**Faith on the field: Athletes exercise religious freedom**

By Tristiaña Hinton

Standing up, kneeling down or sitting out for what you believe isn’t always easy. Athletes whose talent has thrust them into the public spotlight can face an extra level of scrutiny when they express their religious beliefs.

Across religions and across sports, plenty of athletes have brought their full spiritual selves —

their beliefs, practices and values — with them into competition. While the First Amendment says the government can’t interfere with these expressions of conscience, that doesn’t mean such acts are welcomed by fans, teams or the general public.

The cost for athletes expressing their deepest beliefs can be high. Take the case of boxing legend Muhammad Ali, who expressed himself as an opponent of the Vietnam War through the freedoms of religion, assembly and petition.

While Ali had no problem showing up to the ring to "sting like a bee," the heavyweight champ refused to fight in Vietnam. The Nation of Islam, which Ali joined in 1961, was adamantly opposed to the war and strongly discouraged members from participating. When he was drafted in 1967, he refused to join the Army, citing his membership in the religious organization.

Ali was soon convicted of draft evasion, sentenced to five years in prison and stripped of his title. He lost millions in endorsements and prize money. He counterpunched in the courts and, four years later, the Supreme Court granted him conscientious objector status, overturning his conviction.

“Some people thought I was a hero. Some people said that what I did was wrong,” Ali said. “But everything I did was according to my conscience.”

Ali’s stance challenged Americans’ attitudes about the war and inspired generations of athletes to stand up for their beliefs, even if it meant risking their careers.

The First Amendment protects our right to worship or not as we choose. When the government tries to interfere with that by penalizing us for our beliefs, or encouraging or establishing religion, the Constitution steps in. But what about when we’re expressing our religious beliefs at work?

National Football League (NFL) quarterback Tim Tebow made headlines and became an internet sensation after kneeling in prayer before games and after scoring touchdowns. It stirred up a lot of conversation about what place religion has in public life.

For Tebow, all that mattered was he acknowledged his beliefs. “Win or lose, it is most important that I honor my lord and savior Jesus Christ,” he said.

A few years after “Tebowing” took the football world by storm, NFL player Husain Abdullah was penalized for kneeling in prayer after intercepting the ball and scoring a touchdown. Abdullah, who is Muslim, got stuck with a 15-yard unsportsmanlike conduct flag, even though Tebow and his Christian counterparts in the league often celebrated scoring through public prayer or acts of reverence.

After that 2014 game, the NFL caught flak from people pointing out the difference in treatment. The league issued a statement saying Abdullah shouldn’t have been penalized for “going to the ground for religious reasons.”

Unlike many work schedules, sports seasons don’t usually break for holidays, religious or otherwise. So when baseball’s first Jewish superstar, Hank Greenberg, propelled the Detroit Tigers to the American League pennant race in 1934, he came up against a problem: The series fell during the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Greenberg risked offending fellow Jews by playing on Rosh Hashanah and belted two home runs, including the ninth-inning game-winner, to beat the Red Sox, 2-1.

Ten days later, Greenberg sat out a game to observe Yom Kippur. At just 23, he became a role model for a largely immigrant Jewish community seeking acceptance in the U.S.

While the First Amendment protects our right to worship freely, it has no control over public opinion or the course of events that may follow our expression of that right. The choices made by these athletes gave them courtside seats to what it means to publicly embrace religious beliefs, regardless of the consequences.

In the end, they all showed people of different backgrounds that worshipping freely can have a place on the baseball diamond, on the football field or in the boxing ring.

*To learn more about athletes and the First Amendment, visit the Freedom Forum’s* [*pop-up exhibit, “Fair Play: Athletes Speak, Assemble, Petition for Freedom*](https://www.newseum.org/exhibits/pop-up/)*,” which is on display at Ronald Reagan National Airport in Washington, D.C., and Dulles International Airport in Virginia.*

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