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HEADLINE: Move to political arena not a stretch for some ex-jocks

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BODY:

He talks like an athlete, thirsts for competition and handles the spotlight with the same poised coolness that helped him quarterback through 13 seasons of professional football.

Striving at 69, Jack Kemp has yet to lose his edge.

"Some things change," he said, celebrating a birthday last week by attending business meetings in San Francisco. "But certainly, not everything_not what's important."

For Kemp, a man who highlighted his athletic career by leading the Buffalo Bills to two consecutive AFL championships nearly four decades ago, it's more than a coincidence that his character hasn't altered.

It's also more than happenstance that he continues to succeed well beyond his days of elite athleticism.

After he was done with **sports**, Kemp became a politician. Still a leader. Still smooth as suede. Still well known. And still a competitor. Just like the old days.

"I don't see it as separate and distinct," said Kemp, recalling the transition from 13 years of football to 22 years in **politics**. "I think one led to another."

Kemp, who spent 18 years as a congressman, served as HUD secretary for President George H. W. Bush and ran for vice president on Bob Dole's Republican ticket in 1996, has no qualms about comparing **politics to sports**. That said, he certainly wouldn't have questioned former Bears coach Mike Ditka had he decided to run for Senate.

Last week, after teasing the state of Illinois by going public with his desire to become "Da Senator," Ditka said he would not pursue his political career _ for now. But it doesn't take away from the fact that plenty of former athletes and coaches could also see

themselves playing in the political arena.

Now for the executive debate: Can these touchdown-driven temperaments continue to succeed as polished politicians much like Kemp has?

"It's a different game, but it draws on some of the same talents and skills," said Darrell West, a political science professor at Brown University and co-author of *Celebrity Politics*. "**Sports** celebrities are well known. They're wealthy. And they're used to being in the public eye. It's really a natural fit."

Don't believe it? Kemp isn't the only success story. Take Bill Bradley, who played for the New York Knicks before serving as a senator and seeking a presidential nomination in 2000. Or Jim Bunning, a baseball Hall of Famer who has actively served in the Senate from Kentucky since 1998. Or Steve Largent, who spent eight years as a congressman after a Hall-of-Fame football career.

After successful careers in **sports**, there have been more than a dozen athletes and coaches who have made significant impacts in **politics** on the national level. There's been even more success on the local level. And don't expect the trend to let up.

Athletes like John Elway have already toyed with the thought. Michael Jordan even played a significant role in Bradley's quest for a presidential nomination in the 2000 Illinois caucuses. And Charles Barkley, currently an NBA commentator for TNT, also has said several times he wants to eventually become the first black Republican governor of Alabama.

West, who devoted a chapter of his book to athletes entering **politics**, said having someone like Barkley in office might not be such a bad match.

"He's somebody who I think would be an effective campaigner," West said. "He's bright and articulate. Also, he has already spoken out on various political issues. I've just been wondering what's taking so long."

So we know there's interest from the **sports** stars. And we know there has obviously been approval from the public. But how, though, do these celebrities decide they want to make such a leap to begin with?

Is it in their blood_something they would have desired had they never even competed in **sports**? Or, more simply, is it just another thing to do after their legs have given out?

While Kemp said he always saw himself as an activist when it came to **sports** (he was the founder and president of the AFL Players Association during his playing days), he didn't necessarily know a life in **politics** would have been so successful.

But with two years remaining on his football contract in 1970, Kemp decided to forgo his final days on the field to represent western New York in Congress.

"I told people in Buffalo if they didn't elect me to Congress, I'd come back and play quarterback again," Kemp joked, recalling his final two seasons as a struggle for on-field success. "So they sent me to Washington.

"Joking aside, I wouldn't say I was destined for **politics**. But I was an organizer, and I had a great love affair for the country. I'd played football for 13 years, so I figured it was time to launch a new career. That's how it started."

Once Kemp arrived in Washington, he said he was pleasantly surprised how his athletic career helped him succeed. For starters, he said, it helped that his **sports** career prepared for the intensely competitive nature of **politics**. Also, like in football, Kemp was always responsible for what he said and how he performed _ something he'd been good at since his youth.

But mostly, he said, football helped him succeed in **politics** because of his appreciation for his opponents.

"In football, I learned to know once the game is over, you can still be friends with the guys who were just trying to knock your head off," he said. "I never personalized **politics**. I could get up on the floor of Congress and advocate a piece of legislation. If somebody didn't agree with me, I didn't personalize. I never allowed myself to fall into the trap of thinking someone was against me."

But there has to be some differences, too. Right? Agreed, says Kemp.

"In football, your opponent has to stand between the sidelines. And there's a referee between you," Kemp said. "Certainly in **politics**, it's not that clear cut."

Kemp isn't alone in his assessment of the similarities and differences. Reggie Williams, a former Cincinnati Bengal who now works in Orlando as Vice President of Disney **Sports Attractions**, may be the country's most knowledgeable source in comparing **politics and sports**.

That's because he managed to hold careers in both _at the same time. During his NFL career, Williams also served as a Cincinnati city councilman. Coming from Dartmouth, an Ivy League school, Williams said he struggled to find acceptance in the athletic and academic communities.

"In the Ivy League, you're looked down upon for being a jock," he said. "And when I got to the NFL, I was looked down upon because I came from the Ivy League. I felt like there had to be a role where both coexisted."

Williams found the middle ground in his final two seasons of football through **politics**. And although he calls his time on the city council rewarding, he said it was also very trying.

"There's so many similarities in **sports and politics** that you can be playing one game's rules at the wrong time," he said. "To do both, it was very difficult. I was sitting at my desk, and there would be blood running down my legs from a game the day before."

Nonetheless, Williams still supports the idea of athletes enduring political careers after their playing days are over. He also said he believes we'll continue to see more and more athletes making a similar leap.

"There's such a competitive edge in **politics** to have name recognition," he said. "And **politics** initially were created to be the ultimate team **sport**. It was Team USA. I really think there will be a trend of athletes becoming politicians."

But don't just expect to see a trend in athletes trying to seek candidacy—you can also expect them to win, says John Orman, a political science professor at Fairfield University and expert on the subject.

"One thing about **sports** — it has such a tremendous hold on Americans," Orman said. "And **sports** heroes aren't necessarily looked at as republicans or democrats. So those people that are undecided don't associate that athlete or coach with a specific party. If you're a **sports** hero and you want to cross into **politics**, you get the benefit of the doubt."

So as athletes and coaches continue their move into **politics**, the question may no longer simply be whether these celebrities can make it. Instead, it will be a question of how high they can go.

Will an athlete or a coach ever make it to the White House? The thought may seem outlandish. But it isn't impossible.

"Anything can happen in America," Kemp said. "I certainly wouldn't make any predictions, but Ronald Reagan was a movie star. That's what's beautiful about our democracy. There are no limits to what you can do with your life."

"Anything is possible."

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