

PRO/CON: Have the national anthem protests been good for democracy?

By Tim Wendel and Merrill Matthews, Tribune Company on 10.11.16

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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: Protests push all of us to face dilemma of racial injustice

When NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick began refusing to stand for the national anthem, many media pundits and others chastised him for it. An important discussion about race, class and violence in this country nearly fell into the news-cycle churn of a divisive election year.

But then something surprising took place. Many in the sports world closed ranks around Kaepernick and supported his right to protest even as they continued to stand, many with hands over their hearts, for "The Star-Spangled Banner."

San Antonio Spurs coach Gregg Popovich said, "I absolutely understand why they're doing what they're doing, and I respect their courage for what they've done."

Popovich, who served in the Air Force and is the new coach of the U.S. men's national basketball team, added that, "The important thing that Kaepernick and others have done is to keep it in the conversation. ... With our 24/7 news, things seem to drift."

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

Kaepernick, however, certainly isn't the first prominent athlete to use his stage to take a stand against racial inequality.

At July's ESPY Awards, basketball players Carmelo Anthony, LeBron James, Dwyane Wade and Chris Paul took the stage to urge their fellow athletes to become socially more involved. Serena Williams, Michael Irvin and others soon raised their voices, too.

From the black power salutes by Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the Mexico City Olympics to Muhammad Ali's stand against the Vietnam War, time and again, the sports world's best have led by example.

"Generations ago, legends like Jesse Owens, Jackie Robinson ... set a model for what athletes should stand for," Paul told the audience at the ESPYs. "So we choose to follow in their footsteps."

A half-century ago, the St. Louis Cardinals were one of the best teams in baseball for a number of important reasons. Their roster not only included blacks and white but Latino stars, too. Long before Jesse Jackson coined the phrase, the Cardinals "were the rainbow coalition of baseball," as Bob Gibson once said.

The morning after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in 1968, Gibson got into a heated conversation with his catcher, Tim McCarver. The future Hall of Fame pitcher told McCarver that he couldn't possibly comprehend what it was like to be a black person and that it was impossible for whites, no matter how well intentioned, to totally overcome prejudice.

To his credit, McCarver, who had grown up in Memphis, Tenn., where King had been struck down, refused to let the conversation end there. In doing so, McCarver found himself in "the unfamiliar position of arguing that the races were equal and that we were all the same."

Years later, McCarver wrote that "Bob and I reached a meeting of the minds that morning. That was the kind of talk we often had on the Cardinals."

And that's the kind of frank, honest talk we need again.

Of course, many sports stars in the 1960s were criticized and worse for taking a public stand.

Smith and Carlos were stripped of their medals. Ali was banished for years from boxing for refusing to enter the draft. It took the country years to acknowledge the courage and even the wisdom in the positions they took.

"Their powerful silent protest in the 1968 Games was controversial," President Barack Obama recently said of Smith and Carlos, "but it woke folks up and created greater opportunity for those that followed."

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's our loss if we refuse to heed their call.

ABOUT THE WRITER: Tim Wendel is the author of 11 books, including "Summer of '68: The Season That Changed Baseball, and America, Forever." He is the writer in residence at Johns Hopkins University's Washington, D.C., campus.

CON: Dissing anthem hurts sports, insults most fans

For a long time, Americans of all economic classes, backgrounds and political persuasions have been able to briefly escape life's stresses by communally watching sports.

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

He's not the first to infuse politics into sports. At the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City, for example, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, the 200-meter race gold and bronze winners, were expelled after holding up black-gloved fists at their award presentation during the playing of the national anthem.

Nor has Kaepernick been 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 during warm-ups before a game with the Dallas Wings. Four off-duty officers providing security for the event walked off the job, expressing their own type of protest.

But Kaepernick's high-profile visibility ignited the protest echo chamber, from high schools to professional athletes.

While some have voiced their support for the protests, the general public may have a different view.

Early reports indicate that NFL viewership is down this fall. And ESPN recently reported on a poll finding Kaepernick the most disliked player in the NFL.

It's common in protest movements for some to try and push things to the next level.

If athletes can kneel during the playing of 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 associations, team owners, sports reporters and even fans should ask themselves how far is too far?

While I don't question someone's First Amendment right to express their views, I do question the wisdom of the venue these athletes have chosen — and more importantly, their target. By protesting the national anthem, they're protesting America.

It's true that America has at times failed to live up to its ideals, but it has also been striving "to form a more perfect union" for decades — and it has made a lot of progress.

There have been some tragic events lately involving black men and the police. While the jury is still out on some of those incidents, some appear to have been real travesties of justice.

But America didn't cause these tragedies. They occurred in Charlotte, N.C., Tulsa, Okla., New York City and other places. They are local incidents with local actors, even if they have national ramifications.

Some police officers — and perhaps their departments and elected officials — may have failed the African-American community, but most Americans are outraged when injustices occur and want those proven to have overreacted or committed illegal acts to be held accountable.

If high-profile athletes want to make a difference, there are better and more meaningful responses than dissing the national anthem and turning a sporting event into a national soapbox.

If some want to express their concerns about current events, they should tell their publicists they are open for speaking engagements — off the field or court. They will have lots of opportunities — and media coverage.

In addition, if those whose athletic talents have made them wealthy want to have an impact, they should set up a nonprofit foundation or program that actually addresses specific problems. Put their money where their knee is.

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

If some athletes continue to kneel during the playing of the national anthem, that should encourage those of us who still take pride in America to stand a littler taller.

Playing the national anthem at a sporting event is a time for patriotism, not politics.

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