

“Stick to Sports!”

Sports and Politics in the Age of Trump

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“Stick to Sports!”: Sports and Politics in the Age of Trump

Sports and politics are inextricably intertwined, especially in America. Nowhere is this more apparent than when racial issues become magnified through the lens of sports. From Jackie Robinson breaking Major League Baseball's color barrier to Muhammad Ali refusing to fight in the Vietnam War to Tommie Smith and John Carlos standing up for the Black Power movement at the 1968 Olympics, athletes, especially athletes of color, have long used their elevated status to bring sociopolitical issues to the forefront of American dialogue.

Today, in an era of unprecedented sociopolitical division, sports and politics continue to cross paths. Recent controversies in the sports world have included protests during the National Anthem, Colin Kaepernick being de facto banned from the NFL, and ESPN commentator Jemele Hill criticizing Donald Trump on Twitter, even going so far as to call the President a white supremacist. Hill was suspended for her comments. Combining this with other politically and socially charged commentaries and controversies involving the network in recent years (one of which is described below), ESPN has hemorrhaged subscribers and been forced to make hundreds of layoffs, including several high-profile ones such as veteran NFL reporter Ed Werder. NFL television ratings are at their lowest in years for the same reasons. In response to these controversies, ESPN recently instituted a new social media policy that caves to the “stick to sports” camp and also impacts reporters who rely on social media to break news. The policy includes lines like “Do nothing that would undercut your colleagues’ work or embroil the company in unwanted controversy” (ESPN), and Awful Announcing reported that ESPN “wants all social media commentary on political or social issues to

be approved by editors or producers. But the biggest hard-and-fast changes appear to be for those involved in hard news, who are now being told to avoid stances on political and social issues completely.” (Bucholtz)

I work in journalism. I may be a sports journalist, but I am a journalist nonetheless, and I personally believe that it is dangerous not to speak out on behalf of those who are oppressed and marginalized, especially with access to larger audiences via social media. I feel that the “stick to sports” attitude is dangerous, and I believe it is the obligation of all journalists, not just hard news reporters, to report the truth and stand up for the common man. But it’s not just journalists. Athletes and coaches need to do the same. And it’s more than just saying “I think Colin Kaepernick should be playing in the NFL” or sitting or kneeling during the National Anthem (both of which are, in the minds of many, worthwhile efforts). Otherwise, you get comments like Houston Texans owner Bob McNair saying things like “We don’t want the inmates running the prison,” which almost led to an outright revolt by his players, as they interpreted his comments as him seeing his players as prison inmates (Jones).

If there’s one athlete we should all look up to when it comes to sports figures speaking out, it’s Muhammad Ali. The greatest boxer of all time was noted for his stands against segregation and the Vietnam War. He threw his Olympic gold medal into the Ohio River after being refused service at a diner because of the color of his skin. He was once quoted as saying “Why should they ask me to put on a uniform and go ten thousand miles from home and drop bombs and bullets on brown people in Vietnam while so-called Negro people in Louisville are treated like dogs and denied simple human rights?” He even said “I ain’t got no quarrel with them Viet Cong.” Quotes and

questions like those are the ones journalists, sports or otherwise, as well as athletes and people from all walks of life should consider as long as the likes of Donald Trump and Jeff Sessions are in charge of this country. Somebody has to start the conversation – it might as well be someone with 696,000 Twitter followers and millions of television viewers like Jemele Hill.

At the height of the Civil Rights movement in the late 1960s, U.S. track athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos placed first and third in the 1968 Olympic 200-meter race, with Smith becoming the first runner in history to break the 20-second barrier in the event legally. During the medal ceremony, they sparked controversy by each raising a fist, a symbol of the Black Power movement. The display sparked outrage not only in America, but around the world for politicizing the Olympics. Clearly, the “stick to sports mentality” was not an exclusively American thing. However, it set a precedent for political movements becoming as much a part of the Olympics as the games themselves (Henderson), especially more recent games like the financial woes of Greece leading up to the 2004 Olympics, protests over human rights violations in China around the 2008 Beijing Olympics, and draconian anti-homosexuality laws and the killing of stray dogs in Russia leading up to the Sochi Games in 2014.

But perhaps the most famous instance of the intersection of sports and race was in 1947, when Jackie Robinson became the first African American to play in Major League Baseball. Robinson faced tremendous backlash from the fans and his opponents, who would routinely try to spike Robinson sliding into second base as he tried to make a defensive play. But he proved himself to be a valuable contributor, winning Rookie of the Year in his first season and going on to become a one-time

National League MVP, six-time All-Star and first-ballot Hall of Famer (Baseball Reference). His success led to more and more African-American players joining the Majors, including Larry Doby and Satchel Paige signing with the Cleveland Indians, who soon after set the Major League record for highest paid attendance in a season with nearly three million fans (Henry).

So the overarching question of this project is, should athletes and sports commentators “stick to sports”? Or should they use their platform to stand up for what they believe in outside the sports world?

Method

For the poll, I asked a series of questions on demographics and scaling opinions on political discourse by sports commentators and National Anthem protests, as well as how their interest in sports would change depending on how the anthem protest debate was handled. I created the poll in Google Forms and shared the poll on Reddit. I posted it on sports subreddits, such as /r/NFL, /r/baseball, /r/hockey, /r/NBA and /r/MLS, as well as /r/SampleSize, a subreddit dedicated to sharing polls for academic research and other projects. I opened the poll to anyone who wished to answer on those subreddits.

When administering the survey, my hypothesis for the results stemmed from the general reaction to not only the Kaepernick and Hill incidents, but the incidents involving former ESPN and current Breitbart commentator Curt Schilling’s social media use. After Hill made her tweets, White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders publicly called for ESPN to fire her for her comments on Donald Trump (Nakamura), which is actually a violation of federal law – specifically United States Code Title 18, Part I,

Chapter 11, Section 227 – but that’s for another paper. Donald Trump repeatedly called on NFL owners to “fire or suspend” their players for kneeling during the anthem and even went as far to call players sons of bitches for doing so. Fox News, especially Tucker Carlson, routinely trashes ESPN for ostensibly having a “liberal agenda” and degradingly calling them “MSESPN,” playing off the name of the left-leaning news channel MSNBC. But when Breitbart podcaster and former Major League Baseball pitcher Curt Schilling was fired from ESPN for posting transphobic and Islamophobic memes on his Twitter and Facebook accounts, conservatives were trashing ESPN for supposedly violating his free speech rights (Karet). They weren’t, of course, because the First Amendment only protects you from the government punishing you for your speech, not employers. This double standard of reactions by conservatives leads me to hypothesize that respondents who identify with right-wing politics will be more likely to oppose sports figures getting involved in sociopolitical debate, and those who identify with left-wing politics will be more likely to support them.

Results

I received 90 responses to the poll. The questions, choices and breakdown of responses were as follows:

1. What is your age?
 - Under 18 – 2.2%
 - 18-24 – 41.1%
 - 25-34 – 42.2%
 - 35-44 – 12.2%

- 45-54 – 2.2 %
- 55-64 – 0%
- 65+ - 0%

2. What is your ethnicity?

- African – 0%
- Caribbean – 0%
- Caucasian – 77.8%
- East Asian – 11.1%
- Hispanic/Latinx – 5.6%
- Indian – 3.3%
- Middle Eastern – 0%
- Native American – 1.1%
- Pacific Islander – 0%
- Other – 1.1%

3. What is your political affiliation?

- Democrat – 36.7%
- Republican – 4.4%
- Libertarian – 5.6%
- Independent – 30%
- Other – 10%
- Not registered to vote – 3.3%
- Not eligible to vote (not American, under 18, etc.) – 10%

4. For whom did you vote in the 2016 presidential election?

- Hillary Clinton – 47.8%
- Donald Trump – 5.6%
- Gary Johnson – 5.6%
- Jill Stein – 3.3%
- Other – 8.9%
- Did not vote – 14.4%
- Not eligible to vote (not American, under 18, etc.) – 14.4%

5. On the following scale, rate your level of interest in sports.

- 1 (Strongly disinterested) – 7.8%
- 2 – 5.6%
- 3 – 3.3%
- 4 (Neutral) 2.2%
- 5 – 7.8 %
- 6 – 27.8%
- 7 (Strongly interested) – 45.6%
- Mean: 5.62

6. Which of the following sports do you watch regularly? (Check all that apply)

- MLB – 76.7%
- NBA – 31.1%
- NFL – 42.2%
- NHL – 24.4%
- NCAA football – 31.1%

- NCAA basketball – 21.1%
- Pro soccer – 13.3%
- Golf – 6.7%
- Tennis – 11.1%
- Olympics – 36.7%
- Other – 12.2%
- I do not watch sports regularly – 14.4%

7. On the following scale, rate your level of support for sports journalists and commentators publicly engaging in sociopolitical discourse (on air, in print, social media, etc).

- 1 (Strongly oppose) – 7.8%
- 2 – 11.1%
- 3 – 7.8%
- 4 (Neutral) 18.9 %
- 5 – 20%
- 6 – 18.9%
- 7 (Strongly support) 15.6%
- Mean: 4.51

8. On the following scale, rate your level of support for sports media outlets setting rules and potentially disciplining their employees for publicly engaging in sociopolitical discourse (on air, in print, on social media, etc.).

- 1 (Strongly oppose) – 27.8%
- 2 – 26.7%

- 3 – 10%
- 4 (Neutral) – 15.6%
- 5 – 10%
- 6 – 4.4%
- 7 (Strongly support) – 5.6%
- Mean: 2.89

9. On the following scale, rate your level of support for athletes protesting (kneeling, sitting, raising a fist, staying in the locker room, etc.) during the National Anthem (4 is neutral).

- 1 (Strongly oppose) – 8.9%
- 2 – 5.6%
- 3 – 3.3%
- 4 (Neutral) – 7.8%
- 5 – 10%
- 6 – 6.7%
- 7 (Strongly support) – 57.8%
- Mean: 5.56

10. On the following scale, rate your level of support for sports coaches, owners and administrators instructing athletes to stand for the National Anthem.

- 1 (Strongly oppose) – 46%
- 2 – 14.4%
- 3 – 11.1%

- 4 (Neutral) – 11.1%
- 5 – 5.6%
- 6 – 3.3%
- 7 (Strongly support) – 3.3%
- Mean: 2.29

11. On the following scale, rate your level of support for sports coaches, owners and administrators disciplining (benching, suspending, releasing, etc.) athletes who do not stand for the National Anthem.

- 1 (Strongly oppose) – 68.9%
- 2 – 11.1%
- 3 – 4.4%
- 4 (Neutral) – 5.6%
- 5 – 6.7%
- 6 – 1.1%
- 7 (Strongly support) – 2.2%
- Mean: 1.82

12. On the following scale, rate how your level of interest in watching sports would change if athletes were allowed to protest during the National Anthem (4 is neutral).

- 1 (Would strongly decrease) – 3.3%
- 2 – 2.2%
- 3 – 6.7%
- 4 (Neutral) – 73.3%

- 5 – 8.9%
- 6 – 2.2%
- 7 (Would strongly increase) – 3.3%
- Mean: 4.02

13. On the following scale, rate how your level of interest in watching sports would change if athletes were not allowed to protest during the National Anthem (4 is neutral).

- 1 (Would strongly decrease) – 22.2%
- 2 – 13.3%
- 3 – 18.9%
- 4 (Neutral) – 40%
- 5 – 2.2%
- 6 – 2.2%
- 7 (Would strongly increase) – 1.1%
- Mean: 2.98

The consensus I can gather from these results is that people support athletes and sports journalists using their platforms to support their sociopolitical causes, and oppose restrictions on those efforts. If such restrictions were imposed, interest in watching sports would decrease, but not drastically so. Because the NFL is the epicenter of the National Anthem protest debate, I expected more respondents who said they watched the NFL regularly to oppose the protests. As it turns out, only four of the 38 respondents who said they watched the NFL regularly opposed the National Anthem protests. Even the total number of regular NFL viewers was shockingly low.

While these numbers look encouraging to the anti-Trump camp, the demographics of the respondents are fairly skewed towards left-leaning groups, who are more likely to have these views. More than four out of five respondents were 18-34 years old, and only 5.6% of respondents voted for Donald Trump. Posting on Reddit, I could not easily control or select who responded, but if there were any way I could, I would, especially when it came to the ethnic backgrounds of the voters. While the proportion of white respondents was in line with the American population as a whole, minorities were not nearly as appropriately represented. No people of African, Caribbean, Middle Eastern or Pacific Islander descent responded. I also would have liked to have a more accurate representation of how the country voted in the presidential election, but at the same time, I did not want to dilute this poll by posting it on hyper-partisan subreddits, such as the ultra-right wing /r/The_Donald.

Another roadblock in administering this survey is that almost all sports subreddits forbid intense political discussion (they truly do “stick to sports”), and almost all subreddits in general forbid self-promotion, or at least individual threads seeking poll responses like I was trying to accomplish. I had to message the moderators of /r/NFL, /r/baseball, /r/hockey, /r/NBA and /r/MLS to get their permission to post a thread, and they all directed me to post it in the comments of their daily discussion threads instead, which led to them getting buried under more relevant topics. /r/SampleSize is the only subreddit dedicated to administering surveys for academic research.

Because of the small and disproportionately represented sample size, it is hard to say whether my hypothesis is confirmed. While the portion of my hypothesis about left-leaning respondents was pretty much confirmed, the portion about right-leaning

respondents is not as clear. Not one respondent went exclusively to the extreme “stick to sports” side of any of the questions. While it gives people hope that sports fans are more open and flexible towards the intersection of sports and politics than they were 40, 50 or 60 years ago, one does not have to go too far beyond Reddit (or beyond Reddit at all) to see that this welcoming attitude is not as prevalent as this survey makes it appear.

One would like to believe that, looking back on history, it should be easy to tell who is on the right and wrong side of these debates. But the people whom I would think are on the “wrong” side are not easily convinced that they are, and solving these debates goes far beyond not preventing athletes from kneeling during the anthem or journalists standing up for groups of people on social media. The institutional racism that makes this a debate in the first place needs to be solved, but that will take a Herculean amount of work that will have to wait for another paper.

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