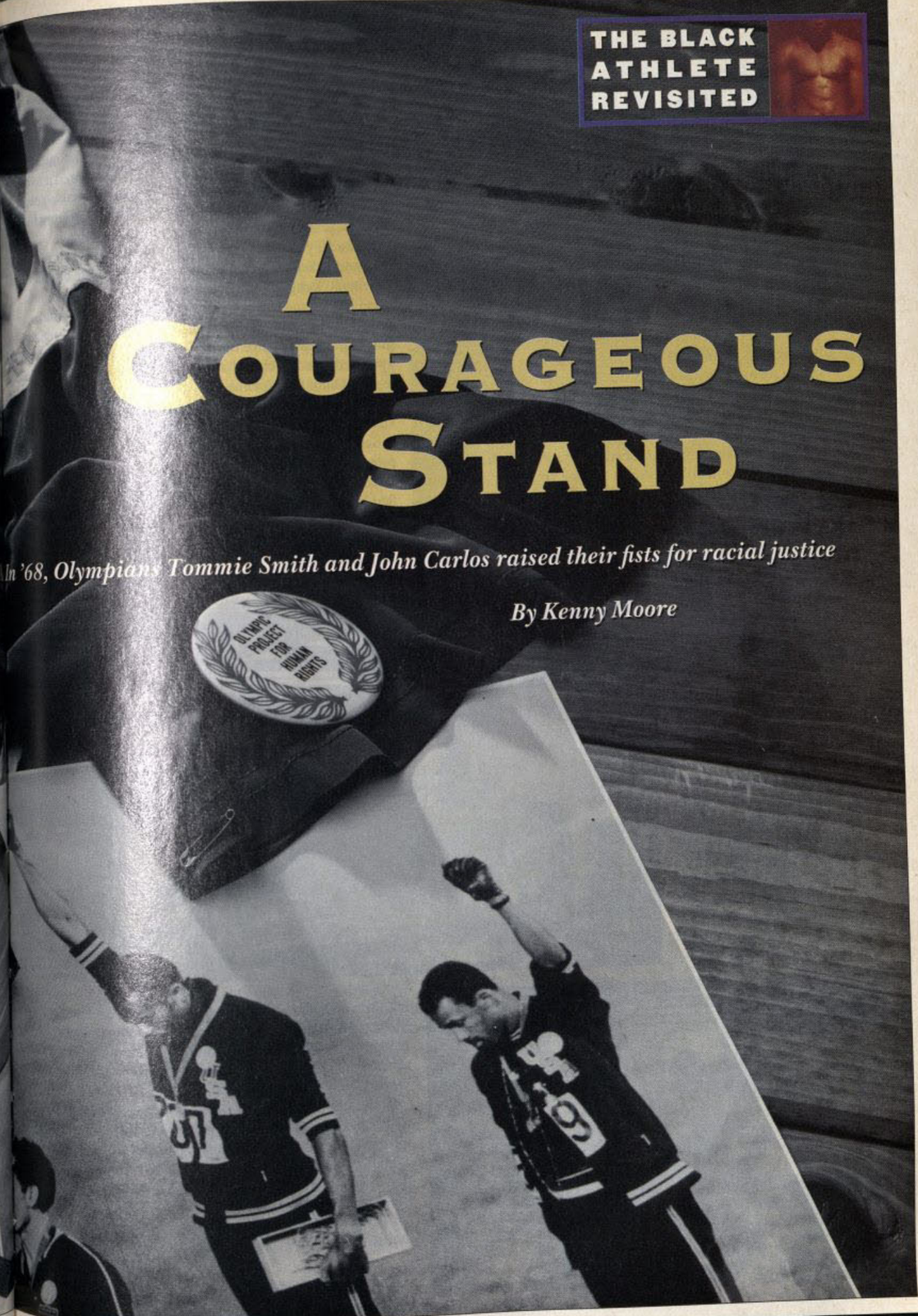
THE BLACK ATHLETE REVISITED

A COURAGEOUS STAND

In '68, Olympians Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their fists for racial justice

By Kenny Moore



COLLAGE BY BRIAN LANIKER; MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. BY AP; POLICE DOG BY CHARLES MOORE/BLACK STAR; RAISED FISTS BY AP

FIRST OF A TWO-PART SERIES

On OCT. 16, 1968, MINUTES AFTER THE Olympic 200-meter dash in Mexico City, gold medalist Tommie Smith and bronze medalist John Carlos stood in stocking feet on the victory platform, bowed their heads during the U.S. national anthem and shot black-gloved fists to the sky.

They meant their unshod feet to represent black poverty, Smith's black scarf and Carlos's beads to signify black lynchings, their fists to mean black unity and power. Any resemblance to Lady Liberty lifting her torch was ironic, for Smith and Carlos were taking U.S. society to task for having failed to extend liberty and justice to all.

The tableau was riveting and grim. Most of the 80,000 spectators in the Olympic Stadium seemed mystified. Over some applause there were boos, catcalls. "Those singing the anthem," Carlos remembers, "started screaming it out." As he left the field, it seemed to Smith, who had just set a world record of 19.83 seconds, that he saw the fangs and yellow eyes of wild animals. "Homo sapiens with hate in its face," he would say. "I threw my arm up again and said, 'Please, God, get me out of here.' "

He was delivered into a whirlwind of reaction. Smith repeatedly said that he loved his country and simply wanted it to be better. "It was not a gesture of hate," he said. "It was a gesture of frustration." Then he and Carlos were suspended from the U.S. Olympic team and thrown out of the Olympic Village.

In the 23 years since, Smith has, by necessity and by his own inclination, kept a low profile. He played on the taxi squad of the Cincinnati Bengals for three years. He was widely shunned. "All I had left for me was my education," he says. He took his master's in sociology from the Goddard-Cambridge Graduate Program for Social Change in Cambridge, Mass. He taught sociology and coached track and basketball for six years at Oberlin College in Ohio. And for the last 14 years he has taught sociology and coached track at Santa Monica College in California. He advised athletes who sought him out. A photo in his cell of an office in Santa Monica is inscribed, "To Tommie, national hero, from a protégé!" It is signed by Edwin Moses.

Yet Smith is not a public man. Save with friends or those certified by friends, he has rarely discussed the events of which he is indelibly a part. "Tommie's almost reclusive," says UCLA sprint coach John Smith. "He could teach white America a lot if he weren't so remote."

On Smith's wall hang a pair of California State Assembly resolutions commending him for church and community work. Smith's post-Olympic life has established that his gesture was neither self-promoting nor nihilistic. His was an act of conscience, so it is only to his conscience, that of a scholar, that we may appeal.

Thus it is put to him that any account of how this nation came to accept the civil rights of African-Americans remains incomplete without his dramatic two cents worth.

Smith is affected. "What I did grew directly out of my education as an American," he says. "So I guess I can't refuse to contribute to others'."

His words, once loosed, flow with such force and organization that it is clear they have been waiting for decades, lining up.

SMITH AND CARLOS CAME OF AGE IN A TIME OF VIOLENT ATTACKS ON BLACKS, FROM POLICE HOSINGS IN BIRMINGHAM IN '63 TO KING'S MURDER AT A MEMPHIS MOTEL IN '68.

essing against the dam. Too, it happens that Smith has the urneys of his youth preserved like peaches in brandy. He can n back, take a sip of memory, and everything comes over him, shly afire.

orn in Clarksville, Texas," he begins. "Red River County, ne 6, 1944. D Day. I was the seventh of 12 kids of James Rich- l Smith, cotton sharecropper. I had red hair, a red glow, red s. My mother, Dora, was Indian. I was the apple of her family. e died in 1970, at 57, of a coronary in church, listening to her ughters sing. Just as she had said she wanted to go." Words, in e Smith family, were not empty.

"Daddy is a quiet person," Smith continues. "Piercing eyes d a scowl. He looks through you. He was self-taught. He rned to read from studying the Bible. When I was little, I went rough the fields behind my father. I remember the muscles of e horses, and the earth dividing before the plow, the sound of e grass tearing, the smell of the wet earth. I followed them for urs, picking up worms."

As Smith the child totters in the furrow, Smith the man closes eyes, thrusts out his hands and breaks open the clods. The y he enters memory makes it seem as if he is overtaken by eam, but Smith always knows what will happen next, how rev- e ends.

"At five I started school, walking three miles, watching for cot- mouths in warm weather. On the farm, we raised hogs and ws. My father hunted meat. There was always corn bread. No res around. We went to one maybe twice a month. No, what did was pick cotton.

"A truck with white people in the cab would get us, our hogs d beds, and deliver us to a shack in another county, where we'd e for a few weeks, picking. We moved a lot like that. We got ybe a sixth of what we should have been paid for what we took m those fields.

"One day a big bus came. And I was confused, wondering why dad was giving the animals away. We kids were told to gather r clothes. I was given a little pee bottle, because once the bus d begun, it couldn't stop.

"We passed four days and four cold nights on that bus. When topped on a wet, foggy September morning, we were at a la- r camp. No heat, just bare cabins and wood benches. We were o miles from Stratford, 10 miles southwest of Lemoore, 40 les south of Fresno, in the San Joaquin Valley in California. at's where my whole life began."

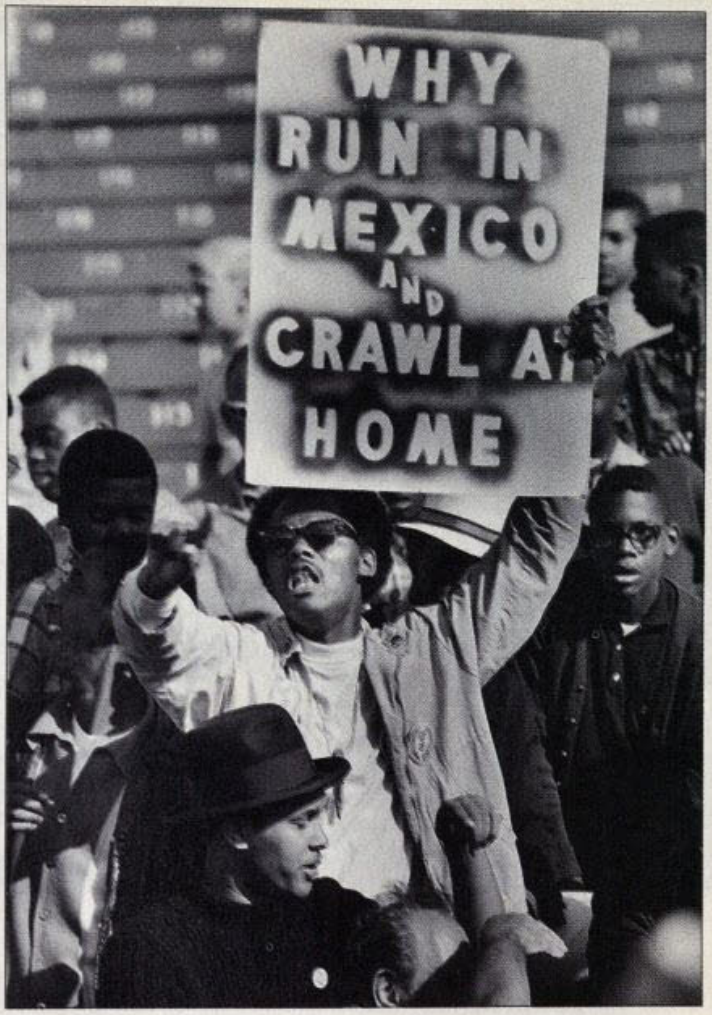
"Look there," Smith continues. "A cotton field a mile long, a arter-mile wide. Fifty heads are above the cotton, all black, all agging a long sack hooked over a shoulder. Two or three white en circling. We keep an eye on them. White men goosed my fa- er on the arm in the fields. All black men were supposed to be sey-goosey—Stepin Fetchit caricatures. My father was not.

"A white man stops at my sack. I see my dad ahead, rising up, lling off his sack, coming back to see what's the matter.

" 'He's half-picking this row!' says the field boss.

"My father protects us by being there. 'Tom,' he says, 'pick tter.' Then he goes toward the boss. 'You *never* handle my ls,' he says, low. 'You come to me first. *We* will deal with it.' I rshiped my father.

"One morning, the principal of Stratford Grammar School, a ite Smith, stopped the bus to the cotton field and said, 'Chil- en off to school.'



THE DEBATE OVER A BOYCOTT REACHED ITS CLIMAX AT THE L.A. TRIALS.

"My dad said, 'You don't tell my kids what to do.' They talked. My dad conceded that we came to California for us kids' education. So we got off the bus and I went to second grade.

"School was integrated, and it was my first look at white folks in any number. I remember the most amazing thing. One day my mother gave me a *nickel*. And I bought an ice-cream cone. And this white kid, Wesley, knocked it out of my hand and said, 'Niggers don't eat ice cream.' I didn't know *what* to do. I went home and pondered it in my heart.

"Three years later, when I was going to Central Union School in Lemoore, this kid transferred in. Walking home, I said, 'I know you?'

" 'I went to Stratford. . . .'

" 'Wesley!'

"They had to pull me off him. I beat him. Then I made him fetch our cows for a week."

In the fourth grade, Smith raced his older sister Sallie to see who was the fastest kid in school. "I ran all out, and I beat her for the first time!" His eyes glisten with the triumph. Smith the adult happily acknowledges the child within. "I can stare at a tree and be overcome by how simple life is," he says. "I'm a kid."

And he's back in sixth grade. "Pivotal year. I realized that academically I was very short. I could barely read. My language was bad, so I didn't talk. No attention was paid to those who needed it. That's when I started thinking of how to better teach school."

Thus the urge to improve self and system was present in Smith at age 12. "Seventh grade and now I'm sitting in the middle of the class. I'm working hard. Academically I'm on my way. But remember, identifying the problem was the crucial first step." Those words carry down the years, sensible and dangerous.

"In eighth grade I was six-foot-two-and-a-half and weighed 155 pounds. But that was the year it seemed like I didn't have to *hide* anymore." Sports-minded men took one look at Tommie Smith and approved. His height and speed let him dominate in basketball. He improved his 100-yard-dash time from 10.9 to 9.9 in the ninth grade, a consequence of lacing on his first spikes.

In his junior year at Lemoore High School he ran the 100 in 9.6, long-jumped 23 feet and met the quarter mile. "Against Hanford, our big rival, we needed points. Coach Burton said, 'Want to run the 440?'

" 'Sure, Coach.' That was my constant reply, 'Sure, Coach.' I'd never run it in my life. At the gun I went like it was a 200. I thought I was to die in the end."

The strength of the land was in him. He held on against the pain to finish in 47.7.

In 1963, having run the 100 and 220 in 9.5 and 21.1, long-jumped 24′ 6″ and high-jumped 6′ 5″, Smith went to San Jose State on a basketball-track-football scholarship.

"I did not want to go back to the fields. I wanted to be an all-American student," he says. "If you got clean shoes, a close haircut and a book in your hand, you had it right. Didn't miss class. Tommie Smith did not miss class. He was desperately tired sometimes, but he always made class."

Not that he aced everything. "I started out on academic probation and my little brain boiled in the library stacks and I still only got a 2.1 GPA as a freshman. Basketball had hurt my sprinting." Smith sat down uneasily before basketball coach Stu Inman. " 'Coach,' I said, 'I'm thinking track and field.'

" 'Tommie,' he said, 'I understand. Good luck. Come see us.'

"Now," says Smith, "I could *concentrate* on something."

San Jose track coach Bud Winter was the finest maker of sprinters of his generation. "A humanitarian," says Smith. "This white, middle-aged gentleman coached Lee Evans, John Carlos, Ronnie Ray Smith and me at a time when we were all quivering with the beginnings of the politics of the black athlete, and he never said a word to us about any of that. He simply coached us and left us free to live our lives creatively."

Winter asked his teams to perform killing drills designed to keep their form unshakable over the final decisive yards. "The high-knee drill, the LaBeach Reach, the perfect lean, you could feel them working," says Smith.

Winter sent his sprinters out to race with unaffected ease. "The key in competition is to push exactly to the point of tiredness or tightness," says Smith. "Push any harder and you stop."

As a sophomore in 1965, Smith pushed elegantly to a 20.0 for the straightaway 220, tying Frank Budd's world record. He was memorable for his acceleration—dubbed the Tommie-jet gear in the press—and for wearing dark sunglasses in races. He maintained that shielding his eyes from the sun kept him relaxed. (Nebraska sprinter Charlie Greene coolly responded by terming his own glasses reentry shades.) "Tommie loved those dark glasses because he was so shy," says Linda Huey, the lone female in Winter's sprint stable, who would become a lifelong friend of Smith's.

The rewards of Smith's performances and renown were largely spiritual. There was no money. Summers, Smith scrubbed floors at Lemoore Naval Air Station with his father.

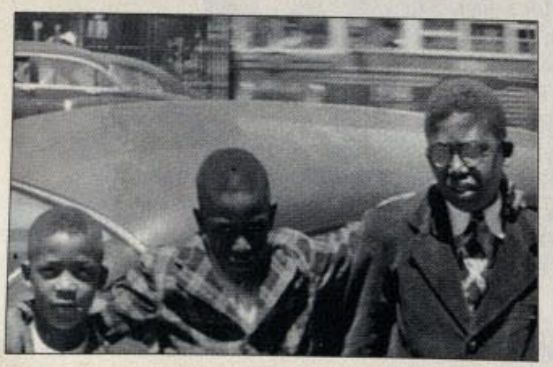
Quarter-miler Lee Evans, 2½ years younger than Smith, transferred to San Jose State from San Jose City College in 1965. Evans, too, had been seasoned by farm labor. "We think we saw each other in the Valley when we were kids," says Smith. "Cutting grapes."

"Tommie was my example," says Evans. "He went to class."

Otherwise, they were a contrast. Smith was contained. Evans was funny and bold. Smith was liquid grace. Evans was burly, head-rolling determination. "He was strength, I was speed," says Smith. When Smith and Evans became teammates and close friends, Winter kept them apart. "Subtly," says Smith. "He never said anything about it. We just always found ourselves in different events."

In 1966 Evans ran the 400 in 45.2 and was ranked first in the world at the distance. Smith set a world record of 19.5 for the

AS KIDS, SMITH (WITH SALLIE) AND CARLOS (LEFT, WITH BROTHERS ANDREW AND EARL) WERE AS DIFFERENT AS CALIFORNIA AND NEW YORK.



SAN JOSE STATE COACH WINTER KEPT HIS EYES ON TRACK TECHNIQUE AND NEVER CRITICIZED THE POLITICAL ACTIVITIES OF HIS STAR SPRINTERS, (FROM LEFT) EVANS, SMITH AND CARLOS.

aightaway 220. "One day in the spring of 1967," says Smith, ud said, 'Tom-Tom, in three weeks I'm going to put you in a arter with Lee in the San Jose Invitational.' Lee and I both d, 'O.K.,' but we both meant, Oh, god!"

"I think that was a race they had secretly agreed never to run," s Huey.

"Five thousand people were at the meet, half of them hanging t of the trees," says Smith. "I suggested to Lee that we just ise, give them a 46.5, give them some high-knee work. But e looked at me like, O.K., you do it, fool. So I thought, Uh-oh, ot to be careful here.

"The time came. We had an AAU starter in a red coat, official hell. Had timers at both 400 meters and 440 yards. I was in ne 3. Lee was outside of me in 4. In the blocks I hoped what I'd d had taken effect.

"At the gun I took two or three steps and rose up to be stylish, d here dirt was hitting me in the face from Lee digging out so rd. I went after him, but he was *out* there."

Evans led past the 220 in 21.5. Smith was four yards back in .9. Each was racing against type. Tradition said that Smith, th the superior top speed, should be the one building an early d. And Evans, with the superior stamina, should be running a ore even pace, to avoid burning out.

Tradition was right. "He'd gone too hard," says Smith. "I ught him off the last turn." Smith drove on with suppressed y to the finish. "I was so tired and so upset at him. When we re done I felt like slapping him, but I couldn't raise my arm."

Evans felt worse. Both walked away changed. Evans would never again misjudge pace. Smith would never again expect to find a friend in a competitor.

Smith had passed the 400 meters in 44.5 and finished the 440 in 44.8. Both were world records. "World records came about every two weeks in 1967," says Smith now. Before he graduated, counting relays, he tied or broke 11 records.

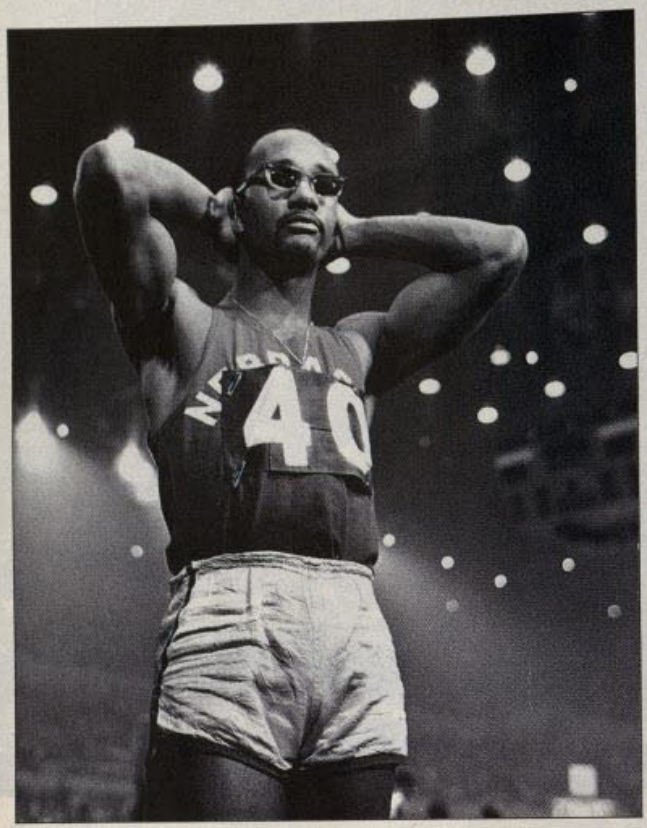
"By the time I was a senior," says Smith, "my grades were up to 2.5, 2.6, and I had a growing sense of really understanding what I was being taught."

Smith, hardly a campus radical, was in the Army Reserve Officers Training Corps. "I always made it a point to follow rules," he says. "Write me a rule and I follow it. But I was a genuine college student. And these were the 1960s."

Smith had come to manhood in the most compelling decade of the civil rights struggle. When Rosa Parks declined to give her seat to a white man and go stand in the back of a bus and was arrested, so beginning the Montgomery, Ala., bus boycott of 1955–56, Smith was 11.

When Freedom Riders were mobbed and beaten by 200 whites at a Montgomery bus station while local police stood aside, Smith was 17. The next year, in Oxford, Miss., white students and townspeople rioted, wounding 160 federal marshals and killing two bystanders rather than see James Meredith admitted to the University of Mississippi.

As Smith began college in 1963, four black girls were killed when the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham was bombed in reaction to school desegregation.



GREENE FELT IT WAS HIS DUTY AS AN AMERICAN TO RUN IN THE GAMES.

"I could read the Constitution," Smith says. "I could compare the writing of this land with its reality."

Smith, with his gift for vividness, remembered the cotton fields and began to fit himself into the black American experience. "I had the language now to really think about it," he says, "about what my father had endured from the field bosses."

Some injustice was nearer at hand. Other black San Jose State athletes had complained about discrimination in housing. "I went apartment-hunting," says Smith, "to test whether there was racism in San Jose. I'd find a nice apartment with a FOR RENT sign on the lawn. I'd get the people to come to the door. They'd say, 'No vacancies.'

"I'd get a blonde, blue-eyed girl to knock and ask if there was a room. And there was." Smith sighs. "There it was, five blocks from the gym."

In Smith's senior year, adding to the San Jose State ferment, one John Carlos appeared. A product of Harlem's P.S. 90, Frederick Douglass Junior High and Manhattan Vocational and Technical High School, Carlos had already run 9.2 in the 100 and 20.2 in the 200 at East Texas State. "I'd gone there not for the college but to get my wife, Kim, and daughter out of Harlem," he says. "I asked the recruiter if my kid could ride horses in Texas. He said, 'Yep.' I also asked about race relations. He said they were O.K. When we hit the airport, I realized my mistake.

"A black man couldn't get a beer in a bar in Austin, in the Texas state capital," Carlos continues. "I wanted to change it."

Carlos recalls that when he was interviewed by the East Texas State school paper, he described racism as he had seen it on campus. "I said how the football coaches called a black receiver who'd dropped the ball 'Nigger' or 'Nigra' or 'Boy.' The athletic department called a meeting of black athletes," he says. "We were told, 'You don't like it here, you can leave.' I said, 'I am leaving,' and I did, as quickly as I could."

Carlos returned to New York City, where he met with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Rev. Andrew Young and Harry Edwards, a former basketball player and discus thrower who taught sociology at San Jose State. They pointed out that Carlos could go to San Jose State with the help of student loans instead of an athletic scholarship. He transferred there in the spring of 1967, drawn also by the urge to beard the lions in their den. "Tommie Smith and Lee Evans were great runners," says Carlos. "I felt I was as great, so the only way to prove it was to get out there and take them on." Carlos and Smith would never be close friends.

Hoarse, abrasive, hugely talented, a fountain of jive, Carlos was a master of the gunfighter braggadocio of sprinters. "I'll save you niggers a piece of the tape," he would croak to the competition when settling into the blocks. He made it a rule to ignore rules, giving the impression that his manhood was somehow sullied by the need to train.

"Tommie Smith walked the path of righteousness," Hunt says. "He liked to feel he'd earned what he won. Carlos liked to feel he'd gotten *away* with something."

For some time, Smith and his roommate, S.T. Saffold, had known and been impressed by Edwards. "He was six-eight and 260, and that was the least of why he was imposing," says Smith. "He was magnetic. It was extraordinary to have an example like Harry: black, an A student, an athlete and a personality of force."

Edwards taught a class called Racial Minorities, which grew in attendance from 60 to 600 students in the 1967–68 school year. "A lot of militancy was rising in the black community," says Edwards. "We stopped referring to ourselves as colored or Negro. You were black or you were not black. An Afro haircut was a statement of black nationalism. Nineteen sixty-seven was the first year I was proud of my skin being black."

"Harry challenged you," says Smith. "He used whatever he could to stop you in your tracks and get you to listen—black jargon, profanity, jokes, threats or a Ph.D. soliloquy on history. [Louis] Farrakhan has nothing on Harry for eloquence."

In September 1967, Edwards urged the black students on the San Jose State campus, most of whom were male athletes, to exert the only leverage they had. "If they won't rent to us," he rumbled, "why should we run or play for them?"

A group of black students led by Edwards demanded that the university rule that housing and social and political organizations that were not open to all students not be open to any. If such action weren't taken, Edwards said, he and the students would do whatever necessary to disrupt the first football game of the season.

Fearing an outbreak of violence, San Jose State president Robert Clark canceled the game, infuriating Ronald Reagan, then California's governor, who publicly reprimanded Clark for allegedly allowing himself to be coerced by Edwards. Clark held talks with the protesters, and their demands were addressed.

An instrument had been created.

Edwards asked Smith, Evans and other black athletes, including UCLA basketball star Lew Alcindor (later Kareem Abdul-Jabbar), to a meeting to be held in late November in Los Ang

les. There they would test support for an Olympic boycott by black athletes to protest racial injustice in America.

The thought of surrendering his chance for an Olympic gold medal was repellent to Smith. "At first I didn't want to get involved," he says. "Why should I risk all I had? On the other hand, if I didn't use the influence I'd gained from being a world-class athlete, I wouldn't be doing my part in society."

"Come to the meeting," said Evans.

"I looked in the mirror," says Smith, facing it again in memory. "I took off my shades and looked harder. 'Tommie,' I said, 'what are you going to do?'

"The mirror said what mirrors say: 'Do you know what is right?' "

Smith knew. But he also knew that no social improvement has ever arrived without disproportionate sacrifice by a few human beings. He knew that sacrifice can get out of hand. He knew that if he joined this movement, he would move into the unknown.

JORDAN (TOP) AND BRUNDAGE TRIED TO STIFF-ARM THE NASCENT OLYMPIC PROTEST MOVEMENT.

Where does courage begin? Martin Luther King Jr. felt it flowing from the young, from the innocently fearless children who marched out singing to face Birmingham police commissioner Bull Connor's fire hoses, police dogs and jails.

Smith, this innate improver, was unencumbered by a true sense of how desperately human beings can hold on to their ingrained, exploitive ways. "I am a kid," he says. Innocence tipped the balance.

"Come to the meeting," said Evans.

"Reluctantly," says Smith, "I went."

The gathering of 50 or 60 athletes issued a list of demands to the U.S. Olympic Committee, asking that South Africa be barred from the Games (it already had been, but it was pushing for reinstatement), that International Olympic Committee president Avery Brundage resign because of his allegedly anti-Negro views, that a second black coach be added to the 1968 U.S. Olympic staff (joining assistant track coach Stan Wright), that Muhammad Ali be reinstated as heavyweight boxing champion (an issue with which the USOC had nothing to do) and that the New York Athletic Club cease its whites-only policy. If all this weren't done, the petition warned, black athletes would boycott the Mexico City Olympics.

"You can no longer count," boomed Edwards, "on the successors of Jesse Owens to join in a fun-and-games fete propagandized as the epitome of equal rights so long as we are refused those rights in white society."

Thus began the Olympic Project for Human Rights. Edwards's mention of Owens signaled a historic shift. The famed sprinter and jumper, whose four gold medals at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin had made a mockery of Hitler's Aryan-supremacy theories, embodied the tradition in which a black athlete was understood to be a "credit to his race."

Owens was always polite, always humble. He had never complained of having been reduced to racing against horses for a few dollars after the Olympics. He had never spoken ill of the hotels that turned him away, the restaurants that refused him service or the society that let this happen. Owens seemed to glory in overcoming obstacles. He preached that if a man worked hard enough, if he endured racial taunts the way Jackie Robinson and Joe Louis had, he would succeed, he would win the white man's respect and things would change.

Indeed, when news of an Olympic boycott reached the USOC, it would choose Owens to talk some sense into these angry new firebrands.

It wouldn't work. The great change was too far along. The new black athlete intended to stand as an equal with whites and point out the ills that needed curing.

To many Americans, this was simply insufferable. *Track and Field News* in December 1967 printed a sampling of letters that Smith and Evans had received. One from San Francisco read, "Smith: Thanks for pulling out. . . . I quit being interested in watching a bunch of animals like Negroes go through their paces. Please see what you can do about withdrawing Negroes from . . . boxing, baseball and football."

"How much," railed a letter from Fullerton, Calif., "are the Communists paying you to make damn fools out of your fellow Americans?"

"Why in hell," asked another, "don't you and all the jigaboo so-called athletes . . . try the Congo? Now, there is a leading country—cook pots and dung piles everywhere, but that is black culture. . . ."

The highest Olympic authority sounded uncomfortably like an aggrieved redneck. "If these boys are serious," said Brundage, "they're making a very bad mistake. If they're not serious and are using the Olympic Games for publicity purposes, we don't like it."

Owens sided with the established order, saying, "I deplore the use of the Olympic Games for political aggrandizement."

But Jackie Robinson, whose brother Mack had finished second to Owens in the 1936 Olympic 200 meters, had had enough. "I say, use whatever means . . . to get our rights here in this country," he said. "When, for 300 years, Negroes have been denied equal opportunity, some attention must be focused on it."

The U.S. Olympic track coach, Stanford's Payton Jordan,

IN L.A., SMITH (WITH BILL RUSSELL AND EDWARDS) WAS ON THE FENCE ABOUT A BOYCOTT.

piced disbelief. "There must be some coercion to have an individual who has worked so long and hard [to qualify for the Olympics] change his mind in the middle of the stream," he said.

On the other side, Rev. Young, then director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and later the man who would help bring the 1996 Games to Atlanta, wrote: "Dr. King applauds this new sensitivity among Negro athletes . . . and he feels that this should be encouraged. . . . Dr. King told me that 'this represents a new spirit of concern on the part of successful Negroes for those who remain impoverished.' "

In what seemed to be a reference to Owens, Young continued, "Negro athletes may be treated with adulation during their Olympic careers, but many will face later the same slights experienced by other Negroes. Dr. King knows that this is a desperate situation for the Negro athlete, the possibility of giving up a chance at a gold medal, but he feels that the cause of the Negro may demand it."

With that, the proposal was already a success. The howls of white protest were testimony to America's continuing racism. And with no less a leader than King expressing sympathy, the boycott idea was something every thoughtful black athlete had to address. A *Track and Field News* survey of black contenders for the U.S. Olympic team showed that one third (nine of 27) would at least consider a boycott.

This was a comfort to Smith, who was new to being reviled. "The people back home in Lemoore said, 'Oh, Tommie, you were always such a *nice* boy,' as if I were now evil beyond hope, beyond redeeming," he says wistfully.

Smith had married pentathlete Denise Paschal in 1967. In February 1968, their son, Kevin, was born. Now, Smith's life was in a holding pattern until after the Olympics, when he planned to serve his two-year military obligation. He also had professional football prospects. "The year before, S.T. Saffold had called me, yelling, 'You drafted, man.'

" 'Couldn't be,' I said. 'I'm in ROTC.'

" 'No, the Rams, the Rams, man.'

"Of course, I hadn't signed then," says Smith. "I couldn't until after the Olympics. Jim Brown contacted me to be my representative. I asked him to lend me $2,000, and he sent his agent to advance it to me against my signing."

Smith worked at the All-American Pontiac dealership in San Jose, washing and detailing cars until his employer, citing Smith's connection with the Olympic Project for Human Rights, let him go. "Meanwhile the hate mail kept coming, the mock plane tickets back to Africa. Someone killed Harry's dogs and left them in pieces. Harry counseled us not to be broken. They'd broken us this way for years."

Black athletes elsewhere were hardly new to mistreatment. Hurdler Leon Coleman was raised in the Roxbury section of Boston, then went to Winston-Salem College in North Carolina.

"Earl Monroe lived across the hall from me," recalls Coleman, who now teaches junior high school in Rocky Mount, N.C. "He and I and some other guys were taken out one night on a social-club initiation. The senior brothers tied us to a headstone in a graveyard. We had to get free and make it back to campus on our own. Well, we'd no sooner gotten the ropes off than we saw a Klan procession through the trees. They must have been coming back from a rally or something, marching in their sheets. We pressed ourselves down behind the wall of that cemetery and froze.

"They passed. We breathed again. We still had to get home. We caught a ride in the only vehicle out that night, a hearse. We pushed the body over, all climbed in the back, and actually beat the guys who'd taken us out there back to Winston-Salem. The stories that night, my lord! It was dawn before anyone could sleep."

And when they did, they had nightmares about the Klan coming upon them a few minutes earlier, when they had been bound and helpless.

In February 1968, the Brundage-led IOC, ignoring apartheid, obstinately readmitted South Africa to the Olympic Games. African and Caribbean nations, Cuba and the Soviet bloc were outraged, threatening to withdraw if the ban were not reimposed.

Suddenly it was conceivable that not one black athlete would appear that autumn in Mexico City.

Mexico and the U.S.S.R. pressured Brundage to call a special IOC session in April. There, South Africa was booted again. "It felt good," Smith says. "We had brothers around the world."

And at home. In March, in New York City, Carlos spoke with King. "I felt he'd find support for athletes who boycotted," Carlos says. "He was the only guy who would and could. Edwards was not in any position to do that then."

On April 4, 1968, King was assassinated in Memphis by James Earl Ray.

Larry James was then a Villanova sophomore from White Plains, N.Y., with a modest best of 47 seconds in the 440. He had looked forward to Villanova's first outdoor meet, at the University of Tennessee.

"Given that Dr. King was executed, so to speak, in Tennessee, some of us were uncomfortable," recalls James. "The team met. The agreement was that we had to be unanimous to not go. We weren't. So we went."

In Knoxville, James learned that when the news of King's death had been announced over the TV in the Tennessee student center, it had caused a standing ovation. Carrying that knowledge in the pit of his stomach, James jogged across the campus to the track meet. "A VW passed and I heard, 'Run, nigger, run!' I immediately started to walk. And I began to internalize things."

James went onto the track and won the 440 in 45.2. "Do you know what a 45.2 *means*, Burner?" yelled miler and Villanova team captain David Patrick, shaking him. "Third-fastest ever! It means *Olympics*, Burner!"

Three weeks later, James completed a running-start relay 440 at the Penn Relays in 43.9, the fastest ever.

Every black athlete of that generation had experiences like Coleman's and James's. They transformed fear, loss and rage into performance. "It was in us," says Smith, "the will to prove our worth."

But was a boycott the best way? Or should they stay with the way that defined them and run for their cause?

On the night of June 5, the recurrent, disorienting violence of 1968 erupted in Los Angeles. After winning the California presidential primary, Senator Robert F. Kennedy was slain by Sirhan Sirhan in a kitchen passageway of the Ambassador Hotel. Seizing the pistol from the assailant's grasp that night was Kennedy's aide Rafer Johnson, the 1960 Olympic decathlon champion. As it had when King was shot, hope drained away amid the screams. Every fear, it seemed in that year of agony, was justified.

Because Mexico City's 7,350-foot altitude needed getting used to, the U.S. conducted preliminary Olympic track and field trials in late June in Los Angeles and invited the athletes who qualified to a summerlong high-altitude training camp above South Lake Tahoe, Calif. The final trials would be held there, at Echo Summit, in September.

At the L.A. trials, the black male athletes met. Of 26 favored to make the team, 13 said they would boycott. But top 100-meter men Jim Hines and Charlie Greene were adamant that they would compete. "It comes down to whether you're an American or not," said Greene, who would go on to a 20-year career in the Army. "I am American, and I'm going to run."

To hold unity, the boycott was abandoned. Blacks would take part in the Games, do their damnedest to win, and then, if one's conscience demanded it, make a gesture on the victory stand. "Things were still hypothetical, since the team wasn't set," says Evans. "I thought we'd wear black armbands or something."

The black athletes threw themselves into the summer of training. At the Echo Summit camp they lived in trailers near a red Tartan track that enclosed an infield of granite boulders and pines. The scene resembled an elaborate bonsai garden. The long-jump runway ran out of the forest. Upon it, Bob Beamon was the most deerlike.

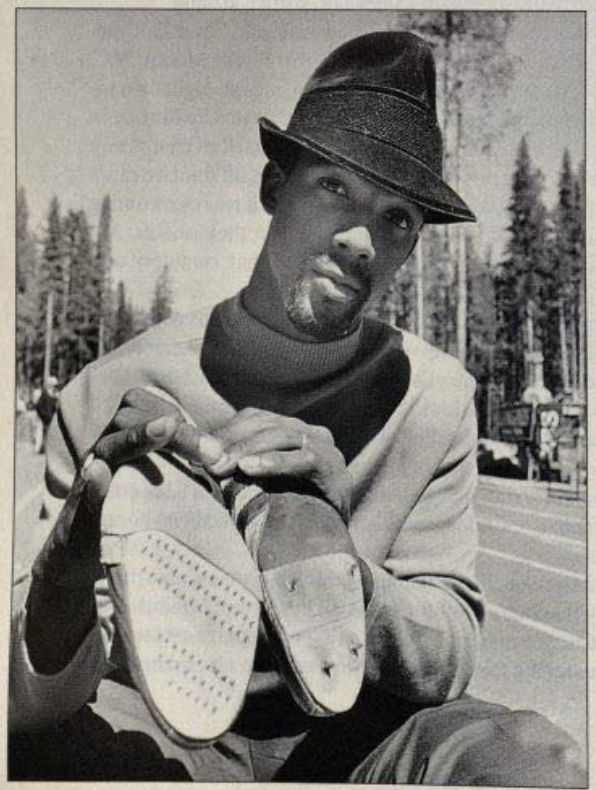
Evans, James, Hines, Greene, Coleman, Beamon, long jumper Ralph Boston, hurdlers Willie Davenport and Erv Hall, sprinters Ronnie Ray Smith and Mel Pender, quarter-milers Ron Freeman and Vince Matthews, even Carlos, did the work of their lives. "You'd go to the track at dawn," recalls Freeman, "to sneak in four or five 200s, and here would be Lee or John already *doing* them."

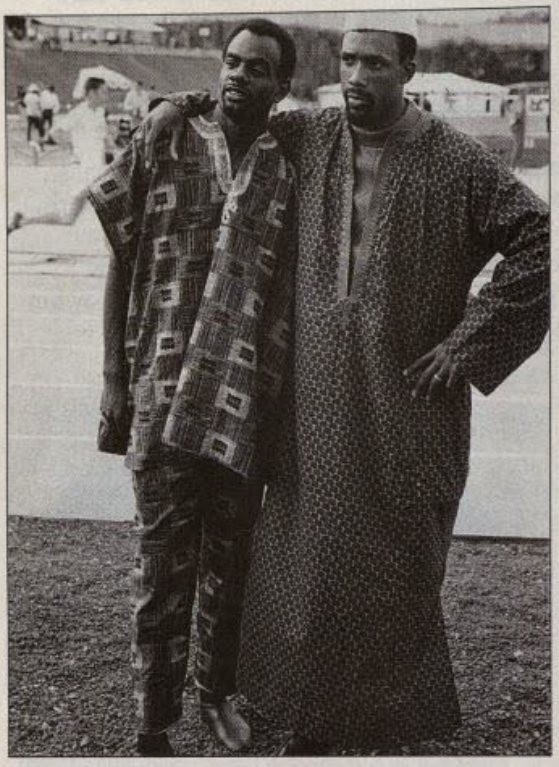
"We trained to beat each other, but we shared mutual admiration," says Carlos. "That was the great chemistry, the texture of that summer. Tahoe was a fun resort. Guys came and guys left. And you could look at every one and know whether he was going to make the team."

Carlos had suffered a torn right hamstring at the time of the Los Angeles trials, so he had been advanced to the Tahoe finals by official fiat—but, oddly, was permitted to run only the 200 meters. "Stan Wright had been Jim Hines's coach at Texas Southern, and I think he was protecting Hines by keeping me out of the 100," says Carlos. "Then, at a meet in Vancouver, Tommie and I and Jim Kemp and Charlie Mays raced the No. 1 U.S. 400-meter-relay team [Greene, Pender, Ronnie Ray Smith and Hines]. I asked Wright, 'If we win, can we have a runoff for the relay?' He said yes. We won, but there was no runoff."

These events offended Carlos's considerable self-esteem. He

AT TAHOE, CARLOS'S UNORTHODOX SHOE (LEFT) SPIKED HIS 200 WORLD MARK.





IN MEXICO, COLEMAN'S AND CARLOS'S GARB MADE A STATEMENT.

began to look to the 200 in the final Olympic trials as an occasion for satisfaction.

Smith, recovering from diarrhea he had contracted on a trip to Germany, reached the final trials in less than peak condition. He ran only the 200.

"Carlos was ready," he says, "but I was distracted. The USOC had sent us a letter saying any athlete who didn't perform in honor of the United States would be sent home from Mexico. Ralph Boston—who'd originally been against the boycott—drafted what we replied: 'Get off our backs and let us train.' "

In the starting blocks, Smith put it to himself that he had no choice but to make the team. "They were all in my head, all the calls, all the meetings, all the racists screaming for me to fail."

At the gun, the muscular Carlos, a magnificent sprinter of turns, bolted to a huge lead, then held off Smith in the stretch to win in a seeming world record of 19.7. But Carlos had worn shoes with dozens of tiny spikes. The rules allowed but six. "They're not spikes," he said. "They're brushes."

"Officials were out on the track before I'd come to a stop, telling me it wouldn't count," says Carlos now. "They *loved* telling me that." The record would not be accepted. Thus his great race, rather than establishing his true sprinting supremacy, became one more case in which he felt wronged by authority. "I always used to say, 'We ain't windup toys,' " says Carlos. " 'We don't hop out of the closet and perform. I'm a man unto myself.' That never seemed to penetrate."

No, because it called for acceptance of the basis of civil rights, of all civility: an even break. So now, since he had proved himself the best, and since things were to be stacked against him even on the track, he could feel his need ebbing for white society's main prize. "After the 19.7," Carlos says, "I did not care about the gold."

Smith's second-place finish put him safely on the U.S. team, which gathered in Denver to be outfitted before the Games. "There, we learned that Brundage had attacked the black athletes," says Evans. "He said we were lucky to be *allowed* on the team. If he hadn't come out like that, I don't think anything would have happened."

What happened was one last, poignant meeting. "Imagine the eagles we had there," says Evans. "And we were going to run. But what *else* could we agree to do? I suggested we run in black socks. Somebody yelled, 'I can't *run* in *any* socks.' People were scattered, thinking of the careers they were going to, some in football, some the military."

"It boiled down to a clash," says James, "between the good—doing good for all mankind—and the *gold*: the individual's self-interest. There was, shall we say, counseling back and forth to sort out the two."

Then Smith stood. "I hold no hate," he began, "for people who can't make a gesture, whatever the reason. But I have to preserve the honor of Tommie Smith. I'm an American until I die, and to me that means I have to do something. I don't know what I'll do. But we have to make worthwhile this last year."

And there it was left. "We all went out and got haircuts," says Evans.

"I left," says Smith, "wondering how I was going to carry this load alone. The decision to go our own ways eliminated what need I had to protect my teammates, but I knew any protest would risk volatile reaction. I felt one person had to take responsibility for it."

They flew to Mexico City and were bused to the Olympic Village. They saw soldiers and broken glass on the streets. Gasoline trucks carried armed guards. A student demonstration protesting the Mexican government's social policies had been fired upon by Mexican soldiers and riot police. Forty-nine people were killed and several hundred wounded.

As the Olympics began, Smith was a man in search of a gesture. "It had to be silent—to solve the language problem—strong, prayerful and imposing," he says. "It kind of makes me want to cry when I think about it now. I cherish life so much that what I did couldn't be militant, not violent. I'll argue with you, but I won't pick up a gun.

"We had to be heard, forcefully heard, because we represented what others didn't want to believe. I thought of how my sisters cringed because they didn't want me to embarrass the family by describing how poor we were, when we *were* poor. No one likes to admit flaws, even though it's the first step to fixing them."

Symbols began to present themselves to him. He asked Dennis to buy a pair of black gloves. A few days before his race, Smith knew what he would do. He did not tell Carlos. Until the race was over, Carlos was a competitor.

The first Olympic sprint final was the 100 meters. Hines, with a world-record 9.95, won it going away from Jamaica's Lennox Miller and Greene. "It was my greatest race," Hines says now. "The greatest thing that will ever happen to me."

Brundage personally awarded the 100-meter medals. Hines and Greene stood at respectful attention during the anthem. "We thirsted for glory," says Greene, "and I wanted the U.S.A. to be better than every other country. I loved that."

TOMMIE FLUNG OUT HIS ARMS IN VICTORY AND THEN JOINED JOHN, WITH DENISE AND KIM, IN A FIST SALUTE.

Yet Hines had avoided shaking hands with Brundage. These re the last medals the IOC president would present at the ck.

After the semifinals of the 200 two days later, it appeared that ith would not stand on any victory platform. Carlos won the st semi in 20.11, unbothered by running in the tight inside ne. Smith took the second semi in 20.13, but as he slowed, he t a jab high in his left thigh. "It was like a dart in my leg. I went wn, not knowing where the next bullet was coming from."

As he crouched on the track, he knew he had strained or torn adductor muscle. All the work, he thought, was now useless. e raised his head and saw before him a familiar pair of hunting ots. They belonged to his San Jose State coach, Winter, who t him up, walked him to ice, packed his groin and then apped it.

The final was two hours later. "Thirty minutes before it, I went the practice field," Smith says. "I jogged a straightaway, then d one at 30 percent. It was holding. I did one at 60 percent, en one at 90. It held. Lord, don't let there be any delays, I ought."

As the eight finalists were led into the stadium, Carlos remem-ers saying to Smith, "I'm going to do something on the stand to t those in power know they're wrong. I want you with me."

Smith, Carlos recalls, said, "I'm with you."

"That made me feel good," says Carlos. "And it made the edal mean nothing. Why should I have to prove my ability hen they'd just take it away somehow? I made up my mind. ommie Smith gets a gift."

They were placed on their marks. "I took no practice starts," ys Smith. "John was in Lane 4. I was in 3. I calculated it this ay: Come out hard but keep power off my inside leg on the turn ith a short, quick stride. Then in the straightaway I'd maintain r four strides and attack for eight."

At the gun, Carlos was away perfectly. Smith ran lightly and ith building emotion. He felt no pain. Carlos came out of the rn with a 1½-meter lead. Then, a man unto himself, he swiv-ed his head to his left and, he says, told Smith, "If you want the gold, stop bull—— and come on." Smith didn't hear him. Eighty thousand people were roaring as Smith struck with his eight long, lifting strides. They swept him past Carlos.

"I pulled back on the reins," Carlos says now. "America deprived our society of seeing what the world record would have been."

"If Carlos wants to say that," Smith says, "I applaud him for his benevolence."

"The medal meant more to Tommie," says Carlos. "Everyone got what he wanted, even Peter Norman." Carlos slowed so much that Norman, an Australian sprinter, caught him at the line for second.

When Smith knew he had won, he threw out his arms. He still had 15 meters to go. "I guess if I'd calculated a 12-stride attack, the time would have been 19.6," Smith says now. That record would have stood to this day.

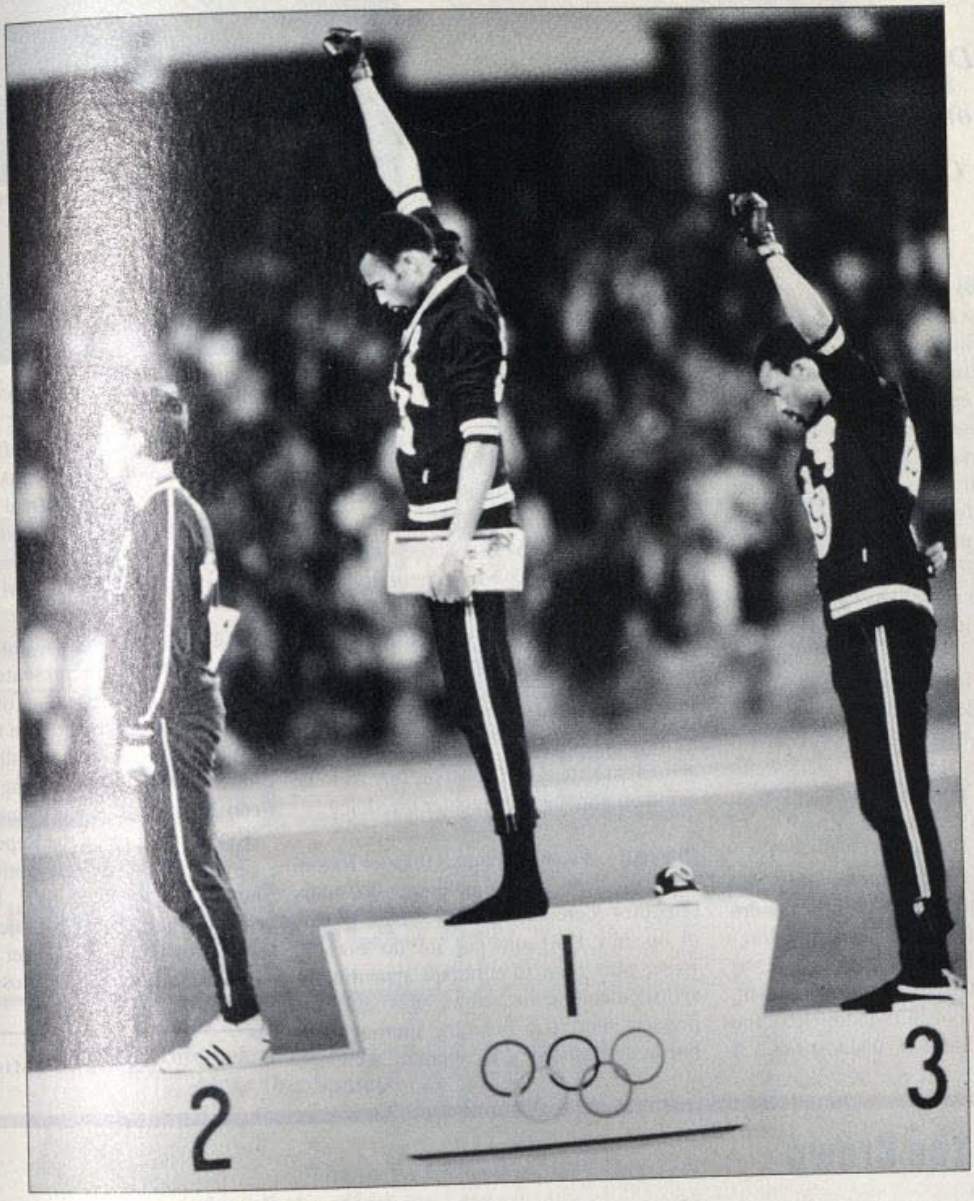
He crossed the line with his arms outflung at the angle of a crucifix. His smile was of joy, relief and vindication. When he came to a stop, he felt resolve cool and strong in him.

The medalists were guided through a warren of stone tunnels under the stadium to a room that held their sweatsuits and bags. "It was a dungeon under there," says Smith.

He went to Carlos. "John, this is it, man," he said. "All those years of fear, all the suffering. This is it. I'll tell you what I'm going to do. You can decide whether you want to."

"Yeah, man," said Carlos. "Right."

"I got gloves here. I'm going to wear the right. You can have the left." Carlos slipped it on.



WITH NORMAN IN SUPPORT, SMITH AND CARLOS MADE THEIR STAND ELOQUENTLY.

Smith explained the symbolism of the gloves, the scarf, the stocking feet and the posture. "The national anthem is a sacred song to me," Smith said. "This can't be sloppy. It has to be clean and abrupt."

"Tommie, if anyone cocks a rifle," said Carlos, "you know the sound. Be ready to move."

Silver medalist Norman, who is white, overheard these preparations, and Carlos asked him if he would participate in the protest. Norman agreed, and Carlos gave him a large Olympic Project for Human Rights button. Norman pinned it to his Australian sweatsuit.

"I thought, In the '50s, blacks couldn't even *live* in Australia," says Smith. "And now he's going back there after doing this." (Norman would be severely reprimanded by Australian sports authorities.)

Smith, Norman and Carlos were placed behind three young Mexican women in embroidered native dress, each of whom carried a velvet pillow. Upon each pillow lay a medal. IOC vice-president Lord Killanin of Ireland, who would succeed Brundage in four years, and the president of the International Amateur Athletic Federation, the Marquess of Exeter, led them to the ceremony.

"As Killanin hung the medal around my neck and shook my hand," says Smith, "his smile was so warm that I was surprised. I smiled back. I saw peace in his eyes. That gave me a two- or three-second relaxation there, to gather myself."

Along with his gold medal, Smith received a box with an olive tree sapling inside, an emblem of peace. He held the box in his left hand, accepting it into his own symbolism.

Then the three athletes turned to the right, to face the flags. *The Star-Spangled Banner* began. Smith bowed his head as if in prayer and freed his young face of expression. Then he tensed the muscles of his right shoulder and began the irrevocable lifting of his fist. ■

NEXT WEEK: THE REACTION TO THE MEXICO CITY PROTEST AND HOW IT AFFECTED THE LIVES OF THE 1968 OLYMPIANS.