



First and Foremost, Athletes Are People

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Photo Credit: Patrick Hamilton, BELGA MAG/AFP via Getty Images

On July 7th, 2020, players from 22 NBA teams arrived to check in the bubble at Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida. Some would stay there until October 12th. There, players would have to undergo daily COVID-19 testing and couldn't leave. Many have come out about their experiences [and how difficult it was](#). Imagine that - being states away from family and friends while a worldwide pandemic is raging. Unrelenting with the infection and death toll on the outside. Not forgetting that with the death of George Floyd, a huge social movement was happening off the court. While the league that is composed of 75% Black athletes played on.

Many of us looked for some sort of normalcy at a time when everything seemed bleak. For that, was sports. But that is the catch. In the past week, four different [instances of fan misconduct](#) have happened. All angled toward Black players. It highlights a different problem now that fans are allowed back to the arenas. While we were sitting at home, athletes have been more vocal about social justice. What do they get for that? They are busy putting a ball in a hoop. They couldn't possibly feel the hurt and sadness that was permeating throughout the country that summer, right?

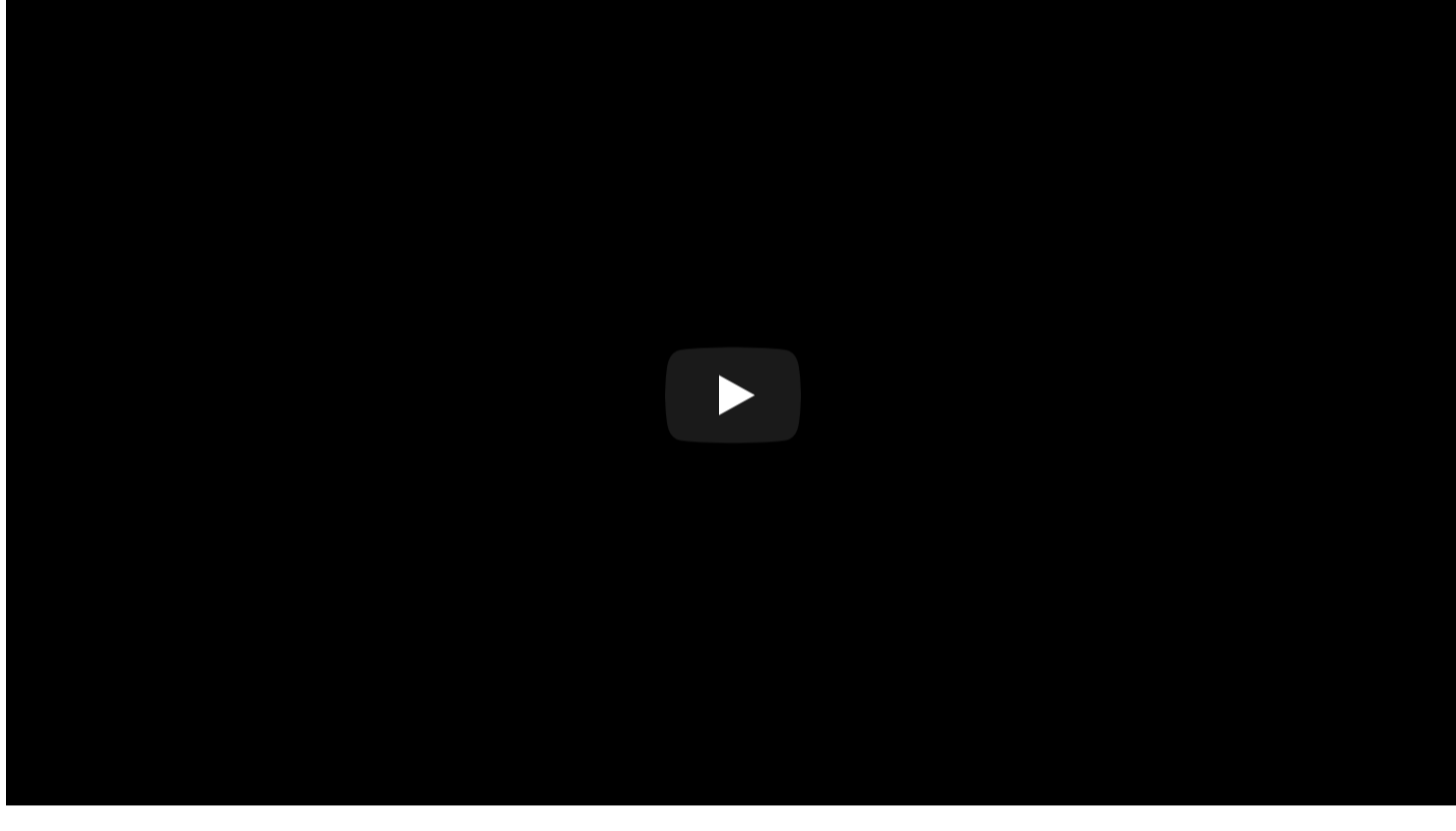
“Shut up and dribble.”

“Stick to sports.”

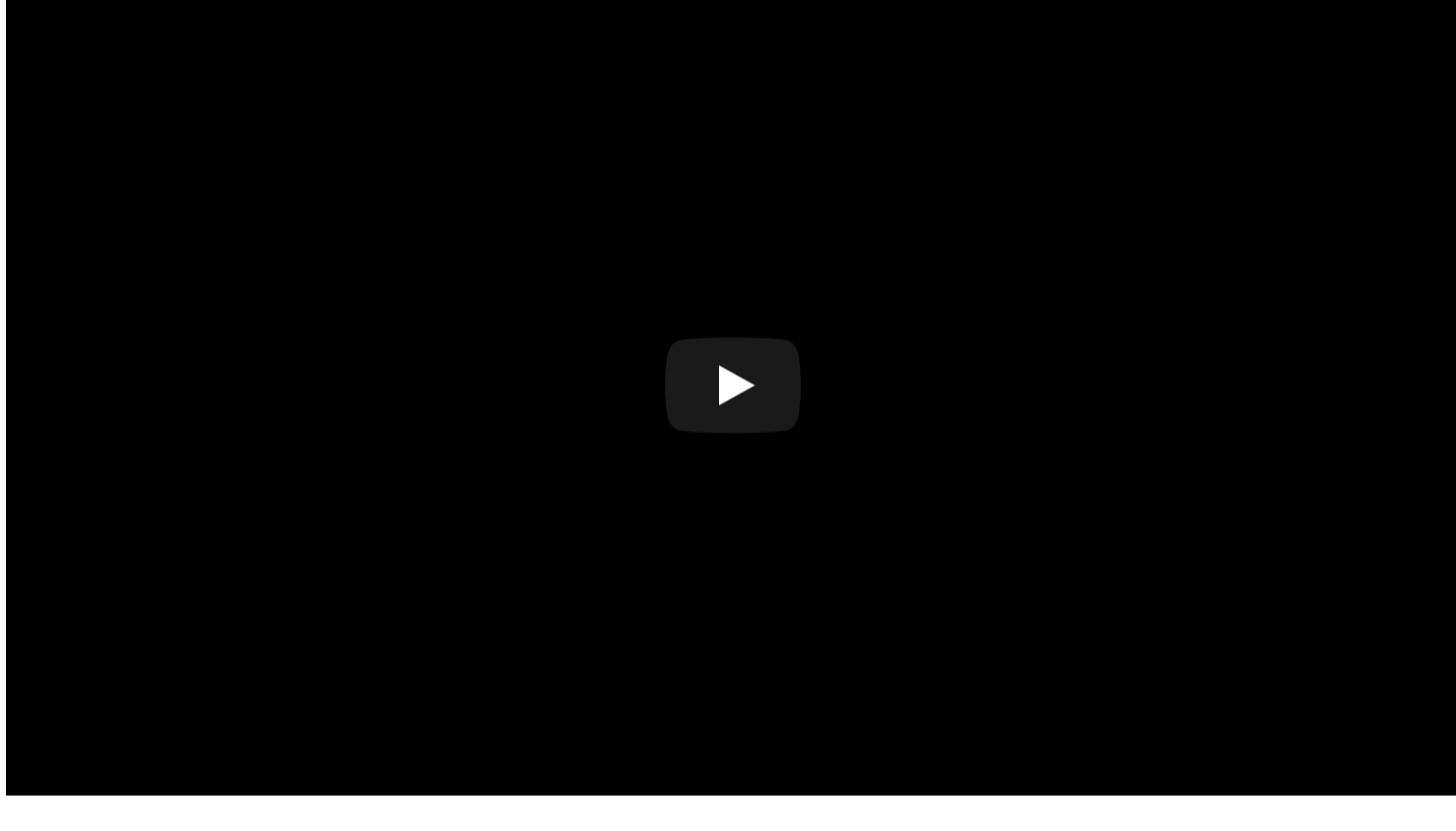
“You get paid millions of dollars. What do you have to complain about?”

As time has gone on, there's been an increase in taking humanity away from athletes. Especially those of colors. They practice day in and day out for the feats that you thunderously cheer for. However, it's the human side that is the greatest part about them. The ability to bounce back from failure, to feel empathy for causes, and be a part of multiple instances of family. Along the way, we've decided that they aren't entitled to feel and exist as human beings. Spitting. Throwing bottles. It all feels like athletes have an agreement to be in a vitriol-laden circus. Those things add up as they would in your own personal lives.

Multiple Grand Slam-winning champion, Naomi Osaka decided to not speak to the media citing her battles with depression and anxiety at the French Open. Roland Garros, not only fined her, but [threatened to remove her from the tour](#). Osaka has been forthcoming with her struggles [to the media in the past](#), but because of this “obligation,” Osaka has now pulled out of the French Open. Roland Garros couldn't possibly work with her to help her anxiety. Now, you lost one of the top players in tennis in this tournament. We have all seen how sports media in tennis has acted towards [players of color before](#). Take a look at Serena Williams at the Australian Open in 2017:



And from the reporter who asked, “why isn't she smiling:”

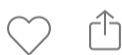


We've had a year whereas, a collective, contemplated the templates of our daily lives. Some of us had to remotely work and that has given us a new appreciation of friends and family. Others have realized that they were grossly underpaid, underappreciated, and went through some sort of abuse at work. Then, we made the appropriate changes to make ourselves happy. It's puzzling coming out of a year when we lost so much and continue to lose that we don't extend that grace to everyone.

Yes, athletes make a lot of money. Money that many of us may never see. However, that doesn't strip the human value from their lives. Just because you purchase a jersey from a sports store does not mean you own that person.

Society has often made allegories attributing hard work to sports. Kobe's 'Mamba Mentality.' Jordan's demon-like tenacity. Tom Brady's fuel to win! These same men and women have families. Just like you and me. They work extremely hard to excel at whatever their craft is and should be attributed the same decorum that you are now requesting at your job. Would you like someone to throw a bottle at you in your cubicle? Or spit at you? Think about how that would make you feel.

Ironically, today is the last day of Mental Health Awareness Month. It happens every May. We share resources, exchange stories, and caution to never forget any of it. Because, somewhere out there, somebody is fighting a struggle you can't see. That goes for every athlete on the court. With every fist pump and high five, they are battling something. Maybe it was too soon to accept fans back in the arenas, and we have some more thinking to do. We have not begun to understand the ramifications that this pandemic has done to us mental health-wise. A little understanding and grace go a long way. Even to the heroes that we look up to. If we deserve it, they do it.

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