

Fists of Freedom: The Story of the 1968 Olympic Games (1999). Produced by George Roy and Steven Stern. Black Canyon Productions/HBO Productions. 60 mins.

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There are a series of iconic images closely associated with 1968, images that instantly take one directly into that tumultuous period: burning neighborhoods in both the U.S. and Vietnam; bloodied bodies, including those of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy; and two black-gloved fists, raised over the heads of two Olympic medalists who wanted to make a seemingly simple point about human rights.

Such images, framed by flames in order to indicate just how fiery the historical moment was, open the Peabody award-winning documentary *Fists of Freedom*. These historic representations contextualize the black power action of Tommie Smith and John Carlos, as well as the organization of which they were part, the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR), amidst the prevailing ideological battles of their moment: civil rights, poverty, and a devastating and increasingly questionable military conflict. In doing so, the film makes clear early on that the action of this duo transcended Olympic Stadium to be located as one of the most critical and highly recognizable moments in American history.

As with other HBO titles made in conjunction with Black Canyon Productions—*When It Was a Game* (1991), *Fields of Fire* (1995)—it is the synthesis of stills, home video, and seemingly ancient archived sports moments that makes this documentary so compelling. It begins by showing how athletes such as Tommie Smith and Lee Evans left behind grape and cotton fields—where they honed their world-record physiques by *working*, rather than by working *out*—for San Jose State University, where they helped polish its reputation as "Speed City" under the guidance of Coach Bud Winter. The footage of Smith, in particular, demonstrates just how powerful the documentary genre can be. Somewhat fortuitously, his college years were well documented on film: we see Smith at home, with friends, studying, participating in ROTC drills, shopping, and singing at a piano. Quickly, these images stand in stark contrast to those of him winning the 200-meters in Mexico, arms outstretched overhead with what he later recalls as a "genuine smile" on his face, and those of him on the victory dais in his self-described "prayer of solidarity."

Although "Speed City" produced champions, it also produced the OPHR, founded by San Jose sociology professor Harry Edwards, to organize a boycott of the 1968 Olympics by black athletes. Backed by footage of a young Jim McKay asking Smith if he felt the boycott effort was unpatriotic, a series of talking heads, from Michael Eric Dyson to Jack Scott, explain just how significant this threat was to America's ongoing Olympic dreams. With archived footage of 1968 U.S. track coach Payton Jordan and International Olympic Committee president Avery Brundage strongly condemning the OPHR's choice of using the Olympics for political gain juxtaposed with hammer thrower Hal Connolly vividly

recalling the troubles he endured for supporting his black teammates, the questions the movement brought to the forefront of the sports world assume suitable importance. This becomes particularly clear as the OPHR auditioned its strategies with an attempted boycott of the New York Athletic Club's (NYAC) annual meet, some seven months before the Olympics. The success of the NYAC boycott was, the film admits, arguable: it gained substantial media attention but failed to achieve a full boycott by black athletes. After the NYAC, the question was clear to many people: should an athlete go to Mexico or not?

According to Edwards, in one of the many interviews he granted for the film, the answer was clear: an athlete either stood "for change" or was "an Uncle Tom." For Charlie Scott, a member of the 1968 basketball team, however, the issue was more complex. In one of the most interesting interviews of the film, Scott recalls that he viewed the OPHR as a West Coast movement, far removed from his own reality as a black athlete in the South. The only black member of the University of North Carolina squad, Scott worried that if he took a revolutionary stance it would jeopardize the chances of another black athlete following in his shoes. Longer jumper Bob Beamon, responsible for perhaps the most remarkable athletic achievement in Mexico City, remembers wanting to go for an even more basic reason: to fulfill a lifelong desire to win Olympic gold.

As the Olympics drew closer, athletes increasingly took on the question of whether to participate, especially at the Olympic training camp at Echo Summit, Lake Tahoe, shown spectacularly in black and white. Designed to help Americans acclimate to the altitude of Mexico City, the camp both shielded them from the increasingly volatile politics of the summer and built a stronger political consciousness amongst them. The runner Larry James remembers that the focus shifted from the idea of boycotting Mexico City to protesting once they were there.

Of course, Mexico City had its own politics to deal with that summer, as university students increasingly filled city streets to rally against what they saw as a hypocritical and repressive government that was spending too much money on the games. While the documentary is somewhat sparse in details of the Mexican strife, dramatic footage of the protests and their violent government suppression reveals much about the brutal days that led up to the Opening Ceremony. An interview with Arturo Ybarra, a student at the time of the bloodshed, further contributes vivid memories of the carnage, gravely concluding that it was "genocide."

However, when the documentary shifts to the pageantry of the Opening Ceremony, much of the visual impact of the slaughter is erased, inadvertently proving true Brundage's mantra that politics have no place in the Olympics. Perhaps unintentionally, the full color footage of the Parade of Nations stands in utter contrast to the austerity of the black-and-white scenes that preceded it, whether the hoses and dogs of Birmingham or the murderous Mexican *judiciales*, creating an almost over-the-rainbow viewpoint that with the commencement of athletic competition came peace.

And what a competition it was. Of the twelve gold medals won by the U.S. in track and field that year, seven belonged to black athletes. As "talking head" and cultural critic Michael Eric Dyson describes it, the group stood together, rather than as a solitary figure like Jackie Robinson, in "the spectacle of their own achievement." Perhaps no one better epitomized the spectacle than Beamon. The film's emphasis on him, and his staggering

leap of 29 feet 2.5 inches (8.9 meters), almost completes the erasure of politics from these games altogether. Despite the fact that many records fell in Mexico City, none play as well on film as Beamon's jump, and few athletes have ever expressed on camera the shock and joy of victory better than he.

The 200-meters, and its notorious victory ceremony, serves as the antithesis of Beamon's moment. Without John Carlos' input (he rarely speaks on the subject) the story is left for Smith and Australian silver medallist Peter Norman to tell: where the black gloves came from, why Norman wore an OPHR button, and what it was like to stand on the dais and look out at what Smith remembers as "animal faces." While their narrations provide some perspective into their experience, the footage of the protest itself is somewhat of a letdown, partly because of its general familiarity and partly because of the striking collection of lesser-known images that preceded it. Furthermore, the events that followed the protest—the IOC meeting, the USOC's expulsion of Smith and Carlos—do not lend well to a visual format, generally taking place behind closed doors.

The story of Lee Evans, however, does play well. A committed OPHR member, Evans did not want to run the 400-meters after his teammates had been expelled, but at their urging he donned his controversial black socks and led a U.S. sweep in world-record time. Though he wore a black beret on the victory stand in what he thought was an act of defiance, many, including Edwards, later accused him of not doing enough. The film paints him as a somewhat tragic figure, one who still feels betrayed and excluded despite his active role in the OPHR. In comparison, Evans remembers, black power advocates embraced Carlos, who allegedly never attended an OPHR meeting.

The film's portrayal of George Foreman, who waved an American flag at the conclusion of his gold medal bout, further complicates any conclusions to be made about the role of politics in Mexico City. The film labels Foreman's win a "positive and patriotic" end to a troubled games and yet praises the protest of Smith and Carlos because it "galvanized black unity in ways even they could not have imagined." Such judgments are seemingly incompatible yet remain central to the protest gesture's legacy. While Michael Eric Dyson likens Smith and Carlos to Rosa Parks, and Ralph Boston compares them to Gandhi and Malcolm X, an interview with Bob Paul, USOC press secretary in 1968, demonstrates that the black-gloved fists failed to permeate the American landscape. Paul states that he remains confused about the actions of young people in the period, whether Mexican students or black athletes, and smiles as he remembers being "emotionally moved" by Foreman's flag waving.

Of course, behind that smile are some of the politics that this film leaves out, namely those of the Cold War, which made the threat of boycott by the black athletes all the more powerful in the American quest to win more gold than the Soviets. Also missing from this film is the complex gender inequities that made women—whether Enriquetta Basilio, the first woman to light an Olympic cauldron, or Wyomia Tyus, who became the first athlete to defend an Olympic 100-meters championship—practically invisible. Despite these and other omissions, what the film does include is captivating. *Fists of Freedom* never directly unpacks television's impact on the Olympic movement—or on the politics of 1968, more generally—but it nonetheless reveals just how much we should think about it.

