

# **When Football and Politics Collide**



**An analysis of the responses to NFL players kneeling during  
the National Anthem**

**Senior Honors Thesis  
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**Abstract:**

A new kind of protest started during a professional football game and has spread throughout the NFL and even into other sports. Kneeling during the National Anthem has created a discussion of racial inequality in the United States, and it started with one quarterback: Colin Kaepernick. Kaepernick's actions sparked many other athletes to follow in his protest, and this topic has become one of the most talked about in 2017. This case study analyzes the reactions to NFL players kneeling during the National Anthem and how their actions affected the NFL's reputation and conversations in the United States.

## **Introduction:**

The separation of football and politics ended on August 26, 2016, when Colin Kaepernick sat on the bench during the playing of the National Anthem before a preseason 49ers game (A Timeline of Colin Kaepernick's National Anthem Protest). When a photo was tweeted of Kaepernick sitting during the National Anthem, it immediately sparked political debate, and the debate continued to grow when the story received national coverage later that day.

The playing of the National Anthem before sporting events has been a custom since the 1918 Baseball World Series, when the Star Spangled Banner was not yet the official National Anthem. The custom started because the country was at war, and the idea quickly spread. Singing the National Anthem at sporting events has evolved from baseball to every sport in the United States, including professional, college and high school leagues (A Brief History of the 'Star-Spangled Banner'). It has been a custom in the NFL since 1942, but it became a requirement by the NFL Commissioner Elmer Layden in 1945. In 2009, NFL players began standing on the field during the playing of the National Anthem. Before 2009, the players were still in the locker room during the National Anthem (The History of Singing the National Anthem Before NFL Games). Since then, players, coaches and fans have stood at attention during the Star Spangled Banner at NFL games. That is why Kaepernick's actions on August 26, 2016, received so much attention.

Kaepernick's actions have been one of the most publicized topics in 2016 and 2017 (10 Biggest Sports Stories of 2016 and The Sports Stories That Already Lit Up the Internet in 2017). The news media, sports networks and social media have been filled with debates since that first game in 2016. Most of the debate has been about Kaepernick's reasoning for kneeling during the National Anthem. Kaepernick's main reason for taking a knee was to show that he could not take

pride in a flag whose country oppresses the rights of African Americans. He believes it is his duty to call attention to the oppression and police brutality that African Americans face in the United States. He wants to use his platform to create change (Colin Kaepernick Explains Why He Sat).

A lot of the debate also deals with ethics. Many people feel that kneeling is a part of free speech. Some even say Kaepernick is a hero and has the right to kneel during the National Anthem. However, others say kneeling during the National Anthem is disrespectful. Not only are people concerned with Kaepernick's ethics, but they are also concerned with the ethics of the NFL and the leaders of the league. After Kaepernick left the 49ers and became a free agent, no NFL team has hired him. Many people say it is because of his strong ties to political debate; others say it is because he's not a good quarterback. Kaepernick believes it is because he has been blackballed by the NFL because of his protests.

### **NFL Company History:**

The National Football League is the professional American football league in the United States. It is the highest level of American Football, and it has the greatest level of fan attendance of all the professional sports leagues in the United States and the world. The NFL was created in 1920, but it was called the American Professional Football Association. The league only kept this name for two years. The league was renamed in 1922 as the National Football League. The NFL has always been the most admired league, but there have been four rival leagues, including the American Football League, but the NFL prevailed over its competitors and is still the most popular league (NFL History).

The NFL has 32 teams and is split between two divisions: The National Football Conference and the American Football Conference. Each team plays 16 regular-season games,

and then there is a single-elimination playoff consisting of 12 teams. At the end of the playoff, two teams will face each other in the Super Bowl. The Super Bowl is the biggest sporting event in the United States and has set many television rating records. The NFL is one of the most successful sporting leagues financially (NFL History).

### **Key Characters:**

Colin Kaepernick is the main piece to this puzzle. Kaepernick sparked the controversy that has spread across sports all over the country. Kaepernick attended the University of Nevada, where he was a football player and was drafted in 2011 by the San Francisco 49ers. He was a successful quarterback and led his organization to Super Bowl XLVII. However, that is not what he is known for today. In August 2016, Kaepernick kneeled during the playing of the National Anthem in protest during a preseason 49ers game. The news quickly spread and became a highly debated topic. After leaving the 49ers to be a free agent, Kaepernick has not been hired by any NFL team. In October 2017, Kaepernick filed a complaint against the NFL and its leaders because he believed he was being blackballed by the NFL. Kaepernick continues to draw attention to the debate and was named GQ Citizen of the Year in November (Colin Kaepernick Biography).

The NFL Commissioner, Roger Goodell also has a big role in this issue. Being the current commissioner of the NFL, Goodell has had a lot to say about Kaepernick's protests and the others that followed him. Since there is no precedent for this issue, Goodell has had to figure out what to do without help from the rulebook.

Many NFL team owners have played a role in the debates and timeline of this issue. Jerry Jones, the Dallas Cowboys owner, made statements and set precedents for the players on his

team. Jones was one of the first owners to speak against Kaepernick's protests, but has since shown some change in attitude.

Eli Harold, Eric Reid and other players on Kaepernick's team began kneeling with him, drawing more attention to the protests. Eventually players on other teams began kneeling or staying in the locker room during the National Anthem. Whole organizations remained seated during the National Anthem to show their support of Kaepernick's protest (National Anthem Protests by Black Athletes Have a Long History).

Athletes in other sports and levels spoke out in support or opposition of Kaepernick. Steph Curry and LeBron James are some of the athletes that gave their support, while Justin Pugh and others expressed outrage (Athletes Respond on Twitter). Even celebrities who are not athletes have shown divided opinions of Kaepernick's protest. Donald Trump is a specific celebrity who has had a lot to say about Kaepernick's actions. President Trump expressed disapproval of the protests and gave negative statements attacking Kaepernick and the athletes who support him.

### **Timeline:**

Colin Kaepernick's protest involving kneeling during the National Anthem began in August 2016, which was the first of its kind, but the United States has a history of similar protests in sports. The following is a timeline of the previous sports protests, as well as the current protests.

- 1968 – Tommie Smith and John Carlos, two African American Olympic track athletes, raised their black-gloved fists on the Olympic podium to represent a black power salute. This became one of the most famous protests in sports history. Smith and Carlos were

suspended and sent home from the Olympics (National Anthem Protests by Black Athletes Have a Long History).

- 1972 – Vince Matthews and Wayne Collett, two African American Olympic track athletes, turned their back for the playing of the National Anthem while they were on the Olympic podium. As they left the podium, Collett raised his fist to give the black power salute. Both athletes were barred from the Olympics (National Anthem Protests by Black Athletes Have a Long History).
- 1996 – Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, a basketball player for the Denver Nuggets, refused to stand during the National Anthem because he converted to Islam. Abdul-Rauf was suspended from the NBA. (National Anthem Protests by Black Athletes Have a Long History).
- August 14, 2016, and August 20, 2016 – Colin Kaepernick sat during the National Anthem at the 49ers' games, but went unnoticed by fans and media because he was not in his uniform (A Timeline of Colin Kaepernick's National Anthem Protest).
- August 26, 2016 – Kaepernick was in uniform when he sat for the National Anthem. Jennifer Lee Chan tweeted a photo on the Niners Nation twitter account of Kaepernick sitting during the National Anthem. The story gained media attention that night. The 49ers and Kaepernick made statements regarding the protest (A Timeline of Colin Kaepernick's National Anthem Protest).
- August 28, 2016 – Kaepernick's made his reasoning for the protest public, and the political and ethical debates began to accelerate (A Timeline of Colin Kaepernick's National Anthem Protest).



- September 1, 2016 – Kaepernick was joined in his protest by 49ers safety Eric Reid, who took a knee with Kaepernick. Kaepernick explained in-depth that his protest was not to bring disrespect, but to bring awareness to the racial issues in the United States, including police brutality.

At the same time, Seattle Seahawk, Jeremy Lane, sat on the bench during the National Anthem. He was the first athlete that was not a team member of Kaepernick's to support him (A Timeline of Colin Kaepernick's National Anthem Protest).

- September 4, 2016 – Megan Rapinoe, a female soccer player, took a knee in support of Kaepernick. Rapinoe received backlash from the soccer community and the public for her actions (A Timeline of Colin Kaepernick's National Anthem Protest).
- September 9, 2016 – Brandon Marshall, a Denver Broncos linebacker, took a knee during a regular season game. He was the first player to take a knee during the National Anthem during a regular season game. Marshall took a knee to support his University of Nevada teammate, Kaepernick (A Timeline of Colin Kaepernick's National Anthem Protest).
- September 11, 2016 – a few NFL teams locked arms during the National Anthem as a way of supporting the continuation of the discussion Kaepernick started. Some players raised their fist to show their support for Kaepernick (A Timeline of Colin Kaepernick's National Anthem Protest).
- September 16, 2016 – Garfield High School football players and coaches took a knee together during the National Anthem before their game (A Timeline of Colin Kaepernick's National Anthem Protest).

- September 17, 2016 – Cheerleaders at Howard University took a knee during the National Anthem to show their support for the movement (A Timeline of Colin Kaepernick's National Anthem Protest).
- September 20, 2016 – Members of the Oakland Unified School District's Honor Band took a knee as they played the National Anthem before an Oakland A's game (A Timeline of Colin Kaepernick's National Anthem Protest).
- September 22, 2016 – Kaepernick was featured on the cover of TIME Magazine. The article discussed the protests, as well as sports activism and racial issues.

The protests continued to spread throughout various sporting events. Basketball teams, football teams, bands and singers continued to show support for Kaepernick's efforts to encourage discussion about racial inequality in the United States. The debates also continued. The more people showed support, the more people expressed disapproval.

- October 9, 2017 – Jemele Hill, an ESPN reporter who is a strong Kaepernick supporter, was suspended by ESPN (ESPN Suspends Jemele Hill).
- October 16, 2017 – Kaepernick filed a complaint against the NFL owners for collusion to keep him from getting hired by a team (Colin Kaepernick Biography).
- November 13, 2017 – Kaepernick was named GQ's Citizen of the Year. Immediate backlash began from the public, while others were in full support (Colin Kaepernick Biography).

### **Public's Reaction Toward the Issue:**

With a topic so controversial, there is bound to be a wide variety of reactions. This topic has received almost every reaction on the spectrum. Most of the debate comes down to respect. Whether it's respect for the flag, country, military, people of color, or NFL players, respect is the

focal point of the discussion. There has been a lot of confusion over the real reason for the NFL protests, which is one of the reasons there has been such a debate. Kaepernick has made definitive statements that his reason to take a knee was to protest the oppression of African Americans and other people of color, as well as the recent police brutality (Everything You Need to Know About the NFL Protests). However, many people chose to look at it differently. Most of the negative responses were because people thought the protest was disrespectful to the United States and its military.

In the past year, Kaepernick has gained a lot of support from other athletes, celebrities and regular people on Twitter. Twitter is a place where anyone can share their opinion so the reactions have not all be positive. Celebrities always have a platform to voice their opinion, but this topic has gained so much attention because regular people are also able to voice their opinion.

President Donald Trump also responded negatively to the protests since his inauguration. At a rally in Alabama, Trump said, “Wouldn’t you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, ‘Get that son of a bitch off the field right now, out, he’s fired!’ You know, some owner is going to do that” (Everything You Need to Know About the NFL Protests). Trump also has taken to Twitter to express his feelings toward the issue. “If a player wants the privilege of making millions of dollars in the NFL, or other leagues, he or she should not be allowed to disrespect our Great American Flag (or Country) and should stand for the National Anthem. If not, YOU’RE FIRED. Find something else to do!” Trump tweeted on September 23, 2017.

Jerry Jones, the owner of the Dallas Cowboys, is another key public who expressed disregard for the National Anthem protests. In October 2017, Jones told the Cowboys

organization that any player who participates in the protest would not be allowed to play (President Trump Reminded Jerry Jones of Game Operations Policy). It was ESPN analyst, Jemele Hill's Twitter response to Jones that got her suspended for two weeks. Hill tweeted, "Don't ask Dak, Dez & other Cowboy players to protest. A more powerful statement is if you stop watching and buying their merchandise." She then followed up by tweeting, "Just so we're clear: I'm not advocating a NFL boycott. But an unfair burden has been put on players in Dallas & Miami w/ anthem directives" (ESPN Suspends Jemele Hill).

### **Player's reactions Toward the Issue:**

The country is divided when it comes to the Kaepernick's protests, and so are NFL players. "I will be STANDING during the National Anthem tonight. Thank you to ALL (Gender, Race, Religion) that put your lives on the line for that flag," Justin Pugh, offensive guard for the New York Giants tweeted in August 2016 (NFL Players React to Colin Kaepernick). Other players did not express their thoughts on the protests, but gave support of Kaepernick's talent. "I think he should be on a roster right now," Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers said. "I think because of his protests, he's not" (I Hope He Gets a Shot to Play in the NFL Again). However, some players showed extreme support for Kaepernick's efforts. Tennessee Titans player, Rishard Matthews wore specialized cleats during an NFL game on November 5, 2017, to show his support for Kaepernick. The cleats had "Colin Kaepernick" written on them, as well as "know your rights." The cleats also featured a drawing of Kaepernick taking a knee (Tennessee Titans' Rishard Matthews to Wear Cleats in Support of Colin Kaepernick Sunday). Each side has countless supporters.

### **Impacts on the NFL:**

One of the most prominent impacts of Kaepernick's protest is that many other players are joining in on it. Every NFL game of the 2017 season has had players kneel, raise a fist or stay in the locker room during the National Anthem to show their support of the protest. The protest has spread to other sports and levels of football. More flyovers have been performed before NFL games because of the protests (They Took a Knee). One worry of Kaepernick detractors is NFL television ratings. As it turns out, the NFL television ratings are down, but there is no way of knowing if it is because of the protests (The NFL's Ratings Are Down). The protests also don't seem to be affecting ticket sales. The biggest impact of the protests are conversations. News outlets, sports shows and regular people are having conversations about racial issues in the United States, which was Kaepernick's goal at the very beginning.

### **Conclusion:**

The collision of football and politics sparked a lot of important debate in the United States. Even though Kaepernick's protest was not the first of its kind, it was unique. Kaepernick's protest shined a light on the controversial issues of racial inequality and police brutality in the country. The protest also inspired debate about respect; respect for the flag, respect for the country and respect for the First Amendment. Any topic of this magnitude is bound to cause debate, and that is exactly what Kaepernick's protest did. The reactions from the public and players are spread all across the board. Many took pride in the movement; others protested the protest. However, Kaepernick did accomplish one of his goals. He started the important conversations that are happening all over the United States about the problems in the country.

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