

PRO/CON: O'er the ramparts we watched as athletes were kneeling

By Tribune Company, adapted by Newsela staff on 10.12.16

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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 got us talking about an important issue

In August, National Football League (NFL) quarterback Colin Kaepernick began refusing to stand for the national anthem. Many people spoke out against the San Francisco 49ers player for his action. In the midst of a divisive election year, an important discussion about race, class and violence in this country was almost abandoned by the news media.

Then, something surprising happened. Many in the sports world supported Kaepernick and his right to protest. Many did so even as they continued to stand, with their hands over their hearts, for "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Gregg Popovich coaches the National Basketball Association (NBA)'s San Antonio Spurs. He said he absolutely understands why Kaepernick and other protestors are doing what they're doing. "The important thing that Kaepernick and others have done is to keep it in the conversation," he said.

Chip Kelly, Kaepernick's coach, said that his quarterback's decision was "his right as a citizen."

Standing On An Athlete's Stage

Kaepernick is not the first famous athlete to take a stand against racial inequality.

At a sports awards show in July, basketball players Carmelo Anthony, LeBron James, Dwyane Wade and Chris Paul took the stage together. They urged their fellow athletes to become more socially involved.

Time and again, the sports world's best athletes have led by example. In 1967, professional boxer Muhammad Ali took a stand against the Vietnam War. In 1968, African-American runners Tommie Smith and John Carlos led the black power salutes, a political demonstration at the Summer Olympics in Mexico City, Mexico.

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

In 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. The next morning, Gibson, who is black, got into a heated conversation about racial equality with his catcher, Tim McCarver, who 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.

Trouble For Taking A Stand

Of course, many sports stars in the 1960s were punished for taking a public stand. Smith and Carlos were stripped of their Olympic medals. Ali was banished from boxing for years for refusing to fight in the Vietnam War. It took the country years to acknowledge the courage and wisdom in the positions they took.

President Barack Obama recently said that what Smith and Carlos did may have been controversial at the time, but it created opportunity for future generations.

We find ourselves at a similar crossroads today, and a growing number of athletes and coaches realize it. They have dared to hold a mirror up to the rest of us, urging us to do better as a nation. It is 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: This is no place to stage a protest

Americans of all economic classes and backgrounds have always been able to escape life's troubles by watching sports.

However, San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick may change that.

He is not the first athlete to mix politics and sports. At the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City, for example, medal-winning 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 one to make a political statement at a sporting event this year. In July, Minnesota Lynx players, part of the Women's National Basketball Association, wore Black Lives Matter T-shirts before a game. Black Lives Matter is an activist-led movement that protests against discriminatory practices toward black people by police and the courts. Four off-duty police officers providing security for the event walked off the job, staging their own protest.

Kaepernick's position is more high-profile, though, and his actions have sparked similar protests everywhere from high schools to professional leagues.

While some have voiced their support of Kaepernick, the general public may have a different view. NFL viewership is down this fall, and a recent poll found Kaepernick to be the most disliked NFL player.

What Is Too Far?

In protest movements, it's common for protestors to try push things to the next level. If athletes can kneel during the national anthem, can they turn their back? Can they stand on a U.S. flag, or even burn it? At some point, school administrators, coaches, sports leagues, reporters and fans will have to think about this. They will have to decide when a protest goes too far.

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

It is true that America has at times failed to live up to its ideals, but it has also made progress.

There have been some tragic events lately involving black men and the police. America did not cause these tragedies, though. They occurred in Charlotte, North Carolina, Tulsa, Oklahoma, New York City and other places. They are local incidents involving local people.

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

Start A Charity Or Nonprofit

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

Both Kaepernick and the 49ers recently announced they will be donating to charities focusing on racial issues. Shouldn't that have been their initial response?

If some athletes continue to kneel during the national anthem, those of us who still take pride in America should stand a little 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 section of the article highlights the idea that it is important to discuss proper ways for athletes to make a political statement?
 - (A) "Standing On An Athlete's Stage"
 - (B) "Trouble For Taking A Stand"
 - (C) "What Is Too Far?"
 - (D) "Start A Charity Or Nonprofit"

- 2 Which excerpt from the section "Standing On An Athlete's Stage" BEST explains why the PRO author cited the St. Louis Cardinals as a good example?
 - (A) They urged their fellow athletes to become more socially involved.
 - (B) Hall of Fame pitcher Bob Gibson once said the Cardinals "were the rainbow coalition of baseball." Their roster not only included blacks and whites, but Latinos, too.
 - (C) The next morning, Gibson, who is black, got into a heated conversation about racial equality with his catcher, Tim McCarver, who is white.
 - (D) 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."

- 3 How does the viewpoint of the PRO author compare with the viewpoint of the CON author?
 - (A) Both agree that Kaepernick's protest creates an opportunity for future generations.
 - (B) Both support professional athletes' opposition to racial inequality.
 - (C) Both agree that professional athletes should donate to charities that focus on racial issues.
 - (D) Both support Kaepernick's protest of the national anthem.

- 4 In which of the following sentences does the CON author acknowledge two different points of view?
 - (A) Kaepernick's position is more high-profile, though, and his actions have sparked similar protests everywhere from high schools to professional leagues.
 - (B) It is true that America has at times failed to live up to its ideals, but it has also made progress.
 - (C) If famous athletes want to make a difference, there are better ways than protesting the national anthem.
 - (D) If some athletes continue to kneel during the national anthem, those of us who still take pride in America should stand a little taller.

Answer Key

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