

ATHLETES FIGHT SOCIAL INJUSTICE

Terrance Harris

There is no doubt in Russell Westbrook's mind that he is an unstoppable force in the backcourt.

But the Rockets star guard knows he was put on this earth to be far more than that.

"I believe, at least for me personally, that God has put me in this position for a reason and it's not just to be able to play basketball," Westbrook said, "but to use my platform to better be able to help other people and to help our youth and to help people across the globe to understand how important different things in life are."

That has become the mission of Westbrook and many athletes across this country. They won't just shut up and play. They are speaking up and pushing back against racial injustice and police brutality that seems to be unfairly afflicting Black people in this country.

It all culminated last Wednesday when the players, following the lead of the Milwaukee Bucks, declined to take the court during the NBA playoffs, leading to a three-day work stoppage that some called a boycott by the players.

"I think we needed a couple of days to sit back and reflect on what's going on in the world," Rockets guard James Harden said. "And I think the world needed to know we are involved with them. We understand what's

going on. This is bigger than basketball and we wanted to show the world we are with them."

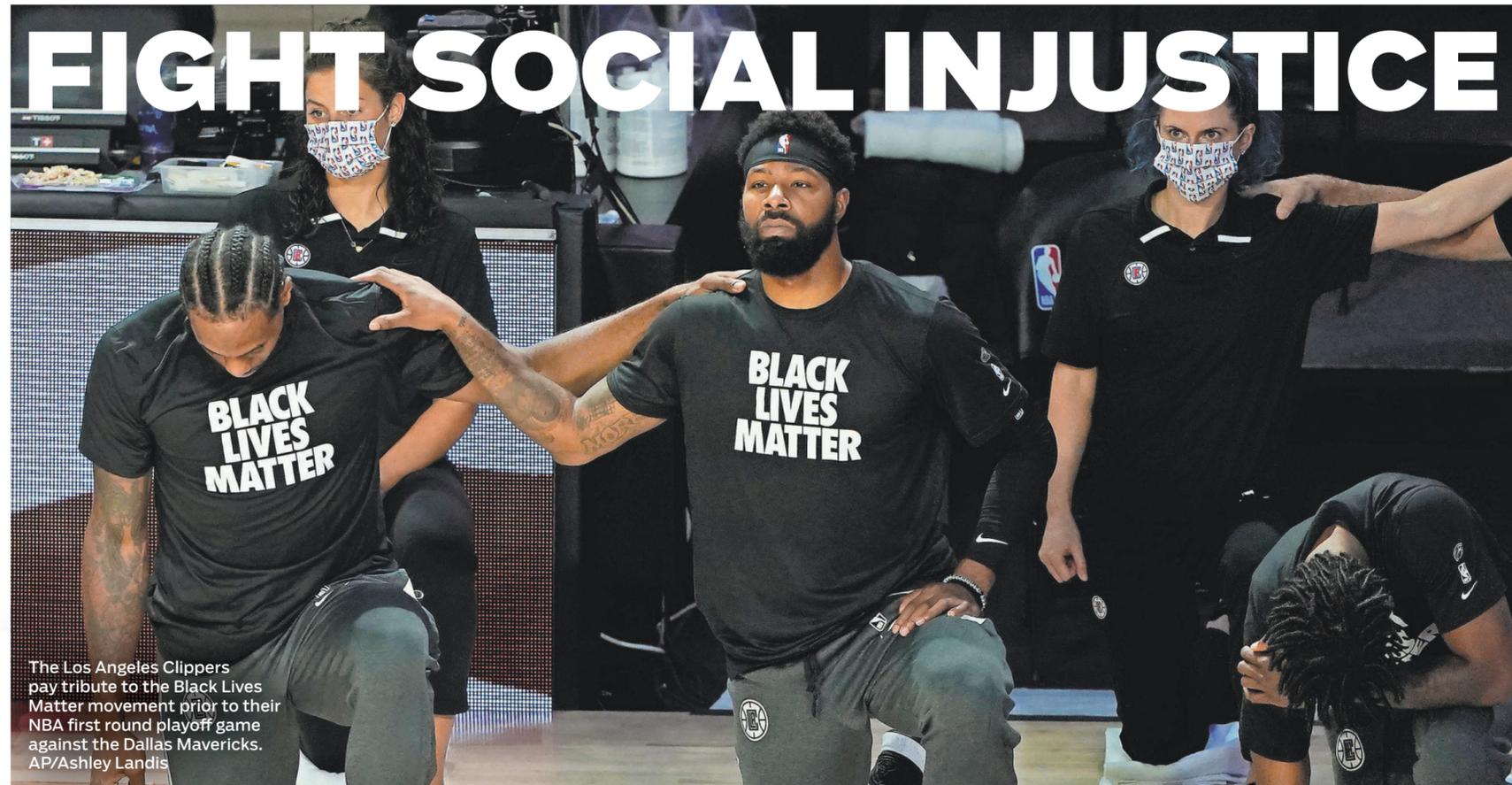
In doing so, the NBA players showed the world the impact they can have on bringing awareness to social injustice. When NBA players pushed pause, the WNBA and some MLB, NHL and NFL teams followed suit.

Respected sports sociologist Harry Edwards believes the players made a powerful statement, proving that their value is far greater than what they do athletically.

"I could see this one coming some time ago," Edwards said on ESPN's First Take. "These basketball players are not just basketball players. They live in this society and they go and play games, but many of them fearing that they will be shot [driving] to or the game. They share that reality with the broader community."

Edwards says now is the time for the players to organize and come up with a plan of what they want to see from ownership, which has the ears of local and national politicians.

"They must begin to come together and understand the urgency of this moment," Edwards said. "They have moved beyond protest to where a statement is made to boycotting where you are sending a message. Now that message has to be meaningful and that means getting everybody on the same page and beginning to approach those people who have power to make changes."



The Los Angeles Clippers pay tribute to the Black Lives Matter movement prior to their NBA first round playoff game against the Dallas Mavericks. AP/Ashley Landis

Kenny Stills talks social justice

Texans wide receiver Kenny Stills has easily become the face of active NFL players in the movement against police brutality and injustice toward Black people.

When Stills was a member of the Miami Dolphins he began joining Colin Kaepernick in taking a knee during the playing of the national anthem as a form of protest. And the 28-year-old veteran has continued to be active in the movement.

In July, Stills was among 87 protesters arrested in Louisville when they marched to the home of Kentucky Attorney General Daniel Cameron to demand action against the police officers who shot and killed Breonna Taylor in her home in March.

The charges were dropped a couple of days later, but with continued senseless shootings like the one that took place in Kenosha, Wis. last month where Jacob Blake was shot seven times in the back



by a police officer, don't think that will be the end of Stills protesting against the injustices Black people face in this country.

Stills recently talked about Taylor, the Kenosha shooting, and his protesting. Here is some of what he had to say.

Defender: What were your takeaways from the experience of being arrested in Louisville?

Kenny Stills: "We went to Louisville to bring more attention to Breonna Taylor's case. We've tried to do everything we can to get in touch with Daniel Cameron to sit down and have a conversation with him and figure out what's going on with this case. It's been over 155, almost 160 days, I think, now. There's been no justice served in this case. Yeah, we went there to bring more attention to this case and we're hoping that something can happen soon. We need the officers to be arrested, fired and prosecuted for what they did to Breonna Taylor."

Defender: What was your reaction to the latest police brutality incident with Jacob Blake in the context of everything that has happened this year?

Stills: "Yeah, I think it further proves the point that we need to make a change with what's going on with our law enforcement. We have another unarmed Black man being shot seven times in front of his children. I think there's other ways to deescalate these situations and just another horrible example of what our law enforcement is doing to our people."

Defender: What were your conversations like with Roger Goodell, and what do you think about him saying he should have listened to Colin Kaepernick about kneeling?

Stills: "Honestly, I don't really have too many thoughts about it. He can say whatever he wants to say now, but in a sense, if we would've taken a more stern stance and he would've listened to us at the beginning of this, there would've been so many lives that could've been saved. There's a lot of progress that we could've made within our law enforcement, within our police. It's a nice gesture, I guess, to say he wishes he would've done something different. But look at the NFL."

NBA takes action

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When the Rockets prepared for Game 5 of the playoffs, something didn't feel quite right. Another Black man had been shot by the police just a few days earlier. This time a

Kenosha, Wisconsin police officer pumped seven bullets in the back of Jacob Blake as his young children watched.

Playing basketball in the Orlando bubble just seemed empty for many NBA players that day. Then word got out that the Milwaukee Bucks were refusing to take the court for their first-round playoff Game 5 against Orlando. Their decision had a domino effect on the next games that day at Disney World, including the Rockets-Oklahoma City game.

It would be the first day of a three-day stoppage in the bubble that was highlighted by emotional meetings among the players and then a meeting between the players in the bubble, NBA commissioner Adam Silver and the owners. The coming together produced an action plan that mostly involved voting initiatives, but it was a start.

"I think it's great. I think we all needed a pause," said Rockets guard Russell Westbrook. "I think emotionally,

physically, mentally ... the pause was for a greater cause and not just for basketball, but for all of the social issues in our world today. Obviously, based on recent events across the world and recent police killings and shootings, it allowed us

The NBA and the NBA players have agreed to enact the following commitments:

1. Immediately establish a social justice coalition, with representatives from players, coaches, and governors, that will focus on a broad range of issues, including increasing access to voting, promoting civic engagement, and advocating for meaningful police and criminal justice reform.
2. In every city where the league franchise owns and controls the arena property, team governors will continue to work with local elections officials to convert the facility into a voting location for the 2020 general election to allow for a safe in-person voting option for communities vulnerable to COVID.
3. Work with the players and their network partners to create and include advertising spots in each NBA playoff game dedicated to promoting greater civic engagement in national and local elections and raising awareness around voter access and opportunity.

to use our platform to be able to stop what we are doing and recognize."

Suddenly, NBA players not only had the attention of team owners but seemingly the world. Next thing they knew their contemporaries from the WNBA, MLB, NHL, and NFL also stopped working temporarily. Athletes using their platform to stand up against racial injustice and police brutality dominated the news and the issue of police reform took center stage.

"For us to be able to pause and take a break, and to be able to come to a few things that we think, is important for now ..." Westbrook said. "Obviously, there are so many

other things going on in our society that we can tackle. But I think initially tackling our voting and finding ways to be able to use our arenas and our teams to be able to understand why voting is important. I think that is a trickle-down effect on our police reform."

NBA stoppage Timeline

SUN., AUG. 23

Jacob Blake, a Black man, is shot in the back seven times by Kenosha, Wisconsin police officer Rusten Sheskey.

MON., AUG. 24

Milwaukee Bucks guard George Hill tells media, "First of all, we shouldn't even come to this damn place, to be honest. ..." during a discussion about the social injustice Black people in the country are facing.

Los Angeles Lakers star LeBron James tweets, "And y'all wonder why we say what we say about the Police!! ..."

TUES., AUG. 25

Following the Los Angeles Clippers Game 5 win over the Dallas Mavericks, Clippers coach Doc Rivers delivers impassioned speech about social injustice and racial inequality during the post-game press conference.

WED., AUG. 26

The Milwaukee Bucks refuse to take the floor for the playoff game against the Orlando Magic and the game is canceled.

Rockets-Oklahoma City Thunder and Los Angeles Lakers-Portland Trail Blazers playoff games canceled because the players refuse to play.

WNBA announces that its players will not participate in their playoff games and will stand with the NBA in boycotting the playoffs.

Some MLB games are called as players stand with the boycotting NBA players.

Tennis Star Naomi Osaka pulls out of the semi-finals of the Western & Southern Open in protest of injustice.

NBA players in the bubble meet until the early morning hours with rumblings that some players want to leave the bubble and end the season, but more players want to play and finish out the playoffs.

THURS., AUG. 27

Players meet again and decide that they will resume the playoffs at some point.

NBA owners and the commissioner meet to discuss the situation and come up with a game-plan on how they hope to proceed.

No basketball is played for the second day in a row.

FRI., AUG. 28

National Basketball Players Association Board of Governors and NBA reach a resolution on voting outreach and social justice initiatives. It's decided that play will resume Sat., Aug. 29.

SAT., AUG. 29

NBA Playoffs in the Orlando bubble at Disney World resumes.