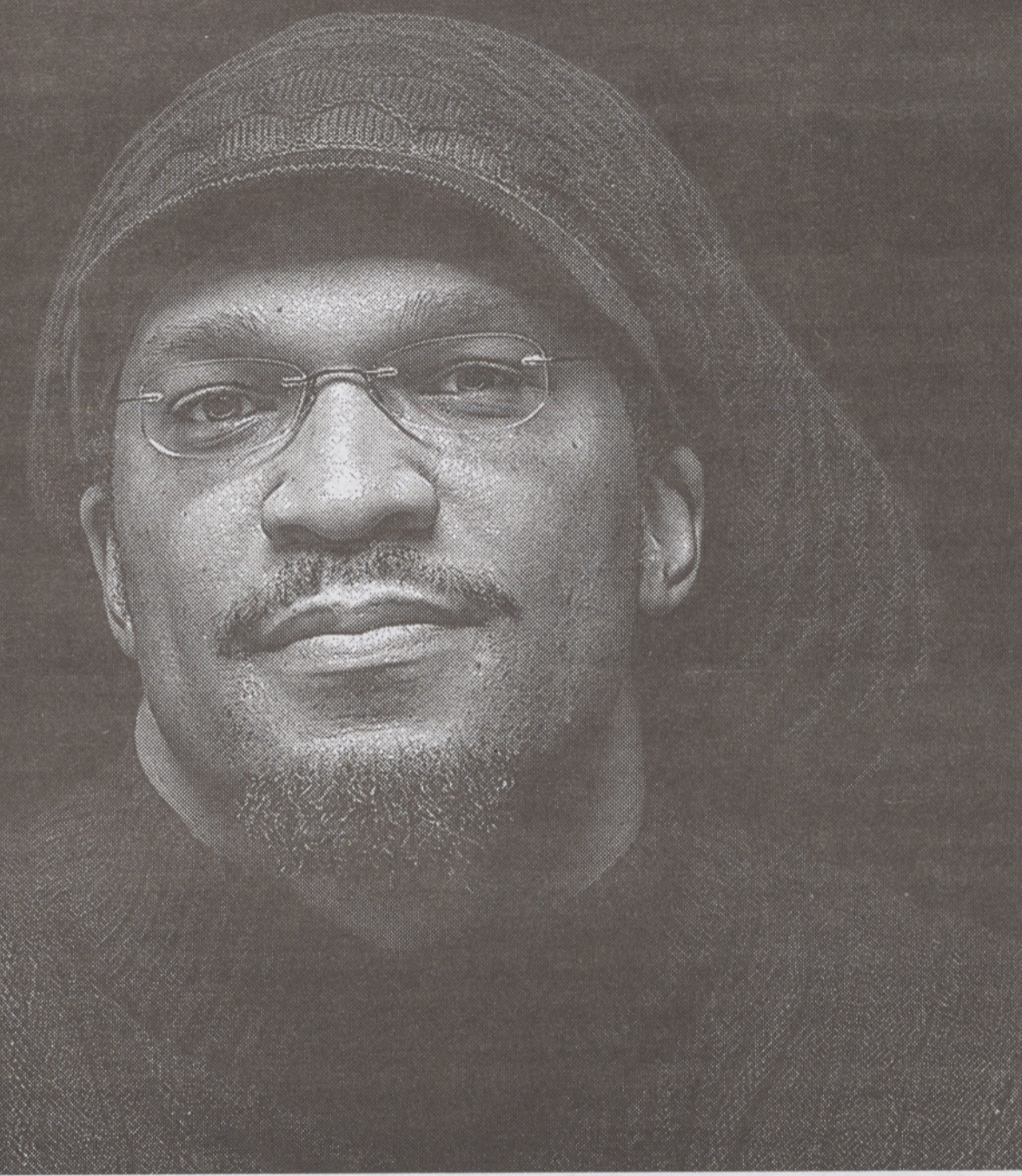


# Etan Thomas

*Backlash against athletes who are vocal about social justice is nothing new, says the former NBA player, whose new book looks at the intersection between athletes and activism*



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**BY DEVON POUNCEY**  
STAFF WRITER

The 2018 NBA postseason is in full swing.

This is the platform that has created historic basketball moments such as Damian Lillard's game-winning 3-pointer that advanced the Portland Trail Blazers past the Houston Rockets in the opening round of the 2014 playoffs. It's also the platform where the Trailblazers are in an opening-round duel with the New Orleans Pelicans. But if you actually win the NBA Championship, such as the 2017 Golden State Warriors did, you run the risk of being uninvited to the White House by the president of the United States. That's a different platform altogether – or is it?

Etan Thomas, a former NBA player, activist and author, knows about the NBA postseason atmosphere firsthand. Like the Warriors, Thomas also knows what it's like to be treated in a negative manner for taking a stance against social injustices.

In his newly released book, "We Matter: Athletes and Activism," Thomas covers a wide range of topics dealing with the intersectionality of sports and social justice, including NCAA amateurism and the coverage of women in sports. Interviews with prominent sports figures – such as Hall of Fame center Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Oklahoma City Thunder guard Russell Westbrook and sports

commentator Jemele Hill – personalize these topics.

During Thomas' time in the NBA – including seven years with the Washington Wizards – his activism spanned denouncing the Iraq War, advocating for racial justice and assisting Hurricane Katrina victims. Today in the NBA, plenty of athletes are standing for similar causes. The Sacramento Kings organization has supported the family of Stephon Clark, an unarmed African-American killed by the Sacramento police, in numerous ways. After Cleveland Cavaliers forward LeBron James and Golden State Warriors forward Kevin Durant spoke about social issues, news anchor Laura Ingraham told them to "shut up and dribble" during NBA All Star weekend.

Thomas spoke with Street Roots about his new book, athlete activism and his interviews with families of unarmed victims.

**DeVon Pouncey:** *Having interviewed athlete activists from past generations to modern day, what could be said about the progress from then to now?*

**Etan Thomas:** I would say that not a lot has changed. The same way the media and mainstream America told Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Bill Russell, John Carlos and Muhammad Ali to "stay in their place" or "be grateful" or "how dare they complain about what's wrong with society" is the same way Colin Kaepernick, LeBron James, Eric Reid and more are currently told to "shut up and play" or have the mentality that athletes should stay in their place and not involve themselves with what is happening in the society and country they live in and are a part of. This isn't a new phenomenon. It didn't start with Laura Ingraham. It has been happening for a long time.

**D.P.:** *You've played at the highest level of NCAA basketball at Syracuse University. Can you share your thoughts on amateurism and athletes' being compensated?*

**E.T.:** I spent an entire chapter on this topic in "We Matter." I interviewed John Wall, Oscar Robertson and, from the Fab Five, Ray Jackson and Jimmy King so we could delve into this topic and dissect it. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar also provided a lot of commentary on this subject.

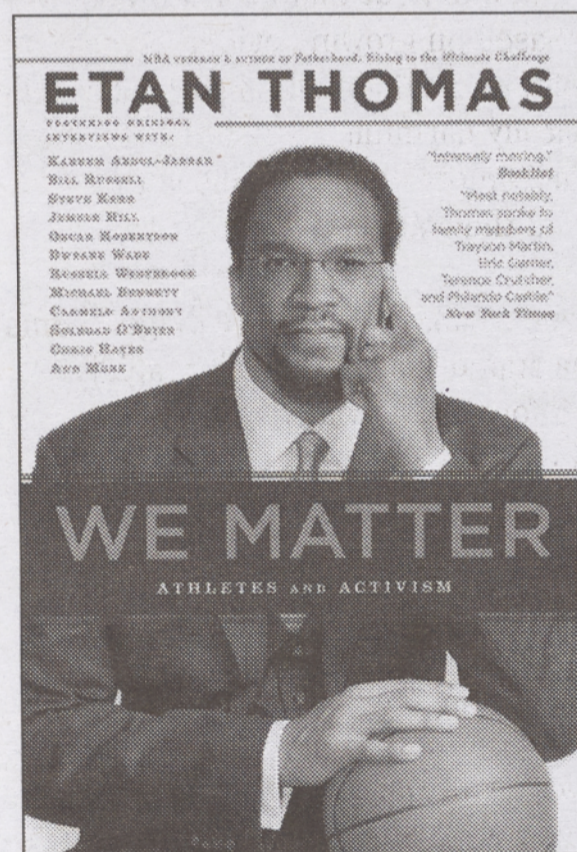
Let me say this: I cherished my time at Syracuse University. I met my wife, graduated with a degree in business management, and developed friendships that I will have for the rest of my life. However, from purely an economic side, Syracuse benefited greatly from my four years there. The NCAA is a billion-dollar industry – with a "B." Maybe back in the day when there wasn't as much money being generated, maybe it was a little more of a trade-off. But now, it's not even close.

Of course college athletes should be compensated. They are able to pay everyone else associated with the athletic department no matter if it's a revenue-generating sport or not, but can't pay the players? No coaches are working for free. No trainers or media people or compliance people or anyone. They can come up with a system if they wanted to, but the problem is they don't want to. The system is working just how the NCAA wants it to, so nothing will change unless they are forced to change.

**D.P.:** *When it comes to activism in the NBA, share what has changed from the time you played in the league to now.*

**E.T.:** I think social media has changed the flexibility and freedom of athletes

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