

# **RACING WITH DOUBLE STANDARDS: POLITICAL NEUTRALITY AND ATHLETE ACTIVISM IN FORMULA 1**

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Submitted to Central European University - Private University  
Undergraduate Studies

*In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts in Culture, Politics and  
Society*

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Vienna, Austria  
2024

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## **ABSTRACT**

Like many other sporting organizations, Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA), F1's governing body, has adopted a politically neutral position in its constitutional document (Statutes). However, throughout its history, the FIA has often violated its own principle. Notwithstanding this historical record, the FIA imposed a politics ban upon F1 drivers and participants in 2022. This thesis argues the FIA has double standards when it comes to neutrality. While the FIA often cooperates with questionable political regimes, its newest regulation restrains drivers' ability to impact political and social issues. The thesis analyzes historical and contemporary intersections of F1 and politics to show that the politics ban is counterproductive, trying to uphold a political neutrality that does not exist in reality. At the same time, it is undermining the potential advantages of athlete activism to bring about meaningful social change.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

According to the Council of Europe, freedom of expression “is one of the foundations of a democratic and pluralistic society”. It also can be “envisaged as [...] ‘one of the basic conditions for its progress and for individual self-fulfillment [...]’” (Di Marco 2021, 620–21). Thus, self-expression is a non-negotiable absolute right for every individual. At the same time, Sporting Organizations (SOs) have traditionally restricted athletes' freedom of speech in order to uphold the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) perpetual pledge to maintain a "strictly political neutral" stance. The political neutrality concept is considered to be one of the "universal fundamental ethical principles" of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the major International Sport Federations (ISFs), closely associated with their "universal nature" (Di Marco 2021). Consequently, SOs uphold their neutral stance at the expense of athletes' freedom of expression.

F1 is possibly one of the most popular sports worldwide as it has gained an immense new wave of popularity over the past five years, reaching a much wider audience globally than before (Coleman 2021). Given F1 is a truly global sport, drivers and teams can use their reach and influence (especially through social media) and speak out on political and social issues. Yet, in 2022 the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA), F1's governing body, imposed a politics ban on all drivers (Media 2023). Article 12.2.1.n, called ‘Guidance on the Principle of Neutrality’, “has been included in the FIA International Sporting Code (ISC) to cement the FIA's longstanding commitment to protecting motor sport's neutrality” (FIA 2022), limiting the drivers' and teams' possibilities to use their voices for greater political purposes. Evidently, the FIA's imposed ban clashes with the principle of freedom of expression by the Council of Europe Freedom.

Extensive literature already emphasizes the perks of athletes using their image and influence for social and political issues. For instance, Di Marco (2021) examines and challenges

the established restrictions on athletes' freedom of speech by considering the place of human rights in sports law and athletic affairs. Agyemang, Singer, and Weems (2020) focus on how sports can be used as a platform for social change and political resistance. Additionally, Scheadler (2022) highlights the psychological benefits athletes gain when engaging in athlete activism. Hence, this thesis addresses the following question: Should sporting organizations stick to neutrality or allow athlete activism? Ultimately, this thesis argues the imposed politics ban by the FIA is rather counterproductive because it censors both drivers and teams in their freedom of expression due to the neutrality of sports (Di Marco 2021) and hinders athlete activism, which has been shown to have a positive reception and impact.

This thesis is structured as follows. The first chapter reviews previous literature in sports and politics to highlight how athlete activism operates. The second chapter reviews the history of FIA's stance on neutrality and the connection between FIA and politics throughout times. Chapter three addresses the most recent developments between F1 and politics – starting in 2020 – and discusses the novel politics ban in F1 and its consequences on F1 drivers' and teams' activism. The last section summarizes FIA's double standards when it comes to neutrality, the main reasons why the ban is counterproductive and how it impedes athletes and teams drawing attention to social concerns.

## 2. ATHLETES AND THEIR POLITICAL VOICE

“You know athletes don’t come down from another planet to entertain us; they’re a part of this world too [...]” (Dave Zirin quoted in Agyemang, Singer, and Weems 2020, 959).

Scholars refer to the practice of "athlete activism" when professional athletes use their visibility to speak out against social injustice or political causes (Müller et al. 2023). Athletes have a long history of advocating for such matters in sports. Evidence of the first wave of modern athlete activism can be traced back to the beginning of the twentieth century, where athletes like Jesse Owens, an American track and field athlete, fought for and spoke up on behalf of their fellow communities and people of color (Magrath 2022; Sansanelli 2022). The second wave, which took place after World War II, was marked by athletes like by American baseball player Jackie Robinson pioneering desegregation. The third wave represented the Black Power movement through professional boxer Muhammad Ali, among other sports personas, during the Civil Rights era. It pursued social justice by deliberately upsetting established institutions and actively disputing legal discourse. Afterwards, athlete activism experienced a decline in the 1980s and 1990s (Sansanelli 2022) only to return after the 2000s.

Today, we are in the midst of the fourth wave. It carries special significance because this activism emerged recently in reaction to Black Americans’ mistreatment and tragic deaths at the hands of police. Many players have joined together at different levels and across many sports to form a larger movement for social justice, which some scholars described as a "distinct and different wave of activism in today's context" (Agyemang, Singer, and Weems 2020, 955). Thus, the Black Lives Matter Movement transferred from the streets onto the playing fields (Agyemang, Singer, and Weems 2020). Since the leaders of this fourth wave of activists came of age in the last ten years and are still going strong, aiming for meaningful reforms to be

implemented and the system successfully redesigned, this generation's activists are the most prevalent and pertinent (Sansanelli 2022).

Colin Kaepernick is arguably the most well-known figure of the current wave. He played quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers in 2016. Due to an injury sustained during the preseason, he was seen sitting on the bench as the national anthem was playing prior to kick off. This was perceived as a form of anti-patriotism and a direct attack on the US, receiving extensive media coverage. He and teammate Eric Reid chose to intentionally protest by kneeling on the sidelines during the American anthem the following game. This started a movement that players, coaches, and supporters joined in on (Sansanelli 2022).

Several reasons are responsible for the rising political momentum in sports. First, the widespread use of new social media platforms (Agyemang, Singer, and Weems 2020; Brown and Brison 2017; Carrington 2023; Mirkovic 2021; Sansanelli 2022) have made it possible for debate, dissent, and the spread of ideas outside of “[...] the restricted spaces of the traditional corporate-controlled legacy sports media [...]” (Carrington 2023, 357). With social media's rapid expansion, the traditional media no longer have the captive audience they once did. Players now have larger social media followings and their own platforms via which they may interact directly and immediately with fans (Cable 2022). Athletes can communicate their feelings while avoiding the sports and mainstream media, which have remained, over the years, largely conservative and white (Agyemang, Singer, and Weems 2020).

Social media provide athletes with important framing opportunities. First, by having agency over their own outlet, they can determine how they are being spoken about. Moreover, social media can function as political platforms where the user sets the agenda, and the traditional media can only provide commentary (Cable 2022). Second, the trend towards more transparent forms of sports racism prevention spurred by different social movements, such as Black Lives Matter, as well as a worldwide media culture that exalts sports and provides celebrity athletes a greater voice upon speaking out. Last, a growing body of evidence suggests



that athletes have the right and even the obligation to speak out on social concerns, undermining the conservative notion that sports and politics are not compatible and the accusation that they “should just shut up and play” (Carrington 2023, 358). This is an essential distinction of the fourth wave of athlete activism.

There are two additional ways in which social media has altered the status quo. Often affected groups, who experience police violence, may live under the impression that the injustices they experience are unique to them. Simultaneously, since police violence in the US often targets certain stigmatized groups, other citizens do not pay attention to this issue since it does not concern them. Thus, social media can make those who have never experienced police violence or have never been aware of it see it firsthand (Agyemang, Singer, and Weems 2020). Confronting the public to such issues can offer wider recognition and push for systematic change. Additionally, there are victims of police violence, especially in communities of color, who felt as though their pain or losses went unnoticed. However, people with a large social media following can take advantage of their range. Therefore, social media also offers a chance of acknowledging the victims’ losses as celebrities, such as Beyoncé, draw attention to them on these platforms (Agyemang, Singer, and Weems 2020), adding to the heightened visibility of and combating injustice.

Mega Sporting Events (MSEs) provide athletes and teams with a platform to express themselves, addressing not only sport-related issues but also social and political ones (McDonald and Marshall 2023). Now, with the advent of social media, this has changed. Its users have the chance to capitalize on the attention being paid to MSE globally to raise awareness of often ignored social issues. Since social media were first introduced, there has been a rise of athletes actively using those platforms to control their own story and increase their visibility to gain recognition. Instead of depending on the exposure provided by mainstream media, sportsmen resourcefully utilize social media channels to create their own storylines and build their fan bases. Thus, they have become a different kind of “influencer”,

trying to keep their relevance and bond with their core fan base through a major common interest (McDonald and Marshall 2023).

Experts highlighted how prominent Black athletes, such as Venus Williams, Colin Kaepernick, and LeBron James used their unmatched independence and impact as social media users and mini-corporate organizations to assent the ideals of BLM alongside other initiatives for social justice in hope to safeguard and transfer power via economic and technological capital. Essentially, Colin Kaepernick's 2016 national anthem kneel changed the dialogue regarding the "[...] politization of sport, and ultimately lead to a swift re-appearance of athlete activism on social media" (Mirkovic 2021, 3).

Despite its proliferation and rising importance, athlete activism often encounters considerable backlash, often at the expense of the athletes themselves (e.g. losing sponsorships or, as in the case of Colin Kaepernick, their place in the NFL (Niven 2021)). A popular, and conservative, notion contends that sports and politics do not mix (Agyemang, Singer, and Weems 2020; Carrington 2023; Næss 2017b). Sports are often viewed as entertainment alone and an escape from economic and social problems, not as a means for social change (Brown and Brison 2017; Thorson and Serazio 2018). Preventing sports from being used as political instruments, or as a means of promoting political beliefs, is a common justification for keeping sports and politics apart (Müller et al. 2023). Furthermore, sports rank among the most popular and revenue generating programs on television in the US. Hence, because of considerable financial risks involved, the sports industry is motivated to "[...] actively maintain sports as an apolitical cultural form in order to avoid alienating fans through partisan politics" (Thorson and Serazio 2018, 392).

Unquestionably, athletes are among the most well-known people in the world today, and their ability to inspire others helps them shape public opinion. Therefore, sport authorities severely restrict athletes' capacity to express themselves, in accordance with the core value of sport neutrality. This "golden rule," which has historically been viewed as "absolute" and

devoid of any moderating or balancing factors, has gained widespread acceptance in the context of the sport autonomy concept (Di Marco 2021). However, the repeated growth of athlete activism, because of athletes like Kaepernick, has not been the only change. There has been a notable increase in scholarly research on athlete activism in recent times (Magrath 2022). Research on athletes' use of their voices for political and social causes challenges and refutes the current hostile attitude towards the intertwining of sports and politics.

For one, Brown and Brison (2017) highlight this rise of athlete activism supports the fight against injustice by professional leagues like the NBA and NFL. The NFL plans to provide \$100 million over seven years to African American community organizations through fundraising events and partnerships with players. The NBA also encourages its players to active social change through charitable events. The 2018 NBA All-Star Weekend, featuring LeBron James and Stephen Curry, featured charitable events, with \$350,000 donated to the victorious team's charity and \$150,000 to the losing team (Brown and Brison 2017). While these certainly are initial steps in the right direction, they have to be taken with a pinch of salt as they do not amount to the capabilities and resources these sports leagues actually have at their disposal.

According to Scheadler (2022) activism provides athletes with psychological benefits, despite common concern for distress or distraction. A study showed that increased optimism, self-actualization, meaning in life, flourishing, vitality, and positive affect are all linked to activism. Minority and marginalized (e.g. LGBTQ\*+) athletes experience identity-related stress but can thrive through activism and relationships with other activists. Activism impacts social inequity and the activist, enhancing their sense of control, hope, and wellbeing. It is a problem-solving approach, emphasizing resilience-enhancing concepts like challenge, growth, agency, change, and control. However, negative effects of activism are only noticeable when activists stop engagement. As a result, activists may have felt more socially supported and connected to others when they participated in grassroots organizations. Thus, social support may moderate the relationship between resilience and athlete activism (Scheidler 2022).

Furthermore, sports fans do not inherently reject athlete activism for the sake of entertainment. Thorson and Serazio (2018) imply that this kind of escapism that sports offer may be more illusion than reality, as attitudes about political and social topics can be shaped and reflected by popular entertainment. Public perception of political activity by athletes is too more optimistic than expected. Müller et al. (2023) studied the public reaction to social and political activism in elite sport in Germany, contrasting with studies focusing on US cases influenced by personal sentiments, opinions, and racial views (Thorson and Serazio 2018; Niven 2021). They found that, contrary to what was first assumed, athletic activism is more popular among Germans than activism by famous musicians. It appears that many Germans no longer contend that politics and sport belong in different domains and neither that athletes have to maintain a great degree of political reticence. The findings also demonstrate that less disruptive types of athlete activism—including symbolic acts and public appeals—are favored compared to confrontational ones, like boycott calls. This result is consistent with political science studies on social movement protest tactics (see Thomas and Louis 2014). Also, in general, Germans supported stronger climate protection campaigning much more than stricter border controls. One possible interpretation of these results would be that, despite being frequently perceived as "apolitical," sport is also commonly seen as a fundamentally "good force" in society that presumably promotes constructive social advances (Müller et al. 2023).

Towler, Crawford, and Bennett (2020) argue that as sports fans have emotional attachments to sports celebrities, athletes are prone to influence their followers. In addition, athletes are particularly ideally positioned to influence and benefit disadvantaged groups, such as members of the racial in-group because for a minimum of two reasons: "they are credible in-group messengers engaged in issue-congruent activism - that rooted in in exposing racial grievances of the group – and their protest of action often results in professional consequences" (Towler, Crawford, and Bennett 2020, 112). A large portion of the present upsurge in the importance of politics in sports, and vice versa, can be explained by Kaepernick's initially little-

known protests against racial discrimination (Niven 2021). Frequent exposure through the media, besides backlash and political controversy, could provide black athlete activists with a promising source for political and social messaging, and thus have implications on mass behavior and public attitudes (Towler, Crawford, and Bennett 2020). Social media arguably only facilitate these processes.

While Colin Kaepernick can be perceived as the leading figure in this current wave of athlete activism, which inevitably draws the United States into the center of attention, other celebrities from different sports backgrounds ought to be considered as well. Lewis Hamilton, often established as one of the best Formula One (F1) motor racing drivers, transformed into one of the world's most outspoken and politically conscious athletes (Carrington 2023). In his case specifically, the emergence of his "[...] critical black consciousness is genuine and significant [...]" (Carrington 2023, 356) and "[...] demonstrates that sport remains an important and contradictory site of popular hegemonic struggle, a contested terrain of politics" (Carrington 2023, 356). He readily and consistently tackles a wide range of topics, from women's rights to gay and lesbian community solidarity to climate change and environmental concerns and openly supports worldwide racial justice social movements. Hamilton has become an active advocate for change and uses his platform to advocate for victims of anti-black violence as well as raise awareness about various social justice issues to followers on social media (Carrington 2023).

By examining Mohamed Salah, an overt Muslim, prominent soccer player in the UK, Alrababa'h et al. (2021) provide evidence supporting the *parasocial contact hypothesis* which supposes that "[...] a salient out-group identity allows effects to generalize beyond one individual to the out-group as a whole" (1125). Overall, they find that discriminatory speech and hate crimes can be decreased by mediated exposure to public individuals from marginalized groups, thus shaping attitudes and behaviors. The "Salah effect" assumably does not only apply to Salah. Social opinions have long been believed to be affected by celebrities who exhibit traits

of role models. Celebrity exposure through traditional and social media are among the most prevalent ways that people from different groups interact. There are three hypothesized requirements for parasocial contact to diminish prejudice: repeated exposure, salient out-group identity, and positivity (Alrababa'h et al. 2021).

All these characteristics are applicable to Lewis Hamilton. Hamilton is very outspoken on his experiences growing up as a person of color and how it influenced him throughout his career, highlighting his out-group identity. As Carrington (2023) pointed out, Hamilton's ethnic background was often the topic of discussion, particularly because he is the first, and to this date (May 2024) sole, black F1 racing driver. Hamilton has addressed obstacles within and outside the sport repeatedly. He candidly talks about being bullied and experiencing racism at school. Nevertheless, his experiences gave him the opportunity to develop personally and gave him a more resilient mindset that helped him to his success. It also allowed him to become selfless, "[...] giving him a determination to be a 'positive light to the younger generation'" (Powell 2023). Moreover, since discrimination and bullying were constant factors in his life, Hamilton uses his experiences to demand racial diversity and awareness on these issues (Younge 2021). With his own initiatives, like the Hamilton Commission and Mission 44, Lewis Hamilton aims at enhancing Black people's representation in UK motorsport and create a more equitable educational system, encouraging young people to pursue STEM careers (Powell 2023).

In other words, he is channeling life lessons to have a positive impact. Given his immense success and F1's popularity, Hamilton undeniably has been (for years) and continues to be omnipresent in the media. His online media is unmatched with anyone else's in F1. On Instagram, his (current) following (36.8 million) supersedes that of F1 itself (28.1 million) or that of the world champion of the last three years, Max Verstappen (11.9 million). Thus, due to his popularity, Lewis Hamilton is without a doubt one of the most significant commercial drivers in F1 (dirango 2019). Hence, Lewis Hamilton, among other athlete activists, would be

a prime example supporting parasocial contact, thus utilizing his resources to advocate for social and political issues.

Based on the above, I claim that sports and politics are a better match than generally believed. Politically active athletes should no longer be judged for their efforts. Social media provide a practical tool through which athlete celebrities can enhance their (already) active engagement in political and social issues. By directly connecting with their fans, they can influence sentiments of millions and alter discourse about crucial topics. Thus, athlete activism can have profound impact on society and benefit not only the public but also athletes themselves (e.g. psychologically).

In the next section I will concentrate on a specific sports sector, namely F1 motor racing. While the above literature predominantly drew on US examples, examining F1 offers a look on the global reception of sports, as F1 is truly global unlike NFL, NBA, or the Premier League that target global audiences but are actually national sports. F1 also allows to look at the role of individual athletes, who simultaneously compete for teams. This could help identify any potential difference between drivers and teams or among drivers themselves. To provide context, the next section explores the historical connection between F1 and politics. I trace back the relationship from the founding of the Automobile Club of France in 1895 to FIA's entanglement with problematic political regimes under Bernie Ecclestone's leadership.

### 3. F1 AND POLITICS: AN OLD RELATIONSHIP

The Automobile Club of France (ACF), the ultimate predecessor of F1's governing body, was founded in 1895 by elite society members, to connect between motorsport, automobile culture, car manufacture, and vehicle consumption. It established its first Technical Commission, whose primary goals included lobbying with public authorities through events, fundraising, a yearly banquet, the establishment of a library, and public outreach regarding the benefits of driving in the Rhône district (Næss 2023).

Clearly, motorsport governance and politics were interconnected from the very beginning, arguably to ensure as little regulation as possible. The ACF played a key role in the establishment of the *Association Internationale des Automobile Clubs Reconnus* (AIACR) in 1904, coordinating “[...] both the touring and the motorsport part of international motoring issues” (Næss 2023, 16), not just France. The ACF elected its president to the presidency of AIACR, moving its administrative headquarters to Paris, a decision that continues to this day. AIACR's early years were trouble-free due to the need for an international driving association, but soon faced competition from other countries (H.E. Næss 2023).

More importantly for this thesis, the political climate in Europe was a challenge for AIACR. Even though it did not explicitly state political neutrality until 1946, it was assumed that politics and motorsports should be kept apart. This implicit neutrality was however complicated in practice, given that members of the AIACR held public positions, operated closely with the media industry and had political connections, making a relationship between motorsport and politics imperative (Næss 2023). In 1925, AIACR became the international governing body of motorsports after winning conflicts with other competing organizations, making the link between the racing organization and politics only stronger.

AIACR tried to have cordial relations to politics of the time. For instance, the association was linked to fascism from the 1920s to WWII (Næss 2023). The Italian Alfa Romeo team's



success in 1924 and 1925 gave Italy international prestige and deflected attention from the Matteotti Crisis, political confrontation between liberals and the Fascist government of Italy. The Fascist regime's patronage of motorsport helped it recover from a slump. Due to the regime's passion of speed and modernity, appropriated from the Futurists, motorsport received significant attention from fascism during a time of need. On the other hand, motorsport helped to ease some of the conflicts and splits that existed within fascist philosophy and culture (Baxa 2022b).

The Italian Fascist's regime's backing of Grand Prix racing in the late 1920s was crucial to its continued existence. Similar events took place in Nazi Germany. The German teams Auto Union and Mercedes-Benz took the lead in the sport after the new formula was unveiled in 1934, which was supported by Hitler's regime. Hitler, who had a passion for fast vehicles, was willing to support these privately run teams. Numerous Grand Prix events were sponsored by the Nazi regime, taking inspiration from the Grand Prix competition in fascist Italy. In the end, Grand Prix racing was elevated to the highest level of motorsport by Nazi Germany, but this would not have occurred if the Italian Fascist state had not set the stage in the 1920s (Baxa 2022a).

In 1946, following the defeat of fascist regimes, AIACR was reorganized as the *Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile* or FIA, introducing a new system of international motorsport governance. This included the creation of the F1 world championship. Clearly, the essence of FIA can be traced back to the early phases of ACF and AIACR (Næss 2023), although the new organization also meant an attempt to escape AIACR troubled history with fascism. In line with the IOC's Olympic Charter's governance and sporting requirements, the FIA was granted full recognition in 2013, adopting point 2 of the IOC Charter which states that the purpose of Olympic competition is “to ‘place sport at the service of the harmonious development of humankind, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity’” (quoted in H. E. Næss 2018, 148).

Just as its predecessor AIACR, FIA declared neutrality in 1946, following the movement of Global Sporting Governing Bodies (GSGBs) from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century which claims “[...] to be politically neutral non-profit organizations” (Næss 2018a, 144). The movement’s founder Pierre de Coubertin idealized the Swiss lifestyle and neutrality as a model for democratizing the sporting life after escaping to Switzerland during WWI. Signatory organizations were to maintain independence from governmental authorities with the help of European states, thanks to Swiss principles on freedom of association. This stance of self-governance, embedded in the IOC Code of Ethics and adopted by the FIA, has provided political and religious autonomy for decades (Næss 2017b; 2018a).

All through the 1950s and 1960s governance of F1 was relatively straightforward. The FIA facilitated world championships with little professional intervention in event management up to the 1970s, serving as the administrative body for its individual event promoters and member clubs. Consequently, in the middle of the 1970s, F1 almost became a private commercial enterprise (Næss 2018a). Yet, both the sport’s economic worth and team operating expenses were rising by the 1970s. This resulted in power disputes over revenue-sharing, sporting regulations, and commercial rights (Kaiser 2021). First racing driver, then team owner, and ultimately chief executive of F1, Bernie Ecclestone simultaneously set out to transform its business model in the 1970s, recognizing the sport's unrealized financial potential. Ecclestone began to play a more significant part in the F1 Constructors' Association (FOCA) by 1972, serving as the foundation for his F1 empire. He was a key figure in the formation of FOCA, and became its CEO in 1978, a coalition of teams seeking authority and autonomy over the sport's commercial aspects. Ecclestone used FOCA to his advantage to secure profitable sponsorship agreements, race hosting fees, and broadcast contracts that turned F1 into a major international business force (Bhambwani 2023).

Conversely, FISA (Fédération Internationale du Sport Automobile), under the direction of Jean-Marie Balestre, wanted to maintain control over the technical and safety rules governing

the sport. Thus, the FISA-FOCA war ensued (Vadke 2023). Following the initial Concorde agreement in 1981, “a contract under which responsibilities and benefits are distributed between FIA, the commercial rights owner and the teams” (Næss 2018a, 146), chair Bernie Ecclestone secured an arrangement with the FIA that gave him commercial authority over F1 and allowed him to leverage the rules of indicators for success (Næss 2018a). Eventually, the 1983 Concorde Agreement granted FOCA greater control over commercial sports, while FISA retained control over sporting and technical regulations (Vadke 2023).

However, FIA’s, and that of GSGBs in general, principle of autonomy has been challenged repeatedly because of the globalization of sports and the development of media globally (Di Marco 2021; Næss 2017a; 2018b; 2018a). Ecclestone’s impact went beyond business because he skillfully negotiated intricate politics of motorsport. Due to his tight friendship with then FIA President Max Mosley, he was able to have a big impact on the regulatory body and basically singlehandedly controlled F1. This challenged further the principle of neutrality, as Ecclestone could negotiate beneficial contracts with racing circuits through his political connections (Bhambwani 2023). Moreover, Ecclestone’s efforts to stop the Blair administration from prohibiting tobacco advertisements on both cars and racetracks (Bancroft 2023) also showed the delicate intersections of F1 and politics.

Ecclestone’s pursuit of expanding by then already popular and F1’s commercial success led to the most gross violation of the political neutrality principle when F1 cooperated with Apartheid in South Africa.

### **3.1 The 1985 South African Grand Prix**

Since the 1960s, South Africa has experienced numerous sporting boycotts as a protest against apartheid-era segregation policies. South Africa was removed from the IOC in 1970 for racial segregation. Simultaneously, numerous drivers declined to compete in multiple races in 1981

and 1982, endangering the existence of F1's sole African event. Because F1 is a global sport in which drivers represent themselves first, followed by their teams, and finally their country, it was not subject to the same demands to comply with the boycott of apartheid South Africa as other sports.

Unaffected by these developments, Ecclestone was ready to continue F1 in South Africa, supported by financier Louis Luyt, whose past includes a covert attempt by the government to buy South African Associated Newspapers and sabotage its liberal publications. Disregarding the principle of neutrality, Ecclestone took advantage of the mounting pressure on South Africa during talks with who ultimately agreed to sponsor the race for three years (Næss 2017b).

After the 1984 race, pressure from the world prompted some F1 teams to consider pulling out. The FIA attempted to continue business but faced political criticism. But Jean-Marie Balestre, the recently elected president of the FIA, resisted political disapproval “and issued a statement before the race saying that FISA’s (FIA’s motorsport arm) hands were tied [...]” (Næss 2017b, 540). This was a rather paradoxical argument, since the FIA is the governing body in F1, but was not authorized to cancel the race. However, when broadcasters declined to cover the race and Adelaide's cargo handlers refused to unload "tainted" cars, Ecclestone persuaded Balestre to call off the 1986 race (Næss 2017b).

Rightfully, critics claimed that F1 in fact gave up political neutrality when it cooperated with countries that did not uphold the global principles of sport (Næss 2018a), which maintain that sport is not a promotional tool for countries, racial or religious groups, but rather an invention of humanity. With time, ethical challenges have permeated its operations. One would think that the FIA would have responded by updating its regulations to reflect the current environment. Article 1.2 of FIA’s constitutional document (Statutes) “states: ‘The FIA shall refrain from manifesting racial, political or religious discrimination in the course of its activities and from

taking any action in this respect' (Næss 2017b, 536). But aside “from a brief ‘Statement of Commitment to Respect for Human Rights’ issued in 2015” (Næss 2017b, 536) by the FOG (Formula One Group), the FIA does not have a clear public policy on how to uphold human rights, democracy or political neutrality.

Even today, while the world has immensely changed geopolitically since FIA, let alone AIACR, were founded, their stances on neutrality and autonomy have not. FIA’s self-regulation has persisted until today even though FIA has grown tremendously in size and financial resources (Næss 2018a). Globalization has made using sports as a political platform a widespread issue, rather than a single incident-focused issue. Advocacy has developed into a global network of advocate activities. Instead of being viewed as an ethically sound defense of neutrality ideals, the FIA's actions and inactions with politically contentious events are seen as a dismissive mentality. Moreover, F1 assisted non-democratic nations taking advantage of the attention from international media to whitewash their reputation abroad diversely (Næss 2017b). A more contemporary example demonstrates such a case and FIA’s unchanged attitude.

### **3.2 The 2016 Azerbaijan Grand Prix**

When F1 started to host races in Azerbaijan, international criticism highlighted the country uses this event as a means of whitewashing. The country has been at the center of ethnic and religious conflicts in the South Caucasus, along with Georgia and Armenia, Chechnya and Dagestan. Simultaneously, counting on Azeri petrol sponsorship, F1 signed an agreement with the country for ten years, starting in 2015 (the race was postponed until 2016 due to a variety of issues) (Næss 2017b).

By being accomplice to using sport for nation-building purposes in fractured societies, FIA runs the risk of losing its credibility joining a government that violates human rights. The Sport for Rights Coalition, an alliance of 21 global human rights organizations, urged Bernie

Ecclestone in May 2016 to publicly demand “the unconditional release of imprisoned journalists and activists [...]” (Næss 2017b, 541) with no effect, much as it had happened in South Africa two decades previously (Næss 2017b). The 2016 Azerbaijani Grand Prix, taking on the name “The European Grand Prix,” was a significant investment of the government to promote Azerbaijan's ties to Europe. However, the country faced challenges due to President Ilham Aliyev's targeting of independent media and dissidents, imposing restrictions on free expression and the free media, and the government imprisoning over 100 political prisoners since 2011. The European Parliament criticized Azerbaijan for its decline in democratic governance and lack of progress in human rights dialogue.

FIA's dismissive mentality on political issues is also evident in the case of Turkey, whose political parties and other government forces have a history of utilizing sports as a means of bolstering and expanding their popularity within the country. While F1's CEO Chase Carey met with Turkish President Erdogan in 2017 to discuss a potential comeback of a Turkish F1 Grand Prix, the FIA did not comment on the issue.

As the number of incidents involving the collision of sport and politics in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries rise, it appears that the operational neutrality of the FIA is being taken for granted and its activities of proving neutrality is rather a myth. Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as International Sporting Associations' (ISA's) influence has increased, so too have the expectations of the international community for ISAs to take on this role. While, for instance, the International Federation of Football Associations (FIFA) implemented a Human Rights policy akin to those of the IOC in 2017, the FIA, on the other hand, has not yet created a similar policy, presumably overlooking that the awarding of sporting contests like the F1 Grand Prix to undemocratic states necessitates a more thorough explanation than brief declarations on neutrality (Næss 2018b).

While FIA's autonomy has not changed since its founding days, its questionable stance on neutrality requires reframing or, at least, elaboration due to its growth, both financially and

in size, the development of global media and international geopolitical changes. While Article 1.2 of its Statue rejects any sort of religious, racial, or political discrimination or statements, reality is different. The FIA has continuously disregarded neutrality. The 1985 South African Grand Prix, the 2016 Azerbaijan Grand Prix, and the meeting between Carey and Erdogan in 2017 to bring F1 back to Istanbul showcase how misplaced FIA's position on neutrality is.

Næss (2017a) concludes that the Grand Prix in South Africa and Azerbaijan both underline that governments sponsor sporting events because they support their national identity and present their cities or nations to the outside world as forward-thinking and modern. However, repressive governments in Azerbaijan and South Africa used F1 to disguise their true intentions, whitewash repressive administrations and manipulate public perception. By refusing to comment on local politics (and possibly cut ties with undemocratic regimes), the FIA adopted a paradoxical position by remaining silent and concealing behind the principle of neutrality that in fact has lent support to these regimes (Næss 2017a).

In the next section I discuss the most recent intersections between the FIA and political and social issues. I also take a closer look at FIA's newest policy in regard to the F1's neutrality: a resolution that prohibits the drivers' political expressiveness during a Grand Prix.

## 4. F1 AFTER THE ECCLESTONE ERA

For many years, Bernie Ecclestone managed F1 practically by himself. In that time, Ecclestone tightly controlled the commercial and sporting aspects of F1 and transformed it into a highly valued global media asset. From the late 1970s until January 2017, the political neutrality of F1 was secondary, what mattered was Ecclestone's preferential treatment by international leaders, including Russia's Vladimir Putin and the UK's Tony Blair (Jolly and Richards 2023). Openly supporting Putin's opinions, such as his sentiments on homosexuality (*The Guardian* 2014), surely benefitted in negotiating with Sochi hosting a Grand Prix in 2014.

At the beginning of the 2000s, Ecclestone progressively relinquished financial control of his business and sold a portion to the US private equity firm CVC in 2005. In 2017 Liberty Media acquired F1 from CVC (Jolly and Richards 2023). Shortly after the takeover, Ecclestone was fired because his personal style of conducting business did not seem to align with contemporary concepts of corporate governance (Jolly and Richards 2023). Some had hoped this would be a new era for F1 and the principle of political neutrality will be upheld, yet the controversies around F1 persist even today.

### 4.1 The Black Lives Matter Movement

Since 2020, instances of F1 being involved in political and social issues have not become fewer. Consequently, F1 and its drivers continue to technically not adhere to their stance on neutrality. The unjustified killing of George Floyd in 2020 rekindled the BLM Movement to different dimensions. Cities and populations globally showed and voiced solidarity with the rights of black people in the US and the racial injustices they regularly face (Roth and McCracken Jarrar 2021). Other sports leagues, apart from the NFL and Colin Kaepernick, did not escape BLM's implications, including F1.



In June 2020, right before F1 went back to racing after the unavoidable break due to COVID-19, F1 launched their initiative “WeRaceAsOne”. It is a forum with the goal of addressing the most pressing problems that the sport and international communities face, like inequality, supporting F1's mission to significantly impact the environment in which they compete (Lowrey 2020). Subsequently, at the Austrian Grand Prix in July 2020 drivers had "End Racism" inscribed on their T-shirts. Lewis Hamilton, who has been utilizing his considerable platform to speak up against racial and social injustice, knelt on the front line in support of the campaign, wearing a BLM T-shirt. The grid was split because six drivers refused to kneel. Less than two weeks had passed since F1 introduced its "We Race as One" campaign to combat racism and injustice, so the disparities in positions were especially noticeable. Following the race, Hamilton informed reporters that he had previously attempted to make a public statement against racism, drawing inspiration from former NFL player Colin Kaepernick's kneeling demonstrations (Grez 2020). Later in the year, at the Tuscan Grand Prix, Hamilton wore a shirt during the award ceremony that said: “Arrest the cops who killed Breonna Taylor” (The Guardian 2022; Wilson and Slater 2022; Kalinauckas 2023).

On a podcast Hamilton admitted to not informing his team about his kneeling or T-shirt changes due to fear of being stopped, but his team would not have had such intentions (Kalinauckas 2023). After all, F1 teams were allowed to and actually supported the initiative by writing “End Racism” slogans on the racing cars, for instance (skysports 2020; RacingNews365 2024). Clearly, not only did drivers use their influence to highlight a pressing social issue but also F1 teams did their, even if small, fair share.

Bernie Ecclestone remains opinionated when it comes to F1 and its drivers taking up activist roles. After a falling out with Liberty Media in 2020, particularly over remarks he made about the Black Lives Matter protests when he called Hamilton "uneducated and ignorant," Ecclestone was effectively barred from the sport. He perceived that Lewis Hamilton is being “used” by BLM (Cary 2021). Ecclestone also specifically commented on the drivers’ protest:

“If I’d still been around there wouldn’t have been anyone wearing [anti-racism] T-shirts on the podium, that’s for sure [...]. One hundred per cent, there wouldn’t have been this business of kneeling before races. I agree the sport should do more to encourage diversity but it shouldn’t be used as a [political] tool” (Ecclestone quoted in Cary 2021).

## 4.2 The War in Ukraine

When Russia attacked Ukraine in February 2022, testers from both countries got banned from international sporting competitions (DW 2024). Several entities within F1 took action. On February 25<sup>th</sup>, the FIA issued a statement that “it is impossible to hold the Russian Grand Prix in the current circumstances” (FIA 2022). This was a major change, since previously F1 openly denied criticizing political regimes, yet this time the race was cancelled. Putin played a major role in the establishment of the Russian Grand Prix in 2014 (Benson 2022). Next, despite the FIA's decision to permit drivers from Belarus and Russia to participate under a neutral flag, the Haas F1 team terminated its agreement with Russian title sponsor Uralkali and driver Nikita Mazepin (Coleman 2022). Furthermore, F1 teams have contributed to UNICEF's campaign to raise money for war victims (Pattle 2022).

Last, drivers voiced their opinions on the matter too. Four-time world champion Sebastian Vettel said he would not race in Russia if the race went ahead. The German said: “I should not go, I will not go. It is wrong to race in the country. I am sorry for the innocent people who are being killed for stupid reasons and a very strange and mad leadership” (Vettel quoted in Benson 2022). The statement reflects a political stance, unlike other drivers who supported FIA's cancellation of the Sochi race due to safety concerns or the perceived horror of war (Benson 2022). Moreover, that season Vettel had been spotted wearing a helmet with the words “No War” and the colors of the Ukrainian flag. He had also urged F1 to assist Ukraine more in the face of Russia's continuous aggression (Pattle 2022).

Unquestionably, F1 saw important changes in the interpretation of the political neutrality principle, yet ambiguity remained: by calling off the Russian Grand Prix in response

to the war in Ukraine but holding a race in Saudi Arabia despite that country's ongoing military action against Yemen, the sport essentially was picking a side in both crises (Bancroft 2023). Evidently, FIA does not tolerate war but also does not shy away from engaging in less overt or violent political issues.

### **4.3 Guidance on the principle of neutrality**

FIA's most recent development in light of their principle of neutrality is article 12.2.1.n of the ISC, called "Guidance on the principle of neutrality". It had been introduced at the end of 2022 "to cement the FIA's longstanding commitment to protecting motor sport's neutrality" (FIA 2022). The following is a rule violation according to its clause:

"The general making and display of political, religious and personal statements or comments notably in violation of the general principle of neutrality promoted by the FIA under its Statutes [...]" (FIA 2022).

FIA posits that International Competitors should maintain neutrality in motor sport, avoiding religious, political, or personal interference. Instead, the focus should be on team and driver performances, not individual advocacy. This principle prevents participants from being forced to take public positions on specific issues they prefer not to. Participants are not allowed to make religious, political, or personal statements (FIA 2022) or face six-figure fines and even being banned from a race (Bancroft 2023).

However, upon implementation, this ban was received as a controversial amendment, especially by the drivers. Lewis Hamilton said in an interview with sky sports: "I'm going to continue to be me and continue to fight for things that I am passionate about. I wouldn't let anybody stop me from doing that" (CNBC 2023). McLaren driver Lando Norris accused FIA of treating the drivers like schoolchildren and Williams driver Alex Albon said he was confused and "concerned" about the ban (Media 2023; CNBC 2023). Alfa Romeo driver Valtteri Bottas questioned FIA's policy again at the beginning of 2023, saying: "People in this world should

be free to say what they want” and that “[...] drivers are trying to ‘make the world a better place’” (skysports 2023). Overall, the drivers' discontent with the rule has been universal (CNBC 2023).

Particularly drivers like Lewis Hamilton and, now retired, Sebastian Vettel took issue with this article since they are among the most outspoken drivers for social change on the grid (Gonzales 2022; Wilson and Slater 2022). In support of LGBTQ+ rights, Hamilton has raced in the Middle East wearing a rainbow helmet and has urged for more reform in Saudi Arabia, stating in 2022 that he was horrified to learn of the country's practice of mass executions (The Guardian 2022). In 2023, the seven-time world champion wore a rainbow helmet during the race in Florida in backing of the LGBTQ community's fight against legislation that he considers to be offensive (Long and Li 2023). Vettel utilized his platform to bring attention to concerns like climate change, women's rights and LGBTQ+ rights too (The Guardian 2022; Bancroft 2023). At the Canadian Grand Prix 2022, he wore a jersey that read, "Stop Mining Tar Sands" and "Canada's Climate Crime." In Hungary in 2021, he protested anti-LGBTQ+ laws by wearing a T-shirt with the slogan "same love" in rainbow colors (Wilson and Slater 2022; The Guardian 2022).

It is clear that throughout recent political and social crises, FIA has not been able to carry out its own value of neutrality. The involvement of drivers and teams in the BLM movement and the war in Ukraine highlight again how F1 and politics cannot be separated. Article 12.2.1.n, the latest development in terms of FIA's effort to secure its neutral stance, portrays a rather counterproductive effect. Drivers, who were the actual target group in this policy, universally voiced their disagreement with it.

While the FIA uses this newest regulation to emphasize one of its core values, I find it inherently flawed. Not only has FIA's neutral position not proven sustainable in practice, but now it is imposing regulations on its drivers which it is not adhering to itself. Even worse, by imposing this rule, the FIA is infringing on the drivers' right of freedom of speech. After initial

reactions, the FIA changed its article “to ‘align itself to the practices of other similar international sports organizations such as FIFA, IOC and FIBA on the matter of neutrality’. It added that it was widening the code “to cover statements/comments in violation of the general principle of neutrality” (Wilson and Slater 2022). Nevertheless, merely stating the motive behind the ban does not justify its legitimacy. Ultimately, the FIA should not have the power to put their regulations above human rights. I agree with Di Marco (2021), who states that “the indications of the ECtHR and the UN, by emphasizing the athletes’ ‘role-model’ function, have paved the way to the idea that the exercising of the right to freedom of expression, consistent with the promotion of human dignity, could be particularly powerful for the ‘progress of a democratic society and for individual self fulfilment’” (637). With the fairly new imposed ban by the FIA, F1’s socially engaging drivers, like Lewis Hamilton, face limitations in terms of their (political) advocacy and their athlete activism is set back.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This thesis critically scrutinizes FIA's principle of neutrality and shows that sport and politics were, in fact, never separate to begin with. The FIA (back then AIACR) was founded by politically and socially influential people, and the political connection persisted even when allegedly upholding sport neutrality. I claim that while FIA acknowledges political neutrality to be one of its core values, it has never actually adhered to it in practice. This results in my opinion in a reprehensible, inherent double standard by the FIA.

On the one hand, economic interest and political connections often proved decisive: F1 races took place in Apartheid South Africa, which, by that time, had already been boycotted by other sporting organizations. Even more recently, by hosting Grand Prix in Azerbaijan, F1 offers this authoritarian country means to whitewash its image. The same can be said about considering hosting a Grand Prix in Turkey, despite undemocratic developments. In essence, F1 races continue to serve oppressive regimes, who exploit them as instruments to sway public opinion. Last, despite F1 parting ways with Ecclestone and starting slow reform, its entanglement with political and social issues continues, as seen with the BLM movement or the war in Ukraine. Consequently, as Næss (2018) puts it, I argue that the separation of sports, in the case of F1, and politics is a myth.

On the other hand, FIA's latest policy from 2022 contends that international competitors in motorsports ought to remain impartial and refrain from interfering with politics, religion, or personal matters. Ultimately, it restricts drivers (and F1 participants generally) from making statements of political nature while it does not prevent FIA to continue its relations with often undemocratic regimes. The new rule censors drivers' freedom of expression, a fundamental human right. Moreover, the ban seems inconsistent with F1's launch of its "WeRaceAsOne" campaign, aiming at tackling social injustices. Drivers' advocacy, such as by Lewis Hamilton or Sebastian Vettel have exemplified positive impact of athlete activism. Essentially, FIA uses

double standards: it imposes a ban to ensure its “golden rule” of political neutrality, which itself has historically violated, at the expense of its drivers.

Furthermore, FIA’s article hinders athlete activism. For one, it strips F1 drivers of taking advantage of the media coverage they are exposed to during pre- and post-race procedures and use those moments to emphasize an issue of political or social justice, potentially changing public opinion. Moreover, this is not only important for drivers (see positive effects in Schedler (2022)) but as Müller et al. (2023) concluded, athlete activism is actually wider and more willingly accepted than assumed, making it an effective tool to advance social developments. Therefore, this ban is counterproductive in the sense that it limits athlete activism and the prospects of social change that could result from it. Instead, FIA should recognize that sports or athletes can and often do play a political role. Rather than trying to ban politics, it should promote norms that consolidate human rights principles and democratic values in its statutes to encourage freedom of expression and political activism for a better world.

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