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## A Social Justice Vision for Sports

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By Philip Carl Salzman

The foundational principle of social justice is that people in each and every societal category and class should be treated equally, and have equal benefit and respect in every social context. This means that every group and every unit of society, including sports teams, must have equal representation of members of every category.

We in the West have progressed far toward achieving this goal, far from our unequal and biased earlier historical stages; yet we still remain far from the goal of absolute equality, and if we are sincere we must put into place every measure necessary to reach our goal. Toward this end, each sports team must have a resident or consulting demographer, charged with insuring equal representation.

While representative distribution has been implemented fairly widely in colleges and universities, and increasingly so in the professions and in business, including the military, so far, sports teams have remained highly unrepresentative, and these teams have not benefited from the diverse viewpoints and experiences of a representative population. This is highly unfortunate, for sports are the area in which the masterly skills of the human body are showcased. To limit the fun, the health, and the financial rewards to a selected and biased portion of the population is deeply unjust. It is, indeed, offensive to those who have been left out.

It should hardly be necessary to say to anyone who has been awake the last fifty years that all sports teams without exception, from little league and primary school, up through high school, college, and the professional leagues should be 51% female and 49% male. The time is long past when women were deemed fragile and incapable of athletic achievement; women have proven to be strong and to be fine athletes. In fact, it has been more than thirty years since Billy Jean King beat Bobby Riggs in tennis's battle of the sexes. The appearance of a representative proportion of women in the NFL and CFL, the NBA, MLB, and NHL is long overdue. It is also time to terminate the gender apartheid in national, international, and Olympic competitions: no more separate men's and women's teams; only mixed teams will be allowed.

Social justice teams will further have representative numbers of gay, lesbian, and bisexual members, as well as transsexuals. As is common practice now, gender and sexual preference will be determined by the self-identification of each individual. Hetero-normality cannot be allowed to impose social injustices on others.

Western societies are home to people of many races and ethnicities. Of course, each race and ethnicity should be represented on every sports team according to its proportion of the population. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, whites make up 72.4%, blacks or African Americans 12.6%, Asians 4.8%, Native Americans 0.9%, Hawaiians 0.2%, mixed 2.9%, other 6.2%.<sup>1</sup> And, these are the racial proportions that should be seen on every

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Race\\_and\\_ethnicity\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Race_and_ethnicity_in_the_United_States)

American team.

Cross cutting race is ethnicity, and ethnic groups should be also represented according to their presence in the general population. According to the 2010-2015 American Community Survey, twenty ethnicities are near the one percent level or above: German 14.7%, Black or African American (non-Hispanic) 12.3%, Mexican 10.9%, Irish 10.6%, English 7.8%, Italian 5.5%, Polish 3.0%, French 2.6%, Scottish 1.7%, Puerto Rican 1.6%, Norwegian 1.4%, Dutch 1.4%, Swedish 1.2%, Chinese 1.2%, South Asian 1.0%, Scotch-Irish 1.0%, Russian 0.9%, West Indian (non-Hispanic) 0.9%, and Filipino 0.9%.<sup>2</sup>

Sports teams must ensure that members of these ethnic groups are presented according to their due proportion. On small teams, representation should be implemented longitudinally, with representatives of ethnic groups cycling in and out over time, so that every category is duly represented. Obviously, ethnicity would be a major criterion in recruitment. Often ethnicity is indicative of religion, but not always. All Poles are not Catholics; all Arabs are not Muslims. The representation of Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and all other religious groups, should be ensured as well.

Members of elite sports teams are highly unrepresentative of the general population, measuring at the physical extremes. Football players are large and heavy, and basketball players are very tall. No places are given to normal, average sized individuals. Slimmer and shorter people, even those very athletic, are blocked from participation. A social justice team would include different physical types—light as well as heavy, short as well as tall—and its members would average the same weight and height as the general population.

There are many different ways of being abled. Some people are abled with fewer limbs than others. Some have different mental abilities. Members of these categories already have demonstrated their athletic prowess in the Invictus games in Montreal, but in segregated events that mark them off from other athletes. This segregation nullifies any exchange of viewpoints and experience. These differently abled athletes must be integrated with other members of the population in shared sports teams. Segregation should be terminated; integration should now be obligatory.

Citizens disadvantaged by poverty, homelessness, drug addiction, and lack of education are nonetheless deserving of equal representation too and should be represented by their portion of the population in each sports team.

A society shows its level of civilization by the way it treats its disadvantaged. No society, no sports team, can be considered inclusive without including the disadvantaged—all the disadvantaged.

Of course, there will be opposition to this proposal based on a wide range of rationalizations: people in some categories should be protected against harm; diverse, inclusive teams would not be efficient and certainly not as entertaining to the paying audiences; people should choose for themselves who they want to associate with. Such objections will, of course, come from those advantaged people whose advantages will be lost in this new world; there are no disinterested observers. But even if there were something valid in these objections, the necessity of social justice vastly outweighs all the objections. If we all stand together as equal and valued human beings, we can look forward to the new inclusive, social justice NFL & CFL, NHL, NBA, and MLB teams.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Race\\_and\\_ethnicity\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Race_and_ethnicity_in_the_United_States)

## About the Author



Philip Carl Salzman B.A. (Antioch), M.A., Ph.D. (Chicago) is Professor of Anthropology at McGill University, appointed in 1968. He founded the Commission on Nomadic Peoples of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, and its international journal, *Nomadic Peoples*, for which he received the IUAES Gold Award. In recent years he has also served as Senior Fellow at the University of St. Andrews, Open Society International Scholar at the American University of Central Asia, Erasmus Mundus International Fellow at the University of Catania, and Visiting Professor at the University of Sydney. Extensive ethnographic field research in Baluchistan (Iran), Gujarat and Rajasthan (India), and Sardinia (Italy) provided the foundation many articles in academic journals, and for book publications such as *The Anthropology of Real Life: Events in Human Experience* (1999), *Black Tents of Baluchistan* (2000), winner of the Premio Pitr–Salomone Marino, *Understanding Culture: An Introduction of Anthropological Theory* (2001), *Pastoralists: Equality, Hierarchy, and the State* (2004), *Culture and Conflict in the Middle East* (2008), *Postcolonial Theory and the Arab-Israel Conflict* (2008), and *Thinking Anthropologically 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.* (2010). His latest book publication is *Classic Comparative Anthropology: Studies from the Tradition* (2012). In public affairs, he was a member of Middle East Strategy at Harvard (2008-2010), a member of the Board of Directors of Scholars for Peace in the Middle East (2004-2012), and is currently a Senior Fellow at the Frontier Centre for Public Policy, a member of the Academic Council of the Canadian Institute for Jewish Studies, a Fellow of the Middle East Forum (2015-), and a member of the Board of Directors of Scholars for Peace in the Middle East (2016-). His articles have been published by the Frontier Centre, the Middle East Forum, the Gatestone Institute, the Canadian Institute for Jewish Research, the Macdonald Laurier Institute, and *Areo Magazine*.