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No Overactivism: Robert Lewandowski's Use of Gentle Protest to Avoid National Political Backlash

Abstract

The last few years have seen the return of athlete activism into major international sports events held worldwide as a mindset based on social responsibility and political freedom of speech has spread into the self-perception of many current top athletes. However, while these athletes may have experienced a recent personal transformation, the national political backlash accompanying activism remains set in a long tradition condemning political interference in sports. This article provides a background on the tradition of castigating political athlete activists, a theory on why and

how national political backlash occurs, and evidence on the successful use of gentle activism to avoid such scenarios. The research examines a case study of Polish international footballer Robert Lewandowski's 'pointing the finger' during a World Cup qualifier in 2022 to illustrate how alternative moderate forms of activism can be adopted. This study aims to introduce the term 'overactivism' into the politics of sport as a concept where the athlete prioritises retaining long-term political relevancy over maximising the political impact of a single event.

Keywords: politics of sport, Robert Lewandowski, athlete activism, gentle protest, overactivism, political backlash, taking the knee, UEFA RESPECT

Aktywizm bez przerostu formy nad treścią: łagodna forma protestu Roberta Lewandowskiego jako środek zaradczy przeciwko atakom politycznym na szczeblu krajowym

Abstrakt

W ciągu ostatnich kilku lat odnowił się trend aktywistyczny na niwie sportowej manifestowany na najważniejszych międzynarodowych imprezach sportowych na całym świecie, a postawa oparta na odpowiedzialności społecznej i politycznej wolności słowa stała się elementem tożsamości własnej wśród wielu czołowych sportowców. Jakkolwiek sportowcy mogli niedawno doświadczyć osobistej transformacji, towarzyszącej aktywizmowi, ataki polityczne w kręgach krajowych pozostają osadzone w długiej tradycji braku przyzwolenia dla ingerencji sportowców w świat polityki. W niniejszym artykule omówiono korzenie, z których wyrasta tradycja piętnowania sportowców angażujących się w aktywizm polityczny, przedstawiono teorię, dlaczego i w jakiej formie sportowców tych spotykają ostre ataki polityczne w reprezentowanym przez nich kraju, jak również pokazano, że wybór

łagodnych form wyrazu aktywizmu pozwala skutecznie uniknąć powyższych scenariuszy. W badaniu przeanalizowano studium przypadku polskiego piłkarza Roberta Lewandowskiego „wskazującego palcem” podczas eliminacji do Mistrzostw Świata w 2022 roku. Przykład Lewandowskiego posłużył jako ilustracja alternatywnych, umiarkowanych środków uprawiania aktywizmu. Celem niniejszego badania jest wprowadzenie terminu „przesadnego aktywizmu/przerostu formy nad treścią w aktywizmie” do dziedziny polityki sportu w kontekście decyzji sportowców, by przedłożyć utrzymanie długofalowej pozycji politycznej nad uzyskanie maksymalnego efektu politycznego w następstwie pojedynczego wydarzenia.

Słowa kluczowe: polityka sportu, Robert Lewandowski, aktywizm sportowców, łagodny protest, przesadny aktywizm/przerost formy nad treścią w aktywizmie, negatywna reakcja polityczna/kontratak, gest przyklękania, UEFA RESPECT (Szacunek)

Introduction

Since the turn of the millennium, the world has become increasingly divided for many. After the Brexit referendum and Trump's U.S. general election victory, both in 2016, a destabilisation of Western politics and the global community occurred, with divisions deepening and the return of mass political protests. Suddenly, after years of what now seems like relative stability, people are again being asked to take sides and get political. Our decision on whether to become involved in political activism is essential.

In its broadest form, activism can be defined as “action taken to create social change” (What Is Activism) by either individuals or groups that are prepared to go “beyond what is conventional or routine” (Martin 19). This means that political activism inherently and unavoidably contains both criticism and resistance towards current political policy, which it seeks to reform. Activism, therefore, exerts pressure for change, which sometimes is welcomed but most often is not. At times and places where specific forms and agendas of political activism are unwanted, regulations function as deterrents and disciplinary action can occur. An essential part of being an activist is understanding the consequences of one's actions and how this will most likely result in losing various forms of personal, professional, and civil liberties. However, there are also arguments to defend harsh responses taken against activists from politicians and regulators. Activism frames a political policy as unfavourable and rarely offers a replacement governance system to take over and stabilise once change has been enacted (Ellis 17). In other words, activists are good at burning down the house but not at rebuilding it, as activism

tends to favour revolutionary, not evolutionary, development. This means political activism can also unwittingly undo the many valuable advancements achieved in the past in the area for which it campaigns, causing even more issues than before (Haidt, Pluckrose, and Lindsay). The regulations and disciplinary actions, alongside the discouragement and even open hostility expressed against activists, are known as backlash and offer a powerful deterrent.

Responsible political activists are aware of the above issues, that backlash should be expected, and they could end up seriously out of their depth. For the professional athlete who needs to remain at the top of their sport to retain access to a public platform required for activism, the complexities of politics can become overwhelmingly loaded with just too many potential pitfalls. However rational this sounds, circumstances can conspire otherwise, and when an event such as the hostile invasion of one's nation occurs, an athlete may become forced to cross the line that separates sport and politics to become an athlete activist.

In 2017, Munshi declared, "The political athlete is back, energised [sic] by the resurgent national furore over race and the direct power of social media" (qtd. in Smith 2388), but "when activist athletes act with integrity and sincerity by promoting social and political justice" they rarely comprehend the extent to which they may also "face a hate-filled backlash of scorn and contempt" (Kaufman 215). This is because while athletes may be inspired by a "long tradition of activism in sport, there is also an equally long tradition of opposition and backlash against any form of protest in the athletic realm" (Hawkins et al. 3), which means the athlete should be "prepared to incur high costs" (Oliver and Marwell 251). So, what does this all now mean for the current wave of athletes becoming political who are more aware than previous generations that they should keep "their social and political views separate from their athletic lives because sports and politics do not mix" (Kaufman 234)? Furthermore, if, as claimed, activism is back on the rise and we now know much more about the process of backlash, are there techniques that athlete activists can use to avoid the most harmful repercussions?

This paper is an examination of keeping athlete activism safely within the boundaries where the athlete will not become cancelled, blacklisted, or banned following becoming involved in issues of national politics. From this perspective, the goal now is for the athlete to make the most compelling statement possible within that individual situation, enabling them to continue at the top of their career and make further, more significant, political statements. The key to this is to understand the difference between activism and advocacy. For example, when writing in 2023, if a Russian athlete were to appear at a closed domestic competition displaying a 'Z' on their clothing, this would not represent activism but advocacy. However, if that same gesture occurred at a major international meeting it can be called activism, even though it may be politically incorrect and overpoliticising, as it represents a protest in opposition to power for which the athlete can expect to incur

consequences. These are two extremes, but within them exists a straightforward means of balancing advocacy and activism to exercise control over backlash and avoid overactivism.

This paper pursues the logic that athlete activists should seek to avoid overactivism, not to disadvantage the athlete's ability to make further political comments. It begins by providing a literature review of published academic materials about backlash to political activism in professional sports. The materials on backlash have been examined for occurrences from ruling politicians of the American and British nation-states. The personal consequences of backlash on the athletes' lives, such as deterioration in mental well-being that then affects sporting performance, while relevant to this subject, fall outside the scope of this study. Here, the concern is directly focused on backlash originating from national governments and supported by international sports organisations, global media networks, and even supporters, all resulting in the athlete losing their position of political influence.

The literature review is followed by the theory of gentle protest and a case study of Polish footballer Robert Lewandowski based on the content analysis of videos and texts taken from reputable online news media sources and official statements. The politics of sport, which includes athlete activism, is still relatively new to academic research, with many past publications taking the form of mainstream biographies or investigative journalism. This study aims to establish greater credibility for the existing academic research on backlash to athlete activism and provide an example of gentle protest in sports to avoid the many pitfalls involved.

The 1960s Civil Rights Movement and Black Lives matter in U.S. sport

In 1968, Tommie Smith and John Carlos demonstrated to the world that no podium is too high for a top athlete to fall from as both were cancelled out of all areas of public influence and life following their gesture in support of U.S. Black Civil Rights at the Mexico City Olympic games until the global sports community reappraised their actions (Bass; Witherspoon; Edwards). Such examples now serve as a further reminder that "during their heyday, athletes such as Muhammad Ali, Tommie Smith, and John Carlos were loathed by the American mainstream" (Brown and Foxx 55) as U.S. media networks encouraged backlash against athlete activists standing up for U.S. black civil rights.

In 2003, long before the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement emerged in 2013, sensationalist U.S. media outlets had continued to refine their skills for manufacturing national controversies out of political athlete activism. An example is backlash generated against female college basketball player Toni Smith,

encouraged by ESPN broadcaster Dan Patrick, who declared, “Boundaries have been crossed. It is one thing to voice an opinion, but it is completely different to turn your back – literally, not figuratively. In turning her back on the American flag, Smith is doing more than making her point – she is rejecting everything the flag and this country represent” (qtd. in Kaufman 223). Following such incidents, Kaufman identified an interesting intensifier to backlash against athlete activists involved in anti-war activism: “In addition to confronting the patriotic fervour that often accompanies war, they must also contend with the near patriotic devotion that often accompanies sport” (225).

Sports journalists have always held political power. In 2016, energised by BLM, a wave of NFL national anthem protests began (Intravia et al.; Frisby; Trimbur; Houghteling and Dantzer) that sports media hosts, such as the controversial ESPN host Skip Bayless would label critically as athletes overstepping their “boundaries of expertise” (Darnell 16). However, what then happened surprised many as the President of the United States, Donald Trump, became directly involved. Trump targeted the primarily African American football players involved in protests and “used politically motivated, racially coded speech to mobilise a nativist, reactionary response” (Athlete activism is on the rise, but so is the backlash). Trump’s message was to the point and unforgiving, stating that “NFL owners should fire players (“Get that son of a bitch off the field. He’s fired!”) who kneel during the anthem” (Jenkins qtd. in Smith 2382). This sent a clear message to all athletes considering political activism not to criticise the Trump administration, or they could expect “to receive a tweet or backlash of any form from then-President Donald Trump” (Schmidt 47).

Athlete activism backlash and personal values were the focus of a 2019 study by Lauren Smith entitled “Stand Up, Show Respect: Athlete Activism, Nationalistic Attitudes, and Emotional Response”. The basic premise of this article addresses how “nationalistic attitudes affect participants’ perceptions of athletes who engage in a form of activism” (2376). It extends upon the work by Frederick *et al.*, who examined fan perceptions of athlete activism on Facebook that were “chastising and condemning the protesting athletes for challenging the status quo” (qtd. in Smith 2380). Surprisingly, despite the widespread belief that racist ideologies were most likely to be found as the primary triggers to backlash against U.S. Black athletes involved in human rights activism, Smith’s research found no such issue occurred. Instead, Smith concluded that data supported “the notion that individuals who displayed higher levels of nationalism would respond with more negative emotions to the athlete activism”, explaining this using evidence that “when an act occurs that threatens an individual’s feelings of nationalism, or a group’s collective ideals of what nationalism is – for example, kneeling during the national anthem – it is expected that members of the ingroup will respond

in such a way that will mitigate this threat to their collective identity and reinforce their own self-esteem” (Smith 2376–2378).

By 2020, and with the Trump administration established in the White House, the general patriotic devotion was resulting in many situations where athlete activists experienced backlash now increasingly from an anti-establishment and nativist fringe (Athlete activism is on the rise, but so is the backlash) further provoked by the pro-Trump media outlets. Fox News host Laura Ingraham is one example of many who said after LeBron James and Kevin Durant spoke out against Trump, “You’re great players, but no one voted for you. Millions elected Trump to be their coach. So keep the political commentary to yourself, or as someone once said, shut up and dribble” (Smith 2382). What had started with these media networks broadcasting protest footage of “former ‘fans’ setting Kaepernick merchandise on fire” for his role in initiating the NFL protests by use of the taking the knee gesture in 2016 (Brown and Foxx 63) has now spread up to the very top of U.S. politics and into all U.S. sports.

Taking the knee in British football

In 2021, a similar scenario began to unfold in Britain, but this time within Boris Johnson’s anti-European hard Brexit conservative government. In 2019, in support of U.S. athletes taking the knee across the Atlantic, the gesture entered European sport as players within the English Premier League started to take the knee before kick-off. The gesture would eventually be adopted by both the England and Wales national teams for the Euro 2020+1 (Back and Mills; Strange; Dixon et al.) resulting in a flashpoint between British politics and sport unlike ever seen before.

Disapproval of the English team taking the knee first surfaced lower down in the ranks of Conservative MPs in the Facebook posts of Lee Anderson, who began accusing the national team of inappropriately supporting a political movement. Anderson’s post read, “For the first time in my life, I will not be watching my beloved England team whilst they are supporting a political movement whose core principles aim to undermine our very way of life” (Tory MP ‘to boycott England’s Euro 2020 matches’ over players taking the knee). This opened the door for other Tory MPs to add their condemnation.

Conservative MP Brendan Clarke-Smith accused the England manager of insulting the intelligence of England fans as “they are just sick and tired of being preached and spoken down to. They are there to watch a football match, not to be lectured on morality.” Clark-Smith argued that the England team “were misguided and should have devised their own campaign at the time.” He continued to explain: “Black Lives Matter is a political movement and also promotes some quite eccentric and extreme policies, such as abolishing the nuclear family and defunding

the police, as well as many others” before urging the England team to “learn some lessons” from their errors (Tory MP ‘to boycott England’s Euro 2020 matches’ over players taking the knee).

The finale to the issue came after England’s 2nd place finish in the UEFA EURO 2020 final in London at Wembley Stadium in July 2021. Now, Priti Patel, the UK Home Secretary, had entered into the argument and “boldly stated that fans had the right to boo the England team, who were indulging in ‘gesture politics’” (Back and Mills 111). When confronted during Prime Minister’s Questions in Parliament, Boris Johnson refused to support nor condemn his MP. An environment of acceptable hostility had now been established where the English football team could be “criticised by Conservative MPs and B-list celebrities alike, [as] these sportsmen drew political ire for using their position to strike the pose in protest” (Back and Mills 111).

The use of gentle protest to avoid backlash

It is critical to understand the connections between the above examples of activism and national backlash to acknowledge the widespread belief that protest is in opposition to power. *The Activist Handbook explains*: “People who do activism reclaim their agency in deciding what kind of world they want to live in. Activism helps us bridge the gap between what needs to be done and what our governments are willing to do” (What Is Activism). This makes activism changeable as governments come and go with contradictory policies.

Athlete activism, however, varies significantly from many other forms of political activism due to its celebrity nature and the sheer size of its global platform. Athlete activists directly connect politics to sport and media when “athletes use their platform (visibility, inherent social power, and wealth) to speak out or build awareness about a cause or issue” (Supporting the Athlete in Society). Both the athlete’s fame and the global platform also greatly intensify the intended backlash due to overactivism that can escalate to national or even international political controversies. For this reason, athlete activists must act exceptionally carefully, knowing that their actions could find powerful opponents.

Gentle protest is a possible cure to overactivism based on identifying a way to make activism work by avoiding the extremes of oppositional confrontation. Fundamental to this is that activists should think carefully about their actions and the outcomes they may bring, as this can determine whether their actions may be considered advocacy or activism. To retain integrity while avoiding backlash, it is recommended that activists conduct their activism in a “way that models the world we want to live in” (Corbett 39). So, if an activist desires for the world to be peaceful, they should plan this into their strategy.

No academic literature on gentle protest in professional sports was available at the time of writing. However, recent studies on gentle forms of activism have occurred within the art and craft world (which sport, at a stretch, could also be argued to be). In Sarah Corbett's *How to be a Craftivist: The Art of Gentle Protest*, the author succinctly explains the logic behind non-confrontational activism. Corbett suggests: "Sometimes it is more effective to find a gentle way to help other people deliver the change we need in the world", believing the key to this is ending preconceptions of protest "as only being about shouting in a crowd" which causes a "negative connotation of the word 'protest'" and where "doing good is framed as anti-bad". Instead, Corbett encourages activists to become gentle where "to engage with people gently is to be thoughtful about your actions, consider carefully the most effective approach to each situation and keep an eye on the detail so nothing is neglected or rushed" (37–38). This represents the opposite of the hard-hitting sensationalist news channel rhetoric with strong political agendas.

Jonathan Cinnamon's article "*Power in Numbers/Power and Numbers: Gentle Data Activism as Strategic Collaboration*" also supports this position. Like Corbett, Cinnamon claims the most effective data activism is "strategically non-oppositional or 'militant'" instead choosing to pursue a "careful, consciously moderated strategic mode of action". Cinnamon then further expands his arguments by providing possible reasons why this may be the case, including the element of human connection, "acting gently modifies action so that it is experienced as recognising, and adequately responding to, the intersubjective and more-than-human capacities to affect, and be affected by others" (2). It is this ability to involve rather than divide that makes gentle protest such a powerful tool in the activist's kit while at the same time making backlash less plausible.

As Kaufman's 2008 landmark article on backlash entitled 'Boos, Bans, and Other Backlash: The Consequences of Being an Activist Athlete' concludes that athlete activists benefit most when they learn how to "distinguish between harmless altruism and backlash-producing activism" (226) as this was the most important lesson learnt from the past experiences of many athlete activists who jumped into national politics only to receive an "education from their activism [where they] did not expect their actions to result in such intense reactions" (232).

Case study: Robert Lewandowski's 'pointing the finger'

This paper will now examine the activism and advocacy in an event involving Robert Lewandowski to show how it is possible for an athlete to navigate the minefield of domestic national politics. Lewandowski is Poland's most successful footballer and the captain of the Polish national team. He has scored over six hundred senior career goals for club and country and was named Polish

Footballer of the Year nine times and Polish Sports Personality of the Year three times. In 2014, he began the most successful period of his career to date at Bayern Munich, where he remained until joining FC Barcelona in 2022 for a total fee of over \$50m. Lewandowski won the Best FIFA Men's Player Award in 2020 and 2021.

In addition to Lewandowski's football background, it is also essential to include information on the volatile political situation in his home country of Poland, which has significantly grown since October 2015 when the Law and Justice Party (PiS) came to power. Upon gaining a political majority, the new government began a range of reforms, often reversing previous pro-European reforms, which NGO-published academic literature on human rights now claimed to be "problematic cases during the previous government period that could be seen as imposing disproportionate restrictions on freedom of speech" (Zych). However, the previous government and their supporters saw this very differently, with rival progressive human rights NGO literature perilously labelling Poland's changes as a "slide toward what can appropriately be termed illiberalism" (Kostrzewski 1). Just one year after Lewandowski's departure to Germany, an endless series of public protests began that met with severe governmental backlash. During the protests against further change to the Polish Constitutional Tribunal in 2017, "party leader Kaczyński and his officials called the concerned citizens protesting in Poland's streets 'scumbags' and 'traitors'; his justice minister argued that a European conspiracy organised protestors. The government's media mouthpiece argued that the protests were pre-planned by foreign PR firms and George Soros" (Kostrzewski 2).

From 2015 onward, Robert Lewandowski continued playing professional football in Germany and avoided any controversy and backlash accompanying political activism. This resulted in accusations being levelled at Lewandowski of wanting to protect his numerous personal sponsorship deals. However, this pressure was then partly relieved by the actions of his wife, Anna Lewandowska (a multiple medalist at the World and European Karate Championships), who had been more vocal (Anna Lewandowska zabrała głos w sprawie aborcji. "Prowadzę tę walkę od lat"). Until 24 February 2022, and the escalation in the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Lewandowski avoided direct association with political activism and instead maintained a cultured and dignified personal profile more in line with a national diplomat. While writing this article, the author attempted to contact Lewandowski through his agent to clarify his motivations behind 'pointing the finger' in the match against England and if this action was pre-planned but did not receive a reply.

The idea of a star professional footballer pointing at the UEFA RESPECT badge on their sleeve as a form of protest was never UEFA's plan or intention. Nevertheless, nearly 15 years after UEFA launched their first major social responsibility program, this simple act has become one of the most prominent gestures available to athletes wishing to stand up for the values UEFA's social awareness scheme represents.

The 'RESPECT' program, originally named 'Unite Against Racism', was started by UEFA for EURO 2008 in Switzerland/Austria as just one of five partner social responsibility campaigns. It was the first time that UEFA had committed to such a large-scale social project, and, unfortunately, during EURO 2008, many efforts fell flat as double standards and paradoxes surfaced within UEFA itself. However, by the end of the tournament, the organisation had learnt an important lesson. They had issued a simple badge with the word RESPECT to be placed on the free area of the left shirt/jersey sleeve of all participating players, which had become an indisputable success. Based on a single non-confrontational and apolitical term, it showed how it was possible to unite everyone under the goals of a social responsibility program.

Unlike other campaigns, there was close to no media backlash to the promotion of UEFA RESPECT and the idea caught on so well that by the end of UEFA EURO 2008, it was agreed to extend the scheme into all future UEFA competitions and to make it an opt-in scheme for top European clubs to wear the badge during domestic matches. After EURO 2008, the next major event for UEFA was EURO 2012, held in Poland/Ukraine, which presented more significant social problems as both countries had long-established reputations for racism both within their domestic societies and national football leagues. In preparation for the tournament, UEFA launched the improved and now renamed 'RESPECT' social responsibility program, including the 'RESPECT Diversity' campaign. The host Poland, then under a strongly pro-European government, took its role very seriously, with the Warsaw-based Polish NGO 'NEVER AGAIN' coordinating an extensive range of educational and promotional events to remove racism from Polish football permanently. The tournament and social responsibility campaign were later claimed to be a great success (Jurczyszyn 251).

The gesture of pointing at the RESPECT badge originated as a response to the Welsh national squad taking the knee before kick-off at the FIFA World Cup Qualifier between Wales and the Czech Republic on 30 March 2021. Wales had announced in advance that they would be taking the knee, and the Czech team, not wishing to join them, opted to point at their UEFA RESPECT badge instead. An official statement from the Czech Football Association read: "To express their support for the fight against racism and other displays of discrimination, xenophobia and antisemitism, the Czech national team will point to the UEFA Respect inscription on the left sleeve of their jerseys, referring to the UEFA campaign of the same name, before the match in Wales [on 30 March 2021]" (Europe Divided on Taking the Knee during EURO 2020 Football Tournament).

This same sequence of events was repeated the following day at Wembley Stadium when England faced Poland in their FIFA World Cup 2022 Qualifier on 31 March 2021. As Benson describes, "To express their objection, the Polish representatives, before the first whistle of the match with England, pointed

to the 'UEFA RESPECT' inscription on the left sleeve of the jersey, which refers to the campaign conducted by the European federation against racism, xenophobia and intolerance" (Robert Lewandowski leads Poland players' gesture while their fans boo England for taking the knee). To explain their decision on why not to join England in taking the knee, the Polish Football issued a statement explaining that they were taking a "neutral and apolitical stance towards the 'Black Lives Matter' initiative before the game against England at Wembley" (PZPN) – a position further clarified by Polish FA President Zbigniew Boniek who said, "I am absolutely against such actions" (Which Euro 2020 Teams Have Taken the Knee and Will Italy Kneel against England in the Final?). Both the Wales/Czech Republic and England/Poland matches were played in empty stadiums during the pandemic, so the acts of taking the knee and pointing the finger occurred without a reaction from a live audience. Robert Lewandowski did not play in the match against England due to injury.

For EURO 2020, played in June 2021, just three months after the above mentioned world cup qualifiers, the Polish international team declared in advance that they would not be taking the knee, then managed to avoid all further issues on the subject as all their EURO 2020+1 matches were against sides who had also chosen not to take the knee: Sweden, Spain and Slovakia. Pointing the finger did not feature in EURO 2020 until England met the Czech Republic on 22 June 2021, when the "Czech Republic did not take the knee in any of their Euro 2020 matches. When they played England, they decided to point to the UEFA Respect logo in their sleeves on that occasion as a 'neutral, apolitical gesture'" (Which Euro 2020 Teams Have Taken the Knee and Will Italy Kneel against England in the Final?).

This now brings us to the main incident in our discussion. On 8 September 2021, Poland played England in the FIFA World Cup 2022 Qualifier at the PGE Narodowy Stadium in Warsaw, Poland, in front of 56000 passionate Polish supporters. As expected, England took the knee before kick-off while Poland remained standing and, as they did, booing and whistling were heard throughout the stadium. On live talkSPORT internet radio commentator Jim Proudfoot described the moment: "England players taking the knee. Boos from some of the Polish supporters. Moreover, as they do, Robert Lewandowski just pointed to the RESPECT badge that was on the side of the sleeve of his shirt. A nice touch, making his point to the Polish supporters" (Robert Lewandowski leads Poland players' gesture while their fans boo England for taking the knee).



Fig. 1. Poland vs England, FIFA World Cup 2022 Qualifier, 8 September 2021, PGE Narodowy, Warsaw, Poland (Image from the webpage: Football world seethes over 'appalling' crowd scenes).

Robert Lewandowski's action was the gentlest of gestures. However, at that exact moment, the nation's cameras were all pointing at him, and his expression of great disappointment in his fellow Polish nationals said it all. Lewandowski had politely and discreetly pointed out to a stadium and nation of Polish fans, in footage broadcast live around the world, that racial intolerance continued to exist and was now making a return to acceptability in Poland. Despite the intense political complexities behind the situation, Lewandowski's criticism did not incur significant backlash from the public, media, or government.

One explanation for the success of Lewandowski's gentle protest in avoiding overactivism and backlash could be its use of advocacy for UEFA's RESPECT at the same time as its activism. From this perspective, Lewandowski's gesture was an expression of support for the global social and political values of international sport as supported by UEFA and FIFA. Lewandowski's actions had been conducted behind an international sports organisation's protective screen that potential sources of backlash would choose not to challenge. Furthermore, this screen was a scheme that Poland was fundamental in constructing, grounding Lewandowski's response in a long history between Poland and UEFA stretching back to the work conducted by 'NEVER AGAIN' in preparation for the EURO 2012. It was consistent with the long-term goals established at the top level of Polish football that sat above the new wave of nationalism and protest that had swept over the country since 2015. Lewandowski was simply confirming his conviction in his beliefs and commitment to higher values in the same way as a Christian may mark a cross on their chest.

While the England team's activism continued to remain embroiled in all the ongoing controversies surrounding taking the knee, Lewandowski's gentle protest achieved a visible effect without experiencing significant adversary backlash. Immediately after the match, liberal Polish online media sources celebrated Lewandowski's beautiful gesture that showed his great class (*Piękny gest Roberta Lewandowskiego przed meczem z Anglią*), describing it as eloquent behaviour (Robert Lewandowski był zdegustowany gwiazdami kibiców). The state-owned TVP Sport, which had transmitted the event live on national television and online, withheld from reporting the incident on their website in any shape or form.

In Robin's 2014 academic paper on activism in South Africa, the author sums up what seems most likely to have happened by explaining: "These strikingly different activist strategies also seem to manifest themselves as contrasts between the politics of the instant media spectacle and the patient, long-term organisational work of 'slow activism'". Robin's 'slow activism' concept shows that "the activist's problem becomes how to translate the realities of 'ordinary', ongoing suffering into media-friendly images and texts that can evoke empathy and action" rather than the anger and emotion of sensationalism that "eventually leads to apathy, indifference and moral fatigue" (Robins 91-95).

Conclusion

The lack of backlash to Robert Lewandowski's gentle yet bold athlete activism serves as a notable example of how much can be achieved through purposely not going head-to-head with those in power whom you are now asking to change. Against the context of current Polish politics, his action of pointing the finger was activism, yet held in the context of FIFA's RESPECT campaign, established in Poland, was an act of advocacy and Polish pride. The gesture sat balanced on a fine line between both, where a more confrontational gesture would have encountered backlash and a less confrontation gesture gone unnoticed.

Mass media publications on Lewandowski since his action, including his transfer to FC Barcelona, confirm that the event did not damage his position as Poland's favourite footballer and primary sports diplomat. The act was neither a detriment to his career nor his reputation and allowed Lewandowski to go on to make even more significant political statements. In February 2022, upon Russia's expanded military invasion of Ukraine, the Polish captain led a protest of the national team to boycott their upcoming world cup qualifying match against Russia. This time, the action challenged FIFA regulation and was supported by the Polish government. The event contributed to FIFA's banning Russia from all international competition in alignment with the UN policy of imposing sanctions upon the Russian economy (Poland Refused to Play Russia Once. It May Have to Do So Again).

Robert Lewandowski has been a significant figure in international football for over ten years, over which time he has occasionally become involved in politics without incurring detrimental consequences. He is now silent again but, if needed, is ready to speak out. In Smith's important article establishing the connection between athlete activism and the nationalist backlash, he summarised his proposed solution: "By re-framing the intent of the protest to align with the views of the reader/viewership more closely... editors and writers can narrate the story in a way that does not threaten the identity of their core audience" (2390). The political activism of Robert Lewandowski provides credible support for this.

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