

# Kneeling Down is the New Standing Up

## *The Power of Sports*

Aaron L. Miller

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### Colin Kaepernick and the power of athlete protest



**Colin Kaepernick.** Mike Morbeck/Flickr  
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In our new age of viral videos, trending topics, and social media outrage, patriotism is now hotly contested in cyberspace—what it means to be a patriot and honor the flag, the anthem, or the nation’s president.

Enter former San Francisco 49er and now free agent NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick, whose 2016 decision to first sit, and then later kneel for the pregame national anthem challenged the traditional values of football—**our nation’s most powerful spectator sport**—landed him on the cover of *Time* magazine, and re-catalyzed the dormant spirit of athlete activism. History may show Kaepernick’s non-violent protest to be one of professional suicide, but also one of the most courageous and patriotic acts an athlete has ever made.

Kap, **as he is known to his loyal fans**, explained his decision to kneel as one driven by a desire to further social justice: “There’s people being murdered unjustly and not being held accountable,” he said after he sat. “People are being given paid leave for killing people. That’s not right. That’s not right by anyone’s standards... When there’s significant change and I feel like that flag represents what it’s supposed to represent, this country is representing people the way that it’s supposed to, I’ll stand.”

Kap had personal experience with racial profiling, when in college police officers drew guns on him and a friend “because we were the only black people in that neighborhood.” He **told ESPN** that they

“came in the house, without knocking, guns drawn on my teammates and roommates.”

Yet Kap stated that it was giving voice to the voiceless that drove his decision to kneel: “This stand wasn’t for me... This is because I’m seeing things happen to people that don’t have a voice, people that don’t have a platform to talk and have their voices heard, and affect change. So I’m in the position where I can do that, and I’m going to do that for people that can’t.”

Kap follows in a long line of American athlete activists, a line that was transformed by **Muhammad Ali** who was not only “The Greatest” boxer, but also a passionate and vocal critic of the Vietnam War and racial injustice in America. Ali knew that speaking out might get him killed, just as it did for Martin Luther King, Jr. and other vocal leaders, or thrown in jail. But he “damned the white man’s money” anyway, and he **passionately made the case that “the black freedom struggle” and “the injustices of the war in Vietnam” were connected events.**

When **John Carlos and Tommie Smith raised their fists at the 1968 Mexico Olympics**, they too risked their lives and livelihoods to protest racial and economic injustice. International Olympic Committee chief Avery Brundage expelled Carlos and Smith from the Olympic Village, and **when they returned home to the US they faced death threats and struggled to find work.**

But in the 1980s and 90s, **when Michael Jordan and Nike took over the world**, star athletes increasingly became global sports icons, corraling millions of dollars not only from professional sports teams but also from corporate America, and **ultimately discouraging American athletes’ protests.**

*Each NFL franchise with a need at quarterback has the power to contribute its own definition of patriotism to the national conversation, and to further the important dialogue stimulated by Kap’s principled, non-violent protest.*

Today, activists like Kap are re-catalyzing that long dormant spirit of athlete protest, long silenced indirectly by the prospect of lucrative sponsorship. For that reason, Dr. Harry Edwards, a seminal figure in both the civil rights movement and the sociology of sport, and the author of *The Revolt of the Black Athlete*, says that Kap **“belongs in the Smithsonian right next to Muhammad Ali, right next to Tommy Smith and John Carlos.”** Like these men and many others, Kap seeks the same goals that Edwards highlighted in *The Revolt*: “Equality, justice, the regaining of black dignity lost during three hundred years of abject slavery, and the attainment of the basic human and civil rights guaranteed by the United States Constitution and the concept of American democracy.”

From the beginning, **Kap imagined kneeling might get him “blackballed” from the League**, making his protest all the more extraordinary. **He knew it might be an act of professional suicide**. Many of his would-be employers—NFL teams in need of a quarterback—run their businesses in red states that pride themselves on a different sort of patriotism. He knew they might pass on him to “avoid the distraction” and eliminate the risk of alienating their conservative fans. (**The Seattle Seahawks recently called Kap’s agent**, but even if Kap is hired there, he will likely be their backup.) When asked if he “might... get cut [from the 49ers] over this [kneeling]”, Kap responded: “I don’t know. But if I do, I know I did what’s right. And I can live with that at the end of the day.” In our highly mediated age, where publicly scrutinized behavior off the field and in social media can impact an athlete’s ability to secure or maintain employment, this is an astoundingly principled statement. And is there anything more patriotic than turning down a paycheck to do what you believe is right for your country?

In the courses I teach on sports and social justice, I challenge my students to think about patriotism by focusing less on blind deference to a flag or an anthem and more on political involvement that demonstrates a deep concern for the future of our country and its laudable ideals. By that standard, I see Kap as a true patriot because he is doing all he can to help his country live up to its own vision.

This off-season, each NFL franchise with a need at quarterback has the power to contribute its own definition of patriotism to the national conversation, and to further the important dialogue stimulated by Kap’s principled, non-violent protest. So far, the only way most teams have contributed to that conversation has been with silence and inaction, passing on Kap for other quarterbacks whose off-field actions are far less controversial. Such silence and inaction, while likely better for their bottom line, effectively encourages real dialogue—and perhaps even athlete activism itself—to go underground once again.

Kneeling down may be the new standing up, but many in our most powerful sports league simply see it as kneeling down.

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*In this monthly column, "The Power of Sports," Miller considers the social and political nature of sports in American society, with an eye toward opening the minds of readers to the seriousness of these so-called escapes.*

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**Rick Wilk** says:

June 28, 2017 at 11:22 pm

I have been teaching at a university that has no official sports teams, and education does not suffer! The National University of Singapore is consistently ranked #1 in the region, in a country that is too small to take professional sports very seriously. Looking forward to the next column.

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