

# What You Don't Know About Olympian Tommie Smith's Silent Gesture

**The simple act of civil disobedience, thrusting a black-gloved fist in the air, produced shock waves across the nation**

By Allison Keyes - Smithsonian Magazine - August 9, 2016

As the strains of the Star-Spangled Banner wafted over the winds of Mexico City, sprinter Tommie Smith, a 24-year old athlete from Lemoore, California, stood in his red-white-and-blue tracksuit. Draped in his gold medal, awarded for his world-record setting performance in the 200 meters, and head bowed, Smith lifted his black-gloved fist into the air, in what the public saw as an embrace of the Black Power movement. American bronze medalist John Carlos did the same, and Australian silver medalist Peter Norman stood proudly by their side.

"I felt alone and free," says Smith, now 72. "There was nothing there to protect me but God, nothing to distract my feeling of equality. ... I was just alone in a position that millions were watching and I hope the millions realized that it was a pride in how I felt about a country that did not represent me. I was proud of the country, but even the greatest things in the world need attention when they're not as strong as they could be. It was a cry for freedom."

His act of civil disobedience made shock waves across a nation already reeling from a tumultuous year. It had only been six months earlier that Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, sparking riots and fires that devastated the inner core of Washington, Chicago and other cities. In June, Robert F. Kennedy was shot in California, throwing the presidential race into chaos and in August, thousands of Vietnam War protestors battled with police in Chicago during the Democratic National Convention. Smith's action put the state of race relations in the U.S. on an international stage.

The tracksuit Smith was wearing that day, October 16, 1968, is among the artifacts acquired by the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, along with the shoes he wore in that race, his official Olympic bag from the Games, and the box containing the olive tree branch he held as he stood on the medal platform.

Smith says he donated the items because he wants people who come to the museum to feel "a message of love and doing things proactively." He says because the Olympics placed him in front of the world, he wanted to tell people something important that day.

"I wanted to give back and let the people know I wasn't the only one under the pressures of inequality," Smith explains. "My life was on the line for the belief in equality during the human rights era of Dr. King and what he stood for."

Curator Damion Thomas says the gesture was both a symbol of people who are willing to take a stand against injustice, and of those who are willing to use their platform to advance issues related to social justice.



“It resonated as ‘Black Power’ for many,” Thomas says, “but for many it also resonated as a gesture of human rights.”

Smith says his gestural statement wasn’t planned prior to a day or two before it actually happened. But he was among the founders of the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR), a coalition of amateur African-American athletes who had been thinking about what message black athletes should send in that turbulent year. The athletes originally formed the group to organize a boycott of the 1968 Olympics, because as Smith’s wife Delois explains, “They decided this is what they would do because we were living in a country where we were not recognized as human beings.”

After what Smith calls a “moving meeting,” the OPHR decided not to boycott, “but we would do what we thought necessary to represent a country without the freedom of equality.”

On the podium that day, Smith, Carlos and Norman all wore OPHR badges along with their medals. Smith and Carlos wore black socks and a single black glove; in what curator Thomas calls a show of solidarity with black people.

“Black people across the world, not just domestically, and people who were fighting for human rights,” Thomas says. “It’s important to remember that this is a black history museum, but black people in America’s fight have always been about helping other people. And it has been an example to other people. It is not just a domestic story.”

Smith ticks off the meaning behind his gestures, and his outfit: “The socks represented poverty, black people’s poverty from slavery to where Tommie Smith and Carlos were. ... The bowed head represented prayer. The Christian experience of us on the victory stand wasn’t there by mistake. We were there because we were appointed in that moment by God to do something representing freedom to man.”

“The fist,” Smith continues, “represented power ... a need to move forward proactively. Not necessarily the black pride of an illegitimate type of fight with the background of militancy. Militancy had nothing to do with that victory stand.”

Smith made military movements on the stand, turning deliberately towards the American flag, and remembers that the boos and catcalls of the crowd as he walked back across the track moved him to raise his fist one more time. The backlash was swift.

“People were upset. Some saw it as embarrassing the United States in front of an international audience,” says curator Thomas. “People saw it as unpatriotic – denouncing the U.S. Some people thought it was helping the Soviet Union in the Cold War.”

Smith and Carlos were suspended from the U.S. Olympic team, and there was worse to come.

“We were continually ignored once we got back to this country, by everyone, because no one wanted to be associated with an icon that did not represent America,” Smith says. “I was told by some of my friends that what happened shouldn’t have happened there, it should have happened on the track and no politics should be involved in the Olympic Games. But the Olympics are basically politics. It is politicized now because of the uniform, the money one gets and the need to be patriotic in anything you do, so because of the money you shut up and pretend everything is perfect.”

Smith says not only was he vilified; he got death threats, though he had been getting those since before even going to the Olympics.

“I put locks on the hood of my car because I was afraid people would put bombs in my car. I was trying to protect myself and my wife,” Smith says. “We had rocks thrown through the window, phone calls and people would send us tickets telling us to go back to Africa.”

Smith says the family still gets mail, but the tide has turned from negativity to positivity. He’s been busy since the Olympics, still fighting for human rights around the world. He played football with the Cincinnati Bengals, taught and coached at Oberlin College, and he’s a member of the National Track and Field Hall of Fame. Smith also was part of the coaching team at the 1995 World Indoor Championship Team in Barcelona and spent 27 years coaching and teaching at Santa Monica College. He held 11 world records simultaneously. The Tommie Smith Youth Track Athletics program holds track meets, and is working in cities from Northern California to Washington, D.C.

Smith says he’s pleased that other athletes are beginning to speak out over human rights issues, as NBA icon Michael Jordan did in the wake of the recent killings of police officers and the fatal police shootings of black men over the past few months. He thinks his victory gesture helped other athletes learn to use their power.

“They are starting to stand up now. Why? Because other athletes are standing up. First one, then there’s a group, and soon you’ll have a coalition,” Smith says. But Smith does think race relations in the nation have taken a step backward.

“We are beginning to see what happened in the 1960s, with the atrocities that have happened over the past five months,” Smith says. “People have to realize when they are saying ‘Black Lives Matter’—black lives do matter but all lives matter. Lives are not man’s to give or take. ... All lives matter when it comes to America and America’s idea of equality.”

Curator Damion Thomas says Smith’s artifacts won’t be on display when the museum opens in September, because they were acquired after the museum had planned its debut exhibitions. But there will be a statue commemorating that moment he says, at the entry to the museum’s sports gallery.

“It captures what this gallery is about. It is about using sports as a way to advance the struggle for greater rights and freedoms,” Thomas says. “Secondly, it’s about celebrating great athletic performance, and thirdly, it is about acknowledging how the African-American presence in sports transforms it, and how our expressive culture is transmitted through sports.”

Thomas says Smith, and his battles for freedom, remain iconic.

“He is someone who represents the best tradition of African-American athletes, world class athletes, and someone who used his platform to advance human rights,” Thomas says.

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