

By Shelley Smith

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When LeBron James walked into our makeshift studio at the Four Seasons Hotel in Washington, D.C., we had no idea what the Cleveland Cavaliers' superstar forward was going to say. We had asked for the interview for our "Outside the Lines" story on NBA athletes and political activism, specifically to see if he'd address why he declined to sign then-teammate Ira Newble's letter a year ago condemning China for its role in the genocide in Darfur.



LeBron James was criticized for declining to sign a letter of protest, circulated by a teammate, over what the letter said was the Chinese government's complicity in the humanitarian crisis in Dafur, Sudan.

At the time Newble presented the letter, James said he didn't have enough information to speak on the issue, let alone sign anything. And he was ripped from coast to coast, by pundits, columnists and social observers. They all characterized James as a greedy, spoiled athlete who cared more about his business interests in China than the slaughter of a reported 400,000 non-Arabs in Darfur. To be sure, China's record on human rights issues was, and remains, a sensitive topic, especially for James' employer, the NBA, which has had its eyes on China for more than 20 years. And then add the pressure of James' \$90 million contract with Nike, which has its own designs on the vast Chinese market. James is so wildly popular there that he already has two China-only marketed shoes and his own museum in Shanghai, filled with artifacts from his life,

including a copy of his birth certificate. And right now, China estimates it has 300 million basketball fans — the same amount as the entire population in the United States.

That's a lot of feet to cover.

And so when Newble approached James last spring, he paused, because he said he didn't know enough about the situation. And now he was sitting down in front of our cameras after agreeing to address the issue. So would he actually decide to speak out on something as horrific as genocide, or would he be like Mike [Jordan]?

It was Michael Jordan who, many observers feel, paved the way for star athletes to be apolitical. Back in 1990, he famously declined to back a Democratic African-American Senate candidate in his home state of North Carolina by saying, "Republicans buy sneakers, too."

During his career, Jordan crafted a blueprint for commercial and endorsement success by declining to take a stance on anything controversial or even slightly political and the younger generation listened. Want to be like Mike? Then do like Mike.

"Within this group of young athletes, this whole age group, there is a huge vacuum of being apolitical on global issues," said Kenneth Shropshire, director of the Wharton Sports Business Initiative at the University of Pennsylvania. "I am sure that many athletes today still look to Jordan and say, 'How did he do it?' and 'I can take those same steps.' It's not going to be helpful to whatever endorsement opportunities you might have to be politically active."

Shropshire and others point out that the images of athletes as political activists we recall most — Tommie Smith's and John Carlos' gloved fists on the 1968 medal stand, Muhammad Ali's refusal to enter the draft in 1967, and Arthur Ashe being arrested outside the South African embassy in Washington, D.C. — were all related to issues that directly affected those athletes in a much more personal way.

To read Ira Newble's letter to the Chinese government, go to the related link above.

Today is a different era with a far different political climate.

"If somebody said, 'Hey, Charles, you can't stay at the Four Seasons,'" explains former NBA MVP Charles Barkley, who is now an analyst for TNT, "or 'You can't eat up here at this restaurant,' now I can understand that. That's activism."

China, Tibet and Darfur are literally half a world away from any NBA city. But as the NBA makes inroads into China and as the Olympic Summer Games in Beijing near, the issue of China's roles in Tibet and Darfur is drawing a lot of attention. And questions will be asked.

Los Angeles Lakers reserve forward Ira Newble, who played with James' Cavaliers from 2003 until he was traded to Seattle this season (later signing with the Lakers), believes he has some of the answers. Last spring he read about the genocide in Darfur in a newspaper, investigated a little and became outraged by the lack of awareness in this country.

"I turned on the TV watching CNN and all I saw was about Paris Hilton and Anna Nicole Smith and things of that [nature] that were dominating the news at the time. I really couldn't believe that I didn't hear anything about what was going on in Sudan, so I decided at that point to get involved."

Newble was raised to use his voice and influence to try to make a difference. His father was a civil rights worker in the 1960s and filled his young mind with stories of great strength in the face of grave danger.

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"He taught me first of all about equality and everybody should fight for equality and one world and unity," Newble said. "If it's something you believe in you have to take a stand and fight for it. So something came up and I decided that I need to back it and use my voice and get behind it."

So Newble crafted an open letter to the Chinese government asking how it could stage an Olympics when it "remains complicit in the terrible suffering and destruction in Sudan." And he gathered his Cavaliers teammates and told them that China was buying oil from and selling arms to the government in Sudan, which was maiming and torturing countless innocent people. It was a stunning revelation for most, Newble said. Many had not even heard of Darfur. He left pamphlets on their chairs in the locker room detailing the evidence and asked them to read the information and come to him if they had questions.

His teammates were also stunned, Newble said, because he had generally been a quiet member of the team. But this was different, he explained, an issue that moved him to speak and to act. And they listened. All but three of the Cavs signed the letter — Damon Jones had a contract with a Chinese shoe company, David Wesley was gone on personal leave, and James simply said he didn't know enough.

"I told him the same thing I told everybody else, except I understand by you being LeBron you have a lot at stake," Newble said. "You can't just put your name on anything, so you need to go back for yourself, get as much information as you can, educate yourself and come to me if you want to sign. He came back and we talked a little bit about it, but at the end of the day he decided not to sign the letter and that's his decision. I respect that's what he chose to do at the time."

Newble's letter made news. But not as much as James not signing it. This took place just as the NBA Finals were beginning between the Cavs and the Spurs, and suddenly James was cast with those who don't know and don't care.

When we queried the Cavs' media relations department a few months ago, asking if James would do an interview about the letter, we were told he would address it at some point, just "not right now."

We found other NBA players reluctant to speak on the issue of activism and China as well, some because they said they were focusing on the playoffs and some who said they hadn't really been paying attention. And there were some who feared what happened to Craig Hodges could happen to them.

Hodges was a sharpshooting guard with the Chicago Bulls in the early 1990s, who won three straight NBA All-Star 3-point contests and helped the Bulls win two straight championships. But at the Bulls' 1991 visit to the White House, Hodges wore a dashiki and handed a letter to President George H. W. Bush condemning the treatment of African-Americans in the United States. The Bulls cut him in 1992 and he never got another tryout with another team.

NBA commissioner David Stern vehemently denies the league had anything to do with Hodges' situation. "Nothing to it," Stern said of Hodges' claims that his actions damaged his job prospects.

Still, some ask, how could rapper Master P get a tryout, but not a pure shooter like Craig Hodges? Others argued that Hodges couldn't guard a post.

To the Bulls, obviously, he was expendable.

"Craig Hodges was a good player," Barkley said. "Like every player in the NBA is a good player. But if you are not a great player and people assume that you might cause trouble, they're not going to have you because it's too big of a business."

Hodges declined to speak to "Outside the Lines" on camera, but told us he still believes his actions cost him his career and millions of dollars. He is now a shooting coach for the Lakers and, ironically, coaches Newble. He said he advised Newble to be careful about speaking out on Darfur, not wanting what happened to him to happen to Newble. Newble said he didn't care.

"I'm not afraid of anything," he said, adding his father wasn't afraid either, even when the ramifications of speaking out in the 1960s sometimes meant losing your life. "I've been playing eight years now so I'm comfortable with my decision. If something comes from it, then so be it. I'm satisfied because when I look at myself in the mirror, I can say, 'Ira, you tried to make a difference.'"

Washington Wizards center Etan Thomas said he was somewhat concerned when he got a letter from the NBA after he spoke at an anti-war rally in 2005, telling him to be careful. Stern refuted Thomas' claim, saying such a letter "doesn't exist." Thomas insists he received it.

Newble's efforts eventually led him to a Los Angeles-based group called Aid Still Required, which was asking NBA players to record public-service announcements in hopes of pressuring the Chinese government to consider its role in the Darfur conflict. Phoenix Suns guard Steve Nash immediately said yes. Nash has been more outspoken than most NBA players. He has publicly criticized the war in Iraq and said he opposed what the Chinese government was doing and wasn't afraid to say it, but could understand why some are.

"I have a little bit of a problem with everyone putting this pressure on young athletes who have trained their whole lives to perform in the Olympics," said Nash, "essentially forcing them to be the ones that have to now take the responsibility for boycotting or taking a stand."

Lakers guard Kobe Bryant, the league's reigning MVP, recorded a public service announcement as well. His was the first released by Aid Still Required and garnered nationwide attention. But when we asked Bryant's representative if he would talk with "Outside the Lines" further about the issue and his involvement, we were told no, because the issue "might be becoming too controversial."

The Houston Rockets were reluctant to speak as well, but for far different reasons. Yao Ming is a teammate and they said that anything they would say could be misinterpreted in China, which would make things understandably difficult for Yao.

Chris Paul was willing to speak with us, but admitted to not knowing much about what was going on in China, choosing instead to focus on issues closer to home, like helping to rebuild New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Most NBA athletes have chosen to support causes at home, something Barkley said he understands.

"I don't believe in cleaning up somebody else's house when your house is dirty," he said. "These guys got a great opportunity to learn. They should know about China and Darfur and the Sudan. Of course they should. But I'm pretty sure they got issues in Los Angeles. And I've been to Cleveland. LeBron's got his hands full with Cleveland."

Thomas, though, believes in Newble's cause and remains the only player outside of the Cleveland team to sign the letter. He believes that if Bryant and James would join with them on Darfur or other causes, they could effect great change.

"What was so special about the '60s is you had the top, top athletes [speaking out politically]," Thomas said. "Jim Brown, Kareem and Bill Russell, at the top of their crafts. I have a voice, but it wouldn't be on the same level as somebody like Kobe or LeBron."

A few weeks after the initial request by "Outside the Lines," an e-mail arrived from the Cavs, reading, "I think we can get that interview with LeBron for you now." We arranged a time and place — after practice during the first round of the playoffs against the Wizards, in a private dining room at the Cavs' hotel in Washington.

An animal rights convention was being held at the same hotel, and the scene had an eerily Hollywood vibe, even though it was in the nation's capital — Pamela Anderson, Donatella Versace, Rob Lowe passed through the lobby just before the Cavaliers' bus pulled in and their stars disembarked.

James came right into the room, sat down, and we quickly learned with his first answer that he wasn't going to shy away from the issue.

"I didn't sign the letter right then and there so now it's blown up," he said. "No one heard my side of the story, but automatically it's 'LeBron didn't sign the letter, he doesn't care.' But for me to try to create awareness of the situation that's going on in Darfur and other places, for me, in the position I am, I should speak on it and I am gonna speak on it."

James told us he spent time over the previous year educating himself about China. He realizes that his voice is powerful and he will be heard. He has yet to sign the letter but said he will continue to speak about the conflict as the Olympics draw closer. He said he hopes the NBA Olympians will band together with a plan on how to address the situation. He spoke eloquently for 15 minutes, and insisted he didn't care about endorsements or contracts or anything but doing what he felt was right.

"At the end of the day we're talking about human rights," he said. "And people should understand that human rights and people's lives are in jeopardy. We're not talking about contracts here. We're not talking about money. We're talking about people's lives being lost and that means a lot more to me than some money or a contract."

James basically refuted what everybody had written and said about him a year ago. Maybe it's because he was criticized, maybe not. Maybe he would have come to these conclusions without Newble's letter.

But maybe Newble accomplished, finally, what he had set out to do. He got LeBron's attention and his support, if not his signature. And in a few months, James will be playing on the world's biggest court in front of the world's biggest audience. It remains to be seen what, or if, James will say then, but the stage has been set.

And at the very least, James showed he's no Jordan ... at least off the court.

"Outside the Lines" producer Lindsay Rovegno contributed to this story.