Incident 4: Tommy Smith and John Carlos (Mexico, 1968)

In 1968, American society was in the grip of a civil rights movement in which African Americans sought to gain equal civil rights. Many politicians in the US were initially resistant to the movement, reflecting the views of a deeply divided society.

Some leaders of the civil rights movement urged their black athletes to unite and boycott the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City. Nevertheless, the athletes did not boycott the Olympic Games because they felt that participating in them and possibly winning an Olympic medal was important to them and their families. They also believed that competing at the Games benefited African-American people by demonstrating their abilities to the world. A boycott could not achieve these benefits.

An incident that highlighted racial issues, and the associated poverty and poor living conditions, occurred in Mexico just before the opening of the Olympic Games there. Mexican troops opened fire on hundreds of students who were protesting about the economic and social conditions that existed in Mexico at that time. This protest was followed by one of the most famous of all Olympic protests.

Tommy Smith and John Carlos, two African-American athletes, were picked as favourites to win the 200-metre track race. Smith and Carlos, who came first and third in the race, were both dressed in the US uniforms, but they also wore black socks. For their medal ceremony, both athletes appeared wearing the US tracksuit, a badge of the Olympic Project for Human Rights, and a black glove. When they appeared on the rostrum, both athletes received their medals with dignity, then turned to face their country’s flag and, during the national anthem, raised a black-gloved hand in a Black Power salute.

Smith and Carlos were immediately expelled from the Olympic Games. In explaining his action, Tommy Smith said: "If I win, I am an American, not a black American. But if I did something bad, then they would say I am a Negro".