CHAPTER 7

GO FUCKING PLAY

Football and the Fear of Black Men

It may surprise you to learn that American football, a sport today known for the Black athletes who showcase their physical speed and strength every Sunday, was created to be played by wealthy white men.

There was a lot of money to be made after the Civil War and during the United States' violent expansion into Western territories in the 1800s. Families newly wealthy from the growth of railroads and trade (brought by the forced displacement of Indigenous peoples) were looking at their own sons nervously. It had taken a lot of strength and force to build their wealth and power, and it would take more strength and force to maintain them. Would their rich, spoiled offspring have what it takes to grow an American empire?

What could wealthy young men do to cultivate strength and aggression if they lived a life of ease? They could, perhaps, play a rough sport.

"The very foundation of football in this country comes out of fears of ruling-class mediocrity and [fears of] the mediocrity of their own children."

I'm sitting at a bookstore café in Washington, D.C., across a table from a noted author on the history of race and sport, Dave Zirin. It's his opening line for our conversation on football and Blackness, and it surprises me. But I shouldn't be surprised to be immediately learning from Zirin; he has written multiple best-selling books on sport, has been nominated for an NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Literary Work, and is widely recognized within the sports world as an authority on sports history and sports labor issues. He's the guy to talk to about this.

Like the mandate to "Go West, Young Man," football was born out of Muscular Christianity. Theodore Roosevelt, American cultural icon and the nation's twenty-sixth president, was, as we've seen, a big proponent of this doctrine.

"Teddy Roosevelt—he was like the prom king of this culture of toxic masculinity in sports and seeing sports as a substitute for the fight for empire and war," explained Zirin.[1]

American football had its beginnings in the Ivy League colleges, which were attended by young elites like Roosevelt. Its early days were so violent that dozens of student athletes died every year, nearly dooming the sport before it fully got off the ground. The *Smithsonian* detailed some of the injuries recorded during a particularly brutal college game in 1905: "Four concussions, three 'kicks in the head,' seven broken collarbones, three grave spinal injuries, five serious internal injuries, three broken arms, four dislocated shoulders, four broken noses, three broken shoulder blades, three broken jaws, two eyes 'gouged out,' one player bitten and another knocked unconscious three times in the same game,

one breastbone fractured, one ruptured intestine and one player 'dazed.'"[2]

As outrage began to rise over the death toll of the sport, the *New York Times* placed football right alongside the lynching of Black Americans as our nation's "Two Curable Evils."[3] Through the great effort of powerful defenders like Roosevelt, who claimed that "it is mere unmanly folly to try to do away with the sport because the risk exists," football's supporters instead pressured colleges to form the NCAA to increase oversight and decrease deaths and serious injury.[4]

Although football persevered through the crisis to become one of our nation's most beloved pastimes, I am not what anybody would call a sports person. My mom signed me up for a flag football league in fifth grade, and I still haven't figured out what I (or the team that had to endure my sulky attitude and extreme lack of athletic ability) had done to warrant such punishment. I have watched a few football games (especially during my hometown Seahawks' Superbowl-winning season in 2014), but I don't think anybody could confuse me for a "fan." Instead, my interest in football has been almost entirely political, increasing with the University of Missouri protests in 2015 and continuing with the national-anthem protests started by Colin Kaepernick. To me, the idea of sitting around watching a bunch of Black bodies crash into each other to the delight of white team owners and managers is not entertaining. Even though I can respect and appreciate the great efforts the athletes put forth, the sport has long represented to me the exploitation of Black labor and Black bodies, and little else. But I have come to value (if often with dismay) the way in which we can see the reflection of American racial attitudes through the sport.

Modern-day American football has in many ways progressed and digressed racially along with American racial attitudes. While many would look at the Black millionaires it produces and think that the sport represents racial progress and Black success, it still also represents the ways in which racism and white supremacy have successfully moved out of the spotlight of violent racial terror and instead woven their way through the fabric of both the sport and society—existing and operating constantly, yet only making themselves more visible when the sport's integrity is directly threatened.

Today, Black athletes make up the majority of popular American football team rosters, but that was not always the case. My great-grandfather on my mother's side was one of the early white players. I remember my mom showing me pictures of Daddy Bud from the early 1930s in his football uniform, before a train accident crushed his foot and his professional prospects. My mom watched football in the tradition of her white family, so it did not carry the same complications for her that it carried for me—although perhaps it should have.

That American football was invented, at least in part, to create and maintain a violent white male ideal—an ideal so brutal that it claimed dozens of promising young lives each year—is a history that should perhaps be just as troubling to white Americans as the current state of football is to Black Americans. The appeal of early football was white male dominance, a hierarchy that many in the sport tried to maintain by excluding Black players. Although football was eventually integrated, that integration stopped at the surface, and it hid all the ways in which the sport still worked to maintain the ugliest of white male power. The white male dominance that was first demonstrated in how white players tackled each other on the field was diverted to how they could control the physical power of Black men. Yes, the majority of players now are Black, but those calling the shots—the owners, the managers, the quarterbacks—are primarily white men. White fans shifted their relationship to football as well. They identify with the quarterback if they identify with a player at all.

"Why is it that fantasy football is so popular?" Zirin asked rhetorically. "It's popular because, when it comes to football, fans identify with being an owner or a general manager, not with being a player. Why don't they identify with being a player? Well, a couple of reasons. One: race, without question," he explains. "And two: because being an NFL player is to be a very specific kind of athlete. You are six foot three, 280 pounds. You're running forty yards in 4.5 seconds, and fans, white fans, view these NFL players as half god, half chattel."

As white America shifted its relationship with Black America, so did football shift its relationship to Black players. Although Black players are allowed to succeed for the few years that their bodies remain healthy, they are expected to be grateful for the same success that is costing them their bodies, and—often after repeated concussions—their minds. No guarantees are given players. They have no true security. And the moment they try to wield any of the power that their fame might bring them, the punishment is swift and sharp. White fans rejoice in order restored.

The fear of the physical power and strength of men of color and their perceived threat to white male power drove the creation of a sport that began with the deaths of dozens of young white men. From there, football briefly became a tool of the exploitation of white workers. It would eventually find its way to the state it is in today—so wed to its need to hold power over Black players that it endangers the health and safety of all players and limits the potential success and popularity of the sport.

In football, I see what the fear of the perceived physicality of men of color means to a white male supremacy defined largely by its ability to maintain control through violence. I see the ways in which the need to maintain physical power over others has been translated into maintaining control over the physical power of Black men. And I also see how even fans of the sport, who only have the illusion of control over the players on their television screens, can be manipulated into helping owners maintain that control over players—even as it risks the sport they love.

But I also see opportunity to move the discussion around race and masculinity forward. I see the potential for people to come together over their love of the sport to have real dialogue on issues of justice and equality in this country. And when I look at how hard those in power in football have worked to stifle any player empowerment or solidarity around issues of justice and equality, I realize that I'm not the only one who sees that potential.

SEGREGATED FOOTBALL NOW, SEGREGATED FOOTBALL FOREVER

There is no more difference in compromising the integrity of race on the playing field than in doing so in the classroom. One break in the dike and the relentless seas will rush in and destroy us.

—Georgia governor Marvin Griffin, 1956[5]

Willis Ward was sitting on the bench. So was Hoot Gibson. Both Ward and Gibson were starting ends for their college teams—Georgia Tech and University of Michigan, respectively—but they were both benched for the entire game, much to the dismay of their teams' fans. Why? Because Willis Ward was Black.

Until that game in 1934, not many teams had had to deal with the issue of Black football players because, well, there just weren't that many. This is not because football wasn't popular in the Black community or because Black players weren't talented. It was because at that time, few Blacks were allowed on most college campuses, let alone on the football teams. Those Black players who persevered and were able to gain a spot on the team were often met with extreme racism and violence. When All-American player Paul Robeson joined Columbia University's team in 1918, the young

"On the first day of practice, I was attacked by twenty-one guys," Robeson recounted. "All the guys on the defense, and all the guys on my team. They put me in the hospital for two weeks."[6]

Robeson's experience, while exceptionally violent, was not all that unique. Black players were frequently attacked and singled out, not only by opposing teams but by their own teammates. Robeson was not the only Black player to end up in the hospital due to the racist aggression of white players, and when a Black player was injured on the field, it was sometimes accompanied by chants of "kill the nigger" or "kill the coon" from the stands.

In 1923, Iowa State's lone Black team member, Jack Trice, was killed after sustaining beatings during a game against the University of Minnesota that left him with hemorrhaged lungs and internal bleeding.[7] Eleven years later, the two universities would once again feature in public racist violence; during a game between them, Iowa State's Black halfback, Ozzie Simmons, endured so many brutal hits from Minnesota players that he was forced to leave the game three times, all while enduring racist taunts from the players who had injured him.[8]

In 1934, due to the racist exclusion of Black players and the regular, violent terror visited upon those who were able to beat the odds and find a place on a college team, Georgia Tech football fans and supporters were surprised, and quite frankly appalled, to find that the University of Michigan expected them to play against Willis Ward, a Black man, in their upcoming game. While Northern teams seemed happy to maim their Black players, Southern teams simply refused to play with or against Black players. When Georgia Tech discovered that Michigan not only had a Black player, but they expected to start him, they demanded that the team pull Ward from the game.

The University of Michigan agreed with little fuss. But after Michigan students launched protests over the university's quick capitulation to open racism, the two universities came up with would also bench one of its starting players. Apparently, the disadvantage of removing one of the team’s star players from the game was worth it if it meant they wouldn’t have to walk on the same grass as a Black man.

Michigan won the game against Georgia Tech that day, but the real winner in the compromise was segregation: Georgia Tech and other Southern teams were so appalled that they had to go to so much trouble to avoid playing against Black athletes that they informally boycotted Northern teams until the 1970s.[9]

> *Mr. Marshall was an outspoken foe of the status quo when most were content with it. His fertile imagination and vision brought vital improvements to the structure and presentation of the game. Pro football today does in many ways reflect his personality. It has his imagination, style, zest, dedication, openness, brashness, strength and courage. We all are beneficiaries of what his dynamic personality helped shape over more than three decades.*
>
> —*NFL commissioner Pete Rozelle, in remembrance of George Preston Marshall, 1969*[10]

From 1934 to 1946, there were no Black players in the NFL. There had been a few Black players before 1934, but for a dozen years there was not a single one. No official answer exists as to why, but we do know that no Black players whose contracts were up in 1933 were renewed for 1934, and no Black players were allowed to try out for NFL teams. When scholars have dug into the reason behind this unofficial ban, they often come across one name: George Preston Marshall.

Marshall was the owner of the Boston Braves, which he later renamed the Boston Redskins, which eventually moved to D.C. and became the Washington Redskins. If you couldn’t tell by the fact that this was the man behind the still highly controversial and

offensive Redskins team name, let me say without any reservation that George Preston Marshall was a fantastic racist. Not only was he the genius behind naming his team a racial slur, but he doubled down on the racism by having his head coach, William Henry Dietz, dress in a headdress and war paint and dance for the crowds during halftime. (Dietz, also known as Lone Star Dietz, didn’t seem to mind this insult to his Indigenous heritage—but maybe that is because he was actually a white dude who had stolen the identity of a Sioux man in order to try to cash in on the white American fascination with Indigenous culture and the immense star power of Indigenous players like Jim Thorpe, Gus Welsh, and Bill Newashe.)[11]

Although Marshall’s racism appeared to be far-reaching, he was at least willing to let Indigenous people play on the team he had named specifically to insult them. But as Black players and even Black coaches like Fritz Pollard appeared in increasing numbers, Marshall and others saw Black football players as a real threat to what had been a predominantly white game. There was absolutely no way that Marshall was going to allow Blacks anywhere near his precious football.

“George Preston Marshall—he was a businessman,” explained Dave Zirin. “He moved the Redskins here [to Washington, D.C.] from Boston because he wanted to appeal to the Jim Crow South.”

As a committed racist and savvy businessman, Marshall saw a great marketing opportunity in racist football fans—especially across the South. The team fight song was sung to the tune of “Dixie” and in fact included the line “Fight for Old Dixie” until the 1960s. This Southern pageantry helped increase the Redskins’ popularity in the Southern areas where Marshall targeted many of the team’s radio broadcasts.[12]

Marshall, a powerful coach in the budding NFL, began pressuring other coaches in the league to make the NFL all white. They didn’t need too much convincing. This was a time fears of Black male physicality were being spread throughout the Jim Crow South. Black men were going to steal your women with their unchecked physical sexuality; they were going to threaten your families with their animal strength and uncontrollable rage. It is easy to see how the rise of powerful Black players in a game that had been founded to showcase white male physical superiority would be a turnoff to fans invested in shows of white male dominance. It is unlikely that Marshall was the only racist coach in the league, but he is recognized by many sports scholars as the driving force behind the unofficial ban of Black players.

The NFL couldn't stay white forever, though; its rival league, the AFL, had begun to increase the number of Black players on its teams. It turns out that some of those Black players were very good at football, even better than the white ones. The NFL started fearing the loss of fandom when they couldn't compete with the talent of the AFL's integrated teams, so the NFL's owners and coaches started recruiting Black players.

Eventually, all the NFL teams were integrated—except the Washington Redskins. Marshall, who loved racism even more than winning games, was the last owner to integrate his football team. Marshall held on to his "no-Blacks" policy so long that the coach and his team became a joke to sports commentators like Shirley Povich and Sam Lacy, who mocked Marshall's steadfast commitment to racism at the expense of his own record.

Decades after the integration of most NFL teams, Marshall's Redskins became a national embarrassment. This was not just any team; this was the team situated in the US capital. During the Cold War, the country's claim of being the defender of global freedom was severely undermined by the very public civil rights battles waging in the United States. Among many other transgressions happening in the country, Marshall's stubborn commitment to racial segregation in a uniquely American sport served to highlight the nation's hypocrisy in its ideological battle with the Soviets. As Dave Zirin said to me, "It was embarrassing on a global propaganda scale." Finally, after the federal government threatened to take away his stadium if he didn't integrate, Marshall recruited the first Black player for the Washington Redskins, who took the field in 1962. Perhaps the strain of seeing a Black man wearing his beloved Redskins uniform was too much for Marshall to handle, for he suffered a major, debilitating stroke in 1963.

I don't think I've ever been as devoted to anything as George Preston Marshall was to his racism. While he could not hold off the integration of football, Marshall made sure that his fight for segregation would live on after him. After Marshall's death in 1969, the bulk of his estate was designated to set up a charitable foundation in his name. One of the stipulations of the money, however, was that none of it was allowed to go to "any purpose which supports or employs the principle of racial integration in any form."[13]

I do not know if Marshall would be happy with how quickly his racism was forgotten—it doesn't appear to be something he wanted to hide, in life or death. But our society likes to make heroes out of some of our biggest bigots. Marshall was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1983. On the Hall of Fame website page about Marshall, the only mention of his long commitment to racism and segregation is the note that he "endured his share of criticism for not integrating his team until being forced to do so in 1962."[14]

MIZZOU AND THE RISE OF STUDENT-ATHLETE ACTIVISM

This is not, I repeat, not, how change should come about.
I take full responsibility for the inaction, and I take full
responsibility for the frustration that has occurred.

—*University of Missouri president Tim Wolfe,* Around two a.m. on October 24, 2015, somebody entered one of the residence halls at the University of Missouri. It was Gateway Hall, named for its mission to be a "gateway to the future of inclusive living." This person drew a swastika on the wall. With human feces.[16]

Students who did not see the swastika in situ found out via a flyer outlining the incident posted by the university's Department of Residential Life. For Jonathan Butler, a twenty-five-year-old Black graduate student at Mizzou, it was the final straw. He began a hunger strike, refusing to eat until university president Tim Wolfe either resigned or was fired.

This was not the first hate incident on campus. There had been racial slurs, homophobic slurs, and antisemitic slurs hurled at students in recent years. Students complained that the university did not take the incidents seriously and that they were made to feel unsafe by the actions. Concerned Student 1950, a student group named after the first year that Black students were allowed on campus, began staging protests shortly after the swastika was drawn. The protests quickly became heated. When students tried to engage Wolfe while he walked to his car and began to drive away, one of the students was allegedly hit by the moving vehicle, although unharmed. When Wolfe finally did meet with students, the situation went from bad to worse: students reported that he acted insulting and dismissive of their concerns.[17] A few days after the protests began, Butler, a Concerned Student 1950 member, began his hunger strike.

Meanwhile, members of Concerned Student 1950 wanted more than just a change in leadership; they wanted a change in college culture. Raising grievances that were greater in scope than slurs and swastikas, they demanded structural changes like cultural competency training for staff, an increase in teachers' diversity, and more recruitment and retention efforts of students of color. Students of multiple races and ethnicities joined the protests,

camping out on campus. Soon faculty joined in, showing their support for students and also calling for Wolfe's resignation.

Although the university's administrators tried to contain the protests, they showed no sign of meeting the larger demands—especially the removal of Wolfe. They suggested that perhaps the parties could, if they were able to address the health risk to Butler arising from his hunger strike, come to a gentler compromise.

Everything changed the moment the football players joined the protest.

Butler had been friends with many of the Black players. Hearing about his hunger strike, sophomore safety Anthony Sherrils met with Butler to learn more. Then he called a team meeting. On November 7, at least thirty of the team's Black players announced that they would not play until Wolfe was gone.

The players posted a group photo to Twitter along with the following statement: "The athletes of color on the University of Missouri football team truly believe 'Injustice Anywhere is a threat to Justice Everywhere.' We will no longer participate in any football related activities until President Tim Wolfe resigns or is removed due to his negligence toward marginalized students' experiences. WE ARE UNITED!!!!!"[18]

If anyone was hoping that the players' white teammates or coach would step in to pull the Black players back in line, they were quickly disappointed. The next day, in a show of solidarity with protesting players, coach Gary Pinkel posted a team photo with the following caption: "The Mizzou Family stands as one. We are united. We are behind our players. #ConcernedStudent1950 GP."[19]

Within seventy-two hours, Wolfe had resigned.

Wolfe did not resign because the statements of the football players had convinced him or the school's board of trustees that it was the right thing to do. He resigned because Mizzou is a football school, and a football school cannot survive without football

To say that football was a big deal at the University of Missouri would be an understatement. The Southeastern Conference champions for two years running, the Missouri Tigers were the heart and soul of the campus. They were also a major money maker for the college. If the standoff had continued into the next week, the team would have risked missing its game against Brigham Young University. That miss alone would have cost the university at least $1 million from a breach of contract with BYU. Further, missed practices and games—let alone an increase in hostility between team and school—could have cost the university its football season and its recruitment chances for the following year.

Almost immediately, the protesting players had the support of the region's Black football community. Many of the Black students on campus, including players, came from the Ferguson area and had been devastated by the killing of Michael Brown the year before. At a time when the local Black community was feeling hurt, angry, and powerless, this strong show of power by people as respected as Black college football players in the Missouri area would only become stronger the longer the protest was allowed to continue.

Anxiety around the players' protest was felt beyond the state. In recent years there had been increasing discussion about the morality of colleges and universities making hundreds of millions of dollars off the destruction of young Black bodies—especially when those students were risking their entire futures to possible injury and not getting paid for their work. Discussion around player safety, player empowerment, and player compensation was a direct threat to the college football system. Who knew how far the list of player demands might reach if the protests grew?

Wolfe later said that he did not resign because of football. He instead appealed to the anxiety of white Missourians who still felt very threatened by the unrest of the Ferguson protests. He explained to *Sports Illustrated* that he had been told that the protest had been infiltrated by "some bad characters that were in Ferguson. They were professionals; they weren't students," and he left to prevent violence instigated by these supposed outside agitators.[20] Not only were Wolfe's comments an insulting dismissal of the activism of Mizzou students; the blatant racism of his wild accusations played directly into white fears of the violence that Black unrest might bring.

Once Wolfe resigned, after eight days of starvation Jonathan Butler began to eat again. Black students and players celebrated a rare and powerful victory.

Team captain and protest leader Ian Simon read the following statement on behalf of the team after Wolfe's resignation:

> It's not about us. We just wanted to use our platform to take a stance for a fellow concerned student on an issue, especially being as though a fellow Black man's life was on the line. Due to the end of the hunger strike, we will be ending our solidarity strike to not practice and returning to our normal schedule as football players. It is a privilege to be playing on the University of Missouri's football team, and we are very thankful for this opportunity. We love the game, but [at the] end of the day, it is just that—a game.
>
> Through this experience, we've really began to bridge that gap between student and athlete in the phrase student-athlete by connecting with the community and realizing the bigger picture. We will continue to build with the community and support positive change on Mizzou's campus. Though we don't experience everything the general student body does and our struggles may look different at times, we are all #ConcernedStudent1950.[21]

It was a powerful moment for many Black people outside Missouri as well. At a time of increased racial tension and trauma around the killings of unarmed Black men by police, and the increased violence of knowing that the officers responsible for the killings would never face justice, to see children—our children—bring a powerful institution to its knees in the name of racial justice was the hope that many of us needed right then. When I read the news reports of Wolfe's resignation, I cried. I knew that the victory was small in the larger battle for Black lives, but I was so grateful for even a little hope that perhaps our children would succeed where we seemed to be failing.

There would, of course, be a price to pay for such audacity. Four days after the protests ended, Coach Pinkel announced that he had leukemia and would retire at the end of the season. The timing was horrible for a team just hitting practice again in the middle of a season filled with so much turmoil. Any coach so beloved by his team would avoid giving his players news this devastating in the middle of a season if it could at all be avoided. But the board of trustees leaked information of Pinkel's diagnosis and future retirement early.[22] Whether the information was leaked due to a lack of discretion by the board or out of spite, it is hard to imagine that the board of a football school—a school that financially depended on the success of its team—did not know how important it was to keep Pinkel's illness and retirement secret until the football season had ended.

A month after the protests, state representatives Rick Brattin and Kurt Bahr introduced a bill that would punish students and faculty for future protests. It included language stating that any "college athlete who calls, incites, supports, or participates in any strike or concerted refusal to play a scheduled game shall have his or her scholarship revoked," and "any member of a coaching staff who encourages or enables a college athlete to engage in behavior" prohibited under the bill "shall be fined by his or her institution of employment."[23]

The bill faced widespread condemnation and was quickly pulled from consideration by Brattin and Bahr, but their desire to ensure that students and universities understood the penalty for

future protest—especially protest that would disturb Mizzou's or any other school's football program—was not unique. The University of Missouri would be made an example of. The following year, the state legislature cut millions of dollars from the university's budget. The message was clear: any protest and disruption on campus would be punished.

"They are there to learn, not to protest all day long. I thought we learned that lesson in the '60s. Obviously we haven't," said Republican state representative Donna Lichtenegger in support of the new budget.[24] College protest is not new; there were certainly campus demonstrations before the 1960s, and there have been every year since. I believe that getting practice in civil and political engagement through protest and other forms of political speech is one of the most important aspects of a college education, and it is dismissed and decried to our peril—but I find the imagery that Lichtenegger evoked of a 1960s campus forsaking education to hold four-year-long protests quite hilarious. Even in an era when most parents across the political spectrum want a college education for their children, though, the stereotype of the liberal-arts student forsaking practical study to major instead in macramé and social disruption is still readily believed in many conservative circles.

The following year, enrollment at Mizzou was down sharply, especially of Black students. This isn't because Black prospective students disagreed with the protests. Black students who decided not to attend the previously well-respected school said that the racism highlighted on campus had turned them off. Some Jewish prospective students said that hearing about swastikas being painted on walls kept them away. And some white prospective students said they didn't want to be associated with a university so widely known to be racist.[25] While many might like to blame the protests for the bad publicity, the truth is that it all began with racism and antisemitism on campus. The experiences that prospective students wished to avoid were real. Instead of looking at how the school's inaction had forced desperate students to launch protests, and instead of seeing the protests as the students showing their commitment to fighting racial hatred on campus, the story has become about how a group of protesters brought a university to the brink of disaster.

The reduced student enrollment, along with funding cuts from the state legislature and decreased donor funding from skittish alumni, placed the University of Missouri in financial turmoil. The chancellor had to institute a hiring and raise freeze, as well as cut some support services. The library had to ask for donations from the public for books.

While the Mizzou community still suffers painful ramifications surrounding the 2015 protest and as the administration continues to struggle to regain the confidence and support of the state legislature, many of the students of color who participated in the protests feel forever changed by the few days they stood side by side with their fellow students to stand up to powerful systems to defend equality and justice—and won.

"I thought I was just coming to college to play football and get an education," Mizzou defensive lineman Marcell Frazier said. "And all of that good stuff happened and opened up my network a lot as far as people outside of football, people outside the academic world, people in the social progress world."[26]

In the 2016 NFL draft, safety Ian Simon—one of the most vocal protestors on the Mizzou team and a well-respected player with good prospects for a professional career—met with several NFL teams but went undrafted and unsigned. Simon, who found work as a custom-suit salesman in Dallas, Texas, told *Sports Illustrated* that he had no regrets over his part in the protests, even if it might have hurt his chances at an NFL career. The protests were a success in his eyes. "There was no stumble. We had a plan, and it couldn't have gone any better," he said.[27]

FOOTBALL TAKES A KNEE

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. He's fired. He's fired!"

—Donald Trump, 2017[28]

On March 11, 2018, as Seattle Seahawks cornerbacks Neiko Thorpe and Mike Tyson left the Virginia Mason Athletic Center in Renton, Washington, they were confronted by an angry white woman. The woman had followed the two Black athletes to work in order to yell at them for protesting police brutality during the national anthem at Seahawks games.

Thorpe and Tyson recorded the interaction, and when you watch the video you can tell that they found the woman's profanity-laden tirade hilarious, if a little confusing.

Thorpe and Tyson had never protested at a Seahawks game.

Whether or not Thorpe or Tyson had ever taken a knee at a Seahawks game didn't matter to the woman yelling at them. They were Black, and they were Seahawks, so they were guilty.

"I don't care who you are," she told them while jabbing an angry finger in their direction. "All I care about is that my tax dollars pay for you to play, and go fucking play. And get off your fucking knees."[29]

The controversy that began when Black NFL players started kneeling or sitting during the national anthem before games shouldn't have come as a complete surprise to league administration. When Roger Goodell first took the job leading the NFL in 2006, he was warned that something like this could happen. At a 49ers preseason game, a sixty-four-year-old Black man named Harry Edwards sat next to him. Edwards was an advisor to the 49ers, a civil rights activist, and a sociology professor at University of California, Berkeley. He had dedicated much of his career to empowering Black athletes and was respected in academia and in football—so much so that he was often referred to as the father of athlete activism.

Edwards warned Goodell that Black athletes were becoming the preeminent stars of the NFL, and with that stardom would come power. If the NFL didn't prepare for how it was going to support and work with emboldened and empowered Black athletes, the league would find itself in direct conflict with the most prominent members of its teams.

Edwards later explained the reasoning behind his advice to Goodell: "These athletes don't leave the issues that they have in the community at the locker-room door; those come in to the locker room. . . . He was going to have to deal with some sociopolitical issues that were extrainstitutional that were going to come over the stadium wall."[30]

Edwards didn't think that Goodell understood what he was saying at the time, and it doesn't look like the league did anything to address a Black majority of players who may have wanted to use their power to address social issues. It is likely that there were not enough Black people in management meetings to tell the administrators. The disconnect between NFL administration and Black players was plain to see in the numbers. Whatever diversity had reached the NFL team rosters had certainly not reached NFL leadership. In 2006 (when Goodell became commissioner), the NFL had never had a Black team owner (it still doesn't today) and had only four Black general managers (or equivalent positions; only two Black GMs had been named in the entire NFL history). Seventy-eight percent of its head coaches were white even though 68 percent of the players were Black.[31] The league was not prepared for a rise in Black power in its ranks. But ready or not, Goodell was going to see firsthand what Edwards was talking about.

It all started in August 2016, when San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick decided to sit for the national anthem

"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 explained to NFL Media. "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."[32]

Kaepernick was not speaking in hyperbole when he said there were "bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder." The last few years had been brutal reminders for Black people across the country of how little, 150 years after the abolition of slavery, their lives mattered to broader society. Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice—these names were making headlines in videos of Black bodies lying in the streets at the hands of those sworn to serve and protect. Twenty-seven percent of people who were killed by cops in 2015 were Black, even though Blacks make up only 12 percent of the overall population. In addition, cops are four times more likely to use force in their encounters with Black people than they are with whites.[33]

After sitting for two games, Kaepernick met with a military veteran. The man asked Kaepernick to kneel instead of sitting for the anthem, as a way to protest injustice against Black people in America while still showing respect for US military vets. Kaepernick took the veteran's advice and began kneeling in protest instead of sitting.[34]

After his first kneeling protest in September 2016, Kaepernick vowed to protest the entire upcoming season. He would do more than protest, though; he also pledged to donate $1 million to charitable organizations that helped marginalized communities. He was doing this because he felt it was his patriotic duty to fight injustice.

"I'm not anti-American," Kaepernick explained. "I love America. I love people. That's why I'm doing this. I want to help make

Kaepernick's words didn't matter. His conversation with a veteran didn't matter. It was a photo of Kaepernick kneeling during the anthem that set off the media firestorm.

Other Black players across the league began protesting. Not in huge numbers, but enough to alarm media, white fans, team owners, and NFL commissioner Roger Goodell. Dozens of players formed the Players Coalition, to support Kaepernick and to work together to advance racial justice issues in and outside the NFL. Discussions of police brutality, free speech, and respect for military veterans dominated news cycles. Opinion was sharply split on racial lines, with 62 percent of whites disapproving of the protests, and 74 percent of Blacks approving.[36] Owners began pressuring Goodell to put a stop to the protests.

"They wanted to make the problem go away real fast," explained NFL player Michael Bennett when I asked him about NFL leadership's response to the protests. "The game was the most important thing. It was winning and losing. But for a lot of the dark brothers, it was the game of life. Like, how are we supposed to tell our kids to go out into the world and be safe like our white teammates?"[37]

To many Black Americans, including me, the protests were understood and welcome. We had been marching in the streets for Black lives as video after video of the murder of unarmed Black people by police hit the internet. We saw our fathers, our sisters, our babies killed, and their killers almost without exception escaped justice. To see prominent, powerful Black athletes protest for our lives on national television during America's game—it gave us some hope that people might start paying attention.

For Donald Trump, who campaigned in 2016 on white male racial anxiety, the NFL protests were a dream come true. There is a segment of the white American population that has always viewed Black dissent as a threat to white safety and security. Since the election of Obama and the increase in protests around the country over the killing of unarmed Black people by police, white anxiety over Black empowerment had increased to a level that many of us had not seen in our lifetimes. Trump gave his angry crowds a prime target against which to vent their fury and anxiety by painting Black Americans as simply ungrateful for the opportunities they had been granted. He reframed the protests as blatant disrespect for America and American veterans, instead of as protests against police brutality. Here were some of the richest Black men in America—Black men who had been paid millions of dollars to play a game, *their* game—and they had the nerve to use that privilege to insult the troops?

Trump would insult and threaten players to raucous cheers. He promised to make sure the protests would stop and the disrespectful players (and their enabling coaches) would pay. Trump, of course, was not the only white person to benefit from stoking anger and hatred toward Black NFL players, or to capitalize on white anger at Kaepernick's audacity. Sean Hannity called Kaepernick, among other things, "a spoiled brat, out-of-touch, super-rich athlete," adding, for that special Hannity seasoning, that Kaepernick "might have converted to Islam in the offseason."[38] Equally bonkers and paranoid was Rush Limbaugh, who claimed that the protests were part of a vast left-wing conspiracy to undermine the NFL and, by extension, American manhood: "I do believe that the left wants to cause great damage to the NFL. What does the NFL stand for? Masculinity, strength, toughness. So, what are they doing to it? You go to college campuses now and you'll find classes on how to take masculinity out of men. It's actually happening. There are studies and courses in college that do this. It's patriotic, you've got the flag, you've got the anthem, you've got uniformed military personnel, all the things that the left wants to erase from this country."[39]

One of the more racist Republican congressmembers, Steve King (who once asked an interviewer from the *New York Times* with genuine confusion why it was considered bad to be a white supremacist), claimed that Kaepernick's NFL protests were "sympathetic to ISIS."[40]

After a difficult 2016 season with the 49ers, in which it was obvious that he was no longer welcome, Kaepernick opted out of his contract in March 2017 to have a better chance of getting picked up by another team than if he had been released. But by then, no team—even ones that were sympathetic to his protest—was willing to be associated with him. Why? Some were wary of the distraction that Kaepernick would bring. Perhaps others worried that the protest would gain ground with other players. But it is also clear that many refused to look at Kaepernick because they didn't want to bring the wrath of the man who was now president of the United States down on them. The protests had been a useful tool for Trump to fire up his base whenever he needed a bit of a popularity boost or a distraction from unflattering headlines. That strategy would be much harder if he couldn't be seen as the victor in the showdown with Black players. Trump absolutely needed to ensure that he could follow up on his promise to angry white voters that he would make Kaepernick pay and would bring order to the NFL. If Kaepernick were to find a happy home with another team, especially when there was every indication that he was staying in top playing shape, it would undermine Trump's appeal to white voters who wanted him to put uppity Black people in their place.

Trump's demands weren't just communicated from his podium to angry fans; he personally intervened with owners to ensure that they understood that he needed to win this battle against Black protest. President Trump called Dallas Cowboys owner Davey Jones with a message for all the NFL owners: "This is a very winning, strong issue for me," said Trump, according to Jones's deposition. "Tell everybody, you can't win this one. This one lifts me." Jones relayed Trump's remarks to the other owners: no team could afford to give Kaepernick a chance. "I thought he changed the dialogue," said Miami Dolphins owner Stephen Ross, who had

been "totally supportive" of the protest until he'd gotten Trump's message.[41]

Even though far less impressive quarterbacks were picked up by teams in 2017, Kaepernick remained unsigned. Team owners and managers preferred having less effective rosters over having to deal with the backlash of allowing Black protest. In October of that year, still unsigned, Kaepernick filed a grievance with the NFL, accusing it of colluding to keep him out of the league in punishment for his national anthem protests.

Seattle Seahawks defensive end Michael Bennett decided to take a knee during the 2017 preseason. Bennett had long been vocal on racial justice issues and watched with dismay as Kaepernick was villainized and then blacklisted. That summer, Bennett was in Seattle to witness and participate in the grief and outrage after Charleena Lyles was killed by Seattle police officers in her home.

Then in late summer, a group of white supremacists held a rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, that they dubbed "Unite the Right." As swastika-wearing, angry white men marched through the city carrying torches while shouting racist and antisemitic slogans, counterprotesters arrived to fight the hate. On August 12, self-avowed white supremacist James Alex Fields Jr. plowed his car into the counterprotesters, killing thirty-two-year-old Heather Heyer and injuring nineteen others. As the nation reeled in shock at the violent protest and brutal killing of Heyer, President Trump refused to condemn the white supremacists, instead denouncing "this egregious display of hatred, bigotry and violence on many sides."[42]

Trump didn't give a full response for two days. When he did, he still refused to condemn the white supremacists. This shocked Bennett and helped galvanize him into action.

"I couldn't believe it took Trump forty-eight hours to respond, and then I couldn't believe when he said 'very fine people' were marching in an army of hate and violence," Bennett wrote in his book, *Things That Make White People Uncomfortable*. "There was no way I could stand for the national anthem, and there was no way I would, until I saw this country take steps toward common decency."[43]

Bennett reiterated that he wasn't just trying to make a political point; he was fighting for his life: "We aren't machines. We are human beings, and we aren't paid to stand for an anthem. We are paid to play football—this is our 'real world.' Maybe some people figure that being a professional athlete somehow graduates us from racism. They think we're not 'that Black.' We're in another category. But if I'm someplace where people don't know me as Michael Bennett, I am a Black man, judged by the color of my skin."[44]

Bennett knew all too well how dangerous it could be to walk around as a Black man in America. In August 2017, Bennett was leaving the Floyd Mayweather–Conor McGregor fight in Las Vegas when shots rang out. The crowd started running in every direction, and Bennett ran too. Suddenly, Bennett found himself being ordered to the ground by Las Vegas police officers with their guns drawn. As Bennett struggled to understand what was happening while getting to the ground, an officer put a gun to his head and threatened to "blow his fucking head off"; another officer jammed his knee into Bennett's back.

Las Vegas police were looking for a shooter, and Bennett had, like so many Black men before him, fit the description.

Bennett was handcuffed and put in the back of a police car. Officers soon realized that Bennett was not the shooter, and that he was in fact an NFL player. He was released without charge.[45]

"The fact is unequivocally, without question why before every game, I sit during the national anthem," Bennett said in a statement posted to Twitter, "because equality doesn't live in this country and no matter how much money you make, what job title you have, or how much you give, when you are seen as a 'Nigger,' you will be treated that way."[46]

When Bennett spoke publicly about the incident, he was met with a swift denial by the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department that the altercation had anything to do with his race. "Many of the folks today have called this an incident of bias-based policing, police officers focusing solely on the race of an individual that they're going to stop," said LVMPD undersheriff Kevin McMahill in a news conference addressing the events. "I can tell you as I stand here today, I see no evidence of that. I see no evidence that race played any role in this incident."[47]

Although the LVMPD tried to downplay the situation, pictures of Bennett on the floor with a gun to his head were soon published all over the internet. Seahawks coach Pete Carroll and NFL commissioner Goodell spoke in support of Bennett. "What happened with Michael is a classic illustration of the reality of inequalities that are demonstrated daily," said Carroll. "May this incident inspire all of us to respond with compassion when inequalities are brought to light and allow us to have the courage to stand for change. We can do better than this."

Goodell issued a statement saying, "The issues Michael has been raising deserve serious attention from all of our leaders in every community. We will support Michael and all NFL players in promoting mutual respect between law enforcement and the communities they loyally serve and fair and equal treatment under law."[48]

Although NFL leadership showed support for Bennett in their statements, he did not receive empathy from all of his fellow teammates. "There were some players who reached out and had a sense of compassion and empathy," Bennett told me when we talked over the phone about the events in Vegas, "and there were other sides saying, like, 'What did you expect? You were asking for it.' . . . 'Why were you there? What did you expect?'"

The realization that the camaraderie the NFL had worked so hard to instill in players stopped at the color line was a painful for Bennett: "It was shocking, because you have the idea where you are a brotherhood. When you have an issue outside of football and you're looking for your brothers to be there for you, and when you find out they aren't, that hurts a little bit."

A few days after LVMPD cops held a gun to his head, Bennett said he planned to file a civil rights lawsuit against the department for racial profiling and excessive force. Months later, three weeks after it was announced that Bennett was going to be traded to the Philadelphia Eagles and right as he was about to launch his book tour for *Things That Make White People Uncomfortable*, police in Harris County, Texas, issued a warrant for Bennett's arrest on a felony charge of causing injury to the elderly.

According to the indictment, Bennett pushed past a sixty-six-year-old disabled female security guard at a New England Patriots game that Bennett had attended to support his brother Martellus, who played for the Patriots. Houston police chief Art Acevedo held a bizarre press conference demonizing Bennett. "You're morally corrupt when you put your hands on a little old lady in a wheelchair," he said. "That is morally corrupt . . . morally bankrupt. He's morally bankrupt. There's no excuse for that."[49]

Much about the indictment and the theatrics around it seemed suspect to Bennett and many observers. The alleged incident had occurred over a year earlier, and yet the matter was shelved by police until Bennett came forward about his altercation with Las Vegas police in September 2017. It was only then that police in Houston began investigating the complaint and, with no video or photo evidence tying Bennett to the assault against the security guard, decided to press charges—just as he was about to release his book, which discussed in detail his assault by Las Vegas police officers.[50]

Equally disturbing was Acevedo's press conference itself. Police are not supposed to make disparaging comments about defendants in public, lest they taint the jury trial. And yet here was the chief

of police in a major city calling Bennett "morally corrupt." The level of vitriol was also unusual for a crime that appears to have only wounded a person's shoulder. Acevedo exaggerated the assault for the cameras, stating that Bennett deliberately pushed an elderly woman and her wheelchair to the floor in his haste to get to his brother. Officers had to later clarify that, no, the woman had not been pushed to the floor, and that with her motorized wheelchair weighing eight hundred pounds, doing so would have been almost impossible.

To many, myself included, it appeared as if Bennett had been made a target by a police department for daring to speak out against police brutality. Bennett, however, saw what had happened to him as simply part of what happens to Black people around the country.

"At first it felt like a conspiracy, but it just happens to be what a lot of Black people go through in America—especially Black men," Bennett explained to me. "We get charged, and if you have a great lawyer you can win and if you don't you end up in jail. I think I was just part of the system and part of what happens to a lot of Americans.

"Your freedom is everything, and if you don't have freedom, what are you supposed to do? You won't be able to take care of you kids. . . . It was just a heavy weight," he continued, reflecting on the year and a half he spent in legal limbo. "When I look back—I think it's just overwhelming when I look back and think about all that."

When Black people threaten white authority, even mildly, there is often a price to be paid. I do believe that Bennett was targeted by police in Harris County. Whether it was because of his protests, or because he spoke out about his treatment by Las Vegas police, or a combination of both, I don't know. But I know that the police in Harris County were willing to waste a lot of money and resources to publicly take on a case that never had any real standing, when the only potential benefit to them would be the damage it would do to Bennett's name and career.

Bennett would live in legal uncertainty until April 3, 2019, when all charges were dropped, citing insufficient evidence. While Bennett was fighting for his freedom, the NFL was still struggling to find a way to get players to stop protesting. With every new protest, Trump would take to Twitter, firing up his angry supporters to attack the NFL. He started telling football lovers to walk out of games if any players protested. Goodell was trying to figure out how to get the league to support racial justice in a way that would make players feel like they could stop protesting.

Although a lot of white commentators decried the athletes' protests, demanding that the athletes "focus on the game," it is important to remember that social causes are not new to professional sports. Professional leagues, including the NFL, have given money and time to raise breast cancer awareness, to fight hunger, and to provide toys to poor children. When we look at the response to peaceful, unobtrusive protests against the killing of unarmed Black men, we need to ask ourselves why so many white Americans saw these protests as an insult.

Kaepernick took a knee to protest a racist system that devalued Black lives. His specific targets were our social and political systems, which were harming people of color. Black athletes who joined the protest spoke repeatedly about the reasons why they were participating—and the reasons pretty much all revolved around their need for equality and safety in a world that was harming them. That this was so easily reinterpreted as an attack on America and therefore an attack on whiteness speaks to how closely many white Americans identify with our racist, oppressive systems.

Members of the Players Coalition met with Goodell, and they began discussing an $89 million commitment from team owners toward social justice issues. It is natural that some players would be skeptical of the NFL's motives for offering up the money, given the

way that Kaepernick continued to be treated. Goodell assured the players that it wouldn't be contingent on the cessation of protests, but he stated a hope that players would be satisfied enough to begin standing for the anthem again.

Protests continued, if to a lesser degree, throughout the negotiations, and Trump continued to place public and private pressure on team owners to stop them.

The skepticism that some players had toward the NFL was justified when league leadership suddenly reversed course on the player protests. Many players felt stunned and betrayed when the NFL announced in May 2019, with no consultation with the players' union, that they were banning protests. Any player who protested the national anthem would be fined or suspended. Players and the National Football League Players Association (NFLPA) were outraged at this violation of players' rights of free speech and of their collective-bargaining ability.

Although Goodell called the new rule a "compromise" that all owners had agreed to, there was clearly some dissent. Jets owner Christopher Johnson said shortly after the rules were announced that he would not punish his players for peaceful protests and would pay any fines they incurred for doing so. Jed York of the 49ers said that his team had abstained from the vote on the new policy.

Whatever the reason behind the NFL's sudden decision, the league appeared to have overstepped its bounds. Banning protest of any kind raised red flags with the NFLPA, as the right to protest and speak freely in the workplace has long been a foundation of union power. While the NFL could punish one man to set an example, any broad rules limiting player protest could also restrict union strikes down the line. The Players Association filed a grievance with the NFL, and the press lambasted the league's poorly thought-through rules that were, in most legal experts' opinions, unconstitutional.

The NFL quickly backed down, stating that it would continue to discuss a solution with players before implementing any new rules.

More than a year after leaving the 49ers, Kaepernick was still unsigned. Even the Seattle Seahawks, who had staged team-wide protests and whose coach had been vocally supportive of his players, canceled a scheduled practice with Kaepernick when he wouldn't assure the team that he would quit protesting.

But Kaepernick did not back down, and he did not forget his promises. On January 31, 2018, Kaepernick announced that he had reached his goal of giving $1 million to organizations serving oppressed communities. Kaepernick had paired up with celebrities and community leaders, pledging to match their donations to boost the overall amount of his own contributions. Usher, Meek Mill, Serena Williams, Snoop Dogg, and Jesse Williams were each inspired to give $20,000 to $40,000 to community organizations.[51]

"With or without the NFL's platform, I will continue to work for the people," Kaepernick said when accepting *Sports Illustrated*'s Muhammad Ali Legacy Award in December 2017. "Because my platform is the people."[52]

I asked Michael Bennett why he continued to protest and speak out, even after dealing with hostile management and teammates, angry fans and press, and possible police retaliation.

"At some point the silence is a sin against God—because you are required to be the person you want to be, you are required to speak up," he explained. "We might run a mile in 4.2 minutes. We might run the hundred-yard dash in 9.6 seconds. But I think the true legacy is how we leave our people—what we do. What is really our obligation as human beings is to change humanity and change society. So as athletes we have to realize that we do have the power—more power than just dunking the ball."

Many fans of football who were dismayed over Kaepernick's protests may be quite pleased that he has been kept from their beloved game. But in punishing Kaepernick, and in stifling player protest, the NFL has maintained a status quo that has harmed all NFL players, of all races. The reactions to the protests at the University of Missouri and to the NFL protests have nothing to do with respect or patriotism. They have to do with power.

"It wasn't about kneeling during the anthem, gimme a break," said Dave Zirin with a chuckle when I asked him about the NFL's reaction to Kaepernick. "It wasn't even fear of alienating white fans or ratings, because their money is locked in from TV—from public money. They didn't give two shits about that."

Football is unique to American sport in that it can make superstars and millionaires out of its players while also fundamentally disempowering them by ensuring that the majority of money and power in the sport will always go to the institutions that own it. It begins in college football, where for many schools, the sport keeps the lights on. College coaches can make tens of millions of dollars a year at big football schools. Players are recruited with the promise of a chance at stardom, the education itself offered by the college often given a lower priority in courting these talents. Student athletes are asked to carry their class load, keep in peak physical condition, and risk life-altering injury every week—and they do it without receiving a cut of the hundreds of millions of dollars that their blood, sweat, and talent bring in. When the majority of the players are Black, it is hard to not see the racial implications of Black men physically toiling for free in order to make white institutions millions of dollars.

As Dave Zirin noted, "These football players at the collegiate level are both completely powerless and have so much power—and both of these things exist side by side. It's all about whether or not they exercise that power."

When Black student athletes at Mizzou seized control of the social power that their work and talent had provided them, how can we be surprised that the institutional power that seeks to harness the athletes' physical power worked to ensure that student athletes would not attempt to exercise their power again? As with so many other institutions that were built to maintain white male authority, any change that threatens the power dynamic must be stopped—even if that change would also benefit white men.

Both the University of Missouri protests and the NFL protests were about labor—more specifically, about a controlled labor force. Entire college and university budgets are built off of the exploitation of football players, regardless of race. Players of all races are being injured, are having their lives irrevocably altered at the young age of nineteen and twenty, all for the remote chance that they might break into the pros. They are breaking their bodies—and often their minds—in order to make millions, even billions, for schools that will give them little in return.

If these athletes make it into the NFL, they will find themselves in some of the most exploitative contracts in professional sports. They will endure workouts at levels of intensity and frequency that doctors say are unsafe. They may suffer multiple concussions that could leave them permanently disabled, violent, or suicidal in later years. They will make good money for the few years they can play before they are injured. With no guaranteed contracts, they will be sent packing when the injuries are too inconvenient, or when a younger player comes along who is willing to risk injury for a little less pay. Then, they will be forgotten.

But sometimes the ones who aren't forgotten use their legacies to try to change the game. In the fall of 2018, a group of football greats—including legends like Jim Brown, Joe Namath, and Lawrence Taylor—threatened to boycott the annual hall-of-fame ceremony in 2020. In their letter to the NFL Hall of Fame, they discussed the great sacrifices they had made to help earn the league

billions of dollars, and they demanded health insurance and an annual salary in return:

> We, the undersigned Pro Football Hall of Famers, were integral to the creation of the modern NFL, which in 2017 generated $14 billion in revenue. But when the league enshrined us as the greatest ever to play America's most popular sport, they gave us a gold jacket, a bust and a ring—and that was it.
>
> People know us from our highlight reels. They see us honored and mythologized before games and at halftime, and it would be reasonable if they thought life was good for us. But on balance, it's not. As a group we are struggling with severe health and financial problems. To build this game, we sacrificed our bodies. In many cases, and despite the fact that we were led to believe otherwise, we sacrificed our minds. We believe we deserve more.[53]

They do deserve more. I think any fan of the game could see that. For the joy they give fans, for the money they bring to the industry and to the cities they play in—all at such great risk to their physical and mental health—they deserve more than a few years in the spotlight and a lifetime of financial and medical struggle.

Student athletes at the University of Missouri were protesting for a better labor deal. They had signed on to play football, and in return they wanted the university to provide a more racially diverse, healthy, and safe educational and living environment.

Colin Kaepernick wanted to bring attention to the issues of systemic racism impacting his life and the lives of many of his teammates of color. But he was also fighting for the ability to control his image and decide what issues his celebrity would be used for. He wanted to be able to determine how to spend his social capital in a profession that regularly requires its athletes to use that capital for NFL benefit through interviews and public appearances.

College football players have been asking for years why they can't get a cut of the billions of dollars they bring in to their institutions. Players from high school through the NFL have been asking for better safety protections and greater transparency around the medical risks of repeated concussions. Professional football players wonder why their contracts are less secure than those in the NBA and MLB, even though they are at greater risk of career-ending injury. They bristle at the media requirements placed on them outside the game to help sell the league to the public. Retired professional players are asking for a little care for their bodies that have been broken for the sport.

The Mizzou and NFL protests did not happen in a vacuum. At the time of the NFL protests, there had been increased talk about the exploitation of college players, the autonomy and career security of NFL players, and the racial power dynamics in both settings. Meanwhile, the NFL was preparing for upcoming contract negotiations during a very high-profile year: the hundredth anniversary of the league in 2020. American football could not afford to have a player body that realized the power it wielded over both public opinion and the NFL's earning potential.

These are labor disputes. This is workers asking if they are being compensated fairly for the work they are doing and if their labor conditions are safe and healthy. In keeping tight control over its athletes—tighter than is exercised in just about any other professional sport in the country—American football can continue to capitalize on its vast popularity and on the athletes that make it so popular, while avoiding ceding any power to those athletes.

This manipulation is unsurprising when we remember that many NFL teams started as company teams as a way to pacify and control workers. Teams like the Decatur Staleys (which became the Chicago Bears) were developed to keep workers busy and happy, and to foster company loyalty during times of union upheaval.[54]

According to Dave Zirin, those teams were encouraged "as something for workers to do after work to keep them away from union meetings, to keep them away from political meetings, to give them a social space that doesn't involve rebellion." Today, where businesses once used football to distract white workers from their labor grievances, American football leadership now uses race to distract the public from the labor grievances of the players.

American football was founded as part of the elite white male preoccupation with maintaining physical power over a nation and its people. When that preoccupation cost too many lives, the sport became a tool for maintaining elite white male power by distracting dissatisfied white working-class men. It is now a tool used to control the football players who risk their bodies and their brains to make rich white men even richer. And through it all, an adoring public has embraced the sport as a symbol of American power and masculinity. When we look at how the sport has embraced violence, undermined workers, and exploited people of color—what could be more American than that?

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