

PRO/CON: Protesting the national anthem in the land of the free

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Rashard Robinson (33) and Antoine Bethea (41) of the San Francisco 49ers raise their fists in protest during the national anthem before a football game against the Dallas Cowboys at Levi's Stadium in Santa Clara, California, October 2, 2016. Photo: Photo by Ezra Shaw/Getty Images

PRO: Pro players exercising their right to protest

In August, football player Colin Kaepernick started refusing to stand for the national anthem. Many people spoke out against the San Francisco 49ers player. Their reaction gave life to an important discussion about race, class and violence in this country.

Then, something surprising happened. Many in the sports world supported Kaepernick's right to protest. They supported him even as they continued to stand for "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Chip Kelly, Kaepernick's coach, is one of those supporters. He said that his quarterback's decision was "his right as a citizen."

Not The First To Protest

Kaepernick is not the first professional athlete to stand up for racial equality. The sports world's best athletes have often led by example.

In 1967, professional boxer Muhammad Ali spoke out against the Vietnam War. In 1968, African-American runners Tommie Smith and John Carlos led a protest against racial inequality at the Summer Olympics in Mexico. At the medal ceremony, they both raised a black-gloved fist in the air. Known as the black power salute, this gesture is a sign of support for African-Americans.

A half-century ago, the St. Louis Cardinals were one of the best teams in baseball. Hall of Fame pitcher Bob Gibson once called the Cardinals “the rainbow coalition of baseball.” Their roster not only included blacks and whites, but Latinos, too.

In 1968, when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, Gibson got into a serious conversation about racial equality with his catcher, Tim McCarver. Gibson is black and McCarver is white. Years later, McCarver wrote, “Bob and I reached a meeting of the minds that morning. That was the kind of talk we often had on the Cardinals.”

We need that kind of direct, honest talk again.

Getting Punished For Positions

Many sports stars in the 1960s were punished for taking a public stand. Smith and Carlos had their Olympic medals taken away, and Ali was banned from boxing for years. It took the country years to acknowledge their courage and wisdom.

President Barack Obama recently said that Smith and Carlos created opportunity for future generations.

We find ourselves in a similar moment today, and a growing number of athletes and coaches realize it. They are urging us to do better as a nation. It will be our loss if we refuse to listen.

ABOUT THE WRITER: Tim Wendel is the author of 11 books, and is the writer in residence at Johns Hopkins University in Washington, D.C.

CON: Athletes should not insult the national anthem

Americans of all kinds have always been able to escape life's troubles by watching sports.

San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick may change that.

Kaepernick is not the first athlete to mix politics and sports. For example, at the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City, runners Tommie Smith and John Carlos were expelled for holding up black-gloved fists during the the national anthem.

Kaepernick is not even the only athlete to make a political statement this year. In July, there was stir in the Women's National Basketball Association, when players for the Minnesota Lynx wore Black Lives Matter T-shirts before a game. People who support the Black Lives Matter movement believe that some police and courts treat black people unfairly. Four security officers walked off the job, staging their own protest in response.

Kaepernick is more well-known, though. His actions have encouraged similar protests everywhere from high schools to professional leagues.

Some have voiced their support of Kaepernick. The general public may have a different view, however. So far this fall, viewership for the National Football League (NFL) is down, and a recent poll says Kaepernick is the most disliked NFL player.

Is America To Blame?

I do not question someone's First Amendment right to express their views. However, I do question the wisdom of the target that these athletes have chosen. By protesting the national anthem, they are protesting America.

It is true that America has at times failed to live up to its ideals. It has also made progress over time, though.

There have been some tragic events lately involving black men and the police. However, America did not cause these tragedies. They are local incidents involving local people.

Some police officers may have failed the African-American community, but most Americans are outraged. They want those responsible to be held accountable.

Finding Other Ways

If famous athletes want to make a difference, there are better ways than protesting the national anthem.

Both Kaepernick and the 49ers recently announced that they will be donating to charities that focus on racial issues. Maybe that should have been their first response.

If some athletes continue to kneel during the national anthem, those of us who still take pride in America should stand a littler taller. Playing the national anthem is a time for patriotism, not politics.

ABOUT THE WRITER: Merrill Matthews is a resident scholar with the Institute for Policy Innovation in Dallas, Texas.

Quiz

- 1 Which selection from the PRO section of the article shows racial diversity in sports teams?
- (A) In 1967, professional boxer Muhammad Ali spoke out against the Vietnam War. In 1968, African-American runners Tommie Smith and John Carlos led a protest against racial inequality at the Summer Olympics in Mexico.
 - (B) Hall of Fame pitcher Bob Gibson once called the Cardinals “the rainbow coalition of baseball.” Their roster not only included blacks and whites, but Latinos, too.
 - (C) In 1968, when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, Gibson got into a serious conversation about racial equality with his catcher, Tim McCarver. Gibson is black and McCarver is white.
 - (D) Many sports stars in the 1960s were punished for taking a public stand. Smith and Carlos had their Olympic medals taken away, and Ali was banned from boxing for years.
- 2 Select the paragraph from the section “Is America To Blame?” that suggests that the majority of people do NOT support racial injustice.
- 3 According to the article, which of the following people or groups is MOST patriotic about “The Star-Spangled Banner”?
- (A) the author of the PRO article
 - (B) the author of the CON article
 - (C) Hall of Fame pitcher Bob Gibson
 - (D) the San Francisco 49ers
- 4 Read the sentence from the introduction to the PRO article [paragraphs 1-3].

He said that his quarterback's decision was "his right as a citizen."

What is the MAIN purpose for including this statement in the article?

- (A) It explains why people should support Kaepernick's protest of the national anthem.
- (B) It explains why Kaepernick's coach did not support his protest.
- (C) It explains why the sports world stood for the anthem when Kaepernick did not.
- (D) It explains why Kaepernick began a discussion about race, class and violence.

Answer Key

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- Paragraph 21:
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