

# Edwards still raging against the machine

By **Mark Gallagher**



**D**R HARRY Edwards turned 75 last November but the renowned sociologist hasn't mellowed with age. Almost 50 years since he crafted one of the most iconic moments in Olympic history, there is still plenty in the world that makes him angry.

He should have been in a good mood last Wednesday when he lifted the phone. The sun was shining on America's west coast, the Golden State Warriors had recently won their second NBA title in three years and Edwards and his wife were planning their first visit to Ireland in the coming week.

'I am doing a lot better than I deserve given what I have done and what the world has done to me,' he observes from his California base. But, for the man behind the Black Power protest of Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Mexico Olympics, the plight of Colin Kaepernick is making him mad as hell.

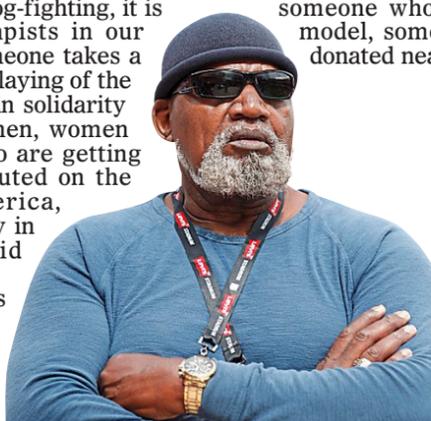
At a time when sport and politics are becoming intertwined as never before in the USA (the victorious Golden State Warriors are refusing to go to the White House), the former San Francisco 49ers quarterback currently finds himself without a job. And Edwards believes that it is because he had the temerity to take a knee during the national anthem, igniting a debate on the number of black people being shot in America.

Seattle Seahawks head coach Pete Carroll added fuel to the fire surrounding this past week when he suggested Kaepernick was as good as most quarterbacks in the NFL. But he still can't find a team.

'In terms of performance as a quarterback, are people seriously trying to tell me that Colin Kaepernick is not better than one of the 64 starting quarter-backs and back-up quarter-backs in this league, or the 32 emergency quarterback whose main function is simply to stand on the sideline, holding a clipboard?'

'What the owners in the NFL are effectively saying is that it is okay to have players guilty of domestic violence, it is okay for someone found guilty of dog-fighting, it is okay to have rapists in our league but if someone takes a knee during the playing of the national anthem in solidarity with the black men, women and children who are getting summarily executed on the streets of America, then he can't play in the league,' said Edwards (right).

'What that tells me is there are people in various positions in the NFL who are more concerned



## Due in Dublin this week, the man behind the Black Power protest at the 1968 Olympics hasn't lost his appetite for the fight

about someone who is making a statement about broadening the basis of democratic participation in American society, particularly with regard to people of colour, than they are with rapists, dog-fighters.'

Edwards is professor emeritus of sociology at University of California and has written several books including *The Revolt of the Black Athlete*, recently reissued ahead of its 50th anniversary. More than five decades at the interface of 'sport, race and politics' hasn't worn him out. He remains passionate and energetic as will be evident in Croke Park next Saturday when he gives the keynote address at the GAA Museum Summer School.

He's certain to mention Kaepernick in his talk as he sees echoes of what happened Muhammad Ali five decades earlier.

'What the NFL has done is turn someone who should be a model, someone who has donated nearly \$2 million

of his own money to urban community programmes, into a martyr. Just as the sports establishment did with Ali in the 1960s.

'When they turned him into a martyr, they succeeded in making him the most popular sportsperson on the face of this planet for 50 years. If you get into a competition against dead people, children, puppies or martyrs, you can't win,' Edwards explains.

Edwards started a movement of his own in the 1960s. A talented athlete on a track and basketball scholarship at San Jose University, the 6'8" Edwards became involved in the Civil Rights movement and set up the Olympic project for Human Rights which called for a black athlete boycott of the 1968 US Olympic team in an effort draw attention to racial inequity and barriers confronting black athletes in sport.

The full boycott never came to pass but, prompted by Edwards, Smith and Carlos made a stand after finishing first and third in the

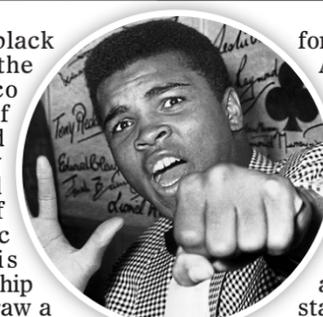
200m, giving the black power salute to the podium in Mexico City. He is proud of what he achieved then, but equally proud that he helped found sociology of sport as an academic discipline. It is through his scholarship that he is able to draw a line from Ali (right) to Smith and Carlos up to Kaepernick this year. 'If there was no Ali, there would have been no Tommie Smith or John Carlos, no Arthur Ashe, no Colin Kaepernick.'

'There are always waves of athletic activism that are framed by historical developments of the moment. Whether it's abject segregation with Jack Johnson all the way back in 1908, whether it was an effort to de-segregate with Jackie Robinson, or the Civil Rights movement of the sixties. We are in the fourth wave now that was framed by the Black Lives Matter movement.'

Professional athletes, especially in the US, make millions of dollars a year these days and have enormous economic power. But that doesn't lessen their courage for standing up. And Edwards reckons the example of Kaepernick will encourage other athletes.

'There has always been a fear of athletes, particularly black athletes, standing up

**STATEMENT:** Edwards is fuming at the treatment of NFL star Colin Kaepernick (left) after his decision to kneel for the American anthem



for what they believe in. African American athletes are still black in America, so you are still risking everything, including your life,' Edwards points out.

'It takes a tremendous amount of courage to make a statement when people say "play the sport, entertain us and then sit down and shut up". Especially when the message makes them uncomfortable.'

'If athletes want to play golf with the most politically-ignorant, pathetically un-informed President in our history, that's okay but if an athlete makes a stand for women's rights or the poor or the black men and women that are being shot on our streets, then they should know their place.'

And Edwards believes that the treatment of Kaepernick is just a continuity of history. 'Smith and Carlos lost everything. Ali lost three prime years in his boxing career. Arthur Ashe was reviled for his stand on apartheid and American support for it. And now Kaepernick can't get a job.'

No wonder that Harry Edwards, even at this point in his life, remains as mad as hell. There is too much in this world that still makes him angry.

■ The GAA museum summer school will take place in Croke Park from next Thursday to Saturday. More information at [www.gaa.ie](http://www.gaa.ie)

“What the NFL have done to Kaepernick is turn him into a martyr”

