

SATURDAY, MARCH 15, 2008

Gingerly, The Athlete Turns Activist

In a public service announcement recently shown on cable television and available at several sites online, Kobe Bryant asks for help on a mission that is somewhat more daunting than winning another N.B.A. title.

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Isn't that what Ira Newble was saying to his N.B.A. brethren last spring, but most of all to the government of China?

Newble, a career journeyman and the son of a civil rights activist, made himself an athlete activist during last season's playoffs with the Cleveland Cavaliers. His letter to China's president, Hu Jintao, joined a chorus calling for intervention in the western region of Sudan, the African nation from which China is the leading importer of oil and by extension the financier of weapons used in the slaughter and displacement of non-Arabs.

Newble's teammates signed the letter, the most notable exception being LeBron James, superstar extraordinaire in the Michael Jordan risk-averse mold.

King James's reticence was tied to his lucrative affiliation with Nike, which is heavily invested in China. He is also an ambassador in an N.B.A. globalization plan that is focused on the Beijing Olympics.

"I was taught growing up that you take a stand for things you believe in," Newble, released recently by Seattle after a trade from Cleveland, said in a telephone interview.

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MIA FARROW

Ira Newble with Darfurian refugees in Chad. He has asked China to intervene with Sudan to stop the killing in Darfur.



MIA FARROW

Ira Newble, an N.B.A. journeyman and son of a civil rights activist, at a refugee camp in Chad.

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From First Sports Page

"But it was a sensitive issue and I always understood the position LeBron was in."

Newble, 33, was careful not to be critical of James, but the publicity touched off another round of lamentation over the modern athlete's contractual servitude to corporations and how it typically impedes the development of a conscience.

Can there ever be another Muhammad Ali, the all-time heavyweight champion of outspoken, politicized athletes? The question surely is worthy of discussion, although icons like Ali tend to be romanticized in the context of the 1960s. To be fair, isn't today's athlete more a reflection of a mainstream culture that prefers reality television to real-life horror, be it in Darfur or Iraq?

My guess is that the ratio of caring professional athletes hasn't diminished, but merely transformed. Like other well-off Americans, they have the capacity to speak more with their checkbooks, and some — David Robinson and Andre Agassi come to mind — have given much more than their money.

Listen hard enough; there are still transcendent voices in sports. Most prominently, and tragically, the pro football player

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Pat Tillman was heard through his enlistment to serve and his subsequent death in Afghanistan. At the other end of the political spectrum, Etan Thomas of the N.B.A.'s Washington Wizards has been an eloquent critic of the Bush administration. Orlando's Adonal Foyle created a grass-roots organization on college campuses called Democracy Matters to rouse politically disengaged youth.

For his part, Newble followed up on his letter-writing advocacy by taking what he called a "life-changing trip" last summer with the actress and Darfur advocate Mia Farrow to refugee camps in Chad near the border of Sudan. Tracy McGrady followed two months later.

But no matter how much they are prodded, the most leveraged of sports stars will continue to be the most careful because, as Newble said, "They have their contracts, their deals." That brings us back to the Kobe Bryant public service announcement, the first of a series gradually being released and placed for broadcast by Aid Still Required, and also featuring McGrady, Steve Nash, Grant Hill and Baron Davis, among others.

The group is the brainchild of Hunter and Andrea Payne, who advised Newble before he undertook his personal letter-writing

initiative.

Hunter Payne, a singer-songwriter, said that his group targeted practical, grass-roots strategies to assist Darfur — for instance, the reforestation of an area ravaged by drought, and the building and distribution of solar stoves so camp refugees will not have to search for firewood while risking atrocities at the hands of the Janjaweed and other armed militias.

"I'm not saying I disagree with the groups that have been going after China," Payne said in a telephone interview. "But I believe that a broad-based approach works better for us. And in this case, it allows the athletes to be involved with less commercial risk."

Fine, too, by Newble's thinking.

"Hunter set up a more relaxed approach so the players could feel comfortable," he said. "I'm all for it. People will probably listen more when it's Kobe Bryant."

In the meantime, Newble is preparing to play more basketball as a multipositional playoff defensive stopper, looking for a new N.B.A. home, not worried about a backlash for having spoken out in a manner that some might have interpreted as unhelpful to the league's global blueprint for success.

"I love the game," Newble said. "But I never thought I was in it just to dribble the ball up and down the court."