

From Mexico City to Gwen Berry: Is There Any Difference?

by Gary Fouse



In the 1968 Olympics held in Mexico City, two black American sprinters who finished in the top three of a race shocked their country by raising their fists in the black power salute during the post-race flag ceremony as our National Anthem was being played. The reaction was swift: John Carlos and Tommie Smith were sent home as the country engaged in a hot debate over whether their action was justified or understandable.

Flash forward to the Colin Kaepernick controversy of the last few years, where the former San Francisco 49ers quarterback refused to stand for the National Anthem and several players followed suit. This led to a public relations nightmare for the NFL from which they have not yet fully recovered. Kaepernick doubled down on these actions by a series of public

statements condemning his country and the police. He also showed up at a workout wearing socks depicting police as pigs. Kaepernick now makes his living as a public dissident as any chances for a return to the NFL dwindle with his advancing age and continued public persona.

Then there is Megan Rapinoe a woman soccer star who refuses to stand for the National Anthem. Her soccer skills will eventually fade away, but she surely will stick around as a public dissident figure, much like Kaepernick.

It is now 2021, and we are moving to the next Olympiad to be held in Tokyo. Most recently, two female (?) athletes have jumped into the spotlight with their own treatment of our flag and National Anthem

Chelsea Wolfe is a transgender person who has qualified as an alternate in the Olympics in some kind of extreme bike riding event. Wolfe (who is white) has promised to burn a US flag on the podium if he/she happens to win a medal.

And now we have Gwen Berry, who qualified to participate in throwing something around in Tokyo for the American team. During the National Anthem, while the other two women stood proudly, Berry turned away as if somebody was passing gas. She has followed that up with a series of inflammatory statements about her country and our Anthem.

So my question is this: Are there any differences between what Carlos and Smith did in 1968 as compared with Kaepernick, Rapinoe, Wolfe, and Berry? I think there is a big difference, and the difference is what America was like for black people in 1968 and what it is for black people (and other minority groups) today.

In 1968, we were still in the middle of the Civil Rights era. The Voting Rights Act had only been passed a few years earlier. It was the era of Martin Luther King, his assassination, the deaths of other civil rights workers, and

the efforts to dismantle segregation in the South. It could fairly be argued that America was a racist country in those days, just beginning to recognize the historical wrongs and trying to correct them. Segregation, in and of itself, was a sign of structural racism.

That is not the America of today although many, including, Kaepernick, Rapinoe, Wolfe, and Berry, would disagree with me. America has changed, in my view, from a country that was racist to a country still dealing with racial problems. There is a difference.

I think most of us white people who remember Tommie Smith and John Carlos have learned to put what they did in perspective. They were rightfully protesting what the situation was in 1968. Even if you disagreed with the time and place (an international forum), they had a right to be angry about the situation for black people in that era. Both of them went on to lead productive lives.

I refuse to give that benefit to Kaepernick, Rapinoe, Wolfe, and Berry. They have had the benefit of growing up in an America that has allowed them to be successful without their paths being blocked by racist, homophobic or sexist sentiment. Not that racists, homophobes, or sexists don't exist; they do, but they are fringe groups who represent nobody but themselves and cannot stop the above individuals from achieving their goals-even if it is burning an American flag.

We are once again going through some rough times, but this country-this society- is bending over backward to advance our minorities, women, and gays-including transsexuals. There are some aspects of that effort that are objectionable, for example, transgender men who are engaging and who will dominate women's sports, access to women's bathrooms and shower rooms, all-black facilities on college campuses (dorms, etc), the attack on free speech, the growing demonization of white people in general (not to mention Jews), BLM, Antifa,

and defunding police. We have every right to speak out and criticize those things without having labels placed on us by our government leaders.

And we have every right to criticize people like Kaepernick, Rapinoe, Wolfe, and Berry, even as we concede their right to expression. I have come to terms with what Tommie Smith and John Carlos did over 50 years ago. I cannot come to terms with what Kaepernick, Rapinoe, Wolfe, and Berry are doing.