

Mannie Jackson: Rumble from the Bubble

by Mannie Jackson

November 10 2020 8:52 AM



It's been a very interesting couple of weeks in professional basketball. Not surprisingly, the sports world has joined the global demand for social justice. The people of America have made high school, college, AAU and professional sports a multibillion-dollar craze in virtually every corner of the nation. In many ways, it's become a visible tribute /symbol to merit-based capitalism and democracy. I think of this reality regularly. My life has personified the potential of sports. Every day I imagine a kid whose great-grandparents were slaves, who were born in a railroad boxcar in southern Missouri with

minimal education until the age of 12 and who became a college graduate, HOF Basketball All-Star, a Fortune 500 corporate leader and a philanthropist.

I grew up around many brilliant Black and White friends, teachers and role models. In my autobiography “Boxcar to Boardrooms,” I referenced a point in my life that should apply to all, “It’s my time now, and I’ve got something to prove so that others will fill the pipeline and have it easier.” Do not ignore history or give away your future. I recall a saying, there’s no such thing as a vote that doesn’t matter. It all matters. Vote!

Recently, I’ve received phone messages from people in the sports world from both the NCAA and the NBA. Most recalled my 2017 Hall of Fame Enshrinement speech in which I said wealth and fame provides a significant platform and also an obligation to help the less fortunate. I’m reminded today Black Lives Matter demonstrations are not a Black, Brown, male, or female issue. Since all lives matter, it’s a matter of the humanities.

I called the BHOF six weeks ago advising them to step forward knowing their bread and butter rests with the best, brightest and wealthy in the basketball world. I strongly advised them to say something; take a stand for social justice. We all know the current situation has been exasperated by George Orwell’s prediction of massive and freewheeling communications. Added to that is the population density, diversity, poor distribution of wealth and power, and the reach and scale of today’s formal and informal socio-political voices. All of these facts are staggering and it has damaged the way all leadership with power must think and behave.

Moreover, I’ve learned to follow the money. When NBA basketballers in Orlando, Florida, were asked to make a comment on the Black Lives Matter issues, they went to Chris Paul — a perennial all-star player, future hall of famer and recipient of the HOF Human Spirit award in 2018 — because he is an extremely smart leader who chairs the NBA Players Association.

I called a mutual friend, Sherman Brown, and asked him to remind Chris to be careful and thoughtful and to call me if he needed my help. I’m going to share the ideas I suggested.

I knew he was going to be asked, “What do you people want to come out of all this?” Along with, “You have a lot of access, you have a good life, why are you risking the golden goose of basketball by getting involved with socio-political matters like our police force and the decisions of central government?”

The media will persist in asking for quotes on why aren’t the guys playing, what sense does not playing make? Some media probe would even suggest no one cares, people

were getting busy with other things, some may state it's a waste of time; some even declare the athletes are foolish, they've got it made, and why are they jeopardizing what they have. My stock response would be:

What reason do players have to be successful, other than to make society around them better and share their success to help those left behind in their old neighborhoods, which they knew were being neglected and condemned? The players also see and hear the rage and frustration with law enforcement (the current shameful and outdated structure makes police work one of the most thankless and toughest jobs ever). Especially when officers are untrained, afraid and biased. Many NBA players believe, as I do, that they have an obligation from their sports and economic platform to engage, educate and protect. Many college-educated athletic leaders today are well-read and enlightened. They know the law; and they listen to people who have been through many challenging circumstances. Also, they know the history of Arthur Ashe, Jim Brown, Bill Russell, John Carlos, Ali, Jackie Robinson, Kaepernick, and my favorite Paul Robeson, etc. Many of today's athletes will admit they are fearful of every place and every time they go out.

When asked about the demonstrations, it's fair to say the NBA has a collection of many of the greatest athletes in the world — these 20-30-year-old young people did a miraculous thing, a brave thing and the right thing. I applaud them for getting the world's/nation's attention focused on the injustices of their era. Justice and respectfulness can no longer be delayed, not because it's a socially cool thing to do, it's because the USA can no longer contain the cost of fulfilling the hypocrisy of domestic tranquility. When athletes see corruption all around them, from universities, owners, coaches, wealthy alumni and the politically powerful, corruption follows when athletes become independent and extremely wealthy. Athletes may ask, "Why are people who look like me being systematically treated the way we are?"

When asked the question, what do you guys want, the answer has been loud and clear — social justice and all barriers to voting removed immediately. Also, have the media and politicians expose this caste system for what it is. The Constitution and the Declaration of Independence say that we are in a country where we are promised to be treated with respect and with justice for all. It is simply the time and a way for these athletes to say "things are not right."

I tell young athletes to be confident, you are not making this stuff up, it's not an illusion, what you see is real and too few powerbrokers care.

Americas' experiment with democracy is vulnerable and very fragile, but it too can be fixed. Nelson Mandela told me years ago, "I love democracy, but I have to tell you, democracy doesn't work if we don't have a fair education system, and democracy works, when the criminal justice system is fair and humane."

The days of not challenging disrespect have to end. In my life, I've traveled to over 100 countries and I learned firsthand that this deadly virus called bigotry is both intelligent, destructive and wicked. I would never say it's going to be ended overnight – but I feel the best minds and leaders in our country need to get involved at the local, state and federal level.

Few students have had critical discussions on the Reconstruction Era and fewer have ever heard of Fredrick Douglas. A better society will only happen in the hearts and minds of our elected leaders and the belief that we are all citizens in this country, and that we are all children of God and we all have an obligation to make positive contributions for the greater good.

In closing, to my friend Chris Paul, you are an iconic leader and a sure first-ballot Basketball Hall of Famer. In my opinion, you've done your job. Aside from climate change, the economic and structural cost of America's caste system is much more devastating than the Covid-19 virus.

The last note I want to make is about the BHOF, which supports the position of NBA Commissioner Adam Silver and of course the Players Association.

It's time this nation takes a serious and in-depth nonpartisan look at the state of social justice. And yes, if you haven't figured it out by now, in a free and civilized country we are all entitled to be treated with dignity, respect, understanding and forgiveness.