

Political Protests in Professional and Collegiate Athletics

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Abstract

Sports are an integral part of American culture. In recent years, however, athletics have been increasingly intertwined with political discussion. This includes several important political discussions such as social justice, gender equality and others. While this phenomenon has been primarily seen at the professional level, collegiate athletics have also begun to mingle with political discourse. An analysis of both professional and collegiate athletic protests showed a better understanding of why politics have become prevalent in athletics as well as an opportunity to decide whether such practices in sports should be encouraged. First, the history of political protest in both college and professional sports provided context for contemporary protests. Next, these current protests were examined. Information was given about how governing bodies at large handle these protests. After that, examples of athletes who refused to protest looked at how some of these athletes were treated for their actions. Social justice is not the only hotly contested debate occurring in sports; there is a list of several other athlete protests regarding the topics of vaccine mandates, NIL and gender equality, the opinions of coaches regarding player protest, why athletes may feel empowered to protest, and what effect such political protesting may be having on sports' viewership ratings.

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Political Protests in Collegiate Athletics

Sports have always been crucial to American culture. Whether it is at the recreational, high school, collegiate or professional level; Americans love sports. This includes those who watch in person, watch on the television or actively participate in sports. However, one controversial issue that has arisen in recent years in relation to professional athletics is its increasing willingness to involve itself in political discussion. While American sports have always had some level of political discourse, recent years have seen a massive increase in organizations and even individual athletes speaking up about issues they believe to be crucial, whether through protests or expressing their opinions. The response to this has been mixed, with some claiming that politics and sports should remain separate, and others calling for more athletes to speak out. In addition, this phenomenon has not limited itself to one sphere of athletics but has trickled down from the professional level to collegiate athletics. College athletes are more and more frequently following in the footsteps of their professional counterparts. To properly understand how collegiate athletics have become integrated in political discussion, one must have a solid overview of the politization of both professional and collegiate sports.

History of Politics in Sports

History of Protesting in Professional Sport

Protesting is not a new concept for American professional sports, but one that has been prevalent for centuries. Professional sports have often provided avenues for athletes to protest. Shannon Ryan (2020) listed some examples of these protests. In 1959, Elgin Baylor refused to play for the Minneapolis Lakers during a game in West Virginia because he was racially discriminated against at a restaurant. Bill Russell followed Baylor's example two years later

when he and the black athletes from both the Boston Celtics and St. Louis Hawks boycotted a game because of unfair racial treatment. Ryan cited Russell, who stated, “We’ve got to show our disapproval of this kind of treatment or else the status quo will prevail” (Ryan, 2020, para. 8). Both examples were professional black athletes refusing to compete because they were treated unfairly. In 1965, black athletes in the AFL decided against playing in the All-Star Game in New Orleans because they were mistreated in the city, and the game was moved to Houston, Texas. Muhammed Ali, a boxing legend, was convicted of draft evasion because he did not support the Vietnam War and as a result was revoked of his heavyweight title. His case reached the Supreme Court, and his conviction was overturned. Yet even though Ali’s conviction was overturned, it still marked an important instance of athletes involving themselves in other social issues.

One of the most prominent examples of sports protest was performed by Tommie Smith and John Carlos. These two men raised their fists during the national anthem at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City and were expelled from the games as a result (Ryan, 2020). Richard O. Davies (2017) cited Carlos who stated, “Tommie and I were just telling them that black people and minority people were tired of what was taking place in the US and all over the world... The press and TV blew it all out of proportion” (pp. 317-318). Carlos and Smith suffered major consequences for their decision to protest. Another athlete, Billy Jean King, played tennis and orchestrated equal pay for female athletes in the sport by threatening to boycott the U.S. Open in 1973 if women received lower rewards for the event than the men (Ryan, 2020). She fought for equality for men and women in the tennis world.

One final example of athletic protests in the past is Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, a player for the Denver Nuggets. In 1996, he knelt for the national anthem and received a one-game

suspension. He later compromised by standing in prayer during the anthem (Ryan, 2020). Jesse Washington (2016) noted that despite being one of the best players on the team (averaging almost 20 points a game), he was traded in the offseason to the Sacramento Kings and lost his starting position. During an interview, Abdul-Rauf said,

It's priceless to know that I can go to sleep knowing that I stood to my principles.

Whether I go broke, whether they take my life, whatever it is, I stood on principles. To me, that is worth more than wealth and fame. (Washington, 2016, para. 3)

Abdul-Rauf set an example that many would follow in the future. By studying these past examples of athletic protests and entanglement with politics, one can have better context for current protests.

Historical Collegiate Protests

Just like many of their counterparts in professional leagues, collegiate athletes have attempted to use their platforms to shine light on social injustice. As is the case with protests at the professional level, collegiate protests are not a new issue but one that has been evident for decades.

Perhaps one of the most crucial historical instances of collegiate protest in the United States can be seen in the Syracuse Eight. The Syracuse Eight was a group of nine football players for Syracuse University who fought for equality for all players on the team (Syracuse University, 2022). William C. Roden (2006) stated that the reason for the incorrect labelling of eight players instead of nine is that one player originally participated while injured and the news media never fixed the reporting error. The squad began by asking that the team hire an African American assistant coach as well as better treatment for players, but when this was not provided, the squad

began refusing to practice with the team. This protest began when they boycotted spring practices in 1970 and continued into the following season (Syracuse University, 2022). In August 1970, the players attempted to return to the team but were suspended because of the missed practices. The struggle continued between university staff and the players when the players refused to compete against the University of Kansas at home. This decision led to riots by other students at the school. Ultimately, it led to a full-scale investigation into the university's handling of racial issues which concluded in December and was determined in favor of the Syracuse Eight. The bravery of these nine young men brought positive change to the university. In 2006, the squad was invited back to the school to be honored for their sacrifices. These men who were formerly seen as troublemakers were later called heroes for refusing to bend to the pressure around them. They chose to do what they thought was right and stood by their beliefs.

Contemporary Professional Protests

Kaepernick

Protests and politics have become a major influence in contemporary sports. The most obvious of these is the kneeling during the playing of the national anthem. This trend increased with San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick. During the 2016 NFL season, Kaepernick refused to stand for the anthem. Michael Serazio and Emily Thorston (2019) noted that Kaepernick sat for part of the season, then switched to kneeling, stating police brutality and racism as his reasons for not standing. This polarized the nation, as some believed it was his First Amendment right to speak freely about issues he cared about while others believed that

Kaepernick disrespected the country in his protest. Steve Wyche (2020), writer for NFL.com, cited Kaepernick 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. To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder. (Wyche, 2020, para. 3)

Regardless of public opinion, Kaepernick had started a movement. Throughout the next few years, players in many different sports leagues followed his example. This included the NBA, NCAA, WNBA and the presenters of the ESPYs (Serazio & Thorston, 2019).

The movement became so large that even the former president of the United States commented on the subject. In a rally in Alabama, Former President Trump stated that he viewed the kneeling protest as a direct attack on America. Trump said, “Wouldn’t you love to see one of the NFL owners, when someone disrespects our flag, to say, ‘get that son of a ***** off the field right now. Out. He’s fired. He’s fired!’” (*USA Today*, 2017, para. 6). This further infuriated the players and at the following games more players knelt. It also further instigated the debate with citizens across the country siding with either the athletes or the president. Trump also refused the Philadelphia Eagles their customary White House visit following their historic first Super Bowl (Tucker, 2018).

Despite Kaepernick’s success at starting a movement, he did not have a successful NFL career. After the 2016 season, Kaepernick was unable to sign to a team and Kaepernick argued that he was unfairly treated because of his protests (Serazio & Thorston, 2019). As of March 2022, Kaepernick has been unsuccessful in his attempts to secure a spot on a roster. He has

participated in several workouts with NFL players as well as spoken with Seahawks Head Coach Pete Carroll, but has not signed with any teams as of March 2022 (Breech, 2022). The possibility of his return remains; however, time will tell whether any team decides to give him a chance. While some argue that he is being treated unfairly because of his outspoken beliefs, others believe that Kaepernick is merely not good enough anymore to be on an NFL team. NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell actually apologized to Kaepernick in 2020, saying “I wish we had listened earlier, Kaep, to what you were kneeling about and what you were trying to bring attention to. We had invited him in several times to have the conversation, to have the dialogue. I wish we had the benefit of that, we never did. We would have benefited from that, absolutely” (Selbe, 2020, para. 3). Despite this sentiment from the head of the NFL, the quarterback has still been unable to find a place on an NFL roster as of March 2022. General managers may be willing to take risks with bad publicity if the player is talented enough to outweigh public outcry, but if they determine that Kaepernick will not be a significant asset to the team, it is possible that they do not want to take the gamble of bad publicity.

Lebron James

Kaepernick is not the only athlete who has been outspoken in recent years about politics. Lebron James, often debated as the greatest NBA player ever, has not shied away from sharing his own political opinions. Howard Bryant (2018) argued that this materialized in his criticism of President Trump. As a result of the critique, he was told to “shut up and dribble” by Laura Ingraham, a host on Fox News (Bryant, 2018, p. 62). This echoes the arguments often made by those who argue that sports and politics should remain separate.

Megan Rapinoe

One final example of a contemporary professional athlete engaging in political protests is Megan Rapinoe. Rapinoe is a member of the United States Women's National Soccer Team and has faced her own set of criticism related to protesting during the national anthem. According to Dies Bieler (2019) Rapinoe originally knelt for the national anthem in 2016 in solidarity with Kaepernick. This changed when the USSF began requiring athletes to stand for the national anthem in 2017, a rule that Rapinoe followed until the USSF repealed the decision in 2021 (Carlisle, 2021). After the announcement of the change, Rapinoe did kneel at the beginning of Team USA's contest against Sweden in the 2021 Olympics, however, this occurred immediately before kickoff and not during the national anthem (Associated Press, 2021).

Rise of "Black Lives Matter" in Professional Sport

Political protesting does not only occur with individual athletes. Large scale protest arose following the deaths of several black men at the hands of police over the summer of 2020. With these deaths came the rise of the controversial Black Lives Matter movement that fights to end racial injustice. Lutz and Paul (2020) reported that the Milwaukee Bucks decided to sit out of a playoff game against the Orlando Magic on August 26 after the shooting of Jacob Blake, sparking a leaguewide protest in which every game scheduled for that day was postponed. That same day, the MLB's Seattle Mariners and Milwaukee Brewers postponed their games and the WNBA postponed all of its matchups. The NBA also painted the slogan "Black Lives Matter" on the basketball courts during the 2020 NBA Playoffs.

Contemporary Collegiate Protests

East Tennessee State and the National Anthem

Many collegiate athletes since the Syracuse Eight have involved themselves in political and social protests and often imitate the protests done by their professional counterparts. One example of this is East Tennessee State University's (ETSU) basketball team, who knelt during the national anthem in February 2021. Much like Kaepernick's protests, this decision was met with mixed responses, with many republican politicians arguing that in doing so, the team disrespected the country. The Senate Republican Caucus for Tennessee sent a letter to the university, which said,

When (players) don the jersey of a Tennessee university, they step out of their personal roles and into the role of an ambassador for our state. We expect all those who walk onto the field of play representing our universities to also walk onto the field of play to show respect for our national anthem. (Allison, 2021, para. 7)

Some of the senators specified that as an individual, kneeling should be allowed, but not when that individual intentionally chooses to represent a given institution such as a public university. ETSU was not alone in choosing to protest that season. Gaydos (2021) reported that Ohio State, Drexel, Virginia Tech, Florida and Colgate all saw some players kneeling during the anthem in the first round of March Madness in 2021. This further integrated social justice into the sphere of athletics because of the sheer number of fans who watch March Madness. Young (2021) reported that 16.9 million viewers tuned into the men's championship game alone in 2021. Because of the enormous audience for such an event, the kneeling no doubt was seen by millions of fans.

University of Michigan

Another example of collegiate athletics merging with political discussion could be found at the University of Michigan. As the nation was being rocked by the Black Lives Matter movement following the death of George Floyd, many people took to different forms of protest in opposition to police brutality. Players from the Michigan football team as well as Michigan Football Head Coach Jim Harbaugh participated in a peaceful march in solidarity with Floyd and other members of the African-American community who died at the hands of police (Kercheval, 2020). Notably, the protest was also attended by several members of the local police department. After the event, the event organizer and former Wolverine Mahmoud Issa spoke about how the protest served the community and stated,

They wanted to make sure they could help out to make sure their connection (to the march) was known. It led everyone to come out to help. We all know there's unrest going on in the community. Everyone wants to do something, but they just don't know where to start. By starting this, it gave everyone an easy way to help out make a difference and get the message out. (Kercheval, 2020, para. 4)

While much has been said about national anthem protests, protests such as those done by Harbaugh and his team have met much less opposition than those who opted to kneel for the anthem. This may be considered a positive in the sense that it seems to be a healthy compromise but it may also be considered a negative by those yearning for more substantial reform. This may be because it does not garner the same level of media coverage. Perhaps the national anthem protests are intentionally divisive for the purpose of enacting change.

Collegiate Governing Bodies

BIG 10

To judge the effectiveness of modern collegiate protests, one must gain a strong sense for how the NCAA and other governing bodies view protest. In 2020, Big 10 Commissioner Kevin Warren announced that players would be allowed to kneel during the playing of the national anthem (Brennan, 2020). This decision shattered previous ones in which players faced strong disciplinary action for any action that slighted the status quo. Warren voiced support of those who chose to protest and claimed that doing so reflected their rights as American citizens.

I'm going to personally empower student-athletes to express their right to free speech and peaceful protest. What I have to do as a leader, I know my words matter, I know my actions matter and I will work through over these next couple months where I stand, and they know I stand together with them in all that I do. (Brennan, 2020, para. 3)

Instead of choosing to discipline its athletes, the conference chose to embrace the student body and listen to their concerns. With universities supporting college athletes, these athletes feel much less push back for protests and no longer fear how their protests will impact their careers.

NCAA

The Big 10 is just one example of an increasingly progressive movement in collegiate politics towards political protests. The NCAA governing body as a whole has also accepted this change towards politics and has expressed support for those fighting for social justice. According to the association's website, it stands behind those choosing to use their platforms for change. In a statement on June 12, 2020, the NCAA Board of Governors wrote,

President Mark Emmert and the NCAA Board of Governors recognize the important role social engagement has on driving positive societal change. The recent demonstrations following the tragic killing of George Floyd showed the world the power of protest, and student-athletes across the country were at the center of that movement. We commend NCAA student-athletes who recognized the need for change and took action through safe and peaceful protest. We encourage students to continue to make their voices heard on these important issues, engage in community activism and exercise their Constitutional rights. (NCAA, 2022)

On the website, the NCAA listed several ways in which athletes could speak out, including protests, community building, student groups and others. Clearly, the NCAA has decided against ignoring the issues and actively seeks to appease the desires of the student body.

Athletes Who Do Not Comply

As sports leagues at all different levels of competition sway to the political atmosphere, not every athlete agrees with the actions of the league. Quarterback Aaron Rodgers and NBA star Kyrie Irving are not the only athletes who have rebelled against the actions of their respective leagues. Specifically relating to national anthem protests, certain athletes do not feel comfortable kneeling for the anthem.

Jonathan Isaacs

One example of an NBA athlete who refused to bow to the pressure of kneeling for the anthem is Jonathan Isaacs. Isaacs currently plays for the Orlando Magic. During the summer of 2020, when NBA players across the league knelt during the national anthem as well as wore clothing supporting the Black Lives Matter movement, Issacs did neither (Quinn, 2020). He

instead stood for the anthem as athletes had done in the past. Isaacs, who is black, could be argued to have had as much right as any other player to kneel to protest, but he instead chose to hold true to his beliefs. CBS reported that following the game, Isaacs provided insight into why he chose to stand for the anthem. Isaacs said,

I believe that Black Lives Matter. A lot went into my decision, and part of it is, I thought that kneeling or wearing the Black Lives Matter t-shirt doesn't go hand-in-hand with supporting Black lives. (Quinn, 2020, para. 3)

Isaacs again emphasized his stance later in the interview and noted that he believed the response to the hate in the world should be from a position of faith.

I think when you look around, racism isn't the only thing that plagues our society, that plagues our nation, that plagues our world, and I think coming together on him that message that we want to get past not only racism but everything that plagues us as a society, I feel like the answer to that is gospel. (Quinn, 2020, para. 5)

Not much was ever discussed further regarding Isaac's decision, however, it demonstrates the disagreement about politics that can occur in sports leagues. It must be considered whether athletes like Isaacs are divisive renegades that prioritize themselves over their teammates, or if they are just brave individuals holding to their beliefs. In addition, what environment is created when athletes chose to protest (or abstain from protesting) when the rest of their team does the opposite?

Kiersten Hening

The question must be asked whether those who refuse to engage in political protest could face consequences for these choices. Will coaches or fellow athletes think less of their colleagues who refuse to protest or hold views that contradict the convictions of the majority?

One court case that sheds light on this potential issue involves Kiersten Hening. Hening, who spent three seasons as a soccer player for Virginia Tech, sued the university in 2021 saying that she was unfairly treated by her coach because her political views did not match those of her teammates, and because she did not feel comfortable with demonstrating during the playing of the national anthem (Canova, 2021). She alleges that her coach, Charles Adair, verbally abused her for standing for the anthem and that his treatment towards her caused her to leave the team after she was benched. Hening argued she left the team because of her unfair treatment by the coach. It should be noted that one of Hening's former teammates Alice Hammel defended the coach and stated that Hening's treatment did not result from her political views but from other factors (Barber, 2021). Since the lawsuit, little more has been said about Hening's status on the team or her lawsuit, however, the outcome of this case could dramatically impact how collegiate athletes respond to social justice movements in the future. It is possible that those who disagree with kneeling for the anthem or wearing clothing that supports the Black Lives Matter movement may be themselves targets of rebuke.

Other Issues Protested

Athletes have even begun to share personal opinions about other political issues outside of social justice. These can include a variety of issues including but not limited to vaccines, the Name Image and Likeness (NIL) debate and equal rights for genders in sports.

Vaccine

One of the most relevant of nonsocial justice issues in today's America involves the coronavirus vaccines. Vaccinations, especially when required by law or organizations, have been met with skepticism by many. Despite a heavy push by professional sports organizations in support of the vaccine, several well-known athletes have chosen to forego the vaccine, citing a lack of knowledge regarding the vaccines side effects. They instead opt to do their own research to determine whether they want the vaccine.

Kyrie Irving

In the NBA, the player making the biggest commotion about the vaccine is Kyrie Irving. Irving chose to sit out the 2021-2022 season because the New York City, the location of the home venue for his team, the Brooklyn Nets, required vaccines to compete or attend games in any capacity (Nadkarni, 2021). He decided not to get the vaccine. In late December, it was announced that Irving would be allowed to return to the team, but only in away games (Youngmisuk, 2021). This has caused many to come to Irving's defense of his freedom of his choice about body but has also caused others to act hostile towards Irving. Perhaps the best example of this can be seen from Stephen A. Smith, a sports analyst for ESPN. In an on-air segment, Smith addressed Kevin Durant, another athlete for the Nets, and stated that Irving betrayed him,

K.D., you made the wrong decision bro and here's why: because you trusted Kyrie. Kyrie Irving *betrayed* you. Flat out betrayed you. Left you hanging... Kyrie Irving is a show stopper, a box office talent, and CAN'T BE TRUSTED. I actually hope Kyrie Irving gets cut. (Glasspiegel, 2021, para. 5)

Smith argued that since Kyrie would not bend to pressure to get the vaccine, he is doing a disservice to his teammates. Smith villainized Irving because Irving did not want to get the vaccine, which could have potential negative short term side effects, and little is known about its longterm complications. New York City later revoked its mandate and provided athletes with the ability to compete even if they were not vaccinated (Ganguli, 2022). Irving returned to the Barclays Center March 27 for his first home game in about 10 months.

Aaron Rodgers

Another athlete who has also spoken out against forced vaccinations is Aaron Rodgers, the current Green Bay Packers quarterback and reigning NFL MVP. As most of the NFL opted to get the vaccine for the coronavirus, Rodgers decided to instead get “immunized” through other means instead of the FDA-approved vaccine.

Look, I’m not some sort of anti-vax, flat earther. I am somebody who’s a critical thinker. You guys know me. I march to the beat of my own drum. I believe strongly in bodily autonomy and the ability to make choices for your body, not to have to acquiesce to some woke culture or crazed group of individuals who say you have to do something. Health is not a one-size-fits-all for everybody. (NFL.com, 2021, para 5)

Much like Irving, Rodgers’ decision has not been without its critics. One MVP voter even claimed that they would not vote for Rodgers to be the 2022 NFL MVP because of his refusal to get the vaccine (Spofford, 2022). This shows the level to which people have criticized Rodgers because of his choices.

The criticism has not stopped there and has even been demonstrated by the President of the United States. President Biden, who has long been a proponent of the vaccine, stated in

December 2021 that Rodgers should get the vaccine. Rodgers responded by blasting the president (Spofford, 2022). Rodgers claimed that the vaccine had little to do with the fatality of the virus and even took a shot at the legitimacy of the administration.

But when you say stuff like that, and then you have the CDC, which—how do you even trust them? —but then they come out and talk about 75 percent of the COVID deaths have at least four comorbidities. And you still have this fake White House set saying that this is the pandemic of the unvaccinated, that’s not helping the conversation. (Raskin, 2022, para. 4)

NIL

One critical issue that affects collegiate athletics is Name, Image and Likeness (NIL). The question that constantly arises in relation to collegiate athletics is whether these athletes should be allowed to accept sponsorship deals or endorsements. Some people argue that NIL provides unfair advantage to certain schools whose fan base can provide lucrative deals. Others claim it unduly places the emphasis of student-athletes to focus on athletics. A third group argues that college athletes should be allowed to profit from play on the field. Obviously, most collegiate athletes fall into this third category. During the 2021 basketball season, some athletes chose to use their platforms for change. ESPN reported that players competing in the NCAA Basketball Tournament planned to raise awareness and champion NIL through discussions as well as the spreading #NotNCAAProperty through social media (Murphy, 2021). The goals of this protest were to open opportunities for college athletes, who do not have the time for jobs, to still make money. Those calling for the reforms set a July 1 deadline for the NCAA to pave the way for these endorsements. Geo Baker, one of the athletes leading the charge during these

protests, tweeted about the injustices relating to NIL that plague student-athletes. He stated that student athletes should be afforded the same chance for profit as other students (Baker, 2021).

The efforts seemed to pay dividends for these athletes as the NCAA finally caved to let athletes benefit from NIL. These changes went into effect in the same time frame requested by the athletes. Mark Emmert, president of the NCAA, stated the significance of the change as well as the benefit it would give to college-athletes. He said,

This is an important day for college athletes since they all are now able to take advantage of name, image and likeness opportunities. With the variety of state laws adopted across the country, we will continue to work with Congress to develop a solution that will provide clarity on a national level. (NCAA, 2021, para. 2)

This discussion will likely continue for decades to come but is an important step forward for collegiate athletes. The success of the NIL movement along with the unprecedented rights given to college athletes should bode well for athletes hoping to protest about other topics.

Equal gender rights

Yet another topic commonly discussed in the sphere of collegiate athletics is gender rights. Even though legislation such as Title IX attempts to provide playing opportunities for female athletes, some argue that these young women are still placed at a disadvantage.

During the 2021 March Madness basketball tournament, while some college basketball stars were fighting for NIL and others were kneeling for the national anthem, a third issue arose. This centered around comparisons that had been observed between the treatment of male and female athletes during the event. According to the *New York Times*, the NCAA originally provided the men's teams with state-of-the-art workout equipment, but only provided meager

exercise equipment for the female athletes (Macur & Blinder, 2021). In addition, the female athletes were given COVID tests far inferior to those given to their male counterparts. These issues obviously caused a major stir among the women's teams. Athletes as well as staff from the universities aired their complaints about the uneven treatment, which eventually led to the NCAA apologizing and seeking to make amends. This showed how merely calling out injustice can sometimes lead to positive change.

Opinions of Coaches

Athletes have a variety of individuals whom they respect and trust. This could include parents, teachers, fellow athletes and others, but perhaps the most impactful person in an athlete's life is their coach. The coach dictates the playing time that the player receives as well as determines what drills and workouts will push the player to maximum success. Because of this strong bond between athletes and their coaching staff, it must be seen how coaches themselves view protests. Michigan football coach, Jim Harbaugh, who was mentioned above, provides a tremendous example of a supportive coach, but the question must be asked whether supportive coaches are the norm or the exception. Just like governing bodies, coaches' opinions go a long way to making athletes feel comfortable speaking out.

Stan Van Gundy

With the rise of protest, different opinions have arisen from coaches on the subject. As far back as 2017, several coaches supported athletes making a stance against injustice through protests. One such coach was Stan Van Gundy, a former coach for the New Orleans Pelicans as well as several other NBA teams. Van Gundy (2017) defended those who kneel for the anthem and even commended them. Van Gundy referenced those throughout history who chose to use

sports as a vehicle for change, including Kaepernick, Carlos, Smith and others, and branded them as “patriots of the highest order” (Van Gundy, 2017, para. 6). Van Gundy said that he believed these individuals to be patriots because they had enough admiration and respect for the country to look for ways to improve it. For Van Gundy, they were patriots because they were serving the United States of America through their actions that may have seemed at first glance to be disrespectful. Van Gundy even compared these athletic protesters to the Founding Fathers and other meaningful heroes who stood up against injustice of every variety. Van Gundy said, “Those who have been at the forefront of great advances in social justice have always been willing to make significant personal sacrifices, and that group has always included athletes” (Van Gundy, 2017, para. 5). For Van Gundy, these athletes are further examples of the same type of protest that created and molded America.

Dabo Swinney

Yet, at the beginning of this new era of protest headlined by Kaepernick, not every coach agreed with using the platform to spark change. In 2016, Clemson Head Coach Dabo Swinney stated that he did not agree with athlete protests (ABC News, 2016). Swinney clarified that he would not interfere with any players on his team who chose to express their beliefs through protest but emphasized that he believed protests to be ineffective and only cause further strife. Swinney said,

I don't think it's good to use the team as a platform... But I just think there's a right way to do things. I don't think two wrongs make a right. Never have, never will. I think it just creates more divisiveness, more division. (ABC News, 2016, para. 3)

Swinney again addressed this issue four years later with many of the same beliefs. He stated that he supported his athletes in their political actions, assuming those actions did not cause strife among teammates (Hale, 2020). Swinney urged his players to make their own decisions as adults. Swinney also clarified that he was willing to work for the betterment of the country but would not entangle himself in politics. Swinney's approach attempted to provide players with personal responsibility as well as the option to make personal decisions. This methodology may be influential in how future coaches address the topic.

Bruce Arians

Another coach who argued against political demonstration was Bruce Arians, head coach for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in the NFL. Arians openly critiqued athletic protests in 2020 and claimed that they do little actual good. Arians said,

I would beg them to take action, find a cause and either support it financially or do something to change the situation, because protesting doesn't do crap, in my opinion. I've been seeing it since 1968. (Encina & Pastor, 2020, para. 9)

This comment, made during the middle of a year filled with protest, demonstrates that Arians viewed protesting as less integral than actual effort. Arians called for actual change instead of just empty protests.

Coach support for NCAA athletes

As NCAA athletes continue to consider protesting, it must be examined how these athletes think their coaches feel about it. According to the NCAA research conducted in 2020, student athletes differ in how they feel about discussing political issues with the team. The NCAA reported that 72% of male athletes and 65% of female athletes considered themselves

comfortable talking with teammates about race (NCAA, 2022). These numbers dropped slightly when athletes were asked about discussion on the same topic with coaches, with 56% female athletes and 63% male athletes feeling comfortable (NCAA, 2022). This demonstrates that there is no consensus on the issue among both team members and coaches and each situation must be taken on a case-by-case basis. Only time will tell if players become more willing to have political discourse among members of the team.

Reasons That College Athletes Feel Emboldened

The rise of collegiate protests in athletics forces one to ask why student-athletes have felt more power and authority to be authors of change. While past examples such as the Syracuse Eight show how college athletes have protested in the past, contemporary protests seem to take protests even a step further.

Perhaps one reason why college athletes feel the desire to lift their voices for causes is that politics have integrated themselves into every aspect of American life. As the BLM movement has continued to gain traction, minorities have risen above the injustices they claim have held them down and openly called out racial inequality. According to the research done in 2020 by the NCAA, the vast majority of athletes showed evidence of political interest. The NCAA found that 84% of college athletes described conversing about politics in the prior year (NCAA, 2022). This number did not vary between male and female athletes but remained at 84% for both (NCAA, 2022). This study also found that a significant portion of the student-athletes participated in some form of protest in the previous six months. The survey reported that 49% of black college athletes attended a social justice protest in that time frame, with 29% of Latinx and

23% of white respondents indicating the same (NCAA, 2022). In an increasingly politicized country, it becomes more and more difficult to avoid discussing and involving oneself in politics.

Another theory for why student-athletes may participate in political discourse is that they do so to mimic their idols who have done so before them. Andrew M. Linder, a professor at Skidmore College, ascribed to this belief. He argued that athletes such as LeBron James provide a pattern for younger athletes who admire him to follow. Linder stated,

Many of the current group of college players may have grown up being inspired by not just their on-court play but also their dedication to speaking out. Consider a college freshman that was about 12 years old when LeBron James wore an 'I Can't Breathe' T-shirt in solidarity with protests of Eric Garner's death. Sports heroes' words and deeds matter. (Skretta, 2021, para. 12)

If Linder is correct, then professional athletes must recognize the impact that they have on the superstar athletes of the future. They must also be cautious to ensure that they steer young players in the proper direction because they are partially responsible for the political actions taken by their successors. Linder's claim provided further insight into the national anthem kneeling movement. Because so many athletes look to Kaepernick as a martyr who sacrificed his career for social justice, they aimed to imitate him. Kneeling spread like wildfire because Kaepernick was seen as a leader.

Public Opinion on Protest

Protesting has been a sensitive subject for several years, with some people defending those who choose to protest and others rebuking athletes who stray from the realm of sport. Several studies have been conducted to determine how the public feels about the intermingling of

sports and politics. In a 2020 survey conducted by the Washington Post, 56% of those interviewed supported athletes kneeling for the anthem while 42% opposed it (Maese & Guskin, 2020). This demonstrates the near even split of opinions on the topic. The Washington Post poll also found that 62% of those surveyed believed that athletes should be allowed to use their positions for social justice, and when focusing solely on Black Americans, this rose above 80% in agreement. The Pew Research Center found similar results in a 2019 research study in which it provided four possible answers: strongly agree, slightly agree, slightly disagree, or strongly disagree for respondents to describe personal opinions on athletic protest. In that study, 62% believed that it was at least slightly reasonable for athletes to comment on politics and 35% disagreed (Gramlich, 2020). The Pew Research Center discovered that opinion on this issue depended on the age of the respondent, as well as the individual's race and political party. For adults between the age of 18-29, 74% showed at least small support for athletes expressing political beliefs. This number gradually decreased as the age of the participants increased. For the top age group, 65 and above, half of those surveyed favored it. In relation to race, 79% of black respondents were in favor of athletes involving themselves in politics, 69% of Hispanics agreed as did 56% of white adults. In relation to political parties, 80% of democrats/left-leaning independents showed some support for the athletes and 58% of republicans demonstrated at least mild opposition. Despite the fact that both of these studies show that the majority of Americans support athletes expressing political beliefs, those in opposition are no doubt a large minority.

Protest Effects on League Ratings

Because so many individuals oppose athlete protests, one must determine what affect that has on sports. In 2020, ratings for several professional sports leagues dropped. However, the

reason for the drops have been debated. Sport Media Watch stated that the NBA Playoffs hosted an average of 3.04 million fans in 2020 as opposed to 4.83 million fans in 2019 (Paulsen, 2020). The 2020 Stanley Cup Finals dropped 38% in viewership from 2019 and the MLB Divisional Series viewership dropped 40% (Paulsen, 2020). Sport Media Watch argued that this was not related to the protests and was instead the result of a drop in overall television viewership the first five nights of the NBA Finals from 83.8 million in 2019 to 76.2 million viewers in 2020 (Paulsen, 2020). While television overall reflected less viewership, cable news networks gained viewers. According to Sport Media Watch, the three largest cable news network's viewership rose from 3.8 million in 2019 to 8.4 million in 2020 during the NBA Finals (Paulsen, 2020). So, not only did the NBA Finals face a lower television viewership than in years prior, but also faced increased competition against news networks.

While Sport Media Watch denied political protesting as impacting sport viewership, others disagree. Valerie Richardson (2018) cited a UBS Securities analysis from the 2017 NFL season that studied why fans stopped watching football. The study found that 50% of those who stopped did so because of the national anthem protests. This survey, while insightful, could be considered outdated and a more current survey would provide further clarity on the subject.

Respect is Paramount

Political protesting in sports is not a new issue and is one that will no doubt continue to be debated. Perhaps the most important lesson that can be learned from this topic is a willingness to listen to opposing viewpoints. While people may disagree on political protests and their effectiveness, ultimately the priority should be respect for others. No matter where one falls in

the debate, every individual should listen to the opinions of others in order to expand and challenge his own beliefs.

Conclusion

As the athletic and political spheres continue to intersect, so will the debate on whether these actions should be allowed. These protests manifest in a variety of ways and do not limit themselves to only one issue. The question remains, should athletes, whether professional, collegiate or otherwise, be allowed to protest as they see fit? This is a question that people should examine for themselves. This complex topic will continue to be fleshed out in the future, as the collegiate and professional athletes of tomorrow will make their own choices about whether they will protest for social justice or any other cause, or whether they will maintain a line between sports and politics.

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