 4, 2020, 5:00 AM in the Belleville News-Democrat.