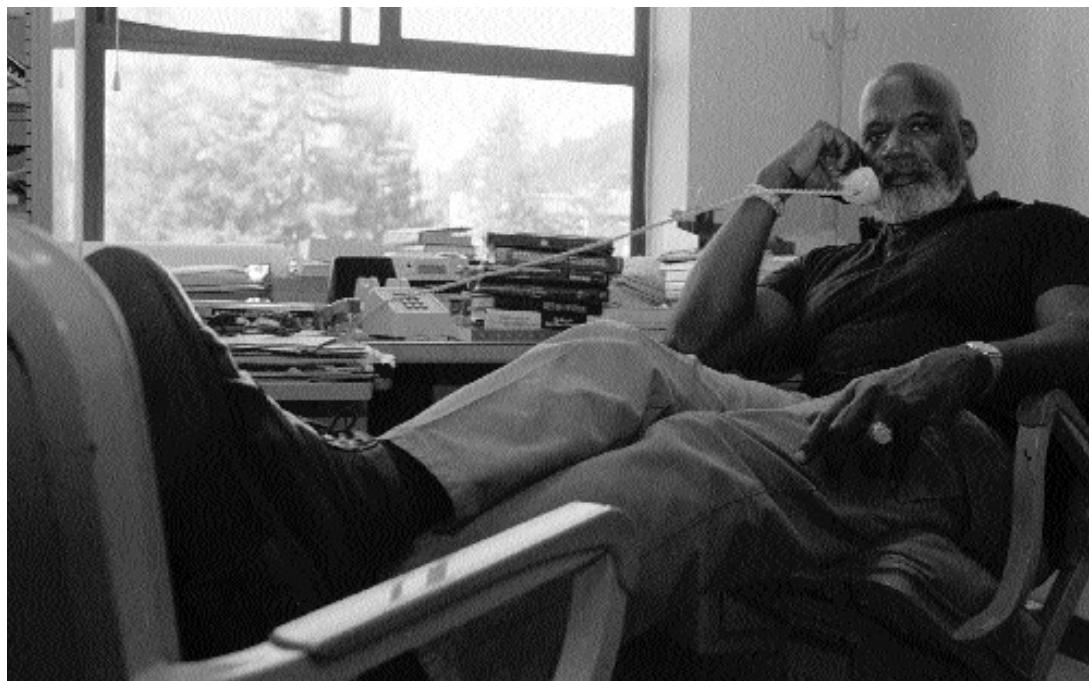


Reflections of a Powerful Mind



“We have made no more progress in sports than we have in society...”

words > **terrence greene** images > **shunka toyama**

Dr. Harry Edwards grew up in a tough community in east St. Louis. He was able to survive the ghetto through perseverance and internal focus. He attended San Jose State University on an athletic scholarship, but let it be known that he had no intention to enroll in the physical education courses that most athletes majored in. Instead, he majored in Sociology, and graduated with honors. He did his graduate work at Cornell University earning his Ph.D. in Sociology. Edwards has worked in the Commissioners office in Major League Baseball for five years and ten years with the Golden State Warriors as a consultant. For the last 12 years he has been a special consultant for the San Francisco 49ers. Also, he has been involved in the struggle for civil rights for African Americans as well as the black athletes for over 35 years. Edwards has authored many books, journals, and magazine articles (including his autobiography which is entitled “The Struggle That Must Be” - a must read).

When it comes to the subject of race and sports, the number one authority is a tall, intimidating, bald-headed, deep voiced, articulate, self-confident, and intellectual better known as Dr. Harry Edwards.

> Sitting in Dr. Edwards' office, one gets a heavy dose of energy, enlightenment, power, history, and honesty - you encounter an extremely focused individual. A single picture of Tommy Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Olympics raising their fists in protest sits off to one side. Most would probably think that this famous picture would be encased in a large colored picture frame for all visitors to see upon their arrival into the office. Instead, it is an original newspaper article, so old it's almost yellow. Edwards seems to keep his involvement in that historical moment in perspective, as one of the many positive steps in the struggle for equality and civil rights.

> Harry Edwards has a confidence that borders on arrogance, but it is based purely on knowledge, history and intellect. When he talks, you have a great understanding that what he says is exactly what he means. He has an astonishing command of the English language and sometimes leaves a person on the

other end of the conversation perplexed by the authority in which he speaks.

The man behind the struggle

> Dr. Edwards has been at the forefront for the struggle of racial harmony in sports for over 35 years. He first arrived on the scene when he played a crucial role in organizing the black athletes revolt at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. Many can remember Tommy Smith and John Carlos raising their black fisted gloves to signify their disdain for how blacks in this country were being treated. Although Edwards was not in Mexico City during the protest demonstration, his presence was truly felt by the participants.

> Sports can sometimes be viewed as a fantasy world when it comes to the issues that are pertaining to society. Edwards has always maintained that sports nonetheless are a reflection of society. “If you have a society which is racist, you will have a sports institution which is racist. If you have a society which is sexist, then you will have sports institution that is sexist. If you have a society that is elitist, then you will have sports institution that is substantially owned, controlled, and operated by the elite of the sports institution. To be an owner of a sports franchise is to be white, male, and rich - a very elitist phenomenon.”

> During the time when black coaches are often overlooked for head coaching opportunities in professional sports, Edwards sheds light on the topic. “In America, which is a society with substantial counter currents of racism, we still have a great deal of difficulty getting blacks and other minorities into positions of authority, leadership, decision making, and ownership in American sports.”

> Today, most black superstar athletes seem to be image conscious, protecting themselves politically in order to secure as many endorsement deals as possible. Edwards states that the athletes of the late 60s, early 70s ventured more into issues concerning social injustices toward black Americans because the movement called for it. “Athletes such as Jim Brown, Curt Flood and Bill Russell were operating against a background, and upon a foundation of a much broader social movement and political consciousness that was called the civil rights movement or the black power movement. These athletes took stands that made them tremendously unpopular, undoubtedly cost them financially, and in some instances cost them their futures as athletes.”

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> As we enter into the 21st century, the black athlete will continue to be under the microscope. The late 60s and early 70s was a time when athletes voiced their opinions about injustices that were occurring not only in black communities in the United State, but also abroad. The late 70s brought about change for black athletes when certain elite athletes began to venture outside of sports, via endorsements and movies. They began to be recognized as superstars. Mass media really began to boom during the early 1980s and has continued through the last part of the century. In this time the media has portrayed black athletes in many ways: superstars, role models, villains, thugs, filthy rich, community activist and people who have the capacity to dunk a basketball, but not the ability to understand salary caps and player development.

The future of black athletes

> Edwards comments on where the black athlete is headed in the new millennium. "I see the same future for the black athlete (and for other blacks involved in sports) that I see for the black masses, we are not going anywhere that the black masses not only cannot go, but that black masses do not provide a foundation for. We are at the end of the golden age of the black athlete, thanks to such phenomena as NCAA propositions 48, 16 and 42. Such phenomena as the homicide rate of young black males ages 15-29 in a traditional black community; and such phenomena (as) a quarter of all black males ages 15-29 are under the control of the judicial system - either incarcerated, under indictment, or on probation. The age group impacted by AIDS, and suicide in that age group, also happens to be the age group from which athletes are drawn."

> He says what is happening today is future point guards, wide receivers, and running backs are being disqualified under NCAA and high school academic requirements, being put in jail, and are being buried. "We are at the very end of the golden age of the black athlete, which lasted approximately fifty years." It began in 1947 when Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in Major League Baseball. It possibly ended when Michael Jordan retired early in 1999. Future stars like these may not make it to adulthood.

> When fans of all ethnic backgrounds attend sporting events and teams are lined with different races, it seems that as though sports can truly be avenue in which there is no prejudice or racism involved. Is this possibly a smoke screen for injustices that really occur outside the playing field? Dr. Edwards states, "We have made no more progress in sports than we have in society. The fact that you have a predominant number of blacks in football and basketball as athletes is a reflection of the racism in society that restrains the possibility of alternative high prestige occupational role models. So more black athletes are seen in positive roles on television and the mass media than you see black doctors, black lawyers, and black engineers."

> When asked which athlete had been the most influential to him, Edwards replied, "Paul Roberson, and it is not even close. Paul Roberson was the quintessential African American athlete role model. He was absolutely brilliant, a committed scholar, an all-American football player, a tremendous singer, and a phenomenal political presence. He laid it all on the line, and literally lost it all in pursuit of peace and justice. If there was one person I could advise black athletes to study and understand it would be Paul Roberson".

> Whenever there are major topics such as the Latrell Sprewell incident, Dennis Rodman with his antics and the so-called thugs in the sports world, one man is always consulted about his thoughts and feelings. That man is Harry Edwards, and the great thing about it is he will always tell you exactly what is on his mind. You have to respect the man, and his thought process. What you heard in the 1960s you will hear again in 2001 from Dr. Harry Edwards.

etc.



University of California Berkeley

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