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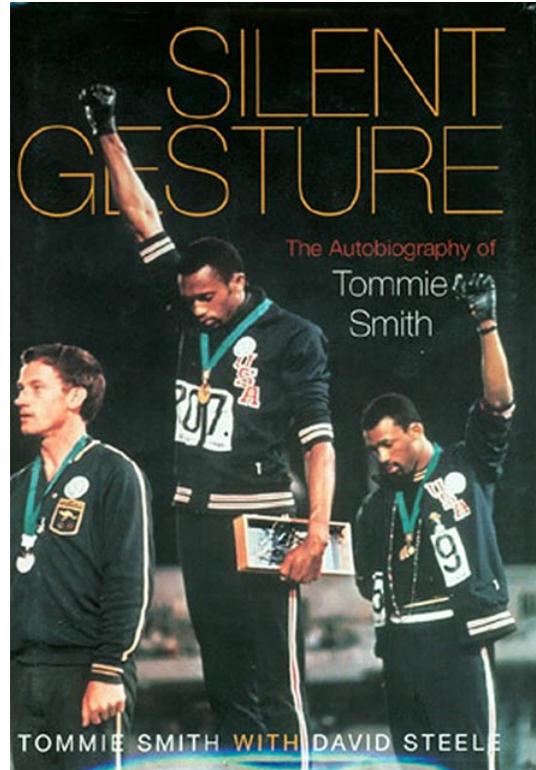
Tommie Smith

The son of a sharecropper, Tommie Smith raced to athletic glory at San Jose State University. He held 11 world records (including indoor and outdoor marks) at distances up to 440 yards and was part of the university's vaunted "Speed City" contingent.

Before the 1968 Mexico City Olympic Games, Smith joined the Olympic Project for Human Rights, a group that initially proposed a boycott of the Games by African-American athletes if its Civil Rights demands were not addressed. The boycott was called off after Smith and other black athletes voted to compete instead. In

Mexico City, Smith won the gold medal in the 200 meters, defeating John Carlos (another San Jose State student) and shattering the world record with a time of 19.83 seconds.

Hours later, Smith stood on the victory podium in his black socks, with a black scarf around his neck. As the National Anthem began to play, he bowed his head and slowly raised his black-gloved right fist in the air. He was joined by Carlos, the bronze medalist, who raised his black-gloved left fist in solidarity. (The silver-medalist, Australia's Peter Norman, wore a button in support of the Olympic Project for Human Rights.)



The photograph of the two athletes, their arms aloft, became a Civil Rights touchstone. Indeed, the image has come to symbolize the turbulent social upheaval that America was experiencing during the Vietnam War era. On the track, the fallout from the protest was severe. Smith and Carlos were sent home and banned from international competition. Afterwards, both struggled to jump-start their lives. Smith caught on with the NFL's Cincinnati Bengals for several seasons before earning his master's degree. He then taught and coached track and field, first at Oberlin College and then at Santa Monica College in Southern California.

Now, nearly 40 years after his stand in Mexico City, Smith (along with David Steele, a sportswriter with the Baltimore Sun) has written "Silent Gesture: The Autobiography of Tommie Smith." The book is the debut volume in the "Sporting" series published by Temple University Press, edited by College of New Rochelle history professor Amy Bass. The book makes clear that Smith has been haunted by his gesture since 1968. As Elliott Vanskike, reviewing the book in the Washington Post, noted: "For good and ill, [Smith's] life has been defined by his iconic act of resistance. With that bold gesture, he burned his bridges with many in track and field, forfeited future jobs and endorsements and brought on decades of death threats."

Retired since 2005 — and a member of the USA Track & Field Hall of Fame since 1978 — Tommie Smith lives with his wife, Delois, in Georgia. SportsLetter spoke to Smith from his home.

— David Davis

SportsLetter: Why did you decide to write the book now?

Tommie Smith: I thought about it many a day, but it wasn't time. Actually, I started on the book some time ago, way back in the 1960s. I used to keep notes on everything. But I didn't have the time because I was teaching and coaching, and that was almost a 24-hour deal. Now that I'm retired and have slowed down, I had time to get my notes together and find a good co-writer. So, I'm setting the record straight after 40 years.

SL: You were raised as a sharecropper's son and later encountered segregation and racial discrimination. Which was more difficult to overcome: poverty or racism?

TS: Actually, both happened when I was young boy. I knew there was a difference, but I didn't know how to differentiate between the two. Poverty, you can work through with tenacity and with work ethic. With racism, I tried as a college student to read and learn and understand why people get treated differently. I thought we were all born equal. But during the civil turbulence that we went through, I saw that we aren't born free. You have to work to attain that. And, that's not according to the Constitution. Sad to say, a lot of people died so that laws could be written that equality exists.

SL: You went to school at San Jose State, which became known as "Speed City" for its many sprinters. What was it like to be around all that speed?

TS: It was almost like a normal thing. I just went out and trained with everybody else. I didn't pay a lot of attention to the speed portion of it. It was more about the camaraderie of people who were fast. That was the important part to me — the social part. Not how fast they ran, but the love that we had for each other.

SL: Was there any runner that you modeled yourself after?

TS: No, because my style of running was different from anybody else's. I was 6-feet-4 and 180 pounds, with this long stride. I also used the ankle flip, and so I worked on my own form. The only 200-meter runner that I used to like to watch was [1964 gold medalist] Henry Carr. Man, he was pretty. He was so smooth. But I couldn't model myself after Henry because he had a long torso and shorter legs. And, I was just the opposite.

SL: At San Jose State, Bud Winter was your coach. What was he like and what did he teach you about track?

TS: Actually, it was humility. Being truthful to yourself and your teammates and your work ethic. Coming out every day and working and having fun while you're doing it. When I say fun, I mean concentration on form, style

and love for your fellow athletes. Not competing with others at practice or talking about them behind their backs. We were a team. That was because of Coach's background.

He was a very honest, down-home person. His humanitarian effect on me has been greater than any other person, except for my dad. He was not an in-the-stands coach. He would stand next to the track and watch us and yell out, "Tom-Tom, your knees." I used to be a very straight-up runner. When I first came to San Jose, I wanted to run before I got up to speed. That's very bad for your stride. He spent a lot of time with us and worked with me on the mechanics, step by step, so that my stride was pushing out and not pulling me back.

SL: You write about first meeting Harry Edwards at San Jose State. What was he like, as a person and as a leader?

TS: Harry, of course, was a sociologist. He was on a mission to get an education and to become somebody. Harry was an "A" student as well as an athlete, and he took the time to talk to athletes who would talk to him. He talked to as many as he could, but not everyone wanted to get involved at that time. Harry turned some people off because of his abruptness and his size and his candor in doing what he did. I spoke to Harry on many occasions and I found him very refreshing. He's a continual talker, and you have to stay mentally with him. Otherwise, he'd lose you and you'd lose interest in him. As I grew older, in my junior and senior years, I realized that everyone needs a platform to make others believe. Harry needed a platform. During the 1960s, there was a great opportunity for Harry to use what he had there at San Jose State — which was world-class athletes. Harry certainly worked for what he got, but he used his surroundings very well. Myself, John Carlos, Lee Evans, Ronnie Ray Smith — all of us were there for him to use. He pulled us aside and started letting us feel the need to become involved in social change of the '60s. He made us understand the need to get involved. He didn't make us do anything, but he started the Olympic Project for Human Rights as a platform.

SL: What was the purpose behind the Olympic Project for Human Rights?

TS: There were 10 points on our platform. Since we were athletes, we

dealt with the athletic part of the system that, in general, did not represent black people equally. So, in that context, our platform dealt with such items as the hiring of more black coaches, the demand that South Africa be banned from the Olympics because of its apartheid policy, the boycott of all meets put on by the NYAC [the New York Athletic Club] for their racist attitudes, and so on. We weren't out to save the world. We were athletes, not politicians, striving for equality in our world.

SL: You and other black athletes discussed boycotting the Games. Were you in favor of a boycott or did you want to compete?

TS: I was a democratic athlete. I was ready to do what the group thought necessary. I wasn't just an individual out there doing my thing. This was a platform that I was a part of.

SL: If the vote had been to boycott, would you have sat out the Games?

TS: Sure. Look, the Olympic Project for Human Rights was started right there on the San Jose State campus. Would it not be appalling for me to have helped start a platform like the Olympic Project and then at the last moment back out of it? No, that's not Tommie Smith at all. I was ready to do what the group thought necessary, and we made the decision [to go to Mexico City] a few days before the Games opened. I was happy that I got that chance to compete, but I was willing to sacrifice for a cause if all the black athletes stood behind that.

SL: How important was it for the Olympic Project for Human Rights that you — or someone involved the Project — win the gold medal?

TS: It was decided in Denver, Colorado, where we met en route to Mexico City, that each individual athlete would participate according to their belief in the Olympic Project for Human Rights and their feelings about a system that did not represent them. I felt singularly that I had to perform to make a stand, and that that was necessary for me to feel that the Project was not a total waste. What happened on the victory stand was part of the platform, but it was not the platform.

SL: What was your relationship like with John Carlos?

TS: John Carlos is from Harlem, and he's very verbose. John can talk about anything, which I cannot, and that's what makes him such an item. Being from Harlem, and being a great athlete, he had it all. He had verbosity and he had the athletic prowess. Put those two things together, and you have a bomb.

He was exciting anywhere he went. Sometimes, when John and I went to a meet, I would walk half a step behind John just to watch people look at him. He was something. He got attention. And, he was one of the greatest athletes I ever competed with — a very powerful runner.

SL: In the book, you quote Carlos as saying, "I let Tommie Smith win" at Mexico City: Why do you think he said something like that?

TS: He told me to my face that he let me win. It's nothing I'm conjuring up. He had beaten me in the Olympic Trials [at the 200 meters], and I think that he felt he was going to win the race in Mexico City. Later, he said that he felt it necessary for me to win because the gold medal meant more to me, that he doesn't value tangible things like medals and trophies. By him saying this, it completely destroyed the camaraderie of competition.

Look, we were two of the greatest sprinters in the history of track and field. We shared something in history, and we have mutual respect for each other. I don't dislike Carlos at all. There are things about Carlos that I don't like. But it's that way with most people I know. You take the good with the bad.

SL: A lot of mythology has arisen about the meaning of your podium stand. To you, what did the black socks and the black gloves symbolize?

TS: Everything we did had a reason. We had the black socks to represent poverty. No shoes, poverty. The gloves represented freedom and power, togetherness. The Puma shoe [that Smith placed on the podium] was in reaction to how Puma backed me during a time when I had a six-month-old son and had no money. They helped me buy Similac and milk for my child.

SL: What about the black scarf you wore around your neck?

TS: It represented the lynchings that we as black people had gone through so that I could get up on the stand, the sacrifices of those who had gone before me. That's what I wore. Carlos had beads to represent the lynchings.

SL: Your upraised fists have often been mistaken for a Black Power or a Black Panther salute. What was your intent when you raised your fists?

TS: I was not a Black Power hate-monger. I was not part of the Black Panthers. I've only belonged to two organizations in my life: my church and the Olympic Project for Human Rights. I was a human rights person who happened to be black. People want to look at me as a militant: I was a black person with a black glove, with the fist raised in the air, so they look at it as Black Power. I look at it as power and freedom, that I am a man. Treat me as a man, and not as three-fifths of a man.

People who saw it, they knew I was doing it for some reason. Instead of my being belligerent and saying things that would upset people, I kept it as plain as possible. So, that was my stand in Mexico City — a cry for freedom, not a cry for hate.

SL: Why do you think that your motives were misrepresented?

TS: The times of the late 1960s were very tense. People believed that the changes of the 1960s were happening because of militancy and because of the Vietnam War. They were locked into this fear. Now, people realize that the victory stand was not what they thought then. Now, they see it and read deeper into what it did, not who did it.

SL: Jesse Owens spoke to the American athletes at Mexico City. What did you take from his speech?

TS: Without a doubt, he was speaking in support of the system. But that's what he knew. He competed in 1936, and his ideology was not about equality. His qualification was that he was the best runner that America had produced, period. Jesse was applauded by America because he defeated Hitler and Hitler's ideal of the Aryan race. He became an American hero by fighting another white man from another country.

When he got back to this country, he was just another Negro. So, I felt that he was just caught up in the time back then, as a lot of people were. Especially black folks — they had to do certain things.

I admired Jesse Owens — you better believe it — because I understood what he went through. My father went through the same thing. I wrote Jesse a letter a few months before he died, when he was living in Arizona, telling him what a great man I thought he was.

SL: A lot of people remember your interview with Howard Cosell after the podium stand. What do you recall about that experience?

TS: Understand, I was just a 23-year-old kid. I was an athlete who was tired and who was afraid. He asked me how did I feel about people talking about what I did and how bad it was. I said something like, “No matter what good you do, someone will find something bad in it.” I think that’s pretty good.

SL: Harry Edwards didn’t accompany you to Mexico City. Why wasn’t he there?

TS: From his own lips, because of death threats. He felt that there was a threat of terrorists trying to kill him, and that the closer he got to John and me, the bigger the chance of that happening. Then, all three of us would be killed at the same time.

SL: Do you feel that Edwards abandoned you?

TS: To some degree, yes. The abandonment came from him not coming to Mexico City. I don’t blame him for that. I just feel that he set us on our way, but he wasn’t there behind us all the way. Harry was out for Harry, like we all are. He’s no different from any one of us.

SL: Was it appropriate to make a political statement at the Olympic Games?

TS: That’s why it was done — because it was a worldwide platform. If we did it at the Olympic Trials, they would’ve pulled the plug and no one

would've heard about it. This was a human rights issue, and this was not only about America. We were saying, wherever there are human beings, we have a problem. In America, many of the problems were caused by race. People tell me all the time, "I'm color-blind. I don't see color." But what they're telling me is, "I don't have to work for a better nation because it can't get any better." We felt like America and the world could be, and should be, better.

SL: Do you have regrets about your actions?

TS: None whatsoever.

SL: You write about the heavy price you paid for your actions in Mexico City. How did that affect your running career and your life?

TS: Mexico City put a damper on my running career because I was banned from any further international competition. That hurt me, especially in Europe. At age 23, at the height of my career, I wasn't allowed to run anymore.

When I came back home, there was nothing. There were no friends, there was no job. I borrowed money from anybody so I could to pay the rent. I had to go to work. I had a family to feed, and track and field wasn't going to help me on that. There was nothing but a chance for an education. So, that's what I did.

SL: If you hadn't been banned, do you think you would have gone to the 1972 Olympic Games?

TS: I don't know. I know that I would have continued competing.

TS: Right after the Games, blacks were rather tenuous about even approaching me because they did not want to be seen with a militant. I'm not a militant; that was their misinterpretation. And, because of the blackness that was so apparent on the victory stand, whites didn't want to deal with me at all because they thought I hated white folks. So, they both shied away. Neither one would give me a job.

SL: From all that's been written about the events of 1968, what has been the one thing that you feel everybody has gotten wrong?

TS: The motive behind the Olympic Project for Human Rights. It was a platform of strength, and not of hate. It was about the social issues facing the black athletes, and it was no different than any other political platform. This is what I did for the betterment of the system. I wasn't there for reasons of hate or militancy. I never was a militant.

SL: What is the legacy of '68?

TS: The openness to society and the understanding of differences. I think the black athletes brought this up: that we are not just athletes. We're also human and we can also think. We're no longer just brutes or academically challenged. I think people are realizing now that athletes — not just black athletes — do have substance.

SL: What's your feeling about the statue that's been erected at your alma mater depicting the podium scene from '68?

TS: It's kind of scary because you walk up there and you look up and you see something that you caused to happen. And then you look away and look back, and it's still there. [Laughs.] It's very humbling to realize that the statue highlights a time in history that was profoundly hated when it was done. And, the idea for the statue didn't come from the NAACP or some other group. This was done by a white, male student who thought it necessary to highlight an event that started on the San Jose State campus. It was his project for a black history class.

SL: You coached track at Santa Monica College for many years after your career. What's your feeling about track and field these days?

TS: It's in trouble, of course, with the doping scandals. But I don't think it's worse than any other professional sport. Doping now is an issue because of the money — the contracts being paid to athletes to perform with their bodies. People are doing this because they know what steroids do. It's not natural, but the dollar bill can't tell the difference. If you win, you get paid. Steroids have been around for a long time. It's interesting that the most

prominent athlete being accused of doping today is black, but back in the 1960s it was the weight people, primarily white athletes, who were doing steroids. A lot of Europeans, too. But nobody said anything back then.

SL: Finally, what's your view of today's black athletes? Should black athletes use their status to speak out about social and political issues?

TS: Are they doing something? Yes. Could they do more? Yes. They're using their status, but it's lopsided. They use it for personal fulfillment, but most of them aren't giving back.

Back in the 1960s, athletes like Bill Russell and Muhammad Ali spoke out against something, whether it was Vietnam or racism. Today, black athletes spend money on schools and programs, which is good, but they don't speak out about against the atrocities in the system, racial and political. They know that the more they speak, the more they're going to lose fans. They're taking a chance of being talked about because they don't take a stand rather than talking about something and losing finances. They should use their status to give back, not just with their money but with their support.