

Don't Hate the Player, Hate the Game

Sports have played a pivotal role in society for centuries. Humans have always been drawn to the intense competitions that come from no more than a simple game. Day in and day out, Americans spend a great deal of their time and money on sporting events whether it be on a major-league level or even allowing the kids to play or represent their favorite team with a jersey or hat. Just to put it into perspective, in 2009 the National Sporting Goods Association performed a study that showed adults in the United States spent more than \$8 billion on sports apparel alone (James W). These numbers don't even account for the money spent on attendance of live games, cable TV to watch the games, or travel to get to the venues, among other expenses. Rivalries are created based on where you live and the teams you cheer for. Sports culture in America is one of the most dominant cultures, if not the most.

When talking about sports culture, you cannot evade talking about the athletes that make it all happen. The only way sports are possible is with the best talents in the country going head-to-head with each other on a stage for the whole country to see. With the eyes of the nation locked on them, these athletes have a platform unlike any other. Spending countless hours in a year in front of the microphones, expressing opinions about their team, the game, practice, and anything else the media wants to get out of them, athletes have numerous opportunities to express their concerns with social issues and attempt to provoke change when it is necessary. They are arguably the people with the most potential to be influential, which makes any protest held stemming from an athlete or a team a widespread discussion. We've seen this in the past and will continue to see it for a long

time to come. Using this platform, athletes of all sports, especially those that grab national attention, should make their voices and opinions heard by citizens and high ranking government officials to provoke change, and when protesting an injustice peacefully, they should not be punished by anyone, whether it be a coach or the commissioner.

Protesting among athletes has been around as long as sports have, ranging from protests about pay or treatment by coaches, to protests about social issues which have recently been more relevant. If a player or players feel they are being treated unfairly, they can protest to get better treatment, just as any other working class American could strike for fair treatment. These types of protest are along the same lines as strikes, but do not have the same societal impacts given the increased influence that an athlete's job has on society in comparison to a desk job. This increased impact on society of an athlete's protest is the sole reason protesting by athletes should be encouraged rather than punished.

Looking back to the late 1960's when Civil Rights protesting was at its peak, many African American athletes pushed the boundaries of what was accepted by society at that point in time. In a student newspaper from the University of Illinois in 1967, Cecil Cheatom, a student at the university, wrote an article in the African American student newspaper focusing on the injustice within the athletics program. Cheatom based the article around the story of Larry Jordan, an African American athlete who was being made a backup to other players on the team because of his race and had contractual obligations to refrain from any activities outside of football to stay on the team, that included protesting. Instead of remaining completely silent, Jordan decided to voice his frustrations at a meeting of the Rotary Club where he accused the athletic department of creating an environment with favoritism and unfair treatment (Cheatom). The "taboo" speech lead to ridicule from the

local media towards Jordan. He took a very justified and peaceful approach to his frustrations, while at the same time breaking the norm. He needed to make a stand and get his point across and even though he did not make a huge impact on the injustice of the time, his platform and perspective allowed for people to get a glimpse at the impact of their own actions. Using his protest, fueled by frustration, in an insightful and peaceful way is the most impactful way to shed light on injustice and make a true change.

A year after the situation involving Larry Jordan, another protest opportunity had come up on a much larger scale for a much larger name. Before the 1968 Summer Olympics, the likes of Tommie Smith, John Carlos, and Ralph Boston were gearing up to bring home medals for the United States but were struck with the issue of whether or not to compete given the current state of the Civil Rights Movement. Tommie Smith and John Carlos were initially in favor of boycotting the Olympics because of their frustration with the injustice occurring throughout America. Ralph Boston on the other hand had this to say on the idea of boycotting: "But I do totally disagree with a Negro boycott of the Olympics. I believe sports has generally afforded Negroes more opportunity to do good for themselves and for their people than any other area of our life, so I do not we should punish these for wrongs committed by others... I believe we should use athletics and the Olympics to further our cause." (qtd. in Wiggins, 294-295). Ralph Boston held a different viewpoint than most African American athletes on the protests. Instead of using the disapproval to turn themselves away from their career, Ralph believed that showing all the people in the United States the poise and excellence that he carried himself with would aid in diminishing the treatment that went on. He believed his platform was made for behaviors and practices other than protesting, but at the same time agreed with the ideas of the other

athletes who wished to protest. Using this mindset Smith and Carlos were convinced to still compete, but were not going to let their cause be suppressed.

During the medal ceremony after their gold and bronze finishes in the 200m dash, the pair put on black gloves, raised a fist, and bowed their heads to symbolize black power. This was done in hopes of giving the African American community across America the ability to rise up and be treated with respect, but instead got various forms of backlash from white communities. In a journal by Jamal L. Ratchford describing various aspects of Civil Rights struggles, he gives the common reaction given by white Americans at the time, describing them as “perplexed and flustered.” Furthermore, he dives into the ideology of “White America” at the time. He captures their perspective saying,

“First, to whites that may have disregarded black concerns, integrated sport best represented the possibilities of American greatness. Second, black protest was seen as antithetical to the idea of sport as a non-political space. Furthermore, black activism in sports was defined as un-American. Historically, black athletes were viewed as property rather than autonomous individuals--their sole allegiances were supposed to be for team, sport, or country.” (Ratchford).

This improper mindset was the initial reason that protests during sports were not and are not being accepted. The atmosphere at a sporting event was supposed to be free from politics and social issues. White people would only suppress their feelings towards black individuals since they were athletes being viewed as property instead of human beings(Ratchford). Once the protests began, they were seen by White Americans as the same as the rest of the population of African Americans, considering them to be ungrateful

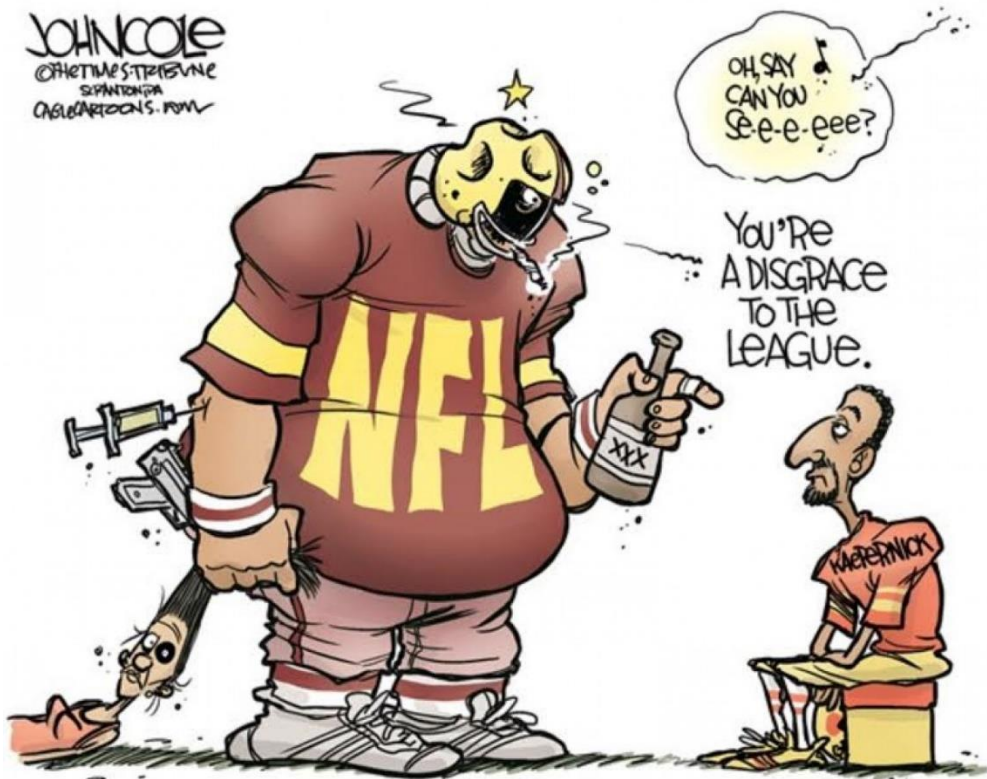
for the things they'd been given. In this sense, protesting created more hatred towards the African American community, but also brought light to the racism and injustice that fueled traditional mindsets. By finally breaking the barrier between athlete and man, these Olympic athletes sparked a major change with a simple gesture.

Fast forward to the 21st century, where the idea of an athlete with a voice has become standard. Although the business of sports builds a platform for all athletes, the size of the platform is largely dependent on the popularity of the athlete, meaning gender and the type of sport played a large role. This made issues within the sports a much more difficult task to get fixed if you were in a less popular sport or were a female athlete. Fighting for the same basic needs of equality, the Australian Women's national team in 2015 felt the need to protest an inequality of pay between men and women playing the same sport. According to Sarah Jaffe of the New Labor Forum: "After six months of negotiations with the Football Federation of Australia, the Australian women's soccer team went on strike, protesting what they say is two months of unpaid work plus wages that did not cover the full-time commitment they made to training for the World Cup... The men earned more than ten times what the women did, in game fees alone." (Jaffe). This inequality in pay drove the female athletes to conference with league officials for months, and when no one made any progress, they had no other choice but to protest by means of sitting multiple games out until a real change was made. This last-ditch effort came because of a lack of voice that is given to these athletes through media attention. From this example, the question 'Does protesting make a difference if you don't get enough attention from the media?' arises. Of course, it does make a difference. Without the ability to protest when you feel something isn't fair or just, you are accepting things as the way they are,

which is not the way the world works. Change is the reason the world is the way it is today, and that should be taken advantage of in the best way possible.

Moving towards the most recent occurrence of athletic protest in the limelight of the media, an incident with NFL quarterback, Colin Kaepernick, reeled in a wide range of mixed reviews. The incident occurred, and is still occurring, in the pregame exercises of the national anthem, where all players generally stand. Kaepernick, who was quoted saying, "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color" (qtd. in Gregory), chose to kneel during the national anthem because of his disagreement with the blind eye being turned to the oppression of African American people in America. This form of protest struck many Americans the wrong way thinking it was meant to disrespect veterans rather than create awareness. Nancy Armour outlines some of the responses from disgruntled fans with remarks such as: "You Nazi (expletive). Patriotism is not defined by protest or reaction to protest. Patriotism is an individual feeling and experience. When these (expletive) take a knee they are spitting on in the graves of soldiers like Pat Tillman." and "If (Colin) Kaepernick really cared about black lives he would be in Chicago telling those primates to stop killing each other." These blatantly racist responses display a perspective of Americans who feel the protest is an improper and disrespectful attempt at healing the current situation. Armour goes on to express an opinion that is a polar opposite to those disgruntled fans saying, "...with all due respect, patriotism and honoring this country is simply a convenient cover for the vehemence and volume of the reaction to Kaepernick and his fellow protesters." (Armour). Armour is essentially stating that the disapproval of the protests is reportedly because of the delivery when in fact they are derived from the reasoning. In the same way that athletes at the

Olympics in 1968 were met with hatred and heinous remarks, Kaepernick is getting disrespected for exercising his right as an American to call to light oppression in a “free” country with a simple gesture. One artist depicted the unjustified hatred in a perspective that calls a different type of villain to the situation:



by JOHN COLE / The Times Tribune, Scranton (via CagleCartoons.com 2016)

This image conveys a perspective aiming the target away from Kaepernick and onto the NFL for issues that are more controversial than his decision to protest (Cole). This cartoon questions the seriousness of the discussion on whether he is being a so-called “disgrace to the league.” The image defends the rationale behind Kaepernick’s form of protest showing that it pales in comparison to these other issues from the NFL. It offers the thought that discussions on the health and safety of players, PED use, and gun and drug use, among

other things, should be discussed before they think about the factor of a player's peaceful protest on the game.

Even though it may not be the most demanding concern in sports, some still believe it should be kept to a minimum because of the affect it could have on the crowds in the arenas watching them or even form riots after these events. On the contrary, a study conducted in the Netherlands looking at "the dynamics of riots related to football (soccer) games and protest demonstrations concluded that "people are not likely to form homogeneous masses in which all individuals behave similarly, people in crowds do not have a higher probability of using violence than they do in their daily circumstances" (Sports and Riots, Come On!). These findings help to refute the idea that there is a possibility of individuals having a higher tendency to riot or create a harmful atmosphere. In turn, Kaepernick's protesting should not decrease the relative safety of fans at any given sporting event.

Colin Kaepernick is setting the tone that replicates that of the Civil Rights movement in the late 60s. He has realized that there are some people that will never get anywhere near the attention that he has. Like all athletes, the platform they are given is an insurmountable number of people watching and learning from them, and also a large amount of influence in society. Athletes are more than just citizens, but only when they use their voices. Without using their voices, they are comparable to the pawns in a chess game, merely a game piece.

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