

The Power of Sports to Change American Ideals

The Power of Sports

Aaron L. Miller

January 17, 2018

When the now former National Football League (NFL) quarterback Colin Kaepernick knelt for the national anthem in a preseason game in the summer of 2016, he set off far reaching political waves. He empowered other players to follow suit and provoked the sitting **United States president to lash out** at kneeling players. But Kaepernick also challenged all us to reconsider the role our most powerful professional sport plays in our politics and in the politics of our workplaces.





American Idol's Katharine McPhee performs the national anthem before the Thanksgiving Day game between Detroit and Green Bay in 2007 at Ford Field. Dave Hogg/
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Trump's tirade against players who knelt for the anthem—referring to them as a “son of a bitch” and demanding their firing—made it clear that he believed NFL owners needed to better control their employees. But several NFL owners already echoed his perspective. Bob McNair of the Houston Texans, with a striking tinge of racism, said the kneeling was creating chaos and **“we don't want the inmates running the prison.”** Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones, on the other hand, told a local radio station that the issue of players kneeling was simply a “workplace issue.”

In fact, the ripples of Kaepernick's protest appear to be extending to the American boardroom; indeed, his actions exemplify a new era in which employees—and consumers—

are now wielding more relative power over their employers. According to a [recent *Economist* article](#), political activism by corporations is on the rise, since top brass are under more pressure than ever to speak out on social issues. This pressure has a number of sources, but most relevant here are the increasing ease of expressing political opinions online; investor movement toward corporations conscious of environmental, social and (good) governance (ESG); and pressure directly from employees. (For example, the *Economist* reported that in the US, investments informed by ESG factors rose from just one-ninth of all assets in 2012 to one-fifth in 2016. In other words, investors now want the companies they support to be “good corporate statesmen.”) Employees are also challenging their employers to take a stand on social issues. According to the *Huffington Post*, [employees increasingly expect their employers to be committed to a plan of corporate social responsibility \(CSR\), and they are more likely to want to apply to a job at a company that has a robust one.](#) Finally, consumers also now have great ability to express their political opinions online and with their purchasing power. When, for example, the actress Mila Kunis announced she donated money to Planned Parenthood in a protest against US Vice President Mike Pence, who is a vocal critic, [supporters of Pence began using the hashtag “boycottJimBeam”](#)—Kunis is one of the [bourbon’s spokespeople](#). As the *New York Times* recently opined, “In today’s political climate, even pizza, bourbon and

coffee can be partisan issues.”

In taking his “workplace issue” perspective to the airwaves, Jones pushed against the ideals of this new era. He wanted to remind his players that they worked for his company *and* that he could discipline them for insubordination. But he also reminded his patriotic fans, for whom anthem-kneeling seemed a slap in the face—that these players would be benched or fined if they chose to “disrespect the flag.” (When asked exactly what such disrespect would look like, Jones answered, “You’ll know it when you see it.”) What Jones wanted, of course, was for everything to go back to normal, before Kaepernick and the “chaos” he created, when NFL fans weren’t turning off their TVs disgusted by protests.

But the anthem controversy is much more than just a “workplace issue”; it involves race, criminal justice, power, and employer-employee relations, which is to say nothing of nationalism and militarism. Most NFL players are black; most NFL owners are white. Kaepernick has said he was protesting racial injustice and particularly police brutality; his opponents say his kneeling is anti-American and anti-military.





Some members of the San Francisco 49ers kneel during the National Anthem before a game against the Washington Redskins at FedEx Field on October 15, 2017 in Landover, Maryland. Keith Allison/ Flickr CC BY-SA 2.0

What is most notable to me, however, especially after writing half a dozen articles on the “power of sports” for this publication, is the power of just one athlete’s decision to protest for what he believes in. Of course, Kaepernick’s choice to kneel had an enormous impact not only on his own career—he will likely never play again in the NFL, and it’s likely he was **blackballed from the league**—but it has also impacted the nation as a whole. In his protest Kaepernick himself did not seek to pressure his employer per se, but rather use his platform to raise awareness. However, his disciples—those NFL players who have since knelt with Kaepernick in solidarity—have achieved quite remarkable

success since then. After the kneeling reached something of a critical mass, **during the 2017 season and after Trump’s tirade, NFL players worked together with the NFL administration to lobby Congress for criminal justice reform.** Their pragmatic approach to working with the league

helped achieve something even Kaepernick probably thought impossible in 2016: first, the **opportunity to tell their own personal stories of racial injustice directly to national legislators**, and, second, an **affirmation from the NFL itself that there was a need for criminal justice reform**.

Entities like the NFL are unsurprisingly focused on making money and thus steering clear of politics wherever possible, but today they no longer have that luxury. Like any corporation living in the age of social media and digitally-driven investment, the NFL must respond to the demands of both employees and consumers, or else their bottom line may suffer. Today the “profitable is political,” or, **as one advertising executive** put it, “Brands are shifting from a world where they avoided politics at all costs...to one where younger consumers want to know that their ‘values are aligned.’” The **NBA’s 2016 decision to move its All-Star Game** away from Charlotte, North Carolina, in response to the state’s controversial HB2 law that was “widely perceived as discriminatory toward LGBT individuals,” is another example. **The loss of that game was estimated to cost the city of Charlotte approximately \$100 million.**

Whether Trump, Jones, or McNair like it or not, the conversation about American sports has entered a new era, which increasingly focuses on American values, not just X’s and O’s, touchdowns and TV ratings. More Americans than ever now must confront the reality that politics and sport are

ever how much common the reality that politics and sport are actually inseparable realms, no longer leisurely havens for the apolitical. It stands to reason, therefore, that athletes like anyone else should not have their right to protest infringed. Trump, McNair, and Jones all have shown their belief that the kneeling protests have attacked the cherished American workplace ideal of “keep your mouth shut and do your job,” but thanks to Kaepernick and his disciples, that ideal seems to be changing. And in this author’s humble opinion, that is unquestionably for the better.

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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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Cite as: Miller, Aaron L. 2018. “The Power of Sports to Change

cite us. Miller, Aaron L. 2018. "The Power of Sports to Change American Ideals." *Anthropology News* website, January 17, 2018. DOI: 10.1111/AN.734

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