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HOSSLI.COM, 8. AUGUST 2008
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Sprinter Tommie Smith talks about his silent protest against racial discrimination at the 1968 Olympic Games.

Interview: [Peter Hossli \(https://www.hossli.com/about\)](https://www.hossli.com/about)



In 1968, American athlete Tommie Smith won the Gold medal in the 200 meter sprint in Mexico City. During the award ceremony he put up his right fist in protest against racial discrimination in his home country. With one silent gesture, Smith created one of the most memorable moments in the history of sports. He captured the sentiment of Black America. Upon his return to his home state California he was called a traitor, an anti-American or worse. For many years he couldn't find a job. Smith, 63, later coached sprinters and is now retired outside of Atlanta.

Tommie Smith, your world record time over 200 meters once stood at 19.83 seconds. How fast do you run it today?

Tommie Smith: I would say no faster than a 24.24 seconds at age 63, not too bad, you know? Of course, Peter, give me a little time to train, gimme a couple months to train so I won't completely blow up.

For years you worked as sprinting coach. Where do you actually recognize a good sprinter, in his legs or his eyes?

Smith: It's the total individual. Just because you see a kid run fast, say, in football or in track and field, doesn't make him a good sprinter.

Everybody can run fast. I will need time in terms of denoting a good sprinter. Because sprinting is a technique, sprinting is an art, sprinting is a science. I need to start from the head. You're what you believe. Then you start working south. The neck, the shoulders, the chest, all the way down to the bottom of the person's feet.

But what makes a winning sprinter?

Smith: Winning also starts in the head. If you run as fast as you can you win. You might not hit the tape first, but you have won in your own mind because you beat yourself from the last time.

You won many times. What made you win?

Smith: I needed to move on. I worked in the fields for others. We were sharecroppers. So the more you did you made others look good. That was the onset of my career. But then I realized, wait a minute, Smith! You win because you want to be the best. That thought process changed into winning because I needed to be the best. I can wave my hand in the air, big smile across my face.

You had your biggest triumph at the 1968 Olympics, where you were the fastest in the 200 meters sprint. Why did you win this race?

Smith: I was winning because I needed to say something. I used my winning as a platform of social need and to talk about racial injustice.

You commemorated your victory in a famous silent protest. During the award ceremony you put your right fist into the air. At what moment was it decided to do it?

Smith: I decided that I was going to do it just before the race. I was a world record holder. In fact, I

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had more records than any man in track and field history. And I felt a need to continue my belief in what I was viewed as a person of humility and humanity. So I needed a platform. I had no microphone. So something had to be done visibly and respectfully on the victory stand to show my community and the rest of the world I believed in human rights, that's all it was.



There are still many myths flying around the people who were behind the silent gesture. Who actually made the decision that you would do that silent gesture?
Smith: I did. That was my decision to do that silent gesture. I, Tommie Smith, will do it, the person with the glove on his right hand.

It was later said black radicals influenced you. Did anyone push or encourage you to do it?
Smith: No, not a soul. It was what I wanted to do. Of course, we had the platform of the Olympic Project of Human Rights that brought us athletes to that point. But during the games, the Olympic Project of Human Rights was

shut. It was up to each athlete. And you know the first group of black American athletes on the victory stand was the four-by-four-relay. And they didn't do anything. They felt that it was necessary to make money.

How did you get the gloves?

Smith: I asked my wife, a few days before the race to bring me some gloves. At this point I didn't know what to do with them.

Did she buy them in Mexico City or back home in California?

Smith: I'm not sure where she bought them. She never told me.

You're wearing the glove on the right hand side, John Carlos, who won the bronze medal, wears it on the left hand side. The official black power greeting always had the right fist covered in a glove. Why did you not ask your wife for two pairs?

Smith: Why would I need two pairs? It was an individual preference. Each athlete did what he wanted to do, not each two athletes. I didn't know what John wanted.

So you're in the dungeons going to the ceremony and John asked you for the gloves? Or did you offer it to him?

Smith: He didn't ask me. And I didn't offer it. I said, if you want it you could have it. John is a very strong academic type person also, and he had his own mind what he wanted to do. This was an individual movement. John and Tommie were two different people in the same event. Since they were my gloves, I wanted the right one and John had the left one.

Everyone talks about the fists. But you were also not wearing any shoes during the award ceremony. You were up there in black socks...

Smith: ... I ran in black socks. It was the first black socks had been worn in competition. They were not athletic socks. They were black dress socks. They represent the same as the glove – the need to survive. The glove represented poverty, and of course the black glove with the fist always represents happiness or pride or power. Even the athletes nowadays raise a fist in the air once they make a heavy-duty three pointer or a good touchdown. Without the dancing, of course, we didn't dance on the victory stand. You can call our action Black Power because number one it's a black glove and number two it's two black athletes wearing it, representing solidarity.

Why did you not wear any shoes?

Smith: The bare feet represented poverty. The sight of the feet had a momentous grandeur.

Your supplier Puma probably wasn't too happy about you not wearing their shoes.

Smith: Puma has never mentioned it, not to this day. Besides, the Puma shoe was on the victory stand.

Where was it?

Smith: Right there by my feet. Soon as they mentioned the Gold Medal—"Tommie Smith, Gold Medal 19.83"—both my hands went up in the air on the victory stand, and my shoe was on my left hand and the glove was on the right. Then as I bent over to have the attendant put the medal around my neck I set the shoe down beside me. And if one were to notice the victory stand, the Puma shoe is standing right beside me.

John Carlos had his jacket open, but yours was closed. Why?

Smith: I don't know. I was just there. Even now, Peter, when I wear my jacket zipped up. Even my wife tells me, "Don't zip it, that's so yesterday".

During the national anthem you put your fist up. What went through your head?

Smith: Oh, God. It was just mightyful. Everything went through my head, all the years, hours, all the minutes and days I worked on human rights. Not only this, but my whole background, working in those fields in the backwoods of Texas and going through different atrocities that my father had to go through just to make enough money for bread.

Was this an intellectual or and emotional experience?

Smith: It's more emotional than intellect. I'm so much about intellect that I forget the emotional. So this, for me, was a very emotional period because there was no census to determine really what I'm gonna do. What does this represent? It was a conglomerate of an explosion of happiness, of sadness, of prayer, of forgiveness, of death. Everything was in that moment. It was an explosion. And I was praying to my savior to deliver me from the jaws of wrath. "Thank you for bringing me here and thank you for delivering me to this spot; please get me off this thing, fast." It was something that I had never felt before.

Were you afraid?

Smith: My background has always been of strength. But I believe God won't put any more on you than you can handle. That was my saving grace.

The third guy on the podium was Peter Norman, a white guy from Australia who won the silver medal. Did you even know that a white guy could run that fast?

Smith: Of course, God had no indication of how fast a person is. I didn't know who he was, though, until after the race.

Norman participated with a button for Human Rights. How important was it that a white sprinter was part of the gesture?

Smith: That was of no importance to me. I wasn't worried about Peter or John or the Jamaican or the Canadian. I was worried about Tommie Smith. I was very severely injured when I ran the race. I was number one in the world and to be ridiculed, had I not done something, because of all my talk and all my belief. I won because of my non-secular background, that's where my strength came from. I mean, how else can a person run faster than they ever ran in the world, in their own life, with a pulled muscle?

What did you achieve?

Smith: During that time in athletics, very few blacks if any had the opportunity, like Tommie Smith did, to reach out or to speak out, physically or mentally, about how they felt about a system, and be heard. Now I could talk, I'm on the victory stand. Later I stepped off the victory stand and kept on talking.

Your protest was nonviolent. Others used violent means to achieve the same thing. What's more effective?

Smith: I viewed both sides. And each side to me was good. The negative side and the positive side was the good side of everything.

After you came back to the United States you were criticized tremendously. Were you surprised to see how much anger was pointed towards you?

Smith: No. I knew what happened in Mexico City wasn't good for people coming from the American standard, from mom's apple pie. The truth is very difficult to accept. A lie is easy to accept because you have no responsibility. I created an avenue to be truthful, to see the truth in racism. Before, everybody said, "You're treated just like me". My action showed, "no, I'm not treated like you, I'm different from you and I'm treated differently than you." Quickly there are those who say, I don't see color, or Gee, we're all the same. No, we're not all the same. If we're all the same there won't be any laws to protect the differences in what we're supposed to be like.

Some of the reaction was very racist. They say, well, it's just a black thing.

Smith: They missed the point. It was about human issues. It was human rights and not black rights, because blacks were human before they got the rights.

You were accused of hating America. Did you hate the US?

Smith: Gosh, no. I didn't hate the US then, I don't hate the US now. A very powerful conservative told me when I came back, "You guys really embarrassed us." And I asked, Why? He said, "Because what you did showed what we needed to improve on in our country. Why can't we work on that internally ourselves." I told one person, well it's been over 375 years and not a whole lot has happened. He said, "Oh yes it has. I don't call you nigger in front of you loudly." I said, "But you still think it." He said, "Yes I do because there is separatism in the way you look, the way I look and the way I think. Therefore there should be separatism in what you get and what I get."

What about the flower girls and the easy riders and Jane and Peter Fonda? The summer of love type people must have greeted you with a warm welcome.

Smith: They didn't greet me at all. These white folks didn't come around me. They wanted their freedoms, but they were after the white type freedoms, it wasn't the black type freedoms, even though we had opened doors for them to think. No white folks made me a hero of anything. I can't remember when any of the Fondas or anybody else came to me in letter or phone call and wanted to talk to me.

Maybe they were afraid to be connected with the radical Black Panther organization. Were you a member?

Smith: No, I was not connected to the Black Panthers. But I supported their ideals. They met force with force, which was the opposite of Dr. Martin Luther King, who met force with nonviolence.

You received death threats. Was there a moment after the event where you actually regretted it?

Smith: Not at all. I think John Carlos said it better than most people can say this. He said, "I regret that the younger generation did not take more freedoms because of what he had sacrificed for him to have."

You later played football. But your career never really took off. Why?

Smith: In 1967 I went to camp with the Los Angeles Rams. But when I came back from Mexico, the Rams had indicated that they could not help me anymore because of what I did in Mexico City.

In 2005 the «New York Times» called you and John Carlos the «greatest sports heroes» this country has ever seen. Was that a vindication for you?

Smith: They weren't wrong. I'm on their side. It took a lot of courage as a young black man to put not only his future on the line, but also his life on the line to prove the need for social involvement.

The image of the award ceremony is one of the most famous images in sports. How does one live being reduced to one gesture?

Smith: It was a burden that was placed on me. I've carried through my non-secular belief. I really believed and believe now that God won't put anymore on me than I could handle. I handle it with a good feeling, with a smile on my face, but with understanding of what I'm doing. This picture isn't burdensome. It is a responsibility.

America loves icons. Why has Hollywood never made a movie about the background of that image?

Smith: I'd love to answer that with some profundity. But I can't. It is simple. Tommie Smith showed the truth, and this truth doesn't sell at the box office.

Could you sell the story? Has this gesture made you a rich man?

Smith: A rich man? No! In fact, the other day my wife said, "don't answer the phone, that's a bill collector". She said, "Tommie, you give so much away, you go give speeches where you don't get paid. You do things and when you ask for money usually people can't do it because of their particular situation, they can't pay you because of this." I said, "Well this is what I want to do." She said, "Then you got to continue to be poor."

What does money mean to you?

Smith: Oh, money means paying so I can buy clothes and shoes for me and my wife and my grandkids. And of course pay my ten percent to the church.

Back then you spoke out, but also Muhammad Ali. Today black athletes are mostly mum, even though Kobe Bryant, or Tiger Woods or LeBron James make way over \$100 million dollar.

Smith: These are heavy chains. They've been bought to stay silent. I don't envy these young folks because they can't say a lot because they're paid by the people I was bringing to the front on the victory stand.

You fought for a cause 40 years ago. Has the situation for black Americans improved ever since?

Smith: Yes it has. I would be remiss and I would be blunderous and an idiot to believe that the lives lost by black people were not worthy of a country giving them credit for their fights. Tommie Smith can sit here in the South and speak the way I'm, speaking, and white folks understand it, not agree with it but understand it.

Some statistics tell a different story. Blacks are filling the prisons, blacks kill each other, and the unemployment rate among blacks is much higher than among any other ethnic groups. Some black leaders, especially comedian Bill Cosby, are starting to blame the lack of responsibility among blacks. He mentions all the fathers who leave their children.

Smith: Yeah, sure. Point very well taken, and a point which is very pin sharp in the black community, when it comes to Bill Cosby and when he comes to talking about family. He sees the family in the family, not in the community, where the father might not do what he should do because the overall system does not, does not empower the dad, the father in the black family to do what's necessary socially and financially to take care of the family.

That means you're also not ready to take responsibility?

Smith: We all bear responsibility. But look at the socioeconomic situation, lets say in South Central Los Angeles. There are no jobs, and the schools are bad. They have no money, that's why they can't take care of their families. Fathers are leaving because of the need to get jobs somewhere else.

Does having no money mean that blacks need to have a culture of violence? Rap music is celebrating gang wars in South Central.

Smith: We all know the problems in our own black culture. We know that. Yes, there are problems in our black community because money is needed.

Because you have no money, you can degrade women as "ho's" and "bitches", as many rappers do?

Smith: It's totally degrading. I won't say the "b word". But it makes money. And this is their pride. This is where the fight for education, fight for freedom is being thwarted because of the ignorance of those who think money is more important than pride.

Back in the days, white slave holders used to "N word" to degrade their slaves. Now blacks use it to call upon each other. At the same time they say its not okay for whites to us it.

Smith: That word is a congregation of our pride. I use that word a lot. We have a pride, we have a culture, and we have a technique using it. And N I G G A , nigga, to young folks, is 'homeboy.' Ain't no white folks a homeboy. Therefore white folks can't use nigga to a black dude. Black dudes use nigger to strengthen their gang. When I say gang, not gang in the streets, but their gang in the church, even.

This is a strange form of pride. The word is very demeaning.

Smith: Demeaning? Of course it's demeaning. Do I want to be called that? Don't even come to my house with it. But I understand why it's being used. It is used because that is our refining of togetherness. "Ho" is different. "Bitch" is different. That's calling you animals. If I call somebody, Hey Nigger, I mean Hey Brother.

The war between white and blacks seems to be over. If you look at the statistics, it's now blacks killing black.

Smith: Who else are they gonna kill in their community? White folks don't come in there. In the black community there's gonna have to be someone to indicate there's another way of doing things.

There is a lot of hope for Barack Obama. Is America ready for a black president?

Smith: Well, black people are here. We were brought here, how much more ready can you be than that? What do you think we are, in this little cage where black people can't do? Heck yeah, we're ready. Come on, Barack, do what you have to do to make it understood that blacks are eligible to become whatever they want in a particular arena.

Will Obama be the next president?

Smith: Well, Gee Whiz. I'm hoping that whatever he is will not be forgotten. This man has gone further on this ticket than anybody else. Barack Obama is taken seriously, because of his background,

and of what he has done. This man has been thrown curve balls that Barry Bonds couldn't hit, and he knocked 'em out of the political arena. Because he viewed things from a humanistic standpoint and not from a, I'm black and you're white.

Does he have your vote?

Smith: He certainly has my discretion.


Black voters often say they are politically disenfranchised. Do you, as Tommie Smith, believe in the political system?


Smith: Yes. I do believe the system works.

Tommie Smith on the Games in Beijing

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