



## Colin Kaepernick & the Fight for Black Lives

In 2016, then San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick tried to get the country to pay attention to police brutality and racial injustice by refusing to stand during the playing of the national anthem at the start of football games. In this way, Kaepernick, with the help of his teammate Eric Reid, started a league-wide, player-led peaceful protest.

"I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses Black people and people of color," Kaepernick told NFL Media in an interview. "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."

Though there were those who appreciated his actions and joined him in taking a knee during the national anthem, Kaepernick also sparked outrage with his protest. Mostly white team owners, fellow players, fans, and politicians criticized and vilified him. Despite his [thoughtfully researched peaceful protest](#), Kaepernick, was [accused](#) of being "unpatriotic, a traitor to the nation, a disruptive, self-aggrandizing narcissist, and a loathsome human being who disrespects the military." There were fans who burned his jersey, and he was often booed at games, even at home.

A growing number of football players and other athletes engaged in similar silent protests that year. The wave of protests even turned into a direct form of resistance against President Trump in September of 2017 when, in a tweet, Trump called on team owners to "fire and suspend" protesting players and encouraged fans to walk out "when someone disrespects our flag." The NFL responded with an announcement that teams would be fined if "team and league personnel" didn't "stand and show respect for the flag and Anthem." The league failed to back its players in their continued attempts to raise awareness by taking a stance against police brutality and systemic racism.

In the end, Kaepernick paid a high price for taking a "stand" for what he believed in. He wasn't drafted or signed by any of the league's teams during the 2017 season. Many believe it was because of his protest. Ultimately, football is a business and with many of the (mostly white) fans upset by his actions, the league chose them and their money over Kaepernick's activism on behalf of Black and Brown lives.

Kaepernick's was not the first such protest by a professional athlete. NBA and WNBA players have publicly protested police brutality and injustice since 2014. During the summer of 2016, entire women's basketball teams and their owners came out in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. WNBA teams have been fined for their protests, as have individual players. WNBA President Lisa Border explained the league's priorities this way: "We are proud of WNBA players' engagement and passionate advocacy for non-violent solutions to difficult social issues but expect them to comply with the league's uniform guidelines." In this case, the league expressed pride in its players protesting police brutality and injustice, and yet it used "the league's uniform guidelines" as a way to punish them for their actions.

Despite the price activist athletes have paid, the history of athlete protest goes back further still to Muhammad Ali, Tommie Smith, and John Carlos at the Summer Olympics in 1968 and many, many others who used the fact that they were in the public eye to shine a light on injustice.

Kaepernick and the other athletes who protested in 2016 were not acting in isolation. They were helping shine a light on grievances that the Movement for Black Lives started working on back in 2013, in the wake of George Zimmerman's acquittal for the shooting death of Trayvon Martin. While Kaepernick was on the national stage taking a knee, he was coordinating his efforts with other activists, who kept him informed of their objectives and strategies, so that efforts would be aligned.

While the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, may have triggered the most recent protests against police brutality, these protests are part of a much larger movement that has been building over the past seven years, which in turn is part of a much longer history of resistance that has been part of this country since its inception.