**Taking a knee: Why are NFL players protesting and when did they start to kneel?**

**Critics say Colin Kaepernick's gesture is 'unpatriotic' and that sport should be clear of politics but athletes have often used their platform to protest in the past**

* [Clark Mindock](https://www.independent.co.uk/author/clark-mindock) New York
* [@ClarkMindock](https://twitter.com/ClarkMindock)
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* [4 comments](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/taking-a-knee-national-anthem-nfl-trump-why-meaning-origins-racism-us-colin-kaepernick-a8521741.html#comments)
* [Colin Kaepernick](https://www.independent.co.uk/topic/colin-kaepernick), the American football star who started the “take a knee” national anthem protest against police brutality has been named as the new face of [Nike](https://www.independent.co.uk/topic/Nike)’s “Just Do It” campaign for its 30th anniversary.
* Kaepernick remains a free agent without a team at present, however, as the [NFL](https://www.independent.co.uk/topic/NFL) appears reluctant to endorse his controversial gesture.
* Nike’s move has already sparked a protest from angry consumers who consider the quarterback’s stance “unpatriotic”, destroying the brand’s products and venting their displeasure on social media.
* A wave of players followed Kaepernick’s example last year, causing the protest to be morph into an act of direct resistance against [Donald Trump](https://www.independent.co.uk/topic/DonaldTrump) after the president weighed in on the issue. The NFL responded by announcing that teams would be fined if their men continued to do so.
* But the move to take a knee during the national anthem before kick-off - or stand with arms locked in silent protest - follows in a long tradition of sports stars standing up for what they believe to be right, despite many believing that doing so is unpatriotic and that politics should be kept out of sports.
* Here’s what you need to know.

**When did this all start?**

Kaepernick’s protest first occurred 21 months ago but was not immediately noticed. At that point, he simply sat on the benches during the US national anthem during a preseason game, just next to some giant Gatorade jugs.

But he later transitioned to taking a knee in protest — saying he was doing so to show more respect for military veterans — which turned out to be the much more iconic pose. Several other players joined his protest, even though they received a lot of criticism from football fans who said that it was disrespectful to the United States. Still, the movement did not gain huge traction that year.

“I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of colour,” Kaepernick said in a press conference after first sitting out during the anthem. “To me, this is bigger than football, and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder.”

**What was the context surrounding those first protests?**

Police brutality has become an incredibly polarising and contentious issue in American life.

This has come as a result of repeated videos showing police shooting and killing unarmed black men, which have been posted online and gone viral — illustrating the brutality that black people in America must contend with when dealing with some police officers, who often do not serve any prison time for pulling the trigger.

**Why is it gaining steam now?**

Mr Trump became a catalyst for the protest in September when he said during a campaign rally in Alabama that he wished that NFL players would be fired for kneeling during the national anthem.

“Wouldn’t you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, ‘Get that son of a b\*\*\*\* off the field right now, out, he’s fired. He’s fired,’” Mr Trump said.

“You know, some owner is going to do that. He’s going to say, ‘That guy that disrespects our flag, he’s fired.’ And that owner, they don’t know it [but] they’ll be the most popular person in this country.”

**Who is protesting?**

Some football teams chose not to come out onto the field at all after Mr Trump’s comments, while other teams allowed their players to protest at their own discretion.

In addition to most, if not all, of the NFL teams seeing some players protesting the weekend after Mr Trump’s September remarks, baseball professionals and basketball professionals also joined in.

Notably, New England Patriots quarterback [Tom Brady](https://www.independent.co.uk/topic/tom-brady) called Mr Trump’s comments “divisive” and locked arms with his teammates during his game following the president’s remarks.

Brady has remained mostly silent about Mr Trump, whom he has called a friend in the past.

**Why exactly is this such a big deal?**

Mr Trump charges that kneeling during the national anthem is disrespectful to American servicemen and women, as do many of his supporters. The White House has repeatedly attempted to rebrand the protest as a protest of the American flag instead of against police brutality and racism in the US.

After Kaepernick first started the protest, he was criticised for introducing politics into sports. Many said that football was somehow sacrosanct, and that it should be a place where people can rise above politics.

**But is it abnormal for sports stars to make their political opinions known during events?**

No, not really. There’s a pretty rich history of American sports stars wading into the political sphere.

For instance, John Carlos and Tommie Smith made headlines across the world when they raised the [black power salute](https://www.independent.co.uk/topic/black-power) on the podium after winning in the 1968 Olympics. That protest brought them death threats, and they were expelled from the games.

[Muhammad Ali](https://www.independent.co.uk/topic/muhammadali) is perhaps one of the best known American athletes to take a major political stand. While not a direct stand against racism, Ali refused to be drafted into the Vietnam War — a refusal that involved jail time. He did so on the basis of his faith, he said, but did note the cruel irony of asking black men to fight in Vietnam for a country that has treated them as subhuman.

More recently, NBA players like [LeBron James](https://www.independent.co.uk/topic/LeBron_James), Kobe Bryant, and others, helped the [Black Lives Matter](https://www.independent.co.uk/topic/black-lives-matter) movement pick up steam by wearing supportive shirts following the death of Eric Garner, who was choked to death in New York.

**What is the new NFL rule?**

NFL owners unanimously approved the new national anthem policy this week, requiring players to stand if they are on the field during the performance of the song.

Players have the option to remain in the locker room during the anthem if they prefer.

If a player or other employee of a team kneels or sits during the anthem, the teams themselves are fined. The teams then have the option to fine the individual players or personnel for the infraction.

The vote was unanimous, but the owner of the San Francisco 49ers — the team Kaepernick played for when he started the protest — abstained from the vote.

The rule will be added to the NFLs game operations manual, and therefore will no be subject to collective bargaining.

The NFL Players Association has said it will review the policy and “challenge any aspect” of the rule that is violates the collective bargaining agreement between players and their employers.

**What has happened to Kaepernick?**

Kaepernick is not currently on any NFL team, even though many of his supporters argue that he is good enough to be picked up by a team. He said himself last year that he was ready to play if any team was willing to hire him.

But, while Kaepernick is out of an NFL job, he has remained busy with charity work. That includes a $1m pledge he made to charitable organisations, which has included support for a variety of groups.

Kaepernick has largely refused to comment on the most recent NFL protests and has refrained from responding to Mr Trump’s criticism of the protest movement he started as “unpatriotic”.

His deal with Nike is a pointedly political choice from the sportswear giant, which deserves every credit.

ARTICLE # 2

[National Anthem Protests](http://www.foxnews.com/category/news-events/national-anthem-protests.html)

November 23rd, 2017

# To NFL millionaires on Thanksgiving, be thankful and get off your knees already

#### [Veteran to NFL millionaires: Get off your knees already](http://video.foxnews.com/v/5660053270001/veteran-to-nfl-millionaires-get-off-your-knees-already)

Kathy Barnette says there are real issues to be addressed in the black community.

On this Thanksgiving, I would like to address an open letter to the multimillionaire National Football League players who continue to take a knee when “The Star-Spangled Banner” is played.

Dear kneeling brothers,

As a proud Army veteran, mom and black American, I thank God that I live in the greatest nation on Earth. For me, Thanksgiving doesn’t just come once a year. I’m thankful 365 days a year.

I recommend you take the same attitude, to appreciate the many blessings you enjoy.

You make far, far more money than almost all Americans – regardless of race. Kids look up to you as heroes. You appear on TV and in the media.

Yet, you keep on protesting – refusing to rise and respect our national anthem and respect the men and women like me who serve or have served in our military.

I was willing to die for my country when I put on the Army uniform. And you’re not even willing to stand up for a short song? This is too much of a sacrifice for you?

One of the many lessons I’ve learned along the way is that there is no place on the planet like America. She is not perfect, because we are not perfect. Yet, she is a consummate beacon of light, set upon a hill, for nations who look to her for hope, dignity and direction.

You big guys should appreciate that – and pause for a few moments to express your patriotism and love for our great nation when our national anthem is played and our flag flies before thousands of people who have paid good money to see you run around a field chasing a little ball.

Let me tell you about me. I’m not as big and strong as you, but I stepped forward to join the Army to fight for your right to play games in peace.

Weeks before I graduated from the Army’s basic training program, I had an epiphany: I could be deployed to war. Would I go? Would I put my life on the line for someone else?

It didn’t take me long to come to a resounding Yes! If called, I would go.

But I gave myself an assignment. If I was going to potentially give life or limb to defend this great country, I would need to know what, exactly, I was defending. I am still learning.

One of the lessons I’ve learned about America is more of a personal lesson. I am not a victim. My two beautiful black babies are not victims. Black Americans are not victims.

We are victors – not so much because of anything we have done, but because of those who came before us. Slaves in chains, treated like farm animals, to be “owned” by others. And after Emancipation, those who endured the humiliation of drinking out of the “dirty” water fountain or taking their child into the “colored” restroom.

Those who were spat upon or cursed out solely because they were deemed the “wrong” color. Those who had to guess the number of jelly beans in a jar to be eligible to vote, notwithstanding their college education.

Those who were hosed down, billy-clubbed across the head or attacked by trained dogs just because they walked across a bridge.

Those who were aroused from their sleep to see hate-filled men covered in white sheets, a cross burning in their front yard and their neighbor calling out for their son.

Those who, oftentimes, paid the ultimate sacrifice – not for their own benefit, but for the joy that was set before them.

We, today, are the joy that was set before them. And, how do you repay them for their sacrifice to be treated as equal under the law? You have chosen to take a knee.

If you followed the rhetoric we hear today, America is not far removed from those Jim Crow days of legalized discrimination against black people.

If you closed your eyes and just listened to the blistering speeches coming from Antifa, the Black Lives Matter folks and many politicians, you would think we’re not even 40 years removed from slavery itself.

The narrative behind “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” perpetuates the storyline that around every street corner there’s a police officer waiting to shoot a black man. It is these narratives that have given life to you NFL players kneeling during our national anthem.

If there was truth behind these narratives, then I would readily support you black millionaire athletes using your national platform to shine a bright light on the systemic racism against the black community.

But we’re not living in 1850 or 1950. Racism is certainly not dead, but it’s not the powerful monster backed by all the resources of government either. And you guys are not exactly downtrodden, going hungry, being shoved to the back of the bus, or used for target practice by Ku Klux Klansmen dressed up like cops.

Allow me to make a few suggestions to you as an alternative to continuing to disrespect our country and flag. If you want to make a real difference that extends beyond getting your picture on a magazine cover, please consider doing the following.

First, invest in black urban schools, to help them pay for the educational programs and enhanced learning opportunities that wealthy suburban schools have to help their students succeed.

Second, commit to providing mentoring and college scholarships for 20, 10 or even just one child in the inner city, from elementary school through high school and into college. You will change their futures.

Third, take $1 million or $2 million – not all of your vast wealth – and invest it into creating jobs, businesses and entrepreneurial internships to help black people achieve the American Dream. Find ways to personally take your millions directly into a distressed community and invest.

Fourth, take a family out of the inner city by giving them a mortgage-free home. Consider the ripple effect of good this stand would have on the lives of an entire family for generations to come.

Fifth, educate yourselves and then others on what the Democratic Party has done to the black community. I have yet to find an inner city run by conservatives. Yet I see one Democratic politician after another representing some of the most distressed communities. These politicians themselves usually do not live in those distressed communities and often live in expensive homes while *their* kids attend private schools.

Teach yourselves and others to hold elected officials accountable. Be determined to no longer fall prey to their sleight-of-hand manipulations that only serve to distract you from their lack of effort to make real changes in the black community.

Doing just one of these things would make an indelible imprint on any community, especially the black community.

So instead of taking a knee, take a stand to stomp out poverty by investing in businesses, by creating an environment that promotes family stability, and by fanning the flames of hope, dignity and direction into the lives of some of our most depressed citizens.

By the grace of God, I was never called into war during my Army service. I know many others who were. Some did not return whole. So, while I can’t play pro football, I have two legs, two arms and a brain that tells me to appreciate and love the United States of America.

For all this I am thankful, and I think you should be too.

Happy Thanksgiving,

Kathy Barnette

ARTICLE # 3

**FROM** [**SLATE**](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/trials_and_error.html) **AND** [**THE FAIR PUNISHMENT PROJECT**](http://fairpunishment.org/)

# The NFL Protests Are Patriotic

## The kneeling players are asking America to do better on criminal justice. If I could, I’d take a knee and join them.

By [John Legend](http://www.slate.com/authors.john_legend.html)

The president of the United States loves to drape himself in the symbols of patriotism, but fails to respect the ideals at the core of our Constitution and national identity. Trump may love the flag, but he doesn’t love anything it’s supposed to stand for. He [actively encouraged](http://www.politico.com/story/2016/07/trump-putin-no-relationship-226282) a hostile foreign power to infiltrate our electoral process. He wants to [suppress millions of Americans’ right to vote](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/jurisprudence/2017/06/donald_trump_s_voter_fraud_commission_is_itself_an_enormous_fraud.html) because they didn’t vote for him. He routinely undermines freedom of religion with his rabid Islamophobia, attacks the free press with disturbing regularity, and is now [attacking the rights](http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_slatest/2017/09/24/dozens_of_nfl_players_take_a_knee_during_anthem_after_trump_criticizes_protests.html) of the people to peacefully protest.

Protest is patriotic. Protest has played a critically important role in elevating the voices of the most vulnerable in our nation. Protest in America has been essential to ending war, to demanding equal rights, to ending unfair practices that keep citizens marginalized. If we quell protest in the name of patriotism, we are not patriots. We are tyrants.

Would there have been a Civil Rights Act without the Birmingham protests? When Bull Connor unleashed his fire hoses and dogs on the schoolchildren taking to the streets, racial disparities and the violence facing people because of the color of their skin became the issues of the times. With savage images of the brutal attack in the news every day, President John Kennedy had little choice but to push for a Civil Rights Act that demanded equal services and equal rights.

Protests in Selma, Alabama, changed the trajectory of this nation and catapulted the Voting Rights Act into being. Soon after images of Bloody Sunday flooded television sets, President Johnson presented to Congress the Voting Rights Act, which would remove barriers to voting like literacy tests. If you think these protests were irrelevant, consider Johnson’s words to Congress: “[A]t times history and fate meet at a single time in a single place to shape a turning point in man’s unending search for freedom ... So it was a century ago at Appomattox. So it was last week in Selma, Alabama.”

These are some of the most iconic protests in our history, but they are simply chapters in the great American novel where protests and social activism push us into a better and more just reality. There are the anti-war demonstrations of that decade, demanding that our soldiers be treated better in this country, that young men not be sent to their deaths for an unjust cause. The day before Woodrow Wilson’s election, thousands of suffragists marched down the street demanding the right to vote. Massive protests from steelworkers and coal miners propelled safer working conditions and better wages for millions of Americans. And where would we be, of course, without the Boston Tea Party?

These protests woke Americans up from complacency. And combined with other forms of social activism, they helped to show citizens, policymakers, and anyone listening that there could be a better way. That hope was not just an idea—a better future was both necessary and possible.

The protests are not some arbitrary statement about a flag.

The NFL protests carry on in this tradition. They are not some arbitrary statement about a flag. They are a demand that we Americans make this country’s reality match its proud symbolism. They are an attempt to educate the public that criminal justice—mass incarceration, lengthy sentences, police brutality—is the civil rights issue of our time. Colin Kaepernick, Michael Bennett, and Marshawn Lynch are demanding that this country again take a breath, self-reflect, and recognize that we fail a large and important population in this country by investing in prison systems rather than education and housing, by using the criminal system as a first rather than last resort, and by failing to punish police officers who engage in illegal racial profiling and police abuse. They are insisting that we do better.

To be clear, this is not the end of their activism. Malcolm Jenkins, who [has raised a fist](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/early-lead/wp/2017/08/11/eagles-malcolm-jenkins-continues-raised-fist-protest-during-national-anthem/?utm_term=.02a9e3ce5ed8), and retired player Anquan Boldin are co-leading a “Players Coalition” of 40-plus players, working with grassroots activists and talking with legislators to demand police accountability and push for change in this country’s bail and juvenile sentencing scheme. Jenkins [recently spent an afternoon](http://www.philadelphiaeagles.com/news/article-1/Eagles-Roger-Goodell-Come-Together-To-Gain-Perspective-On-Criminal-Justice-Reform/a3ed50b7-458a-4612-a44a-ee9f4a5e34d7) watching bail hearings with the NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell, and Boldin left the league to devote all of his time to reform and humanitarian work. Colin Kaepernick has donated at least $900,000 to causes that work to better the lives of the most vulnerable. Chris Long is donating his first six game checks to fund scholarships to poor kids from his hometown of Charlottesville.

But even without this activism, the players’ protests are important. Because of them, almost every day of the week, we talk about racial disparities. People across this country are suddenly thinking about what it must feel like to be a person of color, watch an officer shoot an unarmed man, and walk away with a pension. And every time someone takes a knee or raises a fist, viewers must grapple with the why—with the uncomfortable reality that our country daily marginalizes thousands of people in impoverished communities.

I sing for a living—no one would want me on their NFL team. But if I could, I’d take a knee on Sundays. Because these conversations are necessary for progress. Because these protests are their own form of a pledge-of-allegiance—allegiance to the ideals that are our nation’s founding principles, which many heroes have given their lives to defend. They are the definition of patriotism.

John Legend is a 10-time Grammy Awards winner, an Academy and Tony awards winner, philanthropist, and founder of the [FREEAMERICA campaign](http://letsfreeamerica.com/)