

**Supporting Social Change in Sports:
Policies to Address Social Injustice Issues in the Sports Industry that Hinder the Voices of
Athletes Trying to Achieve Social Change**

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Abstract:

Throughout the history of sports, whenever an athlete has attempted to socially protest, they have been met with the barriers of society, business, and politics. In order to overcome these barriers, the power of the players within their respective sports organization must be raised. In this paper, we put forth the proposal of a Social Justice Coalition, which is a coalition consisting of representatives sent by their respective sports' league to create a united voice, increase their bargaining power, and advocate for societal change.

Society:

If an athlete wants to accomplish social change, they must overcome the barriers to change that society creates. Society acts as a barrier because most people hold the common misconception that sports and society are separate ecosystems. Furthermore, these individuals believe that sports features a completely equal playing field devoid of the injustices that plague society (and it should remain that way). These beliefs are a misconception because sports are actually a reflection of society and contain the issues that expose society's inequality. The commonality of this misconception causes resistance from society towards athletes who want to advocate for social change.

Throughout its history, sports has contained the same social issues as society. When segregation was prevalent in American society during the late 1800s and most of the 1900s, segregation was seen in professional baseball through the formation of the Negro National League, which was a league comprised solely of African Americans.¹ The Negro National League had to be formed because the National Association of Amateur Base Ball Players refused to allow African Americans to join, as the separation between white Americans and African Americans was the dominant ideology in society at the time.¹ Today, where there is

¹ History.com Editors. "Negro League Baseball." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 13 Apr. 2017, www.history.com/topics/sports/negro-league-baseball.

disproportionality between the African American population in the United States and the number of executive positions in society held by African Americans², there is also a disproportionality between African Americans playing in professional sports leagues and African Americans that hold positions of power—such as a management position, a coaching position, or ownership—in those sports leagues.³ According to Dr. Richard Lapchick in a study done to examine the racial makeup of the NBA in 2020, 74.2% of players are African American, while only 23.3% of the head coaching staff and 7.3% of the CEOs are African American.³ This statistic is especially indicative of injustice when it is compared to the ratio between white players and white people who are in positions of power. According to the same study, only 16.2% of professional NBA players are white, while 70% of the head coaching staff and 89.1% of the CEOs are white.

The same disproportionality is present in the NFL. According to Dr. Richard Lapchick in a study done in 2019, while 58.9% of players in the NFL are African American, only 9.4% of the head coaches and none of the CEOs are African American.⁴ This study follows the same trend as the last study, where only 26.8% of the players in the NFL are white, while 81.3% of the head coaches and 96.1% of the CEOs are white.⁴ Through the presence of segregation in professional baseball in the 19th and 20th centuries and the underrepresentation of African Americans in positions of power in professional sports leagues today, it is clear that the issues of society are reflected in sports.

² Brooks, Khristopher J. “Why So Many Black Business Professionals Are Missing from the C-Suite.” *CBS News*, CBS Interactive, 10 Dec. 2019, www.cbsnews.com/news/black-professionals-hold-only-3-percent-of-executive-jobs-1-percent-of-ceo-jobs-at-fortune-500-firms-new-report-says/.

³ Lapchick, Richard E., et al. “The 2020 Racial and Gender Report Card: National Basketball Association.” *Tidesport.org*, 23 July 2020,

43530132-36e9-4f52-811a-182c7a91933b.filesusr.com/ugd/7d86e5_9ed7a1185cc8499196117ce9a2c0d050.pdf.

⁴ Lapchick, Richard, et al. “The 2019 Racial and Gender Report Card: National Football League.” *Tidesport.org*, 30 Oct. 2019,

43530132-36e9-4f52-811a-182c7a91933b.filesusr.com/ugd/3844fb_1478b405e58e42608f1ed2223437d398.pdf.

In addition to the racial prejudices inherent in the system, the misconception that sports is a totally equal playing field devoid of any societal issues causes resistance from society towards athletes who want to accomplish social change. In some cases, the resistance from society caused athletes' careers to end prematurely. In the case of Colin Kaepernick, a former player for the San Francisco 49ers between 2011-2016, he was ostracized from the NFL after kneeling during the national anthem in protest of police brutality.⁵ Nearly a decade earlier, that same fate was shared by former professional basketball player Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, who played for the Sacramento Kings and the Denver Nuggets between 1991- 2001.⁶ Abdul-Rauf protested the national anthem in the late 1990s because he believed that it represented tyranny and oppression.⁷ Because of his protests, Abdul-Rauf's NBA career ended shortly after he was signed to the Vancouver Grizzlies for the 2000-2001 season.⁷ Both Colin Kaepernick and Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf saw their professional careers end because teams in their respective leagues did not want to sign them in fear of backlash from viewers. The viewers did not want the games they were watching to be "ruined" because of protests. They did not want the false reality of sports being an equal playing field to be shattered.

This resistance to social change is still present among viewers today, as the Colin Kaepernick situation and the reaction to social protest in sports still elicits an emotional reaction from many fans. In order to overcome the barrier of society, the dominant ideology in society, which is the ideology that believes social protests do not belong in sports, must be changed. To

⁵ Boren, Cindy. "A Timeline of Colin Kaepernick's Protests against Police Brutality, Four Years after They Began." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 26 Aug. 2020, www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2020/06/01/colin-kaepernick-kneeling-history/.

⁶ "Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf Biography." *ESPN*, ESPN Internet Ventures, www.espn.com/nba/player/bio/_id/1/mahmoud-abdul-rauf.

⁷ Fainaru-Wada, Mark. "The Revival of Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf." *ESPN*, ESPN Internet Ventures, 14 Feb. 2017, www.espn.com/espn/otl/story/_id/18686629/before-colin-kaepernick-protested-national-anthem-nba-star-mahmoud-abdul-rauf-did-same-own-way.

change the dominant ideology in society, the voices of the players must be uplifted so the players themselves can influence society.

Business:

The sports and social protest dynamic can and should be viewed under multiple lenses. Through a careful exploration of the history of protest in sports, we have found that a strong understanding of sports as a business is essential in understanding sports. The book, “*Sports as a Business*” quotes Eric Falt from the UN who began to explain the business side of sports by stating, “It is an industry with unparalleled global reach and power. Globally, sport-related turn-over amounts to three per cent of world total economic activity.”⁸ In other words, sports is a business with great influence. By understanding the business of sports, people can begin to grasp how to change a global business for the better.

The business of sports is a multifaceted one. There are owners, fans, and of course, the players. As the book, the *Business of Sports* points out, it gets even bigger, “As these ventures [of sports business] grew, new players became part of the industry: radio, television, commercial endorsers, licensees, and sponsors.”⁹ This has created an interconnected web of business. The owners affect the fans, the fans affect the sponsors, and the sponsors affect the owners, and so on. A very important relationship in sports business is that of the team owners and the fans. In his appearance on the Teen Think Tank Project’s Sports Business Panel, Dave Perricone, Associate Professor of Sports Management at Centenary University, pointed out that fans are essentially consumers while the owners of teams are essentially the sellers. Like in any market, sellers want to create products that their consumers value. Perricone mentioned the situation with video games. When the owners saw that fans were becoming interested in video games, the

⁸Dolles, Harald and Sten Soderman. *Sport as a Business International, Professional and Commercial Aspects*. Palgrave Macmillian, 2011, 1.

⁹Rosner, Scott, and Kenneth L. Shropshire. *The Business of Sports*, Jones & Bartlett Learning, 2004, xiv.

owners began to license games like Madden, Fifa, and NBA 2k. The owners of teams and owners of leagues want to keep their consumers consuming, hence the movement into the video games sector.¹⁰

As the book, the *Business of Sports* states, “In almost every sports venture, the competitors must cooperate for the venture to be profitable.”⁹ In other words, the different parts of the economic web must cooperate with each other if they want to achieve profitability. This means that the owners must cooperate with the sponsors and the sponsors must do likewise. Gary Belsky, a writer for *Time Magazine* helps explain the relationship between sponsors and owners using the concept of the association principle and its influence over consumers. Belsky notes that the “association principle” is the driving force behind sponsorship.¹¹ The association principle “simply iterates that humans associate themselves with items that they have seen being used by people they know and or trust.”¹² Therefore, the easier question for most fans to answer is “Who’s the official cell phone company of the NFL?” rather than “Which cell phone plan is best for me?”¹¹ Since the association principle makes it clear that the fans associate themselves with the brands that they see in the sports they watch, it makes sense that businesses would be keen to sponsor sports teams. Obviously, with sponsorships come money. By sponsoring a team, a business agrees to give a sum of money to the team in exchange for the team putting the business’s logo on their jerseys, wearing their products, or doing something similar. This explains why sports teams want to hold on to sponsors. They want to keep the money coming.

Furthermore , we must realize that an association between the fans and the sponsor ultimately affects the relationship between the sponsor and the team. This relationship is best

¹⁰DeSantis, Matthew, et al. “Sports Business Panel.” Teen Think Tank Project, 4 Feb. 2021, online.

¹¹Belsky, Gary. “The Official Blog Post of Beer and Football: Why Sports Sponsorships Work.” *Time*, 2 March 2012, [business.time.com/2012/03/02/the-official-blog-post-of-beer-and-football-why-sports-sponsorships-work/](https://www.business.time.com/2012/03/02/the-official-blog-post-of-beer-and-football-why-sports-sponsorships-work/).

¹²Barroilhet, Tamzin, “Brand Integration and Sports Sponsorship: Benefits and Pitfalls. *Masters Essays*, 2016, 46. <https://collected.jcu.edu/mastersessays/46>.

exemplified in the situation surrounding the Washington Football Team's name change. This football team used to be called the Washington Redskins, but when faced with an outcry from its fanbase, indigenous peoples, and members of society at large to change its name on the basis that its name was racist. It renamed itself in large part because of the pressure the corporate sponsors, who were sensitive to the voices of the aforementioned groups, put on the franchise. A [sportingnews.com](https://www.sportingnews.com/us/nfl/news/washington-football-team-new-name-2022/1ah8f7wq4drzflgbfi2wrrufw) article covering the story of the Washington Football Team noted, "FedEx, which holds the naming rights for Washington's stadium, formally asked Snyder to pull away from the name 'Redskins.' Some investors followed suit."¹³ It was the pressure of the affiliated business, namely FedEx, and investors that provoked the name change. Based on this story, it appears that the sponsors and affiliated businesses (looking to exhibit a level of social responsibility that their consumers may find valuable) have a level of influence and control over the team owners.

Finally, the last dynamic to understand (and the one closest to the heart of the problem of sports protest) is that between the players and the team owners. The team owners, in an effort to keep their consumers watching, want to make sure that their players do not act out. They want to make sure that players do not take stances that take a bite out of viewership. A good example of this is found in Colin Kaepernick, who had begun kneeling during the national anthem which played before his football games. This action, according to Eric Reid being quoted in *Football's Fearless Activists* by Mike Freeman, led to a major backlash. "People were telling him to stop. People were threatening him. They were saying they were going to kill him. Kill his family."¹⁴ Since this action caused negative feedback, the team owners were under pressure. Freeman

¹³Heyen, Billy, et al. "When Will the Washington Football Team Get a New Name? Maybe Not until 2022." *Sporting News*, 26 Nov. 2020,

www.sportingnews.com/us/nfl/news/washington-football-team-new-name-2022/1ah8f7wq4drzflgbfi2wrrufw.

¹⁴Freeman, Michael. *Football's Fearless Activists: How Colin Kaepernick, Eric Reid, Kenny Stills, and Fellow Athletes Stood up to the NFL and President Trump*. Sports Publishing, 2020, xx.

interviewed an NFL team owner about issues concerning Colin Kaepernick. The team owner mentioned in the interview that, “They looked at Colin and the protests, some owners did, as a threat to their revenue model.”¹⁵ This is why Kaepernick was essentially removed from the league following his protests. It is evident that the dynamic between owners and players is one of control; the owners want to control the players to keep them in line, to ensure the money continues to roll in.

Business, in and of itself, has to do with money. By looking at the flow of money in sports business, one can formulate possible solutions. It has become apparent through our research that sports fans (as consumers) affect what businesses do; and businesses (as sponsors) have a tremendous effect on what sports leagues do. So, in order to change the way social protest is accepted in sports leagues we must change the taste of society, or more specifically, the fans, who will in turn change the taste and tolerance of businesses. By elevating the voices of the players so they can speak out as Kaepernick did, one can cause a change in what society hears and takes in. This can then cause a change in society. The hope is that by causing a change in society, consumers can cause the way businesses approach social justice issues. Once businesses start to change the way they view and engage social justice issues, team owners will be forced to reevaluate the way they perceive and engage with such issues. Once owners change the way they approach issues of social import, then we will be left with a situation where the players are even more free to speak out.

As Dave Perricone mentioned, team owners market to fans based on what the fans like.¹⁰ If the team owners see that fans are starting to support a certain viewpoint, like social justice and healthy debate, the team owners will begin to try to reach an audience like this. They might allow their athletes to speak out more in the name of healthy debate or take away any social

¹⁵Freeman, Michael, xxiii.

inequality to appeal to fans who support social equality. Just as the team owners moved into video games based on a shift in society's desires and likes, the hope is that the team owners will realize that, for instance, society believes in social justice for black and brown citizens. Upon realizing this, they will begin to support their players who speak on issues like the one Kaepernick spoke out about.

Politics

As we have seen, many social and economic factors have hindered athletes looking to enact social change. In addition to these factors, politics has been a significant contributing factor to the hindrance of athletes looking to use their voices to enact social change. For decades, political issues have consumed the professional sports industry and third-party interests have overpowered the entertainment aspect in exchange for pushing social agendas.

Sports and the political realm will always be intertwined. "The first sports editor in the history of *The Nation*, Zirin has spent over a decade writing about the intersection of sports and politics. He argues that political and social issues have permeated sports at all levels, from youth leagues to the big leagues—and that it's time for sports to be recognized as both a driver and reflection of social change."¹⁶ There is no way to eliminate this connection between sports and politics, because fans are involved in each. Meredith McCleary et al. addresses the intersectionality of sports and government in their article noting that "to understand the relationship between sports and politics, one needs to first understand the relationship between sports and society. Going back millennia, pastimes and sports have symbolized societies' values and provided a glimpse into how people spent their free time."¹⁷ People enjoy watching and

¹⁶ Stromberg, Joseph. "How Politics Has Changed Modern-Day Sports." *Smithsonian Institution*, 1 Feb. 2013, www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/how-politics-has-changed-modern-day-sports-9945631/.

¹⁷ McCleary, Meredith, et al. "Politics and Sports: A Long and Complicated Relationship." *Northeastern University Political Review*, 26 Feb. 2019, www.nupoliticalreview.com/2019/02/26/politics-and-sports-a-long-and-complicated-relationship/.

partaking in sports, and they serve as one of the United States' greatest pastimes. When most spectators think about sports, it is often not as a microcosm of the world that they live in. The ability to think of sports as outside of society has been a privilege to those who have not been affected by the consequences.¹⁸

Sports has a history of leaders, autocrats, and politically powerful individuals using their position to project their political agendas.¹⁹ Adolf Hitler used the 1936 Olympic Games to project his political views and his idea of Aryan superiority.²⁰ The New York State Boxing Commission, which is a division of the New York Department of State, banned Muhammed Ali from competing in boxing when he said that he would not fight in the Vietnam War because he “was not going 10,000 miles from home to continue the domination of white slave masters of the darker people the world over.”²¹ Most recently, then-President Donald Trump derided athletes for kneeling during the anthem, causing fans to forcefully pushback against players and NFL owners to blackball and ostracise Colin Kaepernick after he knelt for the national anthem in support to end racial inequality and to promote social change.²²

This trend of individuals advancing political agendas through sports and at the expense of athlete reputations and careers has continued for many years. But politicians, government leaders, and influential individuals are not the only ones who use political ideology to repress the voices of athletes looking to affect change in society. Fans are known to get into the action when it comes to using politics to repress athletes. Fans utilize sports as an escape from the world in

¹⁸ Davidson, Kavitha A. “If You Thought Sports Were Ever Separate from Politics, Think Again.” *ESPN*, ESPN Internet Ventures, 3 Feb. 2017, www.espn.com/espnw/voices/story/_/id/18614895/if-thought-sports-were-ever-separate-politics-think-again.

¹⁹ McCleary et al, 1.

²⁰ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington DC. “The Nazi Olympics Berlin 1936.” *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-nazi-olympics-berlin-1936.

²¹ Staufenberg, Jess. “How Muhammad Ali Became a Symbol of the Civil Rights Movement.” *The Independent*, Independent Digital News and Media, 4 June 2016,

www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/muhammad-ali-symbol-civil-rights-movement-a7065361.html.

²² Freeman, Michael. *Football's Fearless Activists: How Colin Kaepernick, Eric Reid, Kenny Stills, and Fellow Athletes Stood up to the NFL and President Trump*. Sports Publishing, 2020, 52.

which they live, and when political messages infiltrate their pleasure, responses such as “stick to sports” are made. However, by attempting to limit the athletes' use of political and social protest, the fans are in fact engaging in a type of political pressure.

The reality is that if athletes succumbed to the pressures of individuals using their political position to suppress their voices or listened to the fans and simply “stuck to sports,” the idea of social change in society today would not be achievable. Had Jackie Robinson “stuck to sports,” he would not have broken the color barrier that existed in Major League Baseball in 1947.²³ Had Kareem Abdul-Jabbar not protested the 1968 Olympic Games, there would not be a surge for racial justice like there is today.²⁴ Had Mahoud Abdul-Rauf “stuck to sports” and not acted in line with his conscience, Colin Kaepernick may not have been inspired to engage in his own protest movement. Had Colin Kaepernick not knelt during the anthem, the fight for racial equality would not have picked up the traction it has now. Through protests of athletes and their display of support for movements calling for social change, managers and league officials have begun to recognize this need for social change.

These men are athletes, but before that they are men, proud men of color. Asking men of color to stick to sports while living in a white man's world has proven to be impossible due to the injustices they face because of their skin, a matter which is out of their control. To overcome these issues of inequality, these athletes have raised their voices and have not stuck to sports because change is needed. These men, like others, cannot “shut up and play” because society cannot look past the color of their skin.

²³ History.com Editors. “Jackie Robinson Breaks Color Barrier.” *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 24 Nov. 2009, www.history.com/this-day-in-history/jackie-robinson-breaks-color-barrier.

²⁴ Mosley, Tonya and Serena McMahon. “Kareem Abdul-Jabbar Says 'A Real Commitment' To Racial Justice Will Effect Change.” *Here & Now*, WBUR, 12 June 2020, www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2020/06/12/kareem-abdul-jabbar-floyd-protests.

Politics in the sports world has proven to be almost too great of a challenge to eliminate and overcome, but the WNBA seems to have found a way. The WNBA has been the most promising and prominent sports league at implementing and promoting social change ideas. Their idea of dedicating their 2020 season to the Justice Movement has led to the creation of their own solution to eliminate racism and bias in their league known as the WNBA/WNBPA Social Justice Council.²⁵ This council brings social justice issues to light and continues conversations about race, voting rights, LGBTQ+ advocacy, and gun control amongst other important societal issues.²⁶ The women in the sports industry have fought an uphill battle for equality with their male counterparts, and this ongoing call for gender equality has segwayed into this call for social change. This league has already been fighting for equality, and this step to create social change was one that they noticed was needed and followed it.

Social Policy Recommendation

If other sports leagues could get behind the idea that the WNBA and WNBPA have created, then social change in sports could be achievable. The creation of a Sports League Coalition would allow representatives from all major sports in America to come together to address the societal, corporate, and political challenges that plague athletes who are trying to affect social change in America. By mimicking and expounding upon the idea that the WNBA created in the form of its Social Justice Council, a national Sports Leagues Coalition would serve as a unified platform where athletes, coaches, managers, and owners would come together to discuss important societal issues, band together, create a workable solution, and use their power to create change.

²⁵ “Social Justice Council Overview & Mission.” *WNBA.com - Official Site of the WNBA*, 13 Oct. 2020, www.wnba.com/social-justice-council-overview/.

²⁶ “WNBA Announces A 2020 Season Dedicated To Social Justice.” *WNBA.com - Official Site of the WNBA*, 28 July 2020, www.wnba.com/news/wnba-announces-a-2020-season-dedicated-to-social-justice/.

The different viewpoints between players, coaches, managers, and owners create challenges when trying to promote ideas of social change; but if they all could come together and talk about how they want to proceed on these issues, we could minimize the tension related to creating change that exists today. The Coalition should be composed of representatives from each sport league, and from varying aspects of that sport: athlete, coach, manager, owner. Any team from any sport may send representatives.

The creation of a coalition like this allows athletes to elevate their voices in a way in which they have never been able to before. Under this model, athletes could speak directly to the people stopping them from speaking out for change, express why they feel change is needed, and then see a change of some sort take shape. The owners, managers, and coaches should also weigh in on what they think should be done. The importance of a coalition like this is that the players would be given the chance to create the change they want to make. The players would not have to “shut up and play,” but would rather be able to speak out and promote the type of change that they feel is needed in society while also fulfilling their roles as athletes.

Conclusion

Society, business, and politics are inseparable from the sports industry and ultimately contribute to the social injustices faced by athletes and the world around them. The sports industry needs to respond to the call to end social injustice by creating positive social change. By implementing a Sports League Coalition, social change is achievable and athletes will be able to speak out about their feelings about social change and what needs to be done. Achieving this outcome requires the unification of all sports leagues: the NFL, the NBA, the NHL, the MLB, the MLS, the WNBA and so many more. By uniting all sports leagues to fight against social injustice, the world will improve. This will help heal the divides between sports and society and

will help diminish the conflict between players, teams, and leagues. Failing to implement a coalition like this will result in a digression of social change and social injustice will live on.

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