

How Sports Protests in America Affect National Pride

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This paper investigates how protest in American sports impacts American nationalism and how people react to or against it. How does the Supreme Court interpret these protests and reactions against them by assessing infringement of the First Amendment? This research is necessary and speaks to a more significant gap in the literature, as will recent movements like Black Lives Matter or Climate Change. Protests in sports have been increasing and have been a huge talking point for the last couple of years. This paper will use two case studies, Colin Kaepernick and Mahmoud Abdul Rauf, to answer this question. Both these cases are based on qualitative case selection, and these cases were selected as they are relevant due to their historical importance and empirical similarity. The results of this paper suggest that when athletes protest during sports games, these protests can lead to conflicting results. These studies illustrate and show the divide in America as half the country was with the players and what they protested for, while the other half hated the protests, citing hatred towards the American flag and how these players have no national pride.

Introduction

In May 2020, George Floyd was brutally murdered by a white police officer named Derek Chauvin. The officer's knee was on Floyd's neck for fifteen minutes, during which he screamed, "I Can't Breathe." The whole world was shaken after, and throughout America, people protested. Leading some of these protests were NBA players like Jaylen Brown, Malcolm Brogdon, and Giannis Antetokounmpo (Deb 2020)¹. These protests gained nationwide attention as people, especially Republicans, hated it and started bashing the NBA players, saying that they should "Stick to Sports" and stay in their lane. Others loved it and joined as they saw these athletes using their voices and power to protest for causes close to them. Then, in October, just as the NBA season was resuming after the Covid 19 pandemic hit the U.S. hard, causing the NBA season to halt, another incident similar to the Floyd case happened, this time with a man named Jacob Blake.

Blake, a man who had a warrant out for his arrest, was trying to get into his car but was shot four times by a police officer, and even though it was not a nationwide case like George Floyd, it added more fuel to the fire as the public, especially the minorities, were outraged and wanted change. They wanted police brutality to end, and they wanted to get the same treatment as whites when it came to dealings with the police. To them, it felt like whatever they were doing was insufficient, and the corrupt people kept getting away with this. Now, going back to the NBA, the players wanted to completely boycott the bubble in protest of police brutality as, for now, it was way more than one case, and it felt like they were getting targeted. The NBA decided not to boycott the season altogether, but instead, they boycotted the games for that day. (Spears, 2020)² NBA players,

especially players from Milwaukee like George Hill, and passionate pleas from coaches like Doc Rivers during post-game press conferences. (Polacek 2020)³. These speeches explained why and how police brutality is getting worse by the day. Lastly, to drive home the protest against police brutality, they also decided, for the most part, to kneel for the anthem. There were some exceptions to the last part, like Magic's Jonathan Isaac and, at the time, Heat's Meyers Leonard. Some Basketball fans were more outraged than before because not only were they boycotting during the playoffs. They felt that this case was not bad as Blake had an arrest warrant issued against him, and people were suspicious that he was picking up a knife. Also, some fans hated when athletes kneeled during the national anthem as they felt athletes were disrespecting the country that allowed them to play the sport they loved as their job. Lastly, there was also the crowd that was the shut up and dribble crowd, as Fox Pundit Laura Ingraham said in 2018 (Sullivan 2018)⁴.

This raises the question, how does protest in American sports impact American nationalism, and how do people react for or against it? In this paper the topic of players protesting during sports games and how the fans of these sports will be the main focus of this paper. This paper will also focus on how American sports, like football and basketball, create a sense of American nationalism. By looking at the cases of Colin Kaepernick and Mahmoud Abdul Rauf, this paper will show how fans identified that the sense of nationalism is broken when an athlete does not stand for the anthem and how fans perceive that as disrespectful. This study aims to unfold the public's perception of sports players' protests of a higher magnitude, meaning those covered extensively by the media. The public's perception of sports protests is essential because it adds a historical perspective contrasting well-known cases like Mahmoud Abdul Rauf

with more recent ones such as the Colin Kaepernick case⁵.

In Addition, This paper will also show how athletes use their platform to show what is happening around the world and how we need to change it, like in the case of police brutality with Jacob Blake or George Floyd. These two case studies show us the evolution of kneeling and protesting during the national anthem in sports and why fans reacted similarly/differently over time.

Literature Review

In the past, athletes have used their platform to protest in various ways. Sports in the US were created for entertainment, and the fans of each sport have some American pride. Protests in sports, especially in American sports, have a long history. One of the first prominent examples of sports protest was when Jackie Robinson became the first African American man to play Major League Baseball. Before Jackie Robinson went to major league baseball, baseball was separated into leagues which were known as the Negro Leagues and Major League Baseball or now known as the MLB, due to the south still having jim crow laws in place. Before Robinson joined the MLB, African American sports writers Wendell Smith and Sam Lacy wanted baseball to integrate. They used baseball to start tackling the primary cause of the civil rights movement. The Communist paper, the Daily Worker, also called for this, and protests in New York would rage for baseball to integrate. It ended that baseball would be integrated when, in 1945, the Governor of New York, Thomas Dewey, signed the Quinn-Ives Act banning the discrimination of race when hiring someone and also investigated complaints against incidents of discrimination of race (Drier 2022)⁶.

After this law was passed, and due to the Brooklyn Dodgers owner Branch Rickey already thinking about signing players from the Negro League, Jackie Robinson became the first African American baseball player to sign a contract in the Major League. Many others soon followed (Moore 2022)². Robinson used his platform as the first black athlete in the MLB to call for expanding civil rights. He teamed up with the NAACP, gaining the highest honor of the Spingarn Medal, and during his playing career, he fought for the expansion of civil rights. He did this by often traveling to the south and speaking in rallies like in Jackson, Mississippi, or Birmingham, Alabama, with the likes of Martin Luther King JR (Drier 2022)⁶. Robinson also was a critic of police brutality, which athletes continue to protest against today. Robinson was furious about a situation in Harlem when three black men, part of the group black panthers, a group that was popular in areas like Harlem, were arrested for beating up an officer. However, during their trial, these three black men were beaten up by over 150 white men, including off-duty police officers. When no arrests were made, Robinson, seeing this, publicly criticized the Harlem government and called out the police brutality happening in the city (Dreier 2022)⁶. Robinson's case

is critical and relevant because this was the first instance where we saw a famous athlete like Robinson use his platform to talk about issues he felt were extremely important. Robinson was the one to start the pattern of using his celebrity status to try to get change in the US.

The way Robinson protested was just one-way athletes used their platform to protest for political causes. As time went on, different styles of protests took place. For example, in 2014, Eric Garner, a black man in Staten Island, died after police put him in a chokehold during his arrest. NBA players who saw this incident and another with Michael Brown, which took place in Ferguson, decided to wear t-shirts saying, "I Cannot Breathe." The t-shirts were symbolic because the last words Garner spoke before he was pronounced dead were, "I cannot breathe" (Adande 14). The Miami Heat in 2012 did a similar thing when Trayvon Martin was shot dead by George Zimmerman. Zimmerman would later be acquitted of the charge of second-degree murder of Martin. In response, especially since the shooting took place in Florida, the Heat decided to protest and show the world this tragedy. They did this by dressing up like how Trayvon was the day he got shot, wearing hoodies with the hood up and warming up in these clothes.

These different forms of protest are just a couple of many different types of protests. In all of these instances of sports protest, especially in Robinson's case, the public reacted negatively. Many booed Robinson, viewing him as "whiny" and a "troublemaker." The public was hurt when Robinson used his platform to show the negative side of how African Americans were being treated, and police brutality as fans and fellow players felt that Robinson was disrespecting America. (Dreier 2022)⁶. Another example of protests impacting American nationalism was in 1968 when Black men Tommie Smith and John Carlos, after winning gold and bronze in the 200-meter event in track and field, respectively, put up a fist with their heads down during the anthem to support black power. Americans saw this, and the two were suspended from the US team and then came home and received death threats as many saw this act as them not respecting the US, the country they live in, and pride swelled up for most Americans.

Since there have been many different protests and the history of specific American sports dates back to a century ago, developing the framework for this paper will require examining literature pieces on this topic from the past that cover the topic of American nationalism. The paper will use the works of Zirin (2009) and (Park 2022). These papers all were different in their ways. For example, Zirin's book gave an overview of every American sport since the turn of the 19th century. It gave a brief overview of what happened during the decade, talking about critical events, which could include protests.

Zirin explores different protests over time but does not disclose how the public reacts to them in detail. Zirin only provided a brief overview of Rauf's case, covering only the part when

Rauf did not stand for the anthem in 1995 for his beliefs. Zirin also briefly exposes how fans reacted negatively to Abdul Rauf's decision. However, this paper will go into more depth by analyzing this case, how it started, how the public reacted, and how it impacted American nationalism. Zirin's research shows a broad scope of sports protests and the mechanisms behind why these protests took place. This paper will add to his scholarship, mainly because I foresee a shortcoming in his book, which is based on many case studies from sports players through different eras, in entanglement with how political conflict changes American society. However, it needs to provide an in-depth analysis of each case.

Zirin describes several eras connecting sports players with protests and the public's reaction. For example, in the chapter *CREAM*, several examples of protests, such as the fire in Los Angeles, which is famous because of the Rodney King protests. After the 80s and '90s, protests focused on many more minority issues like LGBT rights and subsidiary rights that arrived from this newfound minority rights debate. Notwithstanding, Abdul Rauf's case is still a highlight in this era because it directly deals with American nationalism as it deals with him not standing to the anthem.

With Park's study, his scholarship's relevance and importance of the studies showed the more legal side of protests. Park mainly focused on sports protests in college and high school campuses throughout the US. This was because in high school and college campuses, the First Amendment right of freedom of speech can be interpreted differently, and Park wanted to show how the Supreme Court would interpret these cases. Park's work highlighted the Colin Kaepernick case, referencing it several times while discussing other campus sports protests. Even if high school sports are not as popular as sports leagues, the public still reacted to these protests in that context. Therefore, there are lessons to learn. Unlike Park's scholarship, this paper does not deal with the legal side of protests.

The two prominent cases I will show when talking about the big question of how protest in American sports impacts American nationalism and how people react for or against would be the case of Mahmoud Abdul Rauf in 1995 and the infamous case of Colin Kaepernick, which started in 2017 and gained nationwide influence. Comments even came from the President at the time, Donald Trump, who opposed what Kaepernick had started doing in kneeling. This paper will use these works and other primary sources to focus on these two cases. It will mainly focus on the media coverage and how the American public reacted to these two cases.

Methods

This paper is based on qualitative case selection. I have selected the cases based on their similarities and considered the cases' characteristics and historical analysis. Mahmoud was the first

case that dealt with the public's reaction to a sportsperson's protest. This is so because famous authors like Zirin, Park, and others have extensively studied this case and hailed Rauf as one of the first sportsperson protesters who got the reaction the way it did. After identifying this critical case study for my analysis, I dived into several cases in the last two decades to identify a case that would be historically comparable with Mahmoud. The main criteria for case comparison were the facts involved in both cases: The Criteria that I wanted in both cases were that I wanted the cases to be primarily similar. I wanted a case protesting during the national anthem like that of Rauf. This is how I landed on the second case of Colin Kaepernick. Kaepernick's case was the one I landed on because of how similar it was to Abdul Rauf. Both were tested during the anthem, with Kaepernick kneeling during the anthem and Abdul Rauf not standing during the anthem. However, I also picked the Kaepernick case because it had two essential differences from the Rauf Case. One is that the reason why Abdul Rauf and Kaepernick protested during the anthem was different. Kaepernick protested during the anthem to protest police brutality. Rauf protested due to his Muslim beliefs. The second main reason was the reaction of the public. In the Rauf Case, the whole American public was against Rauf's protests, while in the case of Kaepernick, the American public was split, with half on Kaepernick's side and the other half against Kaepernick. I first researched the Colin Kaepernick and Mahmoud Abdul Rauf cases with primary sources. Then, my second step was to conduct a citation analysis* on the Washington Post, New York Times, and USA Today and use news articles from these sources. I conducted my citation analysis by searching the key names of Colin Kaepernick and Mahmoud Abdul Rauf and qualitatively evaluated the article that would contribute to the research paper. After that, I checked this information with secondary sources, such as academia, Google Scholar, and additional online libraries, to find reliable secondary sources. While crossing the information between primary and secondary sources, I found out these cases best represent the public's sentiment when emphasizing public sports people.

Case Study 1: Colin Kaepernick

I am using Colin Kaepernick as an example in this paper because Kaepernick's way of protesting is the most well-known sports protest in recent history. This section of the paper presents the past, how the American public reacted to what Kaepernick did, and what he was trying to accomplish. This Case Study will help us understand how American nationalism and sports culture are connected.

* Graber, Shane M., Ever J. Figueroa, and Krishnan Vasudevan. "Oh, say, can you kneel: A critical discourse analysis of newspaper coverage of Colin Kaepernick's racial protest." *Howard Journal of Communications* 31, no. 5 (2020): 464-480.

The NFL season for the 2016-2017 season was just about to start. The talk was normal as the media focused on the favorites to win the Super Bowl, who to win MVP, Etc. During the first week of the preseason, San Francisco's 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick, who previously led the 49ers to the Super Bowl in 2012, kneeled during the national anthem. His kneeling went unnoticed for the first week as the media and fans were still excited about the start of the NFL season. Week 2 Kaepernick kneeled again, but again, like the previous week, the public was still uninterested. However, the media started noticing by the third week of the preseason. When the media noticed that on August 26th, the third preseason game, they started asking Kaepernick questions about why he was kneeling. Kaepernick answered by discussing police brutality. He said: "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color. 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." Kaepernick's reason to kneel and protest was due to lots of unarmed black people getting shot by the police the previous summer. That following game, Kaepernick and his teammate, Safety Eric Reid, kneeled during the anthem again. After hearing his comments from the third game and from the fans starting to notice Kaepernick kneeling, Charger fans, the team Kaepernick was playing, started booing him during the game. The President at the time, Barack Obama, defended Kaepernick, while the NFL commissioner, Roger Goodell, disagreed. That following season was Kaepernick's worst, as the 49ers went 2-14, and by the end of the season, Kaepernick was not playing. However, during this whole time, even when Kaepernick was not playing, they did kneel during the anthem. Other NFL players bought his jersey the most, showing that the players supported the movement. Most NFL players are African American, and for them, the situation that Kaepernick was bringing up was hitting home. However, Kaepernick was in the last year of his contract and was about to enter contract negotiations and maybe even Free Agency. Free Agency is where once a player's contract is up with his former team, and if he and his former team have not yet agreed to a new contract, that player enters a pool of players where all 32 NFL teams can meet with him, and the player can choose, which contract/team is the best for him. Wanting to test the free agency market, Kaepernick declined his option with the 49ers but did not get signed by the NFL. Players and fans who supported Colin Kaepernick were suspicious that the owners, predominantly white, were blackballing Kaepernick from the NFL. The owners and the NFL did not like the kneeling.(Boren 20)." The players, seeing what happened to Kaepernick, also started protesting due to the cause that Kaepernick represented and also to show the NFL that they could expel everyone, like how they blacklisted Kaepernick. By the third week, the protests reached the max. This was because President Donald Trump called NFL players "bitches" during

a speech and said, "Wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, 'Get that son of a bitch off the field right now. Out!'" (Graham 2017). Trump also tweeted, "If a player wants the privilege of making millions of dollars in the NFL, or other leagues, he or she should not be allowed to disrespect our Great American Flag (or Country) and should stand for the National Anthem." Trump also wrote over two tweets in late September. "If not, YOU'RE FIRED" (Fritze 2018). After this, players protested in different ways. This included skipping the anthem altogether, kneeling, or locking arms together in protest of what Trump had said. Some owners, like Cowboys owner Jerry Jones, kneeled before the anthem. However, in the case of Jones, while he kneeled before the anthem, he stood during it.(Boren 20)." Trump did not back down, however. When Vice President Mike Pence went to watch an Indianapolis Colts game, Trump told Pence to leave if the players were protesting the anthem, and when the players did, Pence left the stadium, which Trump approved in a tweet. The President and his supporters felt the athletes were disrespecting the flag and the military of the United States. The players then responded by saying the protest was only for police brutality and they were not disrespecting the military or the flag. Kaepernick was the first to start a nationwide movement. Due to the influence of Kaepernick kneeling three years prior, players in all sports kneeled during the national anthem to protest police brutality when George Floyd was killed. The media started to run with this situation, and two sides formed: The side all for it and the side opposing it; according to a Poll done by Reuters in 2016, 61 percent of Americans opposed and did not agree with the protest Kaepernick was doing but did say he had a right to do so. One of the main reasons why American people opposed the protest was because Kaepernick did not stand for the anthem and disrespected the country and the military of the United States of America(Tennery 2016). The sense of American nationalism, to most fans, felt like it was declining.

From the sport of football and later other sports due to the kneeling of the anthem and the controversy it had fans felt that American sports should be a place where all these political situations should be forgotten and that the sport is just entertainment for millions and millions of hard-working Americans. These blue-collar workers and Americans who served/had family in the military felt Kaepernick, by protesting, was taking away from the main part of the game. Also, as mentioned before, patriotic Americans felt this disrespected the United States military. Most people stood for the national anthem out of respect for the military, protecting the country from enemies. Fans felt Kaepernick was disrespecting the country by kneeling. People like the President called for Kaepernick to be out of the league. They did not want players like Kaepernick to divide the country and hurt American nationalism. People's pride in American nationalism was being threatened, and the fans were getting mad about it. They just wanted the players to play ball, enjoy it,

and live their lives afterward. They did not want to have these players introduce politics into the sports and divide the country. For them, the main con of kneeling was that they disagreed with kneeling as it was disrespecting the American military and also because it was dividing the country and introducing politics into sports. However, some sports fans and commentators supported kneeling during the national anthem. The people who were kneeling saw that Kaepernick was not disrespecting the military but trying to protest what was wrong with America peacefully. They saw Kaepernick as someone trying to bring positive change to America and society. Most Pro Kneelers were minorities who were sick and tired of dealing with the police brutality they still deal with to this day. Many people, like the Commissioner of the NFL, who had previously disagreed with Kaepernick, saw what Kaepernick was trying to do by protesting after George Floyd died. In his opinion, the Commissioner thought Kaepernick was right in what he did and how he conducted the protest peacefully and apologized to him. He said: "I wish we had listened earlier, Kaep, to what you were kneeling about and what you were trying to bring attention to." Goodell said, "We had invited him in several times to have the conversation, to have the dialogue. I wish we had the benefit of that, we never did. We would have benefited from that, absolutely" (Selbe 2020). Goodell also said that it is not about the flag. His exact words were, "It is not about the flag. The message here, and what our players are doing, is being mischaracterized," Goodell said. "These are not people who are unpatriotic, they're not disloyal, they're not against our military. In fact, many of those guys were in the military, and they're a military family. What they were trying to do was exercise their right to bring attention to something that needs to get fixed. That misrepresentation in who they were and what they were doing was a tat really gnawed at me" (Selbe 2020)⁷. However, still, even after Floyd's death, many people disagree with Kaepernick. They felt Kaepernick was not loyal to the country by kneeling to the national anthem, and now, with many more athletes kneeling, not only did the anti-kneeling people start calling out these people for not being loyal, but they also started hating Kaepernick more for being the head of the cause and starting this mess. All these so-called Loyalists were increasingly getting mad after more and more athletes started to kneel. On the flip side, however, during the bubble in the NBA, people on social media were mad at those who did not kneel during the anthem to support the Black Lives Matter movement. They felt that the people not kneeling were racists, and they would think they did not care about their fellow companions because they were famous and rich. One such example of such was the case of Jonathan Isaac. Isaac, a black man, was playing for the Orlando Magic during the bubble in 2020. Every player and coach in the bubble knelt during the anthem and wore a black Lives Matter shirt to show the situation's magnitude. In a game against the Kings, during the national anthem, Isaac was the only person not to kneel or even wear a black lives matter

shirt. Whether it was news stations or social media like Twitter or Instagram, they were questioning him and were getting mad for not kneeling and supporting the cause. Isaac said the reason why he did not kneel for the anthem was that he did not believe putting on a shirt and kneeling supported black lives. His exact words were, "I believe that Black Lives Matter," Isaac told media members. "A lot went into my decision, and part of it is that I thought that kneeling or wearing the Black Lives Matter t-shirt doesn't go hand-in-hand with supporting Black lives. So I felt like, just me personally, what is that I believe is taking on a stance that, I do believe that Black lives matter, but I just felt like it was a decision that I had to make, and I didn't feel like putting that shirt on and kneeling went hand in hand with supporting Black lives. I believe that for myself, my life has been supported by the gospel, Jesus Christ, and everyone is made in the image of God and that we all forge through God's glory" (NBC SPORTS, 2020)¹. People on social media started calling out Isaac as they saw him as a black man not supporting his fellow black companions and as being a traitor to the black community. Later that day, during the game against the Kings, Isaac was driving to the basketball hoop, and while going to the rim, his knee blew out, and he had to leave in a wheelchair. He would later on have a torn ACL, and people on social media said what happened to Isaac was pure Karma. They were, in fact, cheering his injury and were saying this is God's way of supporting the cause started by Kaepernick as Isaac, in the quote, mentioned God and how God supported his decision.

Kaepernick's decision to kneel during the anthem created a movement today, as sports players continue to kneel occasionally. However, in the case of Kaepernick, after the season when he was kneeling, he was out of the league. Some players, media members, and Kaepernick himself speculated that Kaepernick did not have a job after the 2016 season because he knelt, and owners did not want to take on the baggage that was Kaepernick. However, that same 2016 season was Kaepernick's worst season as a player, and he also declined an option to stay with the team to test the free agency market. Kaepernick would then later file a grievance against the NFL and the owners. According to Kaepernick, the reason for filing this grievance was because the NFL and the owners were conspiring to keep Kaepernick out of the league. In a statement about the issue, Kaepernick's Attorney, Mark Geragos, said, "If the NFL (as well as all professional sports teams) is to remain a meritocracy, then principled and peaceful protest — which the owners themselves made great theater imitating weeks ago — should not be punished and athletes should not be denied employment based on partisan political provocation by the Executive Branch of our government," (Neuman 2017)⁸. Kaepernick and the NFL would later settle this grievance in 2018, and while Kaepernick has tried to get back into the NFL, he has not been able to. Also, on the side, Kaepernick still talks about police brutality and how it is still plaguing the U.S.

The Kaepernick case was the most prominent example of protesting by kneeling during the anthem. When today we think of what protesting on sports fields looks like, everyone thinks of the image of Kaepernick kneeling during the national anthem. However, Kaepernick was not the first to do so. To understand the origin of the mode of protest of sports players kneeling during the national anthem, this paper now considers the case of Mahmoud Abdul Rauf twenty years prior.

Case Study 2: Mahmoud Abdul Rauf

The Case of Mahmoud Abdul Rauf, formerly known as Chris Jackson, was the first time an athlete decided not to stand for the national anthem. Abdul Rauf was a young, blossoming point guard for the Denver Nuggets in the 1990s. Today, some people would consider him the original Steph Curry because he shot a lot of deep threes, which was extremely rare at the time.

In 1996, Rauf stopped standing for the national anthem. He attributed his decision not to stand for the anthem to his Muslim beliefs. He stated, "I am a Muslim first and a Muslim last." Furthermore, Rauf said his actions were because of "My duty to my creator, not to nationalistic ideology" (Uitti 2022). Rauf started refusing to stand for the Anthem in March of 1996. The American public saw this and immediately ridiculed, booed, and cursed at Rauf for his actions. Just as Kaepernick was treated by the public twenty years later, Rauf was called a traitor, and sports fans called for him to get out of the league. It also did not help that Rauf called the American flag the symbol of "Tyranny and Oppression," making him even more hated. After the Persian Gulf War in the 1990s, resentment towards Muslim Americans grew, and this helps us understand how people reacted to Rauf's Protest. More importantly, unlike the case of Kaepernick, Rauf was Muslim, and even though Kaepernick got called racist things, this notion intensified during Rauf⁹.

In 2001, the KKK knew where Rauf's house was and, in response to his protests, burned down his house in revenge. They tried to show him that nobody was above the American flag, and this act showed, at times, the negative consequences of how much pride Americans had in their flag.

In 1996, after he decided to kneel, Abdul Rauf was suspended by the NBA for refusing to stand for the national anthem. The NBA stated that Rauf disobeyed a league rule, stating that "players, coaches, and trainers are to stand and line up in a dignified posture . . . during the playing of the American and Canadian national anthems" (Hodges 1996). While this rule has since changed, it was strictly enforced back then. Later, Rauf and the NBA agreed to a "settlement" where Rauf would stand for the national anthem, but he was allowed to pray to himself during the anthem. Fans were still mad and continued to call for him to be kicked out of the league. It got to the point where people like "Ed Wearing, Colorado commander of the American Le-

gion, would call for Rauf to renounce his citizenship." Wearing stated that "refusing to stand up and recognize the unity of this nation as embodied under the flag to me is tantamount to treason" (Hodges 1996). People echoed this statement, saying they wanted Rauf out of the league and the country. They wanted him out of the sport, and they resented him. They also wanted to show a statement to other players, saying that the fans would stop supporting them if they disrespected the flag, showing how much pride the American people had in their country and how much they hated when someone like Rauf, who was somewhat famous, disrespected that country.

Every arena Rauf visited was filled with books as everybody wanted to show how much they hated him and his actions. While Rauf did get support from some of his teammates, like center Dikembe Mutombo, he did not get much support from his fellow players around the league. Nobody said anything about the Rauf situation, and for Rauf, the lack of players' support messed him up in terms of staying in the league. Abdul Rauf would try to stick around in the league. However, Journalists have portrayed him in his most polemic trades, such as 9/11, when he said "he believed the 9/11 attacks were an inside job and suggesting that the Israelis – and not Osama Bin Laden – orchestrated the plan. Abdul Rauf also believed that the ensuing war was not a war on terrorism. However, instead, it was a war on Islam. Even today, his relationship with America is not great, as he always talks about how America did not make him rich and saw America as "the place that held him back" (Raskin, 2023). Even though freedom of speech and freedom of expression is a core part of American society, it does not protect you from getting hated from everyone around you. Due to the hatred with the fans, and no teams wanting to take on the baggage of Rauf with the comments about 9/11 and its aftermath, this meant that Abdul Rauf would be out of the league. He later said he lost "Millions of dollars because he could not keep his mouth shut (Uitti 2022)."¹⁰

Rauf's situation kickstarter years and years of similar protests down the line. Before Rauf, nobody protested during the anthem. Due to Rauf, many athletes started talking and protesting about their beliefs. Also, due to Abdul Rauf, the protest during the anthem got even more popular and led us to the modern-day protest of Kaepernick kneeling during the national anthem. Rauf's decision to kneel during the national anthem was the first situation since the Civil Rights movement, during which African Americans sat out games to protest segregation, where people showed hostility towards an athlete. This hostility speaks to how much pride American people had towards the flag, and it showed how people will react if someone "disrespects the flag" (Keane 2023). Many people will also react similarly to different protests that involved the anthem, like the Kaepernick situation, where many people thought his kneeling was disrespecting his country and flag. Results

Both Colin Kaepernick and Mahmoud Abdul Rauf protested

similarly. Both protested during the anthem. However, there was one main difference between the two protests. The difference was that most of the public was against Mahmoud Abdul Rauf, while with Kaepernick, the public was more split. According to a Reuters poll, even though about 60 percent did not agree with Kaepernick, that same 60 percent also said Kaepernick had the right to protest what he believed in. This was different from the Abdul Rauf case, where the public turned against Abdul Rauf, leading him to not have a job in the NBA.

According to Bryman (Page 89), "Reliability is concerned with the question of whether the results of a study are repeatable. (Bryman, Alan. *Social research methods*. Oxford university press, 2016)." I have considered nine primary sources (from different ideological perspectives) like the New York Times, Reuters, etc. I also used secondary sources to collaborate with the primary sources and ensure everything was accurate. Other authors willing to reproduce my research can continue looking for similar public reactions and their reflections on newspaper articles on other sportspeople during different periods. Due to the Primary sources coming from different ideologies, like the Reuters polls or the New York Times, Ideological Biases in the articles would be there. To ensure these biases would cancel out, I used articles from both sides to get facts and show both sides of the spectrum. Authors could use examples such as Megan Rapinoe, a US women's soccer player who, like Kaepernick, knelt against the oppression of the United States. Another example an author/researcher could use is a more extensive deep dive into the black lives matter movement. While I mentioned the Black Lives Matter movement at the start of the paper, an author could go into a massive deep dive into what happened from May 2020 to even the present day with the movement.

Conclusion

The case studies explored in this paper not only show how athletes like Rauf and Kaepernick use their First Amendment right to protest oppression and inequality by kneeling during the national anthem but also highlight why Americans react with such hostility. The reactions to Kaepernick and Abdul Rauf's protests show that Americans not only see these decisions to kneel as disrespectful of America but also see sports as a venue for entertainment, not politics. The American Public does not want to see athletes protesting against oppression and inequality in America but instead wants them to "shut up and play their sport," as Laura Ingraham said about LeBron James in 2017. However, since Abdul Rauf's protest in 1996, more athletes have started to protest for what they believe is right. They are starting to use the platform they created to raise awareness for contemporary problems in America. Because a lot of Americans watch sports, athletes know that a lot will see their actions and protests of people. Therefore, athletes know they have a platform to shine a light on an issue they believe needs solving.

The protest during the national anthem started when one man refused to stand because of his beliefs and has since continued throughout the years with more and more athletes using the anthem as a way to protest, to make American fans see the terrible things in our world. This tactic has been used throughout the 21st century since Abdul Rauf protested during the anthem in 1996.

Academica have constantly analyzed this literature on the public's perceptions of the players. Recently, through the case of George Floyd, police brutality has sparked the emergency of this literature. However, my paper analyzes public perception in historically relevant cases like the Case of Colin Kaepernick and Mahmoud Abdul Rauf. By analyzing protests in American sports, I have demonstrated how protests impact American nationalism and people's reactions to protests. As demonstrated in the paper, I show two different examples, including the very complex case of Mahmoud Abdul Rauf, which demonstrates the public's reaction to protest dealing with the intersection of nationality and religion.

As the paper demonstrated, Colin Kaepernick and Mahmoud Abdul Rauf protested during the anthem. While Kaepernick had significant support from the public, the same cannot be said for Mahmoud Abdul Rauf. The case of Mahmoud Abdul Rauf was more evident because the public vilified him. This is demonstrated in the case study with the particularity of Mahmoud Abdul Rauf. It remains to be investigated if other cases that deal with protests will also be impacted by the religious act perpetrated by the public.

While this paper only focuses on sports protests, protests are highly contested around the world to this day. Future scholars can use the case studies for other disciplines, such as Political Science, Sociology, and other related fields. Alternatively, protests involving the intersection of religion and incorporating different aesthetics (bodily reactions) play a significant role in polarizing the public. For this reason, dual cases could benefit public opinion by identifying the differences and similarities.

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