



Social Justice in the National Football League: How an Internal Initiative Could Help Dismantle Racism and Promote Player Activism

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Social injustice remains a painfully present issue in American society. The evidence of inequality for people of color in the United States of America is woven throughout history--and is still present today. Despite years of grassroots movements fighting for civil rights and policy reform that have shaped change, there is still an undeniably volatile racial climate in America ignited by years of injustice. Most recently, this injustice can be seen through the lens of iPhones--which have captured the vexing reality of police brutality experienced by people of color, and the absence of justice for those responsible. What should be considered a humanitarian issue has been warped into a divisive political controversy. The racial tension is palpable, and arguably inescapable. Some Americans consider professional football to be a "civil religion," according to Dr. Michael Butterworth, Director of the Center for Sports Communication & Media at University of Texas at Austin. Butterworth also argues that at its best, "civil religion unites Americans around a set of "sacred" heroes, documents, and ideals." In contrast, this civil religion at its worst, "distorts the community, hailing its members in righteous conformity at the (all too often) violent expense of democratic diversity," (Butterworth, 2008). This idea of "civil religion" encapsulates an important contradiction: while some turn to sports as a reprieve from the world's problems, on the other hand, some of the athletes and coaches providing the sports entertainment live in a reality steeped with racism and social injustice outside the bounds of the turf. This article presents in detail the history of social justice and civil rights within the confines of sports, offering an internal training initiative aimed at dismantling racism and promoting player activism in the NFL. By dismantling racism and unconscious bias internally team by team, the NFL could support their staff and players of color. In turn, this would allow for more autonomy for players in the realm of social justice advocacy and utilizing player platforms more effectively through community engagement.

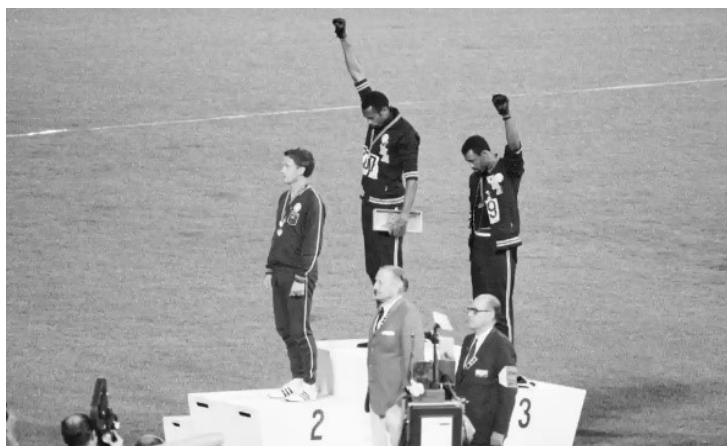
Keywords: social injustice, professional sports, football, racism, activism

George Floyd is now a household name for many Americans. Floyd was a Black man killed by former police officer Derek Chauvin in an act of police brutality in May of 2020. The footage of Chauvin kneeling on Floyd's neck for eight minutes until Floyd took his last breath was captured on an iPhone and widely circulated across several social media channels. The nature of Floyd's death, inarguably caused by a police officer, served as a catalyst for an uprising and demand for social change. Some protests calling for justice assumed the form of riots and looting in several cities across the country. This event, though not the first of its kind, created new conversations surrounding race relations and police protocol. Companies examined the value of adding social justice workshops into their onboarding. Others made statements summarizing their stance on injustice, vowing to take more ownership of their role in promoting a more tolerant, just society. In the 30 days following George Floyd's death, more than 80 million people took to social media to express their own beliefs about social justice and condemn racism through Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, and blogs (Young, 2020). Companies that were not as swift to respond to this call for change were noticed just as much as those that took a stance. Several sports leagues made statements in solidarity with the promise to promote social justice (NFL, 2020). However, in the realm of sports, social justice and the matter of Black lives is far from an emerging issue. The unequal and inhumane treatment of people of color has evolved over time. Though the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited the discrimination of race, unequal treatment has continued-- today a Black person is *five* times more likely to be stopped by a police officer without just cause than a white person (NAACP, 2020). The oppression people of color face in the United States have been fought for decades in many forms, one of which is in the sports arena by athletes using their platform to fight against the oppression of Black Americans.

Literature Review

History of Black Activism in Sports- 1968 Olympic Games

African American athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their fists high on the winners' podium during the Mexico City Olympic Games in an illustration of Black Power (see Fig. 1). The year was 1968, civil rights activist Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated only months before in Memphis, Tennessee. Smith and Carlos had helped orchestrate the Olympic Project for Human Rights, which advocated for Black Pride and better treatment for Black athletes and non-athletes alike (Blakemore, 2018). On the Olympic podium, Smith and Carlos, along with fellow Olympian and Australian ally Peter Norman, wore Olympic Project for Human Rights badges, furthering their collective stance (Blakemore, 2018).

Figure 1. *Mexico City Olympic Games, 1968*

Peter Norman, Tommie Smith, John Carlos (Blakemore, 2018).

Smith, originally from north Texas, was 24 years old during the 1968 Olympic Games. Previously, Smith was a record-breaking NCAA men's outdoor track and field champion at San Jose State (Shapiro, 2020). Unfortunately, Smith's success on the track did not translate into respect from the community. Smith recalled, "We would break a world record or run a good meet and we would still be relegated back to second-class status when we returned to campus or returned to our communities," (Shapiro, 2020). John Carlos could relate to this well--as he and Smith were teammates at San Jose State. Carlos had transferred to San Jose State from East Texas State University and at 23 years old, the Harlem native won bronze in the 200-meter dash the day of the Black Power Salute (Ruffin, 2009).

Unlike Smith and Carlos, Peter Norman was white, and raised in Melbourne, Australia. By 1968, Norman was 28 years old and was experiencing protests in his hometown amidst nonwhite immigration policies in Australia, oppressing the Indigenous Aboriginal population (Montague, 2012). Norman was an "anti-racism advocate", and when Smith and Carlos planned their salute, Norman asked to borrow United States' rower Paul Hoffman's Olympic Project for Human Rights badge in solidarity with the two Black Americans.

Smith and Carlos felt they had to use their platform to make a visual proclamation. They wore black socks with no shoes to represent Black poverty. The two shared a pair of black gloves signifying Black unity and Black Power. They also wore beads around their neck, a haunting reminder of lynching, and the photographs capturing 'strange fruit' as Carlos called it, hanging from Southern trees (Blakemore 2018). These visual cues were the best shot Smith and Carlos had at making a statement. Smith recalled in an interview with Smithsonian, that the 1968 protest, "was a cry for freedom and for human rights," he said, "we had to be seen because we couldn't be heard," (Davis, 2008).

The Olympic athletes experienced backlash immediately for their political protest at the games. Smith and Carlos were suspended from the U.S. team and promptly removed from the Olympic Village. They returned home to death threats. Sportscaster Brent Musburger said the two Olympians were "Black-skinned stormtroopers," who were met with opprobrium. Carlos claimed the pressure was so severe that he believed it played a role in his wife's suicide less than a decade later in 1977 (Davis 2008). As for Norman, though he was white, he too experienced extreme consequences. Norman was considered a pariah and was never invited to partake in the

Olympic games again (Montague, 2012). All three men went their separate ways after their time in Mexico City, but they remained friends up until Norman's passing in 2006--when both Smith and Carlos gave a eulogy (Montague, 2012).

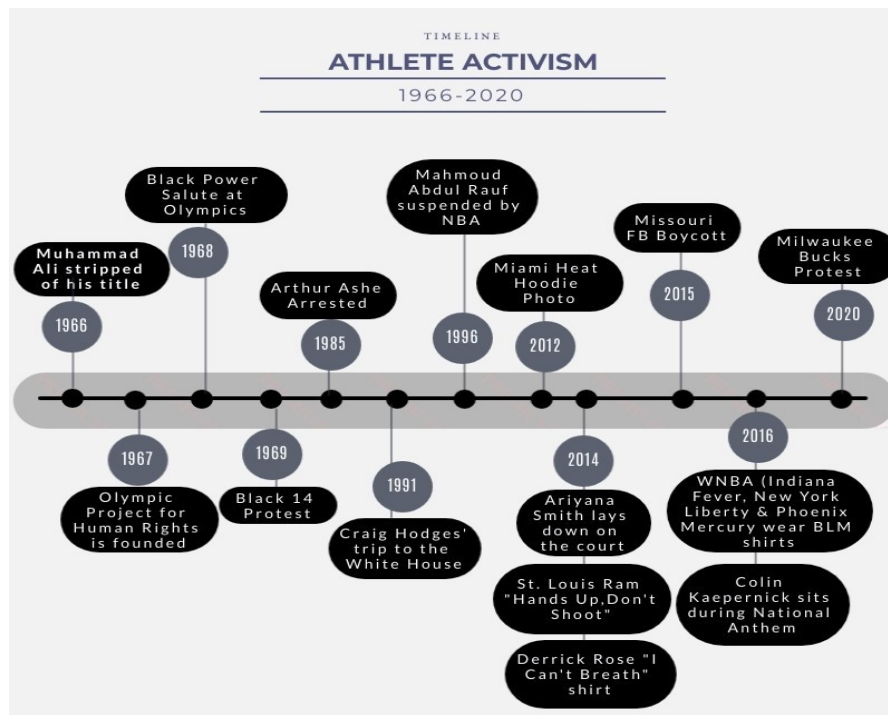
This protest in many ways was a microcosm of a much greater conflict- the questionable relationship between sports and politics. The 1968 demonstration, "threatened to expose the ways in which liberal ideology and sports culture are intimately intertwined," (O'Bonsawin, 2015).

Police Brutality Protests

Michael Brown

In more recent years, athletic protests have narrowed from overall oppression, more specifically, to the impact police brutality has had on the Black community after several Black lives were lost senselessly (see Figure. 2 below). One of which was Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old shot and killed by former police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri (Razek 2020).

Figure 2. *Timeline of Athlete Activism in America (1966-2020)*



In 2014, college basketball player Ariyana Smith of Knox College in Illinois, decided to lay down on the court in protest for 4 minutes and 30 seconds in the wake of Michael Brown's death. Smith said this was meant to symbolize the amount of time Brown's body was left out in the street--4 hours and 30 minutes before it was removed by authorities. She was suspended from the team until Knox College reluctantly reinstated her, after alleged pressure from the media (Sports Illustrated, 2014).

Around this same time, NFL players with the St. Louis Rams organization performed a visual statement of their own. Athletes Stedman Bailey, Tavon Austin, Jared Cook, Chris Givens, and Kenny Britt emerged from the tunnel on game day with a “hands up, don’t shoot” stance, mirroring that of protestors in Ferguson in the aftershock of Brown’s murder (Woody & Geary, 2014).

Trayvon Martin

In 2012, unarmed Black teenager Trayvon Martin was killed by his own Florida neighbor. NBA stars LeBron James and Dwyane Wade took notice. In some ways, painting homage to Martin, who was wearing a hoodie when he was shot and killed by self-proclaimed “neighborhood watchman” George Zimmerman, James and Wade wore hoodies before a game with other members of the Miami Heat NBA team. One photo posted by James featured the hashtag #WeWantJustice, signaling for justice to be served in Trayvon Martin’s murder. For athletes like Wade who had his own sons at home, Martin’s death was a startling reminder of the reality of racial profiling. Heat Forward Udonis Haslem stated, “I couldn't imagine if my son went to a store just to get some Skittles and a pop or iced tea and they didn't come home” (Windhorst, 2012).

A year later, when Zimmerman was acquitted in the murder of Trayvon Martin, a movement of its own was born. The #TheBlackLivesMatter movement was created by three Black, self-proclaimed radical organizers, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi (Steinbuch, 2020). The Black Lives Matter movement spread quickly with the hashtag #BLM, which, when used on social media, encompassed the deaths of every person of color that fell prey to police brutality and all other violence inflicted in Black communities (Steinbuch, 2020). It is important to make mention of the birth of this movement now as it becomes a cornerstone that the NFL in many instances struggled to validate until 2020 (Donahue, 2020).

One athlete ignited a new conversation about protest and the Black Lives Matter movement in 2016 when he sat on the bench during the National Anthem. Colin Kaepernick, quarterback of the San Francisco 49ers explained, “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” (Donahue, 2020). Kaepernick's protest centered around lack of accountability--police officers that were never indicted for killing people of color. A culmination of deaths from 2014 to 2016 including Freddie Gray, Philando Castile, Alton Sterling, Walter Scott, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner were all part of the reason Kaepernick decided to sit down while the National Anthem played (Donahue, 2020).

Similar to the other athletes highlighted in this background, Kaepernick fell under scrutiny for his demonstration. While Kaepernick went from sitting to kneeling after consulting with Military Veteran Nate Boyer, his actions were controversial (Rugg, 2019). NFL executives called Kaepernick a traitor. “He has no respect for our country,” one team executive said, “I don’t want him anywhere near our team,” (Donahue, 2020).

NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell’s statement about Kaepernick’s protest in 2016 gave no definitive action points on what the league would do differently but simply validated that everyone should be standing for the National Anthem. Goodell said, “We also care deeply about our players and respect their opinions and concerns about critical social issues. The controversy over the Anthem is a barrier to having honest conversations and making real progress on the

underlying issues,” Goodell said. “We need to move past this controversy, and we want to do that together with our players,” (Donahue 2020).

Though Goodell mentioned making progress on underlying issues, the NFL made no definitive changes during the 2016 season regarding social justice measures. Kaepernick opted out of his contract with the San Francisco 49ers in 2017 and has remained a free agent ever since.

The NFL’s Ever-Changing Tune

By 2017, tension started to rise as more players peacefully protested during the National Anthem by kneeling (Rugg, 2019). During a political rally in Alabama on September 22, 2017, former President Trump encouraged NFL owners to fire protesting players, who Trump referred to as, “sons of bitches” (Butterworth, 2020). To Trump, the behavior of protesting players did not reflect or align with the “militaristic patriotism” the NFL or the rest of America should stand for (Rugg, 2019).

Trump’s comments sent owners into a tailspin attempting to redirect their sails as a league. They gathered immediately to discuss what could potentially relieve the pressure they were experiencing, hoping to end the protests and political attention. In a recording of the meeting obtained by *The New York Times*, Terry Pegula, owner of the Buffalo Bills said, “we need to put a band-aid on what’s going on in this country” (Rugg, 2019). It was clear the owners were interested in solving these deep-rooted social justice issues with a public-relations approved, lip service solution. New England Patriots’ owner Robert Kraft spoke specifically about the curation of a potential press release saying, “It would be good if you could work in the word ‘unified’ or ‘unity’ in some fashion” (Rugg, 2019).

Hush Money Initiative

In an effort to make the NFL’s “unity” concept tangible, they partnered with the Players Coalition to develop a new initiative (Rugg, 2019). The Players Coalition, a 501c3 advocacy organization made up of athletes working to end systematic and civic inequities, along with owners and some other members of the NFL, set in motion an almost 90-million-dollar program dedicated to social justice. The initiative felt eerily similar to every other corporate social responsibility project the NFL had conjured up before. So much so, that one group of NFL players led by Eric Reid broke off from the Players Coalition and claimed the league was trying to “buy an end to the protests” (Rugg, 2019). Derrick Morgan, linebacker of the Tennessee Titans, considered the initiative “hush money” made to influence players to “stop talking about the issues” (Rugg, 2019).

Fairfield University scholar Adam Rugg captured the events that transpired after the social justice initiative was agreed upon. Rugg notes that just one day after the agreement was made, a policy was created requiring all athletes to stand for the National Anthem. Those that tried to protest would be subject to team suspension or fines. This new rule was placed directly into the NFL game operations manual-- which meant it did not require any sort of notice or approval from players or the NFL Players Association (NFLPA) (Rugg, 2019). It was no surprise that the National Anthem standing policy was disappointing to players, as they realized that the social justice initiative was mainly a vehicle to quell protests (Rugg, 2019). Chief Executive of the NFLPA, DeMaurice Smith stated, “Today, the CEOs of the NFL created a rule that people who hate autocracies should reject” (Rugg, 2019). Malcom Jenkins of the

Players Coalition considered the action to be thwarting players' constitutional rights (Rugg, 2019). After enough backlash, the NFL and NFLPA "indefinitely suspended" the anthem policy. Still, the NFL wanted the protests to come to an end (Rugg, 2019).

By January of 2019, the 89-million-dollar social justice initiative named, "Inspire Change" was formally launched. The efforts created a long-form documentary project, *Indivisible* highlighting social change and as Rugg stated, attempted to capture the "sprawling complexities" of social injustice by creating "digestible narratives." Rugg said the NFL had hoped to stifle the player protest issue by, "diluting it across a campaign steeped in the rhetoric of unification and positive outcomes" (Rugg 2019).

The most notable point Rugg makes in relation to this article subject matter stems from the incongruence the NFL exhibited pouring millions into a social justice initiative only to turn around the next day and ban players from protesting during the anthem, missing the root of the issue entirely, and feeding into the same patterns of indifference and apathy by ignoring player plights (Rugg, 2019).

The Death of George Floyd

The NFL's social justice initiatives prior to 2020 were simply meant to pacify as many parties as possible from management to fans, but not always players (Butterworth, 2020). One common mindset among Americans that Michael Butterworth of University of Texas noted, was prior to 2020, Americans had formed idealistic notions of unity surrounding sports. Meanwhile the reality of creating that authentic harmony is more elusive. Butterworth's research focused on the role that sports plays in society, what he found was that sports served as a veil of kinship, but no one wanted to recognize any politically charged issues faced by Black athletes (Butterworth, 2020). Americans could easily "suppress dissent and romanticize unity" when it came to sports, even if that meant turning a blind eye to players protesting for their livelihood. This American mindset of suppressing dissent made most social justice initiatives in the NFL fruitless in the eyes of fans-- they just wanted to unite, drink a beer, and watch the football game in peace (Butterworth, 2020).

The NFL's tune changed in 2020 after the death of George Floyd prompted NFL players Davante Adams, Jamal Adams, Saquon Barkley, Anthony Barr, Odell Beckham, Ezekiel Elliott, Stephon Gilmore, DeAndre Hopkins, Eric Kendricks, Jarvis Landry, Marshon Lattimore, Patrick Mahomes, Tyrann Mathieu, Patrick Peterson, Sterling Shepard, Michael Thomas, Deshaun Watson and Chase Young to post a video on social media. In the video, the players are featured asking the NFL to take accountability and, "condemn racism and a systemic oppression of Black people ... admit wrong in silencing our players from peacefully protesting ... believe Black lives matter," (NFL, 2020). This pressure from players was met with swift action from the NFL Commissioner.

Goodell promptly responded with a statement contrasting from the 2016 verbiage released around Kaepernick's kneeling protest. Instead of making comments about respecting the flag and moving past controversy, Goodell stated the league was wrong "for not listening to NFL players earlier" and that the recent protests were clearly "emblematic of the centuries of silence, inequality, and oppression of Black players coaches, fans, and staff," (NFL 2020).

Several researchers have honed in on aspects of how the NFL has approached the Black Lives Matter movement in contrast to how the Colin Kaepernick protest was handled. Ben Donahue, MS, MEd's social phenomenological approach delves into the responses from both

NFL personnel and the commissioner and uses the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to code these statements into different themes. The IPA studies how people make sense of an event that happens and how they assign meaning to what happens. In this case, studying the NFL personnel and the verbiage they used during the protesting events of 2016 and the events of 2020 surrounding social justice, especially after George Floyd's death.

The results from Donahue's study show that while the drive of protests in 2016 and 2020 were the same (advocating for black lives), the public response from the NFL differed entirely from 2016 to 2020. Donahue attributed this change in response to, "influences of external interest" namely "government figures, NFL fans, and the public at large" (Donahue, 2020). These entities put pressure on the NFL causing the league to respond with more compassion and affirmation than before. In other words, it took an extreme amount of overwhelming pressure for the NFL to recognize that the league would not exist without Black players, and that it was time to condemn systematic racism and oppression. The NFL's contrasting reactions to player protest can be broken down by the situational factors that were at play during each period.

In 2016, Trump played a huge role in influencing how protests were received by NFL executives (Donahue, 2020). Once Trump voiced his staunch disapproval of player protest, some executives worried about being Tweeted at by the president, while others had contributed to Trump's 2016 presidential campaign and felt allowing player protest would make them seem unpatriotic (Donahue, 2020). One of Trump's campaign supporters was Texans owner Bob McNair, who made statements indicating players needed to be reminded of who was really in charge, "We can't have the inmates running the prison," McNair said (Donahue, 2020).

Donahue noted that for the NFL, the actual cause of the protests was overshadowed by the idea of national pride, losing revenue, and appeasing the president. Police brutality and the BLM movement were never part of the discourse in 2016.

Donahue's research lays an important foundation for this article through the critical analysis of contrasting messaging given by the NFL in 2016 and 2020. It explains the reasoning behind the NFL's verbal response to protests but does not explore tangible actions taken by the NFL to illustrate their commitment to change that was voiced in the 2020 statement by Goodell after Floyd's death.

Diversity Through Statistics

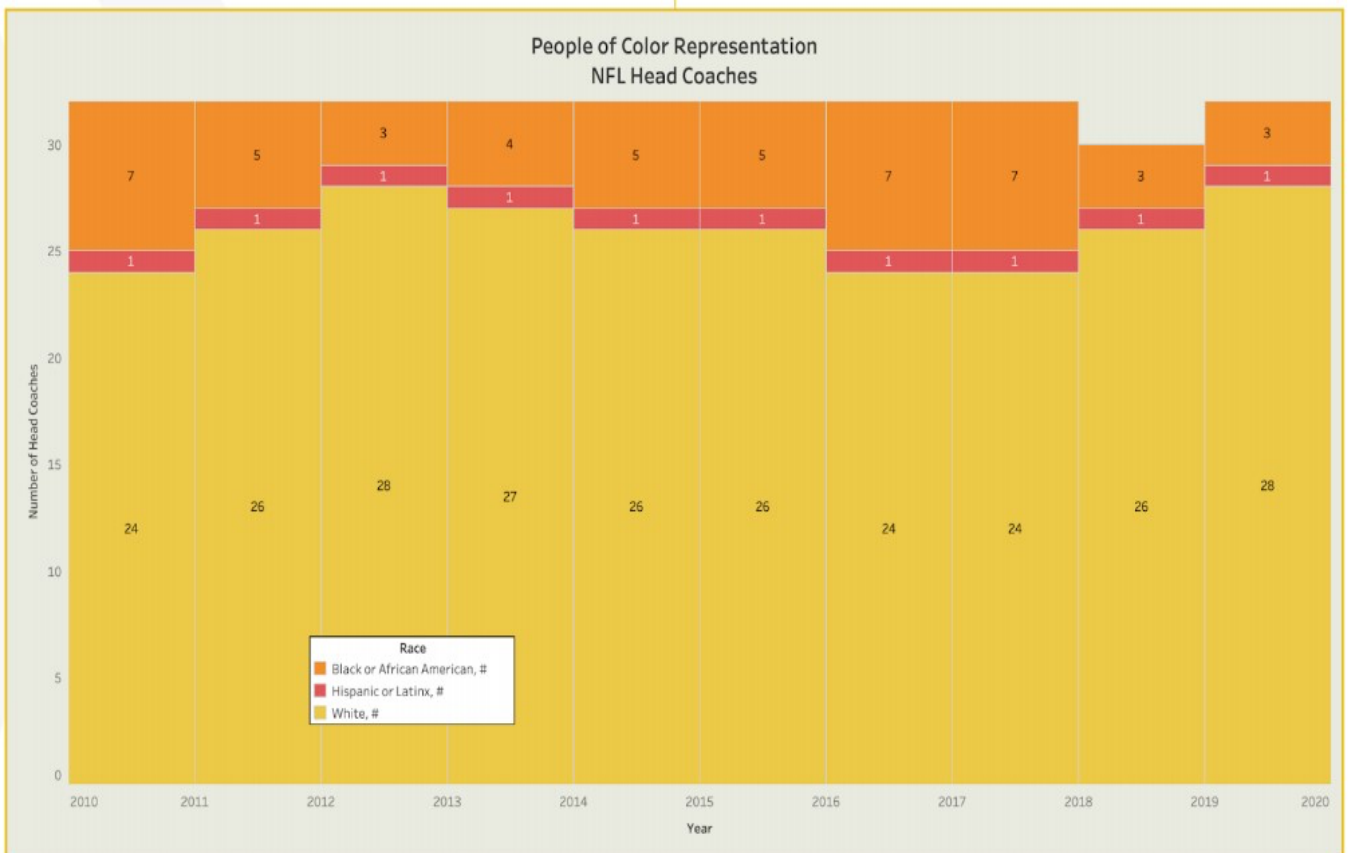
Another telling piece of research that focuses solely on the numbers is the work of Dr. Richard Lapchick. Dr. Lapchick, founder & director of the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport (TIDES), has played an influential role in analyzing the racial breakdowns across several major sports from year to year. As recently as December of 2020, while some changes in diversity were made, the NFL was still lacking in racial and gender equity--especially at the team levels where decisions are made (Lapchick, 2020). In 2019, the NFL had what was considered to be a combined overall grade of 79.3% which decreased to 79.2% in 2020, giving the NFL a B-. Lapchick attributed this to a drop in gender hiring diversity, yet in racial hiring practices, the NFL increased 3.2 percentage points, meaning while the overall grade was a B-, the NFL did achieve a B+ for racial hiring alone (Lapchick, 2020).

Lapchick's research further breaks down those racial hiring numbers to reveal improvements in different racial categories including:

Increases from 10.9% to 13.9% for C-Suite executives, 12.8% to 13.7% for team vice presidents and 28.0% to 30.5% for league office management. However, underrepresentation of women and people of color in significant decision-making roles at the team level remains a persistent issue. For senior administration, the NFL scored 23.9%, compared to last year's 24.4%. Professional administration scored 32.3%, compared to last year's 35.9%” (Lapchick, 2020).

Lapchick points out that African American athletes make up 69.4% of the NFL’s roster, yet in the past year there were only four head coaches and two managers of color, creating a contrast between those playing on teams and those making important decisions (see Figure 3) (Lapchick, 2020).

Figure 3. *People of Color Representation NFL Coaches*



There is a lack of representation in terms of people of color in leadership positions. This shows that there is an overwhelming majority of white coaches (yellow) as opposed to coaches of color (orange) in the NFL.

While Lapchick’s research shows the NFL has made some small changes, his analysis of other leagues, like the NBA, illustrate just how far the NFL still has to go. Unlike the NFL, Lapchick graded the NBA at an A+ for racial hiring, and a B for gender hiring--granting the league an A- overall. This grade, in large part, begins with people of color in

decision making positions--which the NBA has continued to excel at, with 39% people of color in the league office (Lapchick, 2020).

Social Justice and the NBA

The NBA has been trailblazing in many areas when it comes to racial equality, and social justice efforts are no different. In August of 2020 as the NBA postseason was set to resume, NBPA Executive Director Michele Roberts and NBA Commissioner Adam Silver put out a joint statement regarding the changes to be made in the wake of continued social justice and racial equality measures.

Freelance writer Bruce Schoenfeld followed the NBA's reaction to social justice issues, specifically the same issues that created so much turmoil within the NFL. Schoenfeld's observations spark a palpable contrast between league reactions. For example, in response to Kaepernick's protest in 2016, San Antonio Spurs' NBA coach Gregg Popovich stated: "You're grown men. Do what you want" (Schoenfeld, 2017). As more and more NBA players chose to speak out about Kaepernick's protests, there was no talk of league threats or fines. (Schoenfeld, 2017).

Schoenfeld also noted the support Golden State Warriors point guard Steph Curry received after following up on a comment made by Under Armour CEO Kevin Plank regarding former President Donald Trump. While Plank called Trump an "asset to the country," Curry, a stakeholder and sponsor of Under Armour, said in response, that Plank's description was accurate "if you remove the E-T," (Schoenfeld, 2017). Curry endorsed candidate Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election and had been "surprised" by Plank's support of Trump (Joseph, 2017).

Following Curry's statement, Plank clarified that his support of Trump was "limited to his business and not the controversial executive order on immigration." (Joseph, 2017). Plank stepped down as CEO of Under Armour at the beginning of 2021 after sales declines in 2019. Meanwhile, Curry remains tied contractually to Under Armour until 2024 (Zagoria, 2022). Curry, Schoenfeld states, was respected for speaking up, "NBA players could be confident that they wouldn't be punished for expressing and acting on their beliefs," which cannot be said for the NFL (Schoenfeld, 2017).

NBA commissioner Adam Silver has played a large role in molding the NBA into what it is today. While Silver's role encompasses several of the same leadership roles as Goodell's, Silver's approach was remarkably decisive.

My job as a commissioner is not to be a political activist," Silver Stated. "I recognize that. There's always a line that I'm trying to be careful not to cross. And I may have crossed it in certain situations that may not have been apparent to me at the time. But in the same breath, I don't think we have an option. Whether it's a sports league or a consumer-products company, in this day and age, you are required to take a stand. It's what your customers expect of you. It's what fans expect. (Schoenfeld, 2017).

It would come as no surprise then, that when footage of George Floyd surfaced and gained enough traction to start an uproar in all corporate circles, the NBA had a well laid plan of action. NBA Executive Director Michele Roberts and Commissioner Adam Silver announced

that the NBA was establishing a social justice coalition, with focal points on voting access, community engagement and criminal justice reform (Kochkodin, 2020).

Silver understood that players were “uniquely positioned to have a direct impact on combating systemic racism in our country,” and in doing so made every effort to give them the chance to express themselves (NBA, 2020). One of the ways the NBA embraced player voices was through allowing players to wear several messages on their jerseys including: Black Lives Matter; Say Their Names; Vote; I Can’t Breathe; Justice; Peace; Equality; Freedom; Enough; Power to the People; Justice Now; Say Her Name; Sí Se Puede (Yes, We Can); Liberation; See Us; Hear Us; Respect Us; Love Us; Listen; Listen to Us; Stand Up; Ally; Anti-Racist; I Am a Man; Speak Up; How Many More; Group Economics; Education Reform; and Mentor.

While kneeling during the anthem, players also wore shirts sporting, “Black Lives Matter,” that same statement adorned the court in the bubble as well (Medina, 2020). The breadth of the scholarly articles found for this article largely detailed the past oppression of athletes of color, the conflict teams and fans face understanding the intersection of politics and sports, and the attempts that leagues have made in an effort to acknowledge shortcomings and create tangible solutions with the platform of the NFL and NBA.

Thesis

This article offers to help dismantle racism within the NFL through the implementation of an internal social justice initiative based on education and training, that would be then carried out into Black communities creating a corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiative. Through this internal approach, enforced by the NFL and run by a diversity consultant, players will feel a level of authentic support, and feel supported in their social justice endeavors. Player advocacy would not be perceived as stigmatic or outspoken against the NFL, ultimately allowing fans a chance to positively receive this league-driven messaging.

Original Content and Analysis

Internal League-Wide Initiative

One of the biggest differences between the NFL and NBA are the internal responses emitted from the most recent social justice movement spurred by Floyd’s death. Players with the NBA were a part of the decision-making process when it came time to create a social justice game plan (Medina, 2020). The NFL came out with a reactive statement after a push from players through social media. Player involvement and internal initiative are key. Mary Davis, a human resource expert with over 35 years of experience in professional sports, expressed the importance of implementing a new infrastructure-- creating a training for each NFL team based on awareness, education, and compliance (M. Davis, personal communication, March 19, 2021).

The idea of a “league-wide” program implemented by each team is the ultimate goal. *From The Inside Out* (FTIO) would involve internal training, team empowerment from the inside out, and community outreach that puts the team’s support for social justice into action. As opposed to starting with a league-wide initiative, realistically, a case study focusing on one team would be the best place to start. If successful, it creates a blueprint for all future programs, and illustrates to any skeptical team owners that this can, in fact, be done efficiently.

It makes sense to initiate this program where it would be most sought after and could benefit the surrounding community. For example, given the recent tragedy in Minnesota with George Floyd, the Minnesota Vikings would be an ideal team to start with as a proposed case study. For the sake of this argument, the Vikings will be the “pilot” for the following concepts.

In 2018, the Vikings created a social justice committee that was dedicated to having important conversations about race and as well as giving their time to organizations working to fight against systemic racism in the Minneapolis community (Cronin, 2020).

The Vikings also took direct action when Floyd died. The Wilf family, who have ownership of the Vikings, donated 5 million dollars to social justice causes nationwide. The Vikings' social justice committee created the George Floyd Legacy Scholarship for high school seniors of color in the Minneapolis area pursuing a post-secondary education (Cronin, 2020).

As opposed to the previously mentioned outward facing initiatives, this would begin with internal training with the Minnesota Vikings that would later be extended into the community as an ongoing initiative.

Breaking Down the Numbers in Minneapolis

African Americans are the second largest population in Minneapolis behind Caucasians. African Americans account for 19.3 percent of the population. The Black community in Minnesota might not be the largest in population, but they do come in first as the largest percentage of race living below the poverty line in Minnesota. As of 2018, the poverty rate for Black families in Minnesota were 36.5 percent (Data USA, 2018). In terms of police brutality in Minneapolis, according to data documented by the Minneapolis Police Department, body weight pinning has been used by police officers twice as many times against Black people than white people since 2015 (Beer, 2020). This research by the Minneapolis Police Department also revealed that officers were seven times more likely to use violence against Black people (Beer, 2020).

This data illustrates that a notable percentage of the Black community in Minneapolis Minnesota is up against challenges in terms of poverty and risk for incidents involving police brutality. Given these numbers there is reason to believe that FTIO could play a role in positive change in the Black community in Minneapolis.

Why Dismantling Starts Internally--and at the Top

The Vikings' social justice committee is made up of players of color and white players as well. Black leaders like former Vikings' safety Anthony Harris and Vikings' linebacker Anthony Barr have played an integral role in leading the team's efforts, however there is still work to be done within the organization on a leadership level that should not be falling on the shoulders of Black employees (Morris, 2020). “We want to be part of the solution, but we can't carry that weight by ourselves,” Harris explained, “We have conversations in the locker room about our different backgrounds, but we want to start bridging the gap,” (Young, 2020).

According to inclusion strategist Carmen Morris, just because members of an organization are Black, does not mean it should be their responsibility to lead the social justice charge. “The top dressing of race equality issues only serves to protract and exacerbate workplace inequalities,” (Morris, 2020).

Another important point Morris makes stems from the fact that the organizational policies and systematically reinforced behaviors are integral to brand inclusion. In other words, when power structures continue to enable group think and historic influences of the past, racism

flourishes (Morris, 2020). This may sound familiar, as it clearly explains the behavior the NFL exhibited for so long, fiercely avoiding intentional changes or addressing social justice protests and condemning players who participated in that conduct, especially back in 2016.

Morris also eloquently explained the dynamic that for many NFL players, describes the reality they face in terms of being suppressed from acting on social justice the way they want to:

Racist sentiments can be emboldened into the fabric of organizational culture. This helps to support the marginalization of those who do not have the power to shape the culture in an informative way. Having been denied access to the top table, where critical decisions around organizational culture, culture and processes are decided, Black employees and others from diverse groups, face an uphill struggle. (Morris, 2020).

Dr. Lynn Hampton, a sociologist and race relations expert and professor at Texas Christian University explained that, as Morris also noted, positional hierarchy plays a large role in these dynamics. That is where change begins. Hampton said owners and upper management that are part of the Caucasian make-up of a team often do not recognize that African American players, outside of their sport, are humans with their own level of agency and activism. When the top of a hierarchy (in this case owners and other decision makers) makes the conscious decision to validate the full humanity of a Black player, “that they are an independent, thinking, breathing person independent of how they perform on the field-- that affirmation can be healing” (L. Hampton, personal communication, April 30, 2021). Anthony Harris expressed this as a player as well, “we need to see each other as human beings, for our uniqueness, that is part of the goal,” (Young, 2020). This leads to the importance of a mandatory program that provides education and awareness for all team members, beginning the process of validation, affirmation, and healing for Black athletes.

First Steps

Phase one of this new social justice initiative would include a mandatory training program which would be facilitated by an external race relations expert. This would mean coaches and front office personnel would have the same training as players. It is imperative that the players are not the only ones receiving this training, coming from Morris, an expert in leadership diversity and inclusion, “leadership must make a forceful commitment to the prioritization of race equality, within organizational systems and across agendas. It starts at the top,” (Morris, 2020).

These trainings could have the potential to cover some civil rights background as well as briefings on police brutality and race relations, education on microaggressions, protests, and social activism in action. With consistent messaging coming from the inside out, this would foster support with the addition of progressive policies and procedures, empowering both staff and players. While it may be uncomfortable, subjecting some to fragility, however, that is part of the key to disassembling the processes and actions that negatively impact Black players (Morris, 2020).

In several past cases players in the NFL were undermined by upper management when it came to crucial decision making. In contrast, the NBA made its players part of that decision process.

Action Plan

The second phase of this implementation would allow players to take a more involved approach, taking this initiative from internal to external by infiltrating the community. As Davis explains, employee education is an integral first step, while corporate social responsibility and community outreach is a second phase of action (M. Davis, personal communication, March 19, 2021).

For accountability purposes as well as form of support, it would be beneficial for each team to hire an outside race relations expert. Someone that is either in-house or has a consistent in-person presence-- a race, equity, and inclusion consultant dedicated to helping companies to better their leadership and position themselves for diversity and inclusion in their communities.

Community Engagement Initiative

The Wilf Family, partnered with the Vikings Social Justice Committee put out a statement in August of 2020 highlighting three main areas where action would be taken including voting and registration education, supporting educational curriculums based on Black history, and advocating for criminal reform.

While this is a powerful start, and echoes what many other teams have done individually, creating their own outward-facing social justice initiatives, the common pattern seems to be a lack of internal resources and education. FTIO would be different because it would engage teams internally on every operational level, and then move outward into communities. By giving players and personnel the chance to be present in the community in ways that create exposure yet are not solely concentrated on racial topics but rather community involvement, the team can promote humanitarianism and bond as a group by doing good and perhaps find common ground. In terms of financial considerations, it would benefit the community at large as well as the Vikings to create sponsorship opportunities centered on Corporate Social Responsibility.

Financial Considerations

Critical Race Specialist Cost

A study done by Society of Human Resource Management showed that diversity departments range from 30 thousand dollars to 1.5 million dollars each year, when a diversity specialist was made part of human resources, that annual budget was 239 thousand dollars (Barry, 2021). Other groups, like specialists out of University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, charge hourly depending on group size from 6 hundred dollars an hour to 4 thousand dollars per day (UNC Chapel Hill, 2019). This illustrates the range in potential cost for a specialist to come facilitate an internal training for each team. To put this cost into perspective, it would cost less than the last social justice initiative the NFL approved (which was 9 million dollars), coming in at 7.9 million dollars annually to have a critical race & diversity specialist on every single NFL team staff.

Community Sponsors

General Mills, which donated more than 92 million dollars to charitable causes in 2020, is based in Minneapolis, Minnesota. There could be a natural partnership here, as the company has previously donated 293 million meals since 2010 and fit the framework for an organization that cares about corporate social responsibility (General Mills, 2020). Financially, if General Mills was willing to carve out space to donate, it would be possible for the Vikings to partner with General Mills, secure a food donation, and work with local food banks. The players and staff would have the opportunity to serve the community as part of the FTIO initiative. Target is also a Minneapolis based company. According to Target CEO Brian Cornell, “the company is intrinsically linked to the health and vitality of the communities in which we live and work,” and The Target Foundation focuses on investing in organizations that work to break down barriers facing the Black community (Target, 2020). With the common goal of racial equity and community empowerment, a partnership and alliance between the Minnesota Vikings and Target headquarters makes sense.

When Target reached a 1-billion-dollar donation milestone for education, the company’s CSR model shifted from education to wellness, creating Target’s Meals for Minds in-school food pantry program and Target Field Trips. Target’s unwavering commitment to the success of the community could offer a new spin on education. Minnesota Vikings players could rotate in an off-season program where they could come in once a month to their local Target and do a reading in the book section. This would be a great opportunity for players to interact with youth in the community, promote education, and give Target free promotion as well. By utilizing powerhouse companies with a home base in the team’s city, cost is minimized, CSR opportunities can be capitalized on, and the community benefits.

Measurement of Success: Return on Investment or Return on Objective

While it can be challenging to measure something as intangible as social justice, a return on objective can be done by studying the numbers from the FTIO Initiative in Minneapolis. Internally, owners, management, personnel, and players would take anonymous surveys both before and after the educational training to measure growth. These surveys would have questions designed by the race relations expert that measure the effectiveness of the program asking questions designed by the race specialist to measure efficacy, tolerance, and sense of belonging (L. Hampton, personal communication, April 30, 2021). As Dr. Hampton states, this is similar to students on a campus. Those that feel a sense of belonging to the school are more likely to stay at the university, contributing to the long-term retention rate (L. Hampton, personal communication, April 30, 2021).

Tailoring this to the Minnesota Vikings, the survey questions would ask how comfortable players feel posting about social justice issues, whether or not they worry about their job when posting social justice related material, and how validated they feel as a member of the team. Measuring results at the beginning of the FTIO initiative and at the end would be an indicator of the racial climate (L. Hampton, personal communication, April 30, 2021). From a social media standpoint, measurements could be implemented to study how fans are responding to the Vikings’ community outreach portion of the FTIO initiative. The impressions of each player post, as well as team posts using an engagement tool like Sprout Social, could

track trends and illuminate critical insights regarding the team's public perception as it relates to social justice (Sprout Social, 2021).

Community engagement could be measured by the number of individuals that come to events at Target as well as monitor the people helped by the General Mills food drives. On a much broader, long-term scale trying to measure how these projects impact NFL viewership, an econometric analysis could be completed to see how racial perspectives impact NFL attendance, and how those perspectives may change as the FTIO initiative infiltrates different communities and fan bases. This has been conducted previously by Nicholas Watanabe, data curator at University of South Carolina. Watanabe measured racial attitudes and implicit bias to create an econometric model fluctuating attendance at NFL games (Watanabe, 2020).

A culmination of these approaches would be able to project an arch of results indicating the return on objective for the FTIO Initiative and corresponding CSR community engagement.

Conclusion

On April 20th, 2021, former police officer Derek Chauvin was found guilty on all three counts for the murder of George Floyd (Griffith & Siemaszko, 2021). Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison said the verdict could not be true justice, because that would imply true restoration (Griffith & Siemaszko, 2021). However, Ellis said, the verdict did mean accountability, the "first step towards justice," (Griffith & Siemaszko, 2021). That is the goal of this initiative, while it is an idea that can never bring true restoration, could still be the first step toward accountability. By dismantling racism starting within organizations at the top where the most power is, the NFL has the opportunity to be held accountable. More than that, they have the chance to use their platform to create meaningful change within their communities, supporting those who need it, and for the first time, take a true step towards justice.

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