

Ami E.'s Human Rights Speech: Politics in Sports

I want you all to imagine being born into a family of hockey players. Imagine making a select team at 8 years old and practicing twice a week with your team. You get chosen to play in a major hockey league at 10 years old. You train and practice everyday. You get to play in the OHL for years, as you get closer to your life goal of playing in the NHL and winning a Stanley Cup. At 19 years old, you finally get drafted to the NHL. Imagine winning Rookie of the Year. Imagine making it to the Stanley Cup in your second year but losing. Imagine working all of your life for a goal of winning the cup and finally making it to the finals in your 10th year. But at this crucial moment, you are not allowed to play. Your country is at war, or your coach doesn't respect your political views, or you simply stated your opinion. Imagine your team loses without you, and there's nothing you can do about it. Imagine.

Fellow students and staff of The Toronto Heschel School, politics have become too involved in sports and are hurting athletes and their careers. Athletes are being kicked out of tournaments, receiving hate and not being respected by others because of the country they represent, or their political opinions and choices. These major sports leagues believe that boycotting players because of their countries' actions - actions that have nothing to do with them personally - will make a difference. These athletes have the right to play; they practice their whole lives only to be banned from participating in their sport. People also believe that it is ok to publicly hate and threaten athletes for their political opinions. This is not OK.

Over the years several athletes have been kicked out of tournaments or fined by major sports leagues. A recent incident was when Russian tennis players Andrey Rublev and Daniil Medvedev who won the U.S open, and Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova were all unable to compete in Wimbledon. Belarusian athlete Victoria Azarenka was also not able to compete in Wimbledon, because of Belarus' support of Russia in its offensive against Ukraine. Abraham Joshua Heschel said "We can all do our share to redeem the world in spite of all absurdities and all frustrations

and all disappointments.” But are we really doing our share? Or does banning athletes for no reason add to the absurdities, frustrations and disappointments in our world? Banning these players from the tournament doesn't harm Russia, it harms the Russian players who have trained for months and years. These players work their entire lives for the opportunity to play in world class tournaments like Wimbledon, and then they get banned for something that they have nothing to do with personally. This doesn't help the cause, it only makes it worse. This is not OK.

Athletes being banned from tournaments isn't the only example of a human rights violation arising from the insertion of politics into the world of sports. In 2016 former NFL player Colin Kaepernick kneeled during the national anthem. He kneeled to protest racial inequality and police brutality. Kaepernick stated, “I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color. To me, this is bigger than football, and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder.” After he protested multiple times he started receiving hate and eventually lost his NFL job. But why? Why did his opinion and standing for his beliefs cost him his career and the respect of his league?

Why can't athletes state their opinion and not be questioned about it and receive hate over it? Steve Kerr, coach of the Golden State Warriors went into a press conference after the recent shooting in Uvalde, Texas, where he sat down said, “I'm not going to talk about basketball, nothing has happened with our team in the past 6 hours. We are going to start the same way tonight, any basketball questions don't matter.” He went on to talk about the need for political action on gun violence. Kerr gained so much respect from that and got applauded. Kerr stated his opinion just like Kaepernick, but the media and the world has only allowed athletes to state an opinion they agree with. In the Talmud it says (“לא תונו איש את עמיתו” (מסכת בבא מציעא, דף נ"ח, עמוד ב) which translates to “treat everyone equally and don't discriminate against one person. When 2 people state their political opinion, why is one praised and one hated for doing the same thing?

Kaepernick had the right to his opinion and the right to protest, so do all other athletes. This is not OK.

Athletes of all sports have political opinions, but only some share them. The athletes that side with the minority get hated, and the ones that side with the majority get applauded, just for doing the same thing. All athletes are citizens of a certain country. Nothing happens to the athletes from first world countries, yet the ones from countries in war get suspended. For something they have no control over. If you were the CEO of a company and had a Russian employee or an employee with a political opinion you don't agree with, would you fire them? Being a professional athlete is a job, and we have to treat athletes as such. Athletes have the right to a voice, an opinion, and they certainly have the right to do their job and play. This is not OK.