

# Unapologetic refusals: Black women in sport model a modern mental health promotion strategy



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## Value and significance

Muhammad Ali once refused the Vietnam draft; Tommie Smith refused to lower his clenched fist; LeBron James refused to “shut up and dribble.” Naomi Osaka’s and Simone Biles’ recent public refusals have sparked intense discussion about Black health, Black bodies, and power relationships writ large. By putting self-care above self-sacrifice, Osaka and Biles took a radical stance – and summoned Black women en masse towards collective healing.

Coercive power structures that have disadvantaged marginalized groups in society (sexism, ableism, ageism) find a parallel in sport. However, racial capitalism is *particularly* amplified in this setting. In sport, Black bodies are assessed, monetised, and replaced like commodities. Excluded from a status of full humanity in this way, we argue that athletes are often reduced to entertaining performers. As activist-reformer Celia Brackenridge argued, sport embodies a macabre cultural island set apart from and revered by society. With an “almost complete absence of” athlete protections or empathy and “historic institutional blindness to [athlete] abuses,” sport may paradoxically be *least* safe for its *most* valuable stakeholders: Athletes.<sup>1</sup> Where multiple minoritised identities intersect (Black *and* female) danger is compounded.

Just as there are health risks of performing labour in racist and oppressive systems, there are health benefits of refusing to perform in institutions that dishonour one’s humanity.<sup>2</sup> Sport’s current racial justice movement – mirrored in broader society through #BLM – may have measurable health impacts. We argue that biomedical, public health and sports researchers have an opportunity to explore how athletes’ refusals to perform advance social justice and population-level racial

equity, while also boosting Black women’s and other minoritised people’s health and wellbeing.

Civil rights activist Malcolm X famously said, “The most unprotected person in America is the Black woman.” Osaka, Biles, and others are answering thus: though unprotected, they are unapologetically putting forth a compelling community health strategy.

## Refusal as a health intervention

Activism and resistance are associated with well-being across numerous indicators – eudaimonic, hedonic, and social – with some activists reporting higher levels of subjective vitality than their non-activist counterparts.<sup>3</sup> Affirmation of one’s racial identity and a sense of value in one’s stigmatized group are also associated with increased health and well-being.<sup>4</sup> A key mechanism is empowerment.<sup>5</sup> Relevant data suggest Osaka’s and Biles’ actions have yielded and will continue to yield tangible community health benefits: The general public is more supportive than critical of Biles<sup>6</sup>; young people (Gen Z) are more open to prioritizing their wellbeing,<sup>7</sup> building community, and taking meaningful action<sup>8</sup>; and highly-visible digital platforms are successfully shifting public health-related behaviour in non-sport sectors.<sup>9</sup>

Athletes like Wyomia Tyus paved the way for contemporary athlete-activists, but while Tyus and others provoked a negative backlash, in today’s context where social media enables a broader poll of public opinion, reactions to such resistance are overwhelmingly supportive, especially among minoritised persons. This suggests a positive connection between athletes’ activism and others’ wellbeing.

## The refusal framework in the millennial age

In publicly asserting their inherent value above their institution’s at significant personal cost, Osaka and Biles modelled an act of personal courage that inspires self-compassion and self-love; seen also in women like Rosa Parks. Parks’ refusal unfolded against the backdrop of America’s civil rights’ struggle, while Osaka’s and Biles’ took shape against a modern version of the same *plus* an unprecedented global pause. At times like these, people hear in a different way. Activists’

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Observation	Call to Action
Ample evidence demonstrates that racial trauma is collective. But <b>if our trauma is collective, shouldn't our triumphs also be?</b> Public responses to modern athlete-activists suggest that this is possible.	In this digital age, as youth increasingly prioritize personal wellbeing, community, and action, how do we build and make visible accessible conditions for empowerment?
There is an opportunity to learn from and replicate Biles' and Osaka's gestures: refusal may provide a collective buffering effect on psyches against chronic racial trauma.	If refusals are a source of collective healing with measurable physiological and other gains, how do we better understand the ways communities are already measuring these benefits in ways the Academy may consider informal?
Prioritizing racial and ethnic equity research in science, medicine, and health, requires closer scrutiny and intentional investment in sectors where racial capitalism is amplified (i.e., sport).	How do we appropriately and sustainably resource rigorous inquiries into justice-, equity-, and inclusion in sport? Which disciplines must be joined-up?
For research outputs that representatively and responsively advance social justice, fresh questions and methods must be designed to center and allow direction by underrepresented voices/experiences.	How do we facilitate leadership and participation from athletes, athlete-entourages, and the public in research related to sport and other complex sociocultural phenomena?

**Table 1: Call to action for biomedical, public health, sports, and other researchers exploring how refusals advance social justice and population-level racial equity, while boosting Black women's and other minoritised people's personal health and wellbeing.**

demonstrated willingness to risk so much, coupled with the public's openness to renewal, may be a unique combination that compels behaviour change towards honouring Self more consistently and concretely, as a matter of priority and conscious resistance. As people become inspired to reclaim their worth, and their expectations of Self and Community, associated health-related decisions and behaviours shift positively.

Interestingly, Osaka and Biles are under 25 years, identify with their racial groups, and evaluate them positively. Resiliency studies in racialized youth suggest that by demonstrating self-preservation, these athlete-activists offer their peer group a strategy for dealing with toxic stress, some of which is racialized and gendered. In the general population, effective "collective coping" and increased self-efficacy in responding to racial discrimination can be facilitated by social connection (via social media and otherwise) and identification with one's racial community.<sup>10</sup> Importantly, "those who identify more with their group and evaluate it more positively have greater self-esteem, greater mastery, and fewer depressive symptoms."<sup>8</sup>

### Call to action

It is important that Simone Biles and Naomi Osaka, in claiming their individual value (above their institution's and external laurels), generated a surge of public support. **Table 1** offers a preliminary Call to Action, formatted as a series of research challenges which follow observations embedded in Osaka's and Biles' refusals.

### Contributors

Drs. Tuakli-Wosornu and Darling-Hammond conceptualized and designed this manuscript, drafted the initial version, and reviewed and revised the final submission.

Both authors approved the final manuscript as submitted and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

### Declaration of interests

The authors certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial or non-financial interest in the materials discussed in this manuscript.

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