

What Does It Mean to be Important?

Jack Russell Weinstein

The NFL doesn't just want to be popular; it wants to be important. It doesn't just want to make money; it wants to be influential. And it doesn't just want to be entertainment; it wants to embody America. For all of these reasons, it has both a moral obligation and an existential need to celebrate protests on the field.

Consider the myth of the student quarterback: the popular high school kid who dates the head cheerleader, the heroic leader who personifies school spirit and carries the student body's reputation on his shoulders. He is the golden boy in the prime of his life. His time on the field is, in Bruce Springsteen's words, his glory days. In order for this to be believable, football has to either eclipse or provide all of his other needs. It must inspire his parents to love him and his friends to admire him. It must give him honor in battle, teach him to be a man, educate him, and, above all, get him laid.

But history tells us that the quarterback isn't so pure. He is a date rapist and bully. He is arrogant and enabled. Parents, schools, and whole towns hide his misdeeds. People whisper

the truth while his victims cower, but he is given everything because his victory is their validation. Team sports were supposed to teach him responsibility and give him a sense of community, but all that football actually did was hold him above all the others. Even when he gives lip service to the power of the offensive linemen or praises the defensive backs, even when he thanks Jesus for his victory, it is a show.

The quarterback is a selfish gladiator who is entitled to all the spoils, no matter whom it hurts. The townspeople, in turn, disavow the rape victims because they have invested too much in the rapist and only condemn themselves by pointing their fingers. Economists tell us that “sunk costs”—the amount of money a person spends on a failing endeavor—do not justify spending more money, but few believe it. The loyalty and the lies are the sunk costs that the community paid for the conviction that football is goodness.

For all this to succeed, the quarterback must not protest. He must not complain or feel incomplete, or the illusion is shattered. He must accept football in his heart, sacrificing his body and his spirit. Heaven can and will wait for him. His soul is the property of the game. He must trust in the coach and the league. He must be subservient to their decisions. He must bend both knees to their wills, and herein lays the problem. Colin Kaepernick only bends one.

My account of the quarterback and his relationship with others is an oversimplification, of course. No football player is only one thing and condemning all those who play because of the misdeeds of some is profoundly unfair. However, I am discussing the football *mythos* here, not any given individual. Statistics don't tell us anything about specific cases; they reveal patterns. These are the stories that brighten our Friday night lights. These are the invincible dreams that teach our boys all

the right moves. Our midwestern boys. Our rural and, occasionally, our suburban boys.

Football myth is purified by the heartland and soiled by the inner-city. Knute Rockne, the white all-American; Rudy, the Irish-catholic team-conscience; Mox, *Varsity Blues's* unappreciated backup; and even Bobby Boucher, *The Waterboy's* special-needs tackling-machine, are all stories of potential realized. The urban teams, in contrast, the black teams—The Rock's *Gridiron Gang*, Denzel Washington's Titans, Cuba Gooding Jr.'s Rod Tidwell—are all tales of redemption disguised as stories of acceptance. (Tidwell has to redeem not just himself, but Jerry McGuire and Bob Sugar—no small task.) Again, Colin Kaepernick runs against the grain. He is uninterested in his own redemption; he is concerned with America's. He is stepping over the lines. He is [uppity](#).

Uppity is the right word, by the way. As Taylor Branch has convincingly argued in [The Cartel](#), college sports—football especially—is particularly exploitative of African-American men. By naming their employees student-athletes, the NCAA takes away players' abilities to make money off of their own images, get adequate post-college health care, and even self-advocate. As Branch puts it, "College athletes are not slaves.... Yet to survey the scene—corporations and universities enriching themselves on the backs of uncompensated young men, whose status as 'student-athletes' deprives them of the right to due process guaranteed by the Constitution—is to catch the unmistakable whiff of the plantation."

High school diminishes the player's humanity, and college commodifies them, but the NFL asks for worse. With the crushing blows against their poorly protected heads, the NFL demands its players damage their intellect and their very experiences of the world. The injuries sustained from the game produce headaches, torpor, inability to focus, and limit the

attention span. They make it hard to move and to lift things. They take away players' agency and, in some cases, cause depression so powerful that some former players' only escape is suicide. [The NFL knew of these consequences as early as 1994](#)¹, possibly earlier. Yet they denied it, and did little to protect their players.

Their youth gone, their education wasted, their physicality impaired, their profits stolen, and their individualism disregarded, NFL players have only their relationships to call their own. They have their families, they have their citizenship, and they have their group self-identification. But these too are exploited, for example, when the families are shown celebrating victories, or when athletes shout out to their loved ones (and God) after they win, or when the NFL and the U.S. military [stage well-publicized reunions of cheerleaders](#) and deployed service members on the field.² [The U.S. military paid more than five million dollars](#) for four years of "moments" honoring the troops. Players are tools for propaganda as well as profit.³

All of these are challenged by Colin Kaepernick when he kneels on the field in protest, and this is the real reason why his actions should be celebrated. There are other reasons to do so as well: football's role in democracy, players' positions as role models, football's being of such influence that its fields have become, in essence, a public sphere. But these are all secondary to the fact that the NFL should celebrate Kaepernick's actions because it is the moment when he reclaims his humanity. It is the act that allows him to give larger meaning to a pastime that is, in the end, just a game. It is the recognition that his personal history is always embedded in a world that he, too, has a responsibility to contribute to.

The NFL wants to be important, but all it has managed to be is prominent. It has confused moral authority with wealth and ubiquity. We remember the classical Greek Olympics as

a bridge between athletic excellence and human betterment. It was an endeavor of peace and optimism. In contrast, we remember the Roman colosseum as a place of cruelty, corruption, and distraction. If the NFL can only be the latter, if it is just bread and circus, then it is indistinguishable from Wal-Mart and Verizon. All it will ever be is a commercially successful corporation created for private gain, an exploitative and racist feudal lord that is itself exploited for jingoistic purposes. But if it can be more—if it can celebrate protest on its field by honoring the humanity of its players, the citizenship of its viewers, and its role in educating a global audience—then it can have meaning. It can have moral worth. It can, when all is said and done, be justified.

Notes

1. "Timeline: The NFL's Concussion Crisis," *Frontline (PBS)*, accessed August 21, 2018, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/sports/league-of-denial/timeline-the-nfls-concussion-crisis/> [<https://perma.cc/5AXJ-AKDX>]
2. "Surprise Military Reunions At NFL Games Reach Peak Bullshit," *Deadspin*, accessed August 21, 2018, <https://deadspin.com/surprise-military-reunions-at-nfl-games-reach-peak-bull-1727940877> [<https://perma.cc/4HU6-JU78>]
3. "Jets' salutes honor N.J. National Guard but cost taxpayers," *NJ.com*, accessed August 21, 2018, https://www.nj.com/politics/index.ssf/2015/05/taxpayers_pony_up_for_jets_salutes_to_nj_national.html [<https://perma.cc/V34X-8DPT>]



PROTESTING ON BENDED KNEE

**RACE, DISSENT, AND PATRIOTISM
IN 21ST CENTURY AMERICA**

**EDITED BY
ERIC BURIN**

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