

Opinion: A deeper truth under the hoodies

By Phil Taylor, Sports Illustrated

What do you see, America? What do you see when 13 black males stand before you, their faces partially obscured by hoodies? Do you see a group or a gang? Men or menace? Such a powerful image circulated last week, a kind of team photo never seen before: the Miami Heat players in their black, team-issued hoodies, heads bowed both in mourning and protest over the death of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed African-American teenager who was shot to death on Feb. 26 in Sanford, Fla. LeBron James, who came up with the idea along with Dwyane Wade, posted the picture on Twitter last Friday, with the hashtags #WeAreTrayvonMartin, #Hoodies, #Stereotyped and #WeWantJustice. The photo was a statement, but also a question: Look at us, America. Pretend you don't know us as LBJ, D-Wade and friends. Pretend you don't know us at all. What do you see?

Trayvon was killed by George Zimmerman, 28, a neighborhood watch volunteer of Caucasian and Latino descent who apparently found something threatening about a skinny, 17-year-old black kid walking down a street of middle-class townhouses in a hooded sweatshirt. The tragedy became a flash point for age-old anger about the treatment of African-Americans by whites and police. It wasn't just the shooting but also the seeming indifference of investigators. Why, even considering the Florida law that gives wide latitude for the use of force, had Zimmerman not been arrested? Why had police accepted his claim of self-defense even though he was carrying a gun and Trayvon reportedly was packing only Skittles and a can of iced tea? Why had Zimmerman continued to follow Trayvon against the advice of a police dispatcher?

When the Heat photo hit the Internet, it felt as if everyone involved stopped talking for a moment and did a double-take, surprised that athletes would dare join the discussion. We have become accustomed, after all, to players backing away from political and social issues, as if in a prevent defense. Remember when Latino baseball players threatened to boycott the 2011 All-Star Game in Phoenix to protest a controversial Arizona immigration law? It never happened. Or when Michael Jordan declined to make an endorsement in a hotly contested 1990 North Carolina senate race, reportedly explaining, "Republicans buy shoes too"? Most of the greatest stars—think Jeter, Tiger, Brady—have been alike in their neutrality, as it had been with James and Wade.

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