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Offense or Defense?

Leadership of the NBA and NFL in Response to Athlete Activism

by

Katrina Hale

Honors Thesis

Submitted to:

The Jepson School of Leadership Studies
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Advisor: Dr. Thad Williamson

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Offense or Defense?
Leadership of the NBA and NFL in Response to Athlete Activism


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Katrina Hale

This page certifies that this thesis prepared by Katrina Hale has been approved by the thesis committee as satisfactory completion of the thesis requirement to earn honors in leadership studies.

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PREFACE

Over the past decade, the Black community of the United States has faced great discrimination and violence leading to various protests and instances of activism across the country. In the world of sports, where one may think that political engagement has no relation, some Black athletes use their platforms to speak up about these issues. The National Football League (NFL) and the National Basketball Association (NBA) recruit the largest percentage of Black athletes compared to any other professional league in the U.S., but their reactions to racial activism on the field and on the court appear very different. In order to discover why these responses vary, this thesis will examine the game structure of each sport as well as the history and leadership of each league. While both the NFL and NBA struggled to fully accept Black athletes and their culture in the twentieth century, more recently the NBA has spoken on social issues and grants their players more freedom with political engagement. In contrast, the NFL quickly tries to shut down any activism by their athletes and prioritizes their owners first. We found that the culture, structure, and leadership of the two leagues has a direct impact on their response to activism and without any change, will predict the abilities of future athletes in each sport to take a stand.

INTRODUCTION

“Politics and sports should not mix.”

In a world where sports dominate entertainment, recreation, and socialization among citizens, one may view the activity as a break from the stressors and issues that surround them. To claim that sports and politics should remain separate, however, is a paradox given how much influence the two have on each other. Since sports became a popular way for people to enjoy time and interact with each other, it has developed into a symbol of pride for one’s hometown, city, or country. A team represents a part of us and how we identify, with a mascot and colors to differentiate us from other groups. For the United States in particular, sports fans passionately support teams based on where they come from. At sporting events, the American flag flies high to signify that each of those teams represents one country in particular – the United States of America. Before the competition begins, all of those present are asked to “please rise” for the performance of the National Anthem. Each spectator, coach, staff member, and athlete oblige in an almost robotic manner as they place their hand on their heart and listen to the song boom through the venue. Most know the tune by heart, not even able to trace the day or age they learned the words “the land of the free and the home of the brave.”¹ Some groups that make up the fabrics of America, however, have been discriminated against and stripped of freedoms for years. The Black community in particular, who still struggle to this day to receive equal treatment from our nation’s institutions, has to stand for this national anthem just like everybody else. As the flag waves, it reminds us that America still has work to do to ensure freedom for all of its citizens; including the Black athletes that make up a high percentage of our country’s professional sports teams.

¹ “NMAH | The Lyrics,” Accessed April 10, 2023, <https://amhistory.si.edu/starspangledbanner/the-lyrics.aspx>.

Although hearing the national anthem at a sporting event feels normal, it did not become tradition until the twentieth century when institutions used it to demonstrate patriotism and unity in times of war. Later on, after the events of 9/11, displays of nationalism increased significantly not only in our country but in our sports arenas as well. According to journalist Howard Bryant, “before 2009, NFL players often remained in the locker room during the national anthem.”² The league chose to place them on the field like props to show their support for the military, without giving them much of a choice. When Colin Kaepernick took a knee during the national anthem in August of 2016, he challenged this newfound routine and changed the way in which we thought about the song’s message. Two years later, when the NFL banned kneeling during the anthem but allowed players to remain in the locker room if they wished, the league reversed the norm and made those who stayed off the field appear as the enemy.³ The relationship between the NFL and the military remains quite strong, especially in the 21st century as the nation reckons with the 9/11 attacks. Accusing athletes such as Kaepernick for bringing politics onto the field, therefore, is quite hypocritical. He knelt to bring attention to a real issue, the discrimination of Black people in the United States, using a large public space to do so. After the season ended, however, the NFL made sure Colin Kaepernick never stepped foot on a professional football field again.

This thesis examines instances of activism in two professional sports leagues – the National Football League (NFL) and the National Basketball Association (NBA). While these organizations may differ in team size, coaching staff, and fanbase, Black athletes make up the

² Howard Bryant, *The Heritage: Black Athletes, A Divided America, and the Divided Politics of Patriotism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 205.

³ Victor Mather, “A Timeline of Colin Kaepernick vs. the N.F.L.,” *The New York Times*, February 15, 2019, sec. Sports, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/15/sports/nfl-colin-kaepernick-protests-timeline.html>.

majority of their players compared to other sports in the U.S. Despite the integration of both leagues, Black athletes still faced blatant discrimination on the field through position bias, and off the field while traveling for games. Because of this, some professional football or basketball players felt motivated to speak out against racial inequality and the injustice they faced even at the professional level. At first, these players did not receive much support from the leagues as executives focused more on image and maintaining a good relationship with their fans.

Additionally, the culture and structure of these two sports differ greatly given their histories in the United States. American football reflects a setting quite similar to the average workplace – groups of men taking orders from other men to accomplish a goal and increase the chances of success for their team. The NFL’s relationship with the military makes the American flag the centerpiece of the field, and forces players to become a pawn in their game. The game of basketball, on the other hand, relies on cooperation within the team in order to win the game. Individual stars such as Larry Bird and Magic Johnson came to represent the rural and urban audiences that the sport attracts, reaching communities of various ethnicities and races as well. Leaders of the NBA heavily value those individual players that bring success to their franchise, drawing up guaranteed contracts to make sure that they feel secure in their profession.

In order to understand how these two major professional sports leagues respond in dramatically different ways to activism on the court or on the field, I will analyze two recent events – Colin Kaepernick kneeling in 2016 and the Milwaukee Bucks walkout of 2020. Through historical research and leadership analysis, I will show how these differing responses reflect not only choices made by league leaders but also the long-standing differences between the culture of the two sports and organizations. Adam Silver and Roger Goodell, for example, have great influence on the decisions and operations of their organizations as commissioners.

While Silver's strong academic background allows him to make well-thought decisions, Goodell has received criticism from fans and players alike for his actions. The history and culture of the two leagues also influence these leaders and remain an important factor in determining whether or not athlete activism is acceptable in the league. Through the case analysis, the NBA and NFL showed differing responses given their relationship with the Black community, as well as the internal structures that limit or maximize players' individual freedoms.

CHAPTER ONE: THE HISTORY AND CULTURE OF THE NATIONAL FOOTBALL LEAGUE

Americans know about football, even if they do not make an effort to learn the specifics. It is on their parent's television every Sunday without fail. The small town they grew up in only talked about the upcoming Friday night lights high school game each week. Jerseys of local college or professional teams are sold in a nearby Target or Walmart. Fireworks boom and streets flood after the city's team wins big. Although they attract millions of fans now, American football took many years to establish itself as such. Beginning with intercollegiate competitions in the 19th century at elite universities such as Harvard and Yale, the sport remained quite inaccessible to the working class. As the United States transitioned into an industrialized society, however, the work in the factories greatly reflected the structure of what occurred on the football field. Those outside of the white, upper-class groups sparked a new interest in the sport, and professional football organizations emerged during the mid-20th century. Different leagues came and went, but the eventual creation of the Super Bowl by the National Football League (NFL) and American Football League (AFL) established a longstanding tradition well-known to sports fans across the globe. The NFL took many years to become successful, but since then football's influence on American culture has been substantial – with stadiums, players, coaches, and fans dedicating their lives to the sport.

The beginnings of modern American football originated on the grounds of Yale University, but later came to reflect a working-class lifestyle in a newly industrial country. Walter Camp, known as the father of the sport, incorporated a factory-like model into his coaching strategy that emphasized order & obedience.⁴ This tactic worked well as industries

⁴ Dave Zirin, *A People's History of Sports in the United States* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2008), 36.

grew and working together to create a product became commonplace. In addition to this, as soon as American women gained the right to vote and began attending universities, men relied on football so as to not feel that their masculinity had been lost. The physicality of the sport displayed great strength, but also danger without sufficient protection such as the helmets and pads used today. In 1920 George Halas, a football player himself, founded the American Professional Football Association, later renamed the National Football League (NFL).⁵ Despite the establishment of this organization, public attention towards the game at a professional level remained trivial. Teams of cities rose and fell for the first couple of years, and barely enough money flowed into the league.

Racial integration of American football came at a slow pace, with Black players finding more opportunities at the college, rather than professional levels. In 1915, Paul Robeson attended Rutgers University as one of the first African American students at the school, finding success both in the classroom and on the field.⁶ Black football players at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) were quite rare, and Robeson felt very isolated even as a star athlete. Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), on the other hand, produced great talent and were often overlooked by the professional leagues. Only a handful of Black athletes played for the NFL in their first decade. In 1933, however, owners made a gentlemen's agreement to completely ban Black players from the league.⁷ George Preston Marshall instigated this ban, an outspoken racist

⁵ Charles Ross, *Mavericks, Money, and Men: The AFL, Black Players, and the Evolution of Modern Football* (Temple University Press, 2016), 5, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/richmond/detail.action?docID=4513936>.

⁶ Zirin, *A People's History of Sports in the United States*, 39.

⁷ *Behind the Shield: The Power and Politics of the NFL*, directed by Jeremy Earp (2022; Media Education Foundation), <https://go.mediaed.org/behind-the-shield>.

and founder of the Washington Commanders, formerly known as the Redskins. If creating a mascot taunting the indigenous peoples of America did not do enough harm as stands, Marshall's adamant beliefs prevented the league from integrating.

Then a new league, the All-American Football Conference (AAFC), arose in 1946 and challenged the racial standards of the NFL. The Cleveland Browns, a team of the AAFC, signed two Black players, Marion Motley and Bill Willis.⁸ This brought negative attention to the racist ban of Black people in the NFL and their ignorance of collegiate talent. Due to the progressive actions of the AAFC, a push from the public and sportswriters for the NFL to integrate led the Los Angeles Rams to sign Kenny Washington and Woody Strode, two Black players, officially breaking the color barrier of the league.⁹ About a year before Jackie Robinson took the field for the Los Angeles Dodgers, these players proved owners and coaches wrong as they became stars for their teams. Competing for fans and athletes, the NFL and the AAFC struggled to remain afloat as separate entities and lost money trying to make advances.¹⁰ If professional football wanted to find its place in the nation of baseball, multiple leagues would not help to increase fan support. Four years later the NFL acquired three of the AAFC teams – the Cleveland Browns, the San Francisco 49ers, and the Baltimore Colts – and once again became the only professional football league in the country.¹¹ After this acquisition, more Black players began to enter the league and emerge as stars. George Preston Marshall's Washington Redskins, however, became

⁸ Zirin, *A People's History of Sports in the United States*, 109.

⁹ Ross, *Mavericks, Money, and Men*, 5.

¹⁰ Jon Morgan, *Glory for Sale: Fans, Dollars, and the New NFL* (Baltimore, MD: Bancroft Press, 1997), 22.

¹¹ Morgan, *Glory for Sale*, 27.

the last team to integrate in 1962.¹² The NFL needed to maintain a positive image of themselves by integrating, drawing in more fans from different races and classes.

Although the NFL thought they would face no more competition, another major American football league rose to the surface and became quite popular within the country. Lamar Hunt established the American Football League (AFL) in 1959. Incorporating new parts of the game such as the two-point conversion and stitching names onto the backs of player's jerseys, the AFL was the young and exciting league for the country.¹³ Teams in eight cities – Dallas, Houston, Denver, New York, Los Angeles, Buffalo, Boston, Oakland – formed, creating competition in areas where NFL franchises already existed.¹⁴ Amidst the rise of the civil rights movement in the early 1960s, the AFL teams made an effort to reflect the makeup of American society. According to author Charles Ross, the new league “actively sought Black college talent, and seven players from historically Black schools were selected in the inaugural draft,” leaving only one team without a Black player.¹⁵ This made the AFL appear as a more modern league, versus the traditional and old-school NFL. It was also an important shift in recognizing the abilities of Black athletes and considering them for other positions on the field. Black football players usually became running backs or linemen and very few became a quarterback after their college careers. The qualities of a quarterback, being “leaders, decision-makers, and symbols” for teams, were stereotypically associated with white men and coaches often disregarded Black

¹² Zirin, *A People's History of Sports in the United States*, 127.

¹³ Ross, *Mavericks, Money, and Men*, 1.

¹⁴ Ross, *Mavericks, Money, and Men*, 14.

¹⁵ Ross, *Mavericks, Money, and Men*, 20.

men aspiring to take on that role.¹⁶ Then in 1968, the AFL's Denver Broncos placed Marlin Briscoe on the field as the first African American starting quarterback "in the modern era of professional football."¹⁷ Recognition that Black athletes could take on this leadership position on the field challenged the assumptions of many coaches and fans. Exceeding expectations, Briscoe did well as a quarterback, throwing 14 touchdowns and running over 300 yards in just seven games.¹⁸ The Broncos coach, however, had other ideas for the team's future and ditched Briscoe after just one season. This left Briscoe to find a job elsewhere, and he played wide receiver for the rest of his professional career.¹⁹ Since then, the number of Black quarterbacks in the NFL has remained quite low. Even though there are numerous Black football players in America today, the positional stereotypes have stuck with the sport. In this current season players such as Lamar Jackson, Russell Wilson, and Patrick Mahomes are well-known and praised for their talents. The future of Black quarterbacks appears hopeful, as teams assign positions solely based on skill and not race.

Despite public attention gravitating towards the AFL, the NFL initiated some structural changes to create a desirable form of entertainment for the American public. After the former NFL commissioner Bert Bell passed away unexpectedly, Pete Rozelle became the new leader of the league. Before his role as commissioner, Rozelle worked for many years in public relations, more specifically for sports teams. According to author and former NFL player Michael Oriard,

¹⁶ Gregg Easterbrook, *The King of Sports: Why Football Must Be Reformed* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2013), 11.

¹⁷ Ross, *Mavericks, Money, and Men*, 129.

¹⁸ Ross, *Mavericks, Money, and Men*, 130.

¹⁹ Ross, *Mavericks, Money, and Men*, 130.

Rozelle wanted the league to “appear uncorrupted to the public.”²⁰ First, he established a public relations department within the league and moved their office operations to Fifth Avenue in New York City.²¹ Maintaining a clean image remains a key aspect of the NFL today, operating as a large business institution that brings in millions of dollars each year. Rozelle also followed the AFL’s structure of sharing revenues between teams, rather than competing within the league to remain afloat.²² Money mostly flowed from television contracts made with well-known broadcasting companies, divided evenly between teams. But sharing revenues also meant sharing one overall image. The NFL needed to create an effective image of themselves in order to remain a mainstream sport in the United States, making the shield an integral part of American lives. The use of media became the solution to capture this attention, all thanks to Ed Sabol. With a passion for filming almost anything around him, Ed began to record his son’s high school football games and realized he could make a career for himself with his camera.²³ During the 1962 championship game between Green Bay and New York, Sabol used eight cameras of different heights and speeds to film.²⁴ Unlike the usual television coverage or game film of the past, his resulting footage produced a highlight reel that impressed Rozelle. Sabol’s use of multiple lenses to tell a story of two competing teams increased football’s “cultural power” by making the sport easy for viewers to watch and understand.²⁵ By simplifying a somewhat

²⁰ Michael Oriard, *Brand NFL: Making and Selling America’s Favorite Sport* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 13, https://doi.org/10.5149/9780807899656_oriard.

²¹ Oriard, *Brand NFL*, 11-12.

²² Oriard, *Brand NFL*, 12.

²³ Oriard, *Brand NFL*, 15.

²⁴ Oriard, *Brand NFL*, 15.

²⁵ Oriard, *Brand NFL*, 18.

complicated game on television, the stories told of rivals or heroes on the field became more relatable to the typical American citizen. Football not only became the country's sport, but it turned into a popular form of entertainment for all to enjoy.

As the two leagues continued to compete for players, ticket sales, and television time, the successes of one started to depend on the failures of the other. About five years after the start of the AFL, discussions about a merger occurred behind closed doors in 1966. Rozelle and Hunt determined that the two leagues would maintain separate schedules, but the top teams of each would play each other in a championship game at the end of the season.²⁶ By the year 1970, a single schedule would be created that fully merged the two leagues into one.²⁷ This agreement did not form without stipulation, however, as it violated antitrust law and needed approval from the federal government. House Majority Leader and Louisiana congressman Hale Boggs struck a deal with the league to establish an NFL franchise in New Orleans in exchange for his support. Rozelle guaranteed to fulfill this request, and Boggs led Congress to approve the merger in return.²⁸ A few months later in January of 1967, the AFL's Kansas City Chiefs played the NFL's Green Bay Packers in the first ever Super Bowl championship. Led by Vince Lombardi, one of the most well-known figures of professional American football at the time, the Packers represented the "traditional," masculine, and seemingly violent side of the two leagues.²⁹ Lombardi embodied everything that the small-town of Green Bay needed in the 1960s, as he "preached the importance of God, family, and Packer football," relating heavily to the traditional

²⁶ Ross, *Mavericks, Money, and Men*, 95.

²⁷ Ross, *Mavericks, Money, and Men*, 95.

²⁸ Ross, *Mavericks, Money, and Men*, 95-96.

²⁹ Oriard, *Brand NFL*, 30.

values of the team's fans.³⁰ His success as a coach persisted in this Super Bowl match, with the Packers beating the Chiefs 35-10. This game not only served as a commentary on the best league, but it also gained significant media attention with over 65 million people watching from their home televisions.³¹ Today the Super Bowl is one of the most-watched television events in the country and captures the attention of millions, regardless of team affiliation. Creating this game may have been one of the best decisions made by the professional football leagues, as it has significantly increased the momentum of the sport in America. After a few Super Bowls, the two leagues officially became one as the 1970 season commenced. Two conferences would make up the NFL, the National Football Conference (NFC) and the American Football Conference (AFC), with former AFL teams as the AFC, plus two NFL teams to balance out the numbers.³² These conferences still exist today, with some new teams added later on and a few switches between conferences over the years.

The NFL's popularity increased dramatically during one of the most tumultuous and watershed decades in American history – the 1960s. Civil rights protests, opposition to the Vietnam War, and the Nixon presidency provoked times of change and unrest in the United States. Positioning itself “clearly on one side of the era's political and generational divide,” the NFL incorporated a greatly patriotic and pro-military identity on the field.³³ Traditions such as the pre-game flyover and massive displays of the American flag became etched into the widely

³⁰ Oriard, *Brand NFL*, 33-34.

³¹ Ross, *Mavericks, Money, and Men*, 104.

³² Ross, *Mavericks, Money, and Men*, 144.

³³ Oriard, *Brand NFL*, 22.

televised performances put on by the league each week.³⁴ Despite fans considering sports such as football to be a break from the political events of the nation, the league formed close relationships with the political figures and the military to promote patriotism to audiences. Owners and coaches commanded players to follow orders on field, including participating in these pro-American performances. David Meggyesy of the St. Louis Cardinals, however, chose to speak up about his opposition to the Vietnam War and mobilized his teammates to do the same.³⁵ His actions as an athlete-activist, such as refusing to come out during the national anthem, were met with immediate discouragement from higher-ups as it contradicted with the current image of the NFL. The Cardinals then benched Meggyesy in the 1969 season simply because of his protests and not because of his abilities as a player.³⁶ The measures taken by the league to shut out Meggyesy are comparable to what occurred in 2016 with Colin Kaepernick, exemplifying that not much has changed in terms of their political affiliations and desire to keep a clean image.

By the 1970s, television coverage helped American football surpass baseball as the nation's most popular professional sport. The filming tactics implemented by Ed Sabol helped to reach audiences of all ages, genders, races, and classes. Announcers made stories of each game and players gained more public attention as well, becoming celebrities to the thousands of fans in each city. Broadcasting companies such as ABC, NBC, and later on FOX, shared coverage and began incorporating commentary to keep audiences engaged. Super Bowl IV "forever changed pro football and the medium of television" when the head coach of the Kansas City Chiefs, Hank

³⁴ *Behind the Shield: The Power and Politics of the NFL*, directed by Jeremy Earp.

³⁵ Zirin, *A People's History of Sports in the United States*, 178.

³⁶ Zirin, *A People's History of Sports in the United States*, 179.

Stram, wired in for viewers to listen.³⁷ It allowed fans to feel like they were right there with him, strategizing in order to win the big game. Although it is rare to hear a coach's voice during game time on live television today, the coverage of professional football is extensive with multiple cameras on the field filming touchdown plays and excited moments when a team does well. In addition to this, ABC struck a deal with the league in the 1970s to produce Monday night games on television, allowing the sport to obtain a prime-time spot in the national media.³⁸ Players became pawns in the perfect image that owners and television executives crafted to present to the public. Their control of sports entertainment in the United States launched the NFL into a new era of popularity as it approached the 21st century.

The players of the NFL are an extremely important asset, despite the fact that their choices are mostly dictated by coaches, managers, and owners. Although the league received congressional approval to merge the NFL and the AFL, which technically violated antitrust law, the power that clubs had over players remained significant. Because football serves as a full-time job for these athletes, each team must compete with the salaries of the other forms employment available to them.³⁹ Unless you are an All-Pro in the league, your time in professional football is fairly limited and guaranteed salaries remain quite small. During the second half of the 20th century, players established personal career goals for themselves such as getting a PhD or MD while also being a member of an NFL club.⁴⁰ A commitment like this for the modern NFL

³⁷ Ross, *Mavericks, Money, and Men*, 157.

³⁸ Ross, *Mavericks, Money, and Men*, 160.

³⁹ Oriard, *Brand NFL*, 56.

⁴⁰ Oriard, *Brand NFL*, 94.

athlete seems impossible today, as the league pays them a bit more and some rely on brand partnerships for additional income.

Although being a professional athlete does not compare to a typical day job, NFL players are still employees of a major institution and unionize in order to receive benefits such as higher pay or additional time off. In 1956, the National Football Players Association (NFLPA) emerged and fulfilled a few demands such as minimum salary, per diem payments during training camp, and injury protections.⁴¹ At the time, the average player made less than \$6,000 per season, equivalent to around \$65,000 today.⁴² The owners of the teams did not necessarily favor the establishment of this union as it meant their ability to completely rule over all players would be diminished. Requests made by the NFLPA remained quite small until the 1970s when it became clear that players did not feel free and wanted to make decisions for themselves. In 1974, 63 new demands and a pre-season strike brought more attention to the fact that the NFL still violated antitrust laws and kept the movement of their players quite restricted.⁴³ The NFLPA took it upon themselves to strike at training camps that summer, which were not as effective as executive director Ed Garvey had hoped. It created quite a strain not only between players and owners, but also led fans to observe a different side of professional athletes that they did not realize existed. For a fan, it may be difficult to understand that their hero on the field still hopes to be fairly compensated and receive benefits from the organization they work for, like any other workingperson in the world. Players that participated in these strikes started to “become bums in

⁴¹ Oriard, *Brand NFL*, 57.

⁴² Career Trend, “NFL Salary History,” Accessed April 20, 2023, <https://careertrend.com/nfl-salary-history-13670918.html>.

⁴³ Oriard, *Brand NFL*, 62.

fans' eyes," finding it difficult to praise a well-paid player asking for more money.⁴⁴ Despite backlash from players, these strikes served as a significant starting point for the future of the league's players and their ability to advocate for themselves. About a year later the "Rozelle Rule," that restricted free agency for players, became illegal and allowed for more freedom and movement between teams.⁴⁵ The abolishment of this rule, however, did not change much in the league as teams hesitated to give up draft picks for players. The fight for freedom in the NFL continued with a 57-day strike in 1982 that led to an increase in league revenues distributed to players.⁴⁶ After almost two decades of efforts made by Gene Upshaw, the NFLPA, and several lawsuits filed against the league, players achieved unrestricted free agency and increased compensation from an organization experiencing significant financial growth themselves. In the 21st century, strikes and lawsuits in the NFL have been rarer compared to the times of Garvey and Upshaw. When desired changes arise, players write up a collective bargaining agreement (CBA), the latest one being on March 15, 2020, where players received more money, an expanded roster, and more rest in their schedules.⁴⁷ As the league continues to grow and profit off of their players, it is only fair that they respect them and treat them as adults. The hierarchical structure still exists, but players have gained more of a public voice to speak out against the all-powerful owners of the league.

⁴⁴ Oriard, *Brand NFL*, 72.

⁴⁵ Oriard, *Brand NFL*, 63.

⁴⁶ "1980s: The Fight For Free Agency," NFL Players Association, 2022, <https://nflpa.com/about/history/1980s-fight-free-agency>.

⁴⁷ "2000s: A Landmark CBA," NFL Players Association, 2022, <https://nflpa.com/about/history/2000s-a-landmark-cba>.

The federal government considered the NFL as a tax-exempt, non-profit organization until 2015. This status began during the second World War, when the league struggled financially and needed some extra assistance to stay afloat. According to the U.S. government, an organization is able to file for tax-exempt status if they “provide a good or service that is undersupplied by the market.”⁴⁸ Having this distinction, however, comes with requirements such as disclosing financial records and not distributing earnings privately to individuals. It should be specified that only the league’s office did not have to pay taxes in the past, while all 32 teams paid taxes individually each year. This meant that as the league grew dramatically from the mid-20th century, they distributed some of the money saved to league leaders, owners, and administrators. Roger Goodell, the NFL commissioner, makes upwards of \$60 million per year. In addition to this, families who have maintained ownership of teams “live as pashas at the average person’s expense” due to the millions saved by the league through tax exemptions.⁴⁹ Even though each of the teams pay taxes, their franchises make a substantial amount of money from ticket sales and television contracts that pay for the millions of dollars in salaries for top players. Only a handful of athletes, however, build a long-term career in football given the high level of competition and number of players per franchise.⁵⁰ Each year teams draft new players from college with less wear and tear than existing players, allowing for a fresh start in August. Replaced players may remain on the practice squad, switch to a new team, or end their football career altogether if they cannot find a feasible salary for the next few years. Despite the fact that

⁴⁸ Liam O’Gorman-Hoyt, “501(c)(6) Tax Exemptions: Closing the Loophole the NFL Just Exposed,” *Front Office Sports*, June 1, 2016, <https://frontofficesports.com/501c6-tax-exemptions-closing-the-loophole-the-nfl-just-exposed/>.

⁴⁹ Easterbrook, *The King of Sports*, 60.

⁵⁰ Easterbrook, *The King of Sports*, 62.

the NFL's billion-dollar empire benefited from its tax-exempt status in the past and now will continue to prosper as a taxable organization, they still fail to provide their players with sufficient compensation to live on after their career concludes.

Given that the NFL no longer has to adhere to the financial regulations of a tax-exempt organization, they have the ability to use revenues in a more private manner without oversight. Liam O'Gorman-Hoyt of Front Office Sports makes the argument that the league should have paid an "exit tax" to make up for the lavishly large salaries subsidized by American taxpayers over the years.⁵¹ The grand team stadiums built are paid for mostly through public dollars, even as a singular game's high-ticket price can prevent low-income citizens from even attending. Furthermore, high-rated games on television are only broadcasted "within seventy-five miles" of the home team.⁵² This regionalized coverage of the league appears unfair, given how much the public has paid in the past to keep professional football afloat. Middle-class Americans do not possess enough power to force the league to change its ways, but recent years have shown that criticism from the media and players themselves has a profound effect on how the NFL presents itself. The league must maintain their position as the most popular sport in the country, which means sometimes altering their decisions to please their audience.

American football has completely dominated the sports world, including its various media forms such as television and gaming. Its play structure of working together towards a common goal with a handful of coaches giving orders, reflects "the contemporary workplace" and becomes a relatable experience for anyone and everyone.⁵³ Not only are games on Sundays

⁵¹ O'Gorman-Hoyt, "501(c)(6) Tax Exemptions."

⁵² Easterbrook, *The King of Sports*, 73.

⁵³ Easterbrook, *The King of Sports*, 265.

and Mondays, but there are now Thursday night games as well as weekly coverage of anything even slightly football related. Video games such as *Madden NFL* and daily talk-shows such as *The NFL Today* integrate the sport into every aspect of life. The league dominates cities, televisions, social media apps, and more that you would expect the American flag to include a small NFL shield on it at this point. During games, commentators and fans continue discussing different plays even if those on the field have moved on. One part of the NFL that has become increasingly popular is fantasy football, which allows participants to create fictional teams of real NFL players and compete with both strangers and friends throughout the season.⁵⁴ Fans have access to various platforms where they can pay attention to multiple games at once, even if their favorite team is not playing. In 2014, the Fantasy Sports Trade Association estimated that “more than 30 million people played” fantasy football.⁵⁵ A number this high truly represents the grasp that the NFL has on its audience, encouraging them to not only buy game tickets or turn on the game every Sunday, but to also spend time crafting a fake team each week to win money. In the United States, it can be difficult for one to avoid the coverage of professional football on televisions, social media, and more.

Over the past decade, the U.S. experienced several social justice movements aiming to recognize the racial and gender inequalities that still exist in several aspects of society. Given the large cultural influence of the NFL, it would be expected that they would make an effort to fit in with the changing times surrounding them. The league, as stated previously, has a history of taking a patriotic and pro-military stance that resonates with many of their fans so their approach to become more inclusive with gender and race is quite careful. Even though around 70 percent

⁵⁴ Thomas P. Oates, “Race, Economics, and the Shifting Politics of Sport Media” *Radical History Review*, no. 125 (May 1, 2016): 160, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-3451892>.

⁵⁵ Oates, “Race, Economics,” 160.

of the league consists of Black players, there are very few Black coaches and zero Black team owners.⁵⁶ Colin Kaepernick taking a knee during the National Anthem in 2016 served as a wake-up call for the NFL, especially if they want to keep their popular image intact. Social justice-related changes made by the league recently have been quite positive, but the culture and history of the sport itself still loom in the background and make it difficult to think that football can completely adjust to modern times.

Ultimately, it can be said that the NFL's growth in the past century has made it the most popular sport of the United States today. Its physical and masculine origins encourage men throughout the country to participate in the sport, as well as begin following the pros at a young age. Even if you are not a die-hard fan, professional football finds a way into every person's life whether it be the annual Super Bowl, a television commercial, or the city they live in. The NFL greatly impacts the world around them and represents the culture of the nation, despite the ups and downs of its history. Professional football players, coaches, and owners may be paid significantly more than the average American but their purpose of working hard to accomplish their goal of winning aligns closely with fans. The NFL continues to prosper today since its inception in the early 20th century, exerting great influence as a sport unique to one nation.

⁵⁶ Jeremy Engle, "Does the N.F.L. Have a Race Problem?" *The New York Times*, February 9, 2022, sec. The Learning Network, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/09/learning/does-the-nfl-have-a-race-problem.html>.

CHAPTER TWO: THE HISTORY AND CULTURE OF THE NATIONAL BASKETBALL ASSOCIATION

Although the sport of basketball established itself over 130 years ago, its popularity and impact on the world arrived much later in the twentieth century. Attractive to both small towns and urban areas, the game drew in people from various racial and ethnic groups in the United States. Similar to American football, professional basketball leagues fought to become the most desirable one in the country and the NBA even faced competition into the 1970s. In order to compete with other sports such as baseball and football, the NBA relied on stand-out players such as Bill Russell, Larry Bird, Magic Johnson, and Michael Jordan to launch themselves into popularity. Their defensive and offensive abilities brought in fans from around the country, and television only made the connection to these stars greater. The league even experienced certain structural changes to the game of basketball, which made it more fast-paced and exciting for an audience to watch. Although its global presence today reaches audiences in various countries, the NBA took some time to figure out how to operate successfully as a professional sports organization. Additionally, NBA leaders and fans struggled to fully accept the Black athletes that made up the majority of their league. In the modern day, individual athletes in the NBA demonstrate great autonomy in their career and have become role models for social justice in the United States.

Despite efforts to create a civilized, winter sport, basketball quickly evolved into a more physical and fast-paced pastime. In the small city of Springfield, Massachusetts in 1891, James Naismith arrived at the YMCA and became the inventor of a brand new sport. He aimed to create a game that “promoted the benefits of self-control, order, and sacrifice” and established a

set of rules for interested players to follow.⁵⁷ As the new sport became more widespread, people began to add their own touches to make it more competitive. Aspects such as dribbling, as well as making the game increasingly more physical turned basketball into a “semi-professional game with ethnic rivalries and rowdy fans.”⁵⁸ Barnstorming teams spread knowledge of the game, motivating European immigrants such as the “Irish, Swedes, Jews, Slavs” and others to practically integrate the sport into their culture.⁵⁹ Early teams on both the collegiate and the professional level came and went during the twentieth century. Other sports such as baseball and football, however, overpowered the small, ten-person game of basketball and its somewhat unestablished playing style. Citizens of the United States continued to watch the sports they knew well, and basketball only thrived at the amateur level.

Small professional basketball leagues of the mid-twentieth century such as the National Basketball League (NBL) and the Basketball Association of America (BAA) helped to grow the presence of the sport throughout metropolitan areas, but soon struggled to function as separate entities. Businessmen in small cities across the Midwest established the NBL in 1937, providing a “leisure activity” and hoping to turn a profit from it.⁶⁰ Given that the NBL preceded the BAA by almost a decade, they maintained a good reputation among star college players such as George Mikan and barely received competition from any other professional league. At the time, the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) and the Harlem Globetrotters posed as the only alternative to

⁵⁷ Aram Goudsouzian, “Basketball,” in *A Companion to American Sport History*, ed. Steven A. Riess (UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2014), 247, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118609446.ch11>.

⁵⁸ Goudsouzian, “Basketball,” 248.

⁵⁹ Goudsouzian, “Basketball,” 249.

⁶⁰ David G. Surdam, *The Rise of the National Basketball Association* (Baltimore: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 21, <https://doi.org/10.5406/j.ctt3fh694>.

playing in the NBL. Sponsored by “large corporations such as Phillips, Caterpillar, and Goodyear,” the AAU had the ability to offer its players full-time employment as well as the opportunity to continue playing basketball.⁶¹ At the time, basketball players spent more time actually obtaining a college degree and felt motivated to work after graduation as well as compete. Therefore, the AAU presented a great opportunity for those hoping to live a balanced life. The Harlem Globetrotters, on the other hand, traveled all over the country and fans once considered them as the “best professional team.”⁶² Both of these smaller leagues remained present during the growth of the NBL and the BAA, sometimes posing a financial threat when competing for players and arena space.

Even though the NBL performed well during their first few years, ambition to spread the game of professional basketball began to grow. In the summer of 1946, owners of hockey arenas created the BAA in order to increase revenues and provide the sport of basketball to citizens of bigger cities in the U.S..⁶³ The proposition appeared quite simple: provide basketball games during the nights when hockey did not play and sell tickets to fans to make a profit. These eleven new BAA teams, however, needed to create their teams mainly from college players as the NBL obtained most of the professional stars.⁶⁴ Before they established a draft process similar to that of the National Football League (NFL), the BAA used to draft players provincially and select those from colleges in close proximity to the team’s city.⁶⁵ Although this may have led to some uneven

⁶¹ Goudsouzian, “Basketball,” 250-251.

⁶² Surdam, *The Rise of the National Basketball Association*, 43.

⁶³ Surdam, *The Rise of the National Basketball Association*, 20.

⁶⁴ Surdam, *The Rise of the National Basketball Association*, 28.

⁶⁵ Surdam, *The Rise of the National Basketball Association*, 41.

distribution of talent, owners employed this strategy to attract a local audience so that they could continue to watch their favorite players in the professional league.⁶⁶ Prior to the inaugural season, it appeared that maybe the BAA would find success with their new teams and sell the same amount of tickets as other professional sports did in places like New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. The owners' wishes, however, did not come true. Four teams out of the eleven ceased operations after the first season given the impossibility to turn a profit with such low audience numbers.⁶⁷ Despite being concentrated in the northeast and Midwest regions of the U.S., teams could barely afford the travel costs for away games and overall did not employ a sound financial strategy. BAA players did not receive much already in salary and the success of the NBL became too hard to match. A merger became these suffering owners' only hope.

The merger helped to alleviate some financial troubles, but professional basketball still struggled to create a sense of enthusiasm among the fans. In comparison to the merger of the NFL and the American Football League, this process appeared simpler given the two leagues did not have any overlap with cities between them.⁶⁸ The multitude of cities with a professional basketball team showed signs of hope for the future of the National Basketball Association (NBA). Prior to the official unification of the two leagues, four teams from the NBL switched to the BAA on May 10, 1948, given its potential for growth.⁶⁹ These teams resided in major basketball cities, such as Minneapolis and Indianapolis, causing the remaining teams in the NBL to suffer. About a year later on August 3, 1949, the official merger materialized, and the NBA

⁶⁶ Surdam, *The Rise of the National Basketball Association*, 116.

⁶⁷ Surdam, *The Rise of the National Basketball Association*, 24-25.

⁶⁸ Surdam, *The Rise of the National Basketball Association*, 55.

⁶⁹ Surdam, *The Rise of the National Basketball Association*, 56.

became seventeen teams divided into three divisions.⁷⁰ Change did not come without its consequences, however, and NBA teams began to fold due to owners' inability to keep up with operational costs or some small cities' inability to sustain a professional sports team. For the next few years following the merger, the NBA shrunk down to eight teams by the 1954-55 season.⁷¹ Despite efforts to create one league and draw in fans, the loss from insufficient ticket sales remained a significant issue.

Building a professional basketball league not only meant creating opportunities for college players, but it also entailed captivating the American public in order to gain a following. The game of basketball, regardless of how many points put up on the scoreboard, appeared as a boring game to the audience. Poorly established rules and dominating teams led to a lack of interest in the sport – there was no “wow” factor. A few key changes in the NBA allowed the league to survive and progress into the latter half of the twentieth century. In the 1954-55 season, Syracuse Nationals owner Danny Biasone introduced the twenty-four-second shot clock rule in order to allow both teams to maintain possession of the ball throughout the game.⁷² NBA owners hoped to get rid of the ball-hogging days in early professional basketball that made it so mundane. Although the rule change received some complaints, positive shifts in the league such as an “immediate jump in scoring” engaged fans in a more exciting form of entertainment.⁷³ This rule continues to make basketball games fun for the audience – counting down the seconds to warn the offense, or holding on hope that a player will succeed in securing a last-minute win for

⁷⁰ Surdam, *The Rise of the National Basketball Association*, 57.

⁷¹ Surdam, *The Rise of the National Basketball Association*, 58.

⁷² Surdam, *The Rise of the National Basketball Association*, 120.

⁷³ Surdam, *The Rise of the National Basketball Association*, 122.

their team. The newfound suspense of the game kept fans involved, as well as shifted the strategies of both players and coaches.

Change in the NBA developed around the same time that television became extremely popular in the American household. To spread professional basketball more easily across the United States, owners formed deals with newfound broadcasting companies. Not only did television coverage help to gain a larger audience, but it also added a source of revenue for the league to profit from. Beginning in 1948, New York Knicks owner Ned Irish struck an agreement with the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) to “televise their entire schedule in Madison Square Garden” and also their playoff games for about \$200 per game.⁷⁴ The NBA began coverage of all teams in the early 1950s on the DuMont Network, then later upgraded to the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) for \$100,000 per season.⁷⁵ By utilizing television, owners now felt more comfortable financially and teams benefited from the distribution of these revenues. Now basketball fans had the ability to follow not only their local college teams, but also the professional ones that drafted their favorite college stars. The world of professional basketball grew with the rise of television, and owners started to figure out how to present their product as a desirable one.

Creating the NBA did not come without its struggles, one of them being additional competition from a new league in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This new organization, the American Basketball Association (ABA), differed from the typical professional basketball team

⁷⁴ Surdam, *The Rise of the National Basketball Association*, 127.

⁷⁵ Surdam, *The Rise of the National Basketball Association*, 129.

with its “more wide-open, flashy style of offensive play.”⁷⁶ They began to demonstrate some of the freedoms that basketball allowed as both an individual and team-oriented sport, as well as foreshadow the future of the NBA in the late twentieth century. Some unique rules in the ABA such as the 30-second shot clock, the three-point field goal, and using a tri-colored ball, let players demonstrate their shooting talents while having a little more time on offense.⁷⁷

Additionally, the ABA created the slam-dunk contest during its all-star game, a tradition that continues to attract millions of fans to this day.⁷⁸ Aside from the new and inspirational approach to the sport, the ABA did not have the resources to compete with the well-established NBA. Three years after their debut season, discussions to pursue a merger began among NBA owners.⁷⁹ The desire to monopolize on professional basketball, as well as maintain national television coverage and grow their fan base, motivated the bigger league to take over the new one. Only four teams – the Denver Nuggets, the Indiana Pacers, the New York Nets, and the San Antonio Spurs – survived the merger on June 17, 1976.⁸⁰ Although the ABA only lasted about a decade, their impact on the sport can be seen later on in the NBA’s success during the 1980s and 1990s. The league needed to fully embrace these stylistic freedoms of this short-lived league, as well as implement the three-point shot in order to become one of the most popular sports in the country.

⁷⁶ Frank P. Jozsa, “American Basketball Association–National Basketball Association,” in *National Basketball Association Strategies: Business Expansions, Relocations, and Mergers* (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2014), 83, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-10058-6_7.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Jozsa, “American Basketball Association–National Basketball Association,” 85.

⁷⁹ Jozsa, “American Basketball Association–National Basketball Association,” 89.

⁸⁰ Jozsa, “American Basketball Association–National Basketball Association,” 92.

Throughout its growth in the mid-twentieth century, professional basketball significantly impacted the lives of Black athletes and the Black community. According to David Surdam, the NBA's integration story "lacked the drama" that occurred in other sports leagues such as the MLB.⁸¹ In many northern cities and colleges, white and Black players competed often so the decision to integrate for some felt normal. Three players in particular – Chuck Cooper, Earl Lloyd, and Nat "Sweetwater" Clifton – signified the integration of the NBA during the 1950-51 season. The NBA first drafted Cooper, then Lloyd played first in a game, and Clifton signed his high-paying NBA contract the earliest.⁸² Even if this transition to an integrated league appeared simple, travel to more segregated areas in the U.S. remained difficult especially with hotels and restaurants. Most of the country still functioned as a racially separate society, and solving the issue in a basketball arena could not fix what occurred outside of it. Throughout the 1950s, the league continued to integrate their teams but "only fifteen African American appeared on the NBA rosters" by the 1956-57 season.⁸³ The league, therefore, appeared more as a desegregated organization rather than a completely integrated one.

One player in particular, Bill Russell, transformed the sentiment about Black athletes in the NBA. After a successful Olympic games in Australia, Russell signed with the Boston Celtics in 1956.⁸⁴ His defensive style of playing shocked everyone, given his athleticism and ability to steal away shots from some of the best. As stated by Aram Goudsouzian, "Russell played defense the way Picasso painted or Hemingway wrote stories – not simply with excellence but

⁸¹ Surdam, *The Rise of the National Basketball Association*, 81-82.

⁸² Surdam, *The Rise of the National Basketball Association*, 83.

⁸³ Aram Goudsouzian, "Bill Russell and the Basketball Revolution," *American Studies* 47, no. 3/4 (2006): 65, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40643954>.

⁸⁴ Surdam, *The Rise of the National Basketball Association*, 148.

changing the way people thought about the craft.”⁸⁵ A new way of playing basketball evolved from Russell’s career, and he became a superstar-athlete in the U.S.. Russell, along with Bob Cousy and Red Auerbach, led the Celtics to eleven championships in thirteen seasons.⁸⁶ No one could challenge this powerful team, except maybe Wilt Chamberlain. Chamberlain began his professional career with the Harlem Globetrotters, then debuted for the NBA’s Philadelphia Warriors during the 1959-60 season.⁸⁷ A younger player with innate talent and the ability to compete with Russell, Chamberlain’s popularity only increased after his college years. Their rivalry, which began in November 1967, “laid a foundation for the league’s growth.”⁸⁸ Fans felt excited and passionate about the game of basketball, watching as the two players strategically tried to win against each other. Chamberlain and Russell’s popularity also created a shift in the NBA as a whole, inspiring other young Black players to step up and dominate the court. Even with a majority-white following, the sport of basketball became associated with a Black aesthetic – as players demonstrated “grace, improvisation, showmanship, intimidation, (and) individual flair”.⁸⁹ With more and more Black players joining the league later on, following the footsteps of Russell and Chamberlain, the original structure of basketball altered into something new and exciting.

Popularity and revenues increased in the 1950s and 1960s for the NBA, incentivizing athletes to stand up for themselves as both employees and the faces of their franchise. Back then,

⁸⁵ Goudsouzian, “Bill Russell and the Basketball Revolution,” 63.

⁸⁶ Jozsa, “American Basketball Association–National Basketball Association,” 89.

⁸⁷ Surdam, *The Rise of the National Basketball Association*, 134.

⁸⁸ Goudsouzian, “Bill Russell and the Basketball Revolution,” 67-68.

⁸⁹ Goudsouzian, “Bill Russell and the Basketball Revolution,” 74.

college basketball players spent more time obtaining a four-year degree than other sports.⁹⁰ Some would go on to both work and play after graduating, such as joining the AAU or other industrial leagues. If they wanted professional basketball to be their full-time career, however, the league “needed to induce them” with a sufficient salary.⁹¹ Players also had the ability to unionize when they believed the league should have provided more satisfactory working conditions. Bob Cousy, a star for the Boston Celtics, became an “integral part of the players’ efforts to create a player union” in the NBA.⁹² Requests such as a pension from television revenues, a better schedule, and limiting the number of exhibition games arose during the formation of the NBA Players Association (NBPA).⁹³ Catching the attention of both the league commissioner and owners, this new union demonstrated the importance of listening to the players’ voices even if they were small in numbers. Larger action by the NBPA took place when the NBA owners voted to merge with the ABA in 1970. Known as the Oscar Robertson suit, players claimed that “a merger would form a monopoly and restrict player mobility” in the world of professional basketball.⁹⁴ Oscar Robertson, a Black player, served as the NBPA’s president at the time. Similar to reactions of player union requests in the NFL, both the media and fans criticized these high-paid players for demanding even more. Black athletes like Robertson “posed a threat to the social order of white privilege” with their economic status, so the public viewed their participation in the union

⁹⁰ Surdam, *The Rise of the National Basketball Association*, 45.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Surdam, *The Rise of the National Basketball Association*, 141.

⁹³ Surdam, *The Rise of the National Basketball Association*, 141-144.

⁹⁴ Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, “‘Too Black’: Race in the ‘Dark Ages’ of the National Basketball Association,” *The International Journal of Sport and Society* 1, no. 1 (2010): 229, <https://doi.org/10.18848/2152-7857/CGP/v01i01/53864>.

negatively.⁹⁵ Basketball, given its small sized teams, presents a challenge to NBA owners trying to maintain complete control over their players. In an individualistic sport like basketball, standout athletes cannot be replaced as easily. Therefore, when these players speak out and make demands, the NBA has to carefully work to preserve both their public image and accommodate the needs of their stars. The NBPA represents a collective voice, and the individuals within hold the power to create desired changes.

The NBA grew immensely with the Russell-Chamberlain rivalry and the exceptional Celtics team, but experienced a temporary decline in their reputation during the late 1970s. Known as the “Dark Ages” of the NBA, “alleged drug abuse, on-court fisticuffs, and public union struggles” presented the league as stereotypically Black to the public.⁹⁶ Alongside societal changes in the U.S. such backlash against the civil rights movement and the use of “color-blindness,” the league struggled to determine how to effectively embrace blackness while also pleasing their white fans.⁹⁷ The style, skill, and overall athleticism of Black basketball players intimidated those used to a more simplistic way of going about the sport. To make matters worse for the NBA’s image, the *Los Angeles Times* released an article in 1981 claiming excessive cocaine use among players.⁹⁸ The unfortunate stereotype made between Black people, violence, and drugs at the time caused the public to stir about the character of the NBA and their plans to crack down on the issues at hand. Even with emerging stars such as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Julius Erving, the scramble to maintain a positive image overtook this era of the league. Not until

⁹⁵ Schneider-Mayerson, “Too Black,” 229.

⁹⁶ Schneider-Mayerson, “Too Black,” 227.

⁹⁷ Schneider-Mayerson, “Too Black,” 224.

⁹⁸ Schneider-Mayerson, “Too Black,” 225.

the 1980s and the hiring of commissioner David Stern did the NBA begin to see a brighter future ahead.

Basketball fans tend to reminisce about the players of the 1980s and 1990s as the best in NBA history. Those years also happened to be a time when the league worked to reclaim its image by using star players such as Magic Johnson, Larry Bird, and Michael Jordan.

Commissioner Stern, hired in 1984, cleaned up what remained of the “Dark Ages” in the NBA and worked to “obscure its players’ cultural and sociohistorical blackness.”⁹⁹ Only the perceived positive qualities of Black athletes remained, beginning with Johnson’s career for the Los Angeles Lakers. In order to distance themselves from being “too black,” the league utilized Johnson as the “‘cool’ and ‘respectable’” player that amazed white audiences.¹⁰⁰ His rivalry with Larry Bird, who played for the Boston Celtics, revived fans’ interest in the sport once again after a tumultuous few years. The American people loved cutthroat matchups like these, and nostalgia about a “physically tougher, more competitive, not amicable, less globalized... and more masculine” basketball league lingers in the current day.¹⁰¹ For a spectator, it can be more exciting to observe enemies fighting until the very last second to win. Rivalries in all sports engage fans in the games, the teams, and the players as they always hope for that miracle. No one kept the NBA more alive, however, than Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls. Jordan presented qualities such as “toughness... and a mythical, God-like charisma” that has left fans discussing his legacy to this day.¹⁰² Although Jordan distanced himself from discussions of

⁹⁹ Schneider-Mayerson, “‘Too Black,’” 227.

¹⁰⁰ Yagmur Karakaya and Alex Manning, “The NBA Isn’t What It Used to Be: Racialized Nostalgia for ‘90s Basketball,” *Sociological Inquiry* 92, no. 2 (2022): 540, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soin.12473>.

¹⁰¹ Karakaya and Manning, “The NBA Isn’t What It Used to Be,” 538.

¹⁰² Karakaya and Manning, “The NBA Isn’t What It Used to Be,” 546.

politics and social justice during his career, his success as a player and ability to attach himself to the Air Jordan brand changed the league forever. Other professional athletes began to receive endorsements themselves, and their salaries and brand deals significantly increased profits in the NBA.¹⁰³ Athletes transformed into celebrities, with their faces plastered on advertisements for the whole world to see. Professional basketball changed forever from these stars, launching into the 21st century with the sought-out status of a national pastime in the United States.

At the turn of the century, the NBA continued to carefully shape its image in the eyes of the public. The increasing presence of basketball in Black communities influenced the future of the league, as more Black players rose through the ranks in the early 2000s. Additionally, a new form of “black cool,” with an urban and hip-hop dominated style, infiltrated into the culture of basketball.¹⁰⁴ The perceived embrace by league executives of their Black players lasted only a few years, but then a dramatic shift towards more control occurred after the “Malice at the Palace” incident in 2004. At a Detroit Pistons’ home game against the Indiana Pacers, a fight broke out between players after a hard foul by Indiana’s Ron Artest (now Metta World Peace). As the commotion continued, Artest laid out on the scorer’s table and someone from the stands struck him with a full cup.¹⁰⁵ Joined by teammate Stephen Jackson, Artest charged into the stands and began to fight fans.¹⁰⁶ The event escalated quickly and left some fans injured, instilling fear in those who witnessed it either in person or watching at home on television.

¹⁰³ Bruce Schoenfeld, “The Justice League,” *Esquire*, September 25, 2017, <https://www.esquire.com/sports/a12461360/nba-activism/>.

¹⁰⁴ Karakaya and Manning, “The NBA Isn’t What It Used to Be,” 541.

¹⁰⁵ ESPN, “Artest, Jackson Charge Palace Stands,” November 20, 2004, <https://www.espn.com/nba/news/story?id=1927380>.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

Discussions in the days after the fight aggravated stereotypes about Black men in America, which led NBA leaders to make definitive changes in order to alleviate concerns of their white fanbase. Not only did David Stern ban “street” wear during NBA events and restrict the length of shorts afterwards, but he also implemented a minimum age requirement so players could no longer be drafted from high school.¹⁰⁷ This demonstrated a time in which the NBA chose to clean up their image rather than protect their Black athletes, establishing strict standards to take away blackness from the league.

Today the NBA has become a sports league recognized for their inclusivity and social justice initiatives, especially in comparison to others in the United States. Although stars like Michael Jordan used to avoid making political statements in fear of losing sponsorships, today players such as LeBron James and Chris Paul use their larger platforms to be vocal about social issues. According to Bruce Schoenfeld of *Esquire* magazine, NBA players “see political engagement as something approaching a responsibility” in their careers.¹⁰⁸ They give back to their communities in more ways than one, by helping them both financially and vocally when issues arise. High-paying contracts allow professional athletes to do as they please with their earnings, but as fans look up to these individuals for guidance, it has become commonplace to show this type of support. During the beginning of David Stern’s career, however, the NBA as an organization did not tolerate activism on the court. For example, Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, who identifies as Muslim, refused to stand for the national anthem as it went against his beliefs. Stern suspended Abdul-Rauf and issued him “a fine of \$31,707 per game” if he continued his

¹⁰⁷ Karakaya and Manning, “The NBA Isn’t What It Used to Be,” 541.

¹⁰⁸ Schoenfeld, “The Justice League.”

actions.¹⁰⁹ The NBA has experienced quite some change since then and has learned to cooperate more with the players given their influence on the organization's success.

Overall, the NBA grew to become a national pastime in the United States and continues to compete with baseball, football, and hockey leagues. Naismith's goal to bring a more exciting game to the winter months allowed for the creation of a cooperative, fun sport that brings communities together. Pick-up games between strangers happen at the gym, and mini hoops hang from bedroom doors of children as they grow up to love the sport. Individual athletes who rise to fame in the league become known by their infamous moves, such as when a person aims for a shot and yells "Kobe!" Black athletes make up a large majority of the league, and it took many years for their culture and style to be accepted in the NBA. Their influence in the country and world still leads the organization to make careful decisions, but they have become much more accepting of those individuals who have a strong voice that fans listen to the most. As the NBA works towards a more inclusive future with their fairly new commissioner Adam Silver, they appear as a model for other sports leagues still struggling to mix in political engagement while pleasing their fans.

¹⁰⁹ Schoenfeld, "The Justice League."

CHAPTER THREE: CASE ANALYSIS OF ATHLETE ACTIVISM IN THE NFL AND THE NBA

Sports in the United States only grew throughout the twentieth century, as larger professional leagues gained ground and television coverage allowed people all over the country, and soon world, to watch live games in the comfort of their own home. The first two chapters illustrated the historical background and cultural aspects of both the National Football League (NFL) and the National Basketball Association (NBA). In this chapter, I aim to discover how these two leagues are both similar and different in the way that they respond to athlete activism on the field or on the court. Given the prominence of Black athletes in the two sports, I will focus on instances of activism pertaining to issues of race and social justice in the United States. Two specific cases – Colin Kaepernick kneeling during the national anthem in 2016 and the Milwaukee Bucks walkout in 2020 – provoked the leagues to react and respond quickly. Therefore, their actions demonstrated whether or not the leaders of the NFL and the NBA cared more about protecting their public image than showing respect towards the lives of their Black athletes.

Case 1: Colin Kaepernick kneels during the national anthem

On August 26, 2016, during an NFL preseason game, quarterback Colin Kaepernick of the San Francisco 49ers sat on the bench during the national anthem. Although games like this rarely gain attention from fans, photos of Kaepernick began to circulate the internet given that the game was “their first time in uniform” before the actual season began.¹¹⁰ The somewhat controversial nature of the protest elicited responses from fans, players, coaches, and others that

¹¹⁰ Mike Garafolo [@MikeGarafolo]. “He’s Actually Done It All Preseason. No One Noticed. First Time in Uniform Was Last Night. <https://t.co/RkNrPgHZrz>.” Tweet. Twitter, August 27, 2016. <https://twitter.com/MikeGarafolo/status/769498231243993088>.

felt Kaepernick's actions disrespected the flag. His motives, however, strayed far away from the narrative. As he told NFL Media, "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses Black people and people of color".¹¹¹ Incidents of police violence against innocent Black men and women in the U.S., as well as a growing prominence of white supremacy at the forefront of the 2016 presidential election, triggered something in Kaepernick. His success with the San Francisco 49ers brought the team to the 2013 Super Bowl, so fans of the team and of the NFL overall knew him well.¹¹² Using his platform, therefore, to stand up for those who rarely have a voice brought the player great amounts of attention and press. Kaepernick even altered his method, after listening to suggestions from a former Green Beret Nate Boyer and knelt during the national anthem at a September 1st preseason game. Eric Reid, a teammate on the 49ers, joined the protest and after the game Kaepernick announced to donate one million dollars to non-profit organizations in order to advance his cause.¹¹³ Throughout the season, mixed responses from players, coaches, fans, and the overall public to this protest required NFL leaders to tread carefully with their words.

Immediate reactions to Kaepernick both sitting and kneeling during the national anthem led to misinterpretation of his intentions, and discussion focused more on his method rather than his message. For example, a study done by Coombs et al. discovered "how little of the (media)

¹¹¹ Mather, "A Timeline of Colin Kaepernick vs. the N.F.L."

¹¹² Kevin Draper and Ken Belson, "Colin Kaepernick and the N.F.L. Settle Collusion Case," *The New York Times*, February 15, 2019, sec. Sports, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/15/sports/nfl-colin-kaepernick.html>.

¹¹³ Billy Witz, "This Time, Colin Kaepernick Takes a Stand by Kneeling," *The New York Times*, September 2, 2016, sec. Sports, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/02/sports/football/colin-kaepernick-kneels-national-anthem-protest.html>.

coverage actually focused on Kaepernick's message about police brutality and social justice."¹¹⁴ Instead, the public threatened that his actions were anti-military or even anti-American, demanding that he find another way to get his message across. Even after changing to a kneeling position, negative attitudes towards Kaepernick's protest persisted and overshadowed his initial goal of calling attention to the racist policing in America. Fear consumed these fans, burning Kaepernick jerseys and sending death threats, as if no one wanted to confront the current realities of their country.¹¹⁵ Although one might assume that the negativity arose from only one side of the political spectrum, backlash "was not limited to Trump supporters on the right".¹¹⁶ Given that the majority public perceived his protest as anti-American, political figures tiptoed around words of approval for Kaepernick. Positive public reactions, however, slowly uncovered themselves. "Polls showed that huge majorities of Black Americans supported" the protest, as they had no trouble understanding an issue that they most likely experienced.¹¹⁷ Additionally, jersey sales for Kaepernick increased in both the San Francisco 49ers online store and the NFL online store.¹¹⁸ He spoke up when no one else had the courage to do so. This type of action spoke to the fans that looked up to their idols on the field and hoped that they also cared about the world around them. Therefore, the use of his platform to create a stronger voice for the Black community allowed for

¹¹⁴ Danielle Sarver Coombs, Cheryl Ann Lambert, David Cassilo, and Zachary Humphries, "Flag on the Play: Colin Kaepernick and the Protest Paradigm," *Howard Journal of Communications* 31, no. 4 (August 2020): 324, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10646175.2019.1567408>.

¹¹⁵ *Behind the Shield: The Power and Politics of the NFL*, directed by Jeremy Earp.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ Marissa Payne, "Colin Kaepernick's Jersey Sales Soar amid National Anthem Protest Controversy," *Washington Post*, November 27, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/early-lead/wp/2016/09/05/colin-kaepernicks-jersey-sales-soar-amid-national-anthem-protest-controversy/>.

bigger discussions about discrimination and bias to become frequent and inspired other athletes to take a stand as well.

Some NFL players joined in on the action with the start of the regular season and advocated for Kaepernick on the field, while others demonstrated disapproval for his method. The raising of the fist, “an alternative show of support,” occurred on the sidelines of the Los Angeles Rams, the San Francisco 49ers, the Kansas City Chiefs, and the New England Patriots, as well as standing arm in arm with teammates during the national anthem.¹¹⁹ This season-opener happened to occur during the 9/11 anniversary, bringing additional conflict to the matter given its anti-American connotations. Additionally, four Miami Dolphins players took a knee, receiving criticism from public figures like actress Kate Upton who deemed their actions “unacceptable” on that particular day.¹²⁰ Players that chose to participate by raising a fist, linking an arm, or kneeling signified a sense of support towards Kaepernick. African Americans make up over two-thirds of the athletes in the league, standing out as the majority in a sport with a majority white management and fanbase.¹²¹ These actions in 2016, therefore, did not go unnoticed and it demonstrated a sense of unity among these Black players that used to have no autonomy on the field whatsoever. A different kind of response to Kaepernick’s protest came in the form of increased patriotism by players, coaches, and more. Given that many interpreted his actions as an insult to the country and the military, something near and dear to the league’s heart, teams such the Washington Redskins (now Commanders) and Pittsburgh Steelers held the field-

¹¹⁹ Euan McKirdy, “Colin Kaepernick Continues Kneeling Protest Ahead of 49ers Opener,” CNN, September 12, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/09/12/sport/colin-kaepernick-nfl-opening-day-reaction-trnd/index.html>.

¹²⁰ McKirdy, “Colin Kaepernick.”

¹²¹ Ross, *Mavericks, Money, and Men*, 167.

sized flag alongside those in the military during the national anthem.¹²² Their counter-protest proved that the misinterpretation of Kaepernick's message led to a greater emphasis on standing up for America, rather than the already-suffering Black community. National anthem protests in the league, however, would continue amongst players and other league employees for over two years even as criticism persisted following Kaepernick's movement.

Statements from both the San Francisco 49ers and the NFL came in parts over the 2016 season and the years that followed, showing the cautiousness the league took with handling the situation given its cultural background. As a beat writer stated on a 49ers fan site on August 27th, "the NFL is a conservative organization down to its patriotic logo and it's an organization that is heavily intertwined with the military."¹²³ In Chapter One, I detailed the history and culture of the NFL, and how its close ties with patriotism and military tactics such as the pre-game flyover have become a prominent part of its image. Therefore, Kaepernick choosing to kneel on an NFL field during the national anthem went against the pristine American values that the league maintained for several decades, especially since September 11, 2001. After Kaepernick first sat, the 49ers quickly made a statement to recognize the importance of the national anthem during the pre-game ceremony, but also mentioning the "right of an individual to choose to participate, or not" in its celebration.¹²⁴ No one from the team stopped Kaepernick from continuing his protest and they showed support for the freedom of expression that he partook in.

¹²² McKirdy, "Colin Kaepernick."

¹²³ Jennifer Lee Chan, "Colin Kaepernick Sat Quietly in Front of the Gatorade Coolers during the National Anthem." Niners Nation, August 27, 2016, <https://www.ninersnation.com/2016/8/27/12669048/colin-kaepernick-did-not-stand-during-the-national-anthem>.

¹²⁴ Mike Florio, "Kaepernick Sits during National Anthem," *ProFootballTalk* (blog), August 27, 2016, <https://profootballtalk.nbcsports.com/2016/08/27/kaepernick-sits-during-national-anthem/>.

The NFL, on the other hand, barely said a word for those weeks during the preseason and the beginning of the regular season. Sports reporter Juliet Macur described it as “two weeks of conspicuous silence” from the league until commissioner Roger Goodell made a statement on the matter.¹²⁵ Beforehand, only a short sentence responding to the actions of August 26th came from the NFL, stating that “players are encouraged but not required to stand during the playing of the national anthem.”¹²⁶ Goodell appeared more in disagreement with Kaepernick’s actions rather than supporting the overarching idea that players can do whatever they please. Despite pleas from fans that felt threatened by the protest, the NFL remained fairly silent about the whole thing. No words of great support towards those kneeling or raising a fist, but also no words of complete disapproval or immediate penalties towards players as well. Instead, the league chose to let the season run its course and then silently made sure Kaepernick never touched an NFL field for the rest of his life.

Although Kaepernick and others appeared free to protest without consequence during the 2016 NFL season, he quickly became an unemployed free agent after the fact and his removal from the league signified their true feelings about the matter. Free agency left Kaepernick in search of a new team for months, a rare occurrence given his history as a former starting quarterback that led the 49ers to a Super Bowl. No one even signed him as a backup quarterback, leading to suspicion that the league “blackballed” him due to his actions from the previous season.¹²⁷ The amount of attention Kaepernick received when he knelt during the national

¹²⁵ Juliet Macur, “Colin Kaepernick’s Anthem Protest Leaves the N.F.L. Necessarily Uneasy,” *The New York Times*, September 8, 2016, sec. Sports, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/08/sports/football/colin-kaepernick-anthem-protest-nfl-roger-goodell.html>.

¹²⁶ Mather, “A Timeline of Colin Kaepernick vs. the N.F.L.”

¹²⁷ Mather, “A Timeline of Colin Kaepernick vs. the N.F.L.”

anthem appeared undesirable to teams hoping to stay uninvolved, and the possibility that NFL leaders took part in this decision remains speculation to this day. Despite the fact that national anthem protests continued into the next season, if the league could remove its initial instigator, it may be easier to salvage their public image and then slowly silence the other participants as well.

Other players, not just Kaepernick, experienced career consequences due to their actions of protest on the field as well. In a study performed by David Niven, he found that after the 2017 season “30% of protestors experienced a reduction in guaranteed payment” versus the “22% of non-protestors” who received a reduced contract, a statistically significant result.¹²⁸ Additionally, Niven found that 55% of protestors moved to a new team from the 2017 to the 2018 season, a significant difference from the non-protesting players even if their performance on the field appeared the same.¹²⁹ His study also mentions that these players still remained on active rosters, in contrast to Kaepernick, but the changes in salary and increased movement suggests that the NFL owners, general managers, and coaches felt more inclined to get rid of those more likely to protest. The employment risk associated with participating in national anthem protests played a role in the choices these players made on the field, and it became clear that the league had full control over their futures. Additionally, Niven described a difference between players who chose to protest and those who did not. The participants consisted mainly of well-liked players and those picked in the first-round of the NFL draft, signifying that teams considered them irreplaceable and therefore they did not experience as much consequence in the next season.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ David Niven, “Stifling Workplace Activism: The Consequences of Anthem Protests for NFL Players,” *Social Science Quarterly (Wiley-Blackwell)* 101, no. 2 (March 2020): 648, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12756>.

¹²⁹ Niven, “Stifling Workplace Activism,” 650.

¹³⁰ Niven, “Stifling Workplace Activism,” 644.

The power of the league to determine the future of these athletes and their employment status meant that NFL leaders could do as they pleased to completely shut down national anthem protests. Athletes wanted to maintain their stable, high-paying jobs and now understood the potential risk of taking a knee on the field.

Once the league chose to erase national anthem protests from their public image entirely, they set themselves up for a difficult future of maintaining neutrality in a country experiencing frequent incidents of racist policing and violence. In 2018, team owners ruled that “players can no longer kneel” without punishment.¹³¹ Not only did kneeling have an effect on contracts in the year prior, but now players did not even have an opportunity to continue their protest on the field. NFL leaders silenced the movement altogether, a decision that would come to “haunt” them later on in 2020 during the George Floyd protests.¹³² Additionally, the league continued to deal with a legal case after Kaepernick remained unemployed for several months during the season. Kaepernick accused the NFL of “colluding to keep him out of the league,” as his experience on the field should have provided him with an opportunity to be at least a back-up quarterback.¹³³ Instead, many novice quarterbacks received contracts and Kaepernick sat at home with no opportunity to jump back into a career in football. NFL leaders did their best to erase him from league history, but he would not back down without a fight. The collusion case continued for a few years before reaching a settlement in February 2019.¹³⁴ Lawyers left the public uninformed about the details of the settlement, such as possible monetary compensation

¹³¹ Mather, “A Timeline of Colin Kaepernick vs. the N.F.L.”

¹³² *Behind the Shield: The Power and Politics of the NFL*, directed by Jeremy Earp.

¹³³ Mather, “A Timeline of Colin Kaepernick vs. the N.F.L.”

¹³⁴ Draper and Belson, “Colin Kaepernick and the N.F.L. Settle Collusion Case.”

from the league to the affected players. The NFL wanted to move on from the Kaepernick era and by paying their way out, they could live in a future without any more risk to the league's image.

About a year later, however, the murder of George Floyd ignited a new movement across the country, and across the globe. Given the strength of these protests, and the conversations that arose from them in response to racism and police violence in the United States, the NFL could no longer exist in the background and continue their play without change. Discussions began to allow players to wear helmet decals or jersey patches to recognize "those impacted by systemic racism and police brutality."¹³⁵ Although a small step in the right direction, this type of performative activism that exists on helmets and fields of NFL teams does not allow players the freedom to act on their own accord. The league still maintains full control, making sure to carefully execute their public image with these new changes and leaving their players to speak up mainly through social media. Additionally, as the NFL appears to accept a more progressive mindset, they remain fairly silent on their history with Kaepernick and his banishment from professional American football.¹³⁶ It may appear that players have more freedom to speak on social issues, but the extreme control maintained by the league remains and consequences such as fines still ensue.

Overall, Colin Kaepernick's movement in 2016 sparked a new conversation on how an organization like the NFL reacts and responds to athlete activism on the field. As the public grappled with the fact that he chose to kneel during the national anthem, connecting his actions

¹³⁵ NFL, "NFL Discussing with Players Social Justice Patches; Black National Anthem to Be Played Week 1," July 2, 2020, <https://www.nfl.com/news/nfl-players-discussing-social-justice-decals-patches>.

¹³⁶ Ken Belson, "The N.F.L. Embraces Progressive Action, but Not Yet Kaepernick," *The New York Times*, June 12, 2020, sec. Sports, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/12/sports/football/nfl-protest-colin-kaepernick-activism.html>.

to an anti-military and anti-American mindset. Kaepernick's message, however, aimed to focus on the police violence against the Black community in the country and used his public platform to speak up. While his team at the time, the San Francisco 49ers, demonstrated support for his protest, the league avoided statements of both encouragement and condemnation in order to carefully preserve their public image. Supporting evidence also found that the NFL quietly worked to pay less money to those who did protest, as well as blackballing Kaepernick and his teammate Eric Reid from the league completely. This exile of players who chose to speak up for their communities suffering in the United States demonstrates how the NFL will choose to put the needs of the league first, rather than their own players. In the next chapter I will illustrate how the NFL's leadership and culture heavily influenced this reaction and response to Kaepernick.

Case 2: The Milwaukee Bucks walkout during a playoff game

Exactly four years later from when Kaepernick first sat on the bench, the Milwaukee Bucks staged a walkout in response to the shooting of Jacob Blake. During the summer of 2020 sports leagues all over the world navigated their seasons with extreme caution due to the raging COVID-19 pandemic. The coronavirus dominated media headlines and public discussion for months, but so did incidents of police violence against the Black community in the United States. With more free time to watch television, scroll through social media, or even sit down and read a newspaper article, people began to pay closer attention to these acts. One in particular, the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, led to an outburst of protests across the nation. As the National Basketball Association (NBA) set up to play their very delayed season that summer, players such as Kyrie Irving began to question "whether their presence on the basketball courts

would distract from more important work being done in the streets.”¹³⁷ With a majority-Black league like the NBA, basketball did not appear significant compared to the blatant racism occurring throughout the country that cost people their lives. Despite this initial thought to delay the season even more, the league began to play in their bubble at Disney World. Then on August 23, 2020, police in Kenosha, Wisconsin shot Jacob Blake, a Black man, seven times and left him partly paralyzed.¹³⁸ Unnecessary police violence struck the U.S. once again, only a few months after Floyd’s death. Kenosha, a city only a 40-minute drive from the Milwaukee Bucks’ home, resonated with these players as they prepared to take on the Orlando Magic in the first-round of the playoffs.¹³⁹ Instead of heading to the court, the Bucks sat in their locker room for three hours “attempting to reach the attorney general of Wisconsin, Josh Kaul,” in order to determine a course of action as a team and craft a statement of demands.¹⁴⁰ Their walkout created a domino effect, postponing the rest of games for that day and pausing the playoffs indefinitely. Reactions and response to this protest remained quite positive from other players, sports leagues, coaches, and owners, demonstrating NBA’s acceptance of activism on the court.

After gathering in the locker room, the Bucks spoke to the press to express their concerns and explain their decision to not play. Led by players George Hill and Sterling Brown, the team spoke of the racial injustices that plague the U.S. and urged that “the officers (who shot Blake)

¹³⁷ Tania Ganguli, and Dan Woike, “NBA Players Refuse to Play Games over Jacob Blake Shooting,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 26, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/sports/story/2020-08-26/nba-players-discuss-boycott-of-playoff-games-jacob-blake-shooting>.

¹³⁸ Christina Morales, “What We Know About the Shooting of Jacob Blake,” *The New York Times*, November 16, 2021, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/article/jacob-blake-shooting-kenosha.html>.

¹³⁹ Ganguli and Woike, “NBA Players Refuse.”

¹⁴⁰ Ganguli and Woike, “NBA Players Refuse”; Shams Charania and Joe Vardon, “Bucks Stage Walkout, All of Wednesday NBA Playoff Games Postponed,” *The Athletic*, August 26, 2020, <https://theathletic.com/2025253/2020/08/26/sources-bucks-players-in-serious-talks-about-sitting-out-game-5-vs-orlando/>.

be held accountable.”¹⁴¹ As these athletes stood together, united behind a well-crafted statement, it showed great contrast from the more individualistic protest that NFL players participated in years prior. Brown addressed the inaction of public officials “despite the overwhelming plea for change,” and explained that the “focus today cannot be on basketball.”¹⁴² The loss and hurt of the Black community in America overpowered a sport played quite frequently, and nothing else mattered to the Bucks other than justice for Jacob Blake. By using their allocated game time for something other than basketball, it showed both NBA leaders and fans what these players really cared about at the end of the day. No one appeared to worry about losing their job or receiving a decrease in pay like the NFL players, which attributes to the culture the NBA has created surrounding social justice and Black activism over the past decade.

The shift to embracing activism in the NBA, however, did not occur until the appointment of Adam Silver as the commissioner in 2014. Silver’s career in the league began around the same time that the Donald Sterling tape leaked, which brought about a great amount of controversy as Sterling owned the Los Angeles Clippers. His recording captured him “reprimanding his girlfriend for posting a photo of herself with a Black man, who happened to be Magic Johnson.”¹⁴³ He spoke in an offensive tone about both Johnson and Black people in general, a tone that would not be tolerated in the U.S. in the twenty-first century. Silver did something unexpected by most, and “banned Sterling for life from the NBA.”¹⁴⁴ Standing up to a team owner like this had never been done before, and Silver demonstrated his assertiveness as

¹⁴¹ Charania and Vardon, “Bucks Stage Walkout.”

¹⁴² Ganguli and Woike, “NBA Players Refuse.”

¹⁴³ Schoenfeld, “The Justice League.”

¹⁴⁴ Schoenfeld, “The Justice League.”

the new leader of the league. Additionally, a much-needed change in the way the NBA treated its Black players, fans, and others involved came along with this decision. In the past, the league appeared to be accepting of its Black athletes. NBA leaders such as former commissioner David Stern, however, cared more about the league's public image and only chose to embrace the perceived positive aspects of Black culture. Given that the Black Lives Matter movement began around the same time Silver became commissioner, his actions meant a lot to those in the league that hoped to participate in the movement publicly. Since then, his acceptance allows players to stand up for what they believe in and use their platforms for the greater good.

Reactions to the Bucks' protest remained fairly positive from fellow NBA players and other sports leagues. As word spread that the Bucks refused to play, "a swell of support and anger poured over social media."¹⁴⁵ Figures like LeBron James felt angry about the never-ending police violence against the Black community, and therefore passionately supported what this Milwaukee team chose to do. Additionally, a few MLB teams such as the Milwaukee Brewers chose to postpone their games, recognizing that sports could wait a few days in order to address more pressing issues.¹⁴⁶ Messages of support flooded in from American football players as well, an interesting factor given the recent history of the NFL and activism. Despite suppression from NFL owners and commissioner Goodell, individual players still spoke up about these issues from time to time. Kenny Stills, a former wide receiver and known activist-athlete, at the time noted that the "NBA is showing us how it's done."¹⁴⁷ A sense of envy felt by players of other sports

¹⁴⁵ Ganguli and Woike, "NBA Players Refuse."

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ben Golliver, "Sports Come to a Halt: NBA, WNBA, MLB, MLS Postpone Games as Players Protest Jacob Blake Shooting," *Washington Post*, August 27, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2020/08/26/bucks-boycott-nba-playoff-game/>.

organizations watching the Bucks protest without consequence demonstrates the differences in culture between the NBA and more conservative leagues like the NFL. Sociologist Harry Edwards commented on the Bucks' actions in relation to the NFL, stating that Goodell "has to be blind not to see he has some issues here that he's going to have to deal with up front with the players."¹⁴⁸ Edwards pointed out the clear differences in treatment between the players of the NBA and those of the NFL, and how both commissioners reacted to instances of athlete-activism during scheduled game time. Given the number of instances of police violence in the years leading up to 2020, however, this protest by the Bucks felt different and supportive responses followed.

Criticism still lingered despite the mainly positive response to the action done by the Bucks and the NBA. Donald Trump, the president at the time, made a comment that the league "had become too political."¹⁴⁹ Statements similar to this one tend to arise when organizations supposedly unrelated to politics begin to participate in activism or publicly promote civic duty. Although actions like these should be considered the norm, their association with the left became more prominent during the 2010s. Therefore, when leagues such as the NBA made political engagement a part of their image, critics claimed that sports and politics should never mix. Given that people view sports as a neutral activity, where fans from all backgrounds come together behind one team, objection results when teams or leagues attend to the societal issues that surround them. Additionally, players in both the NFL and the NBA received criticism for protesting because of their financial status in comparison to the average American citizen. A

¹⁴⁸ Golliver, "Sports Come to a Halt."

¹⁴⁹ Kevin Liptak, "Trump Stays Silent on Jacob Blake Shooting but Vows to Stop Violent Protests and Slams the NBA | CNN Politics," CNN, August 27, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/27/politics/donald-trump-jacob-blake/index.html>.

financially stable person protesting and being able to “take the night off from work” without consequence appears unfair to those who do not have that luxury in their typical day job.¹⁵⁰

Although these players hope to use their large public platform to advocate for others, their privilege will sometimes overshadow their true intentions in the public eye. The Bucks’ protest during the 2020 playoffs received a fairly positive response, and the actions of NBA leaders allowed them to execute it peacefully.

Because the protest postponed the NBA playoffs, statements from both the Milwaukee Bucks owners and league executives followed shortly after. Additionally, remaining teams and their players held a meeting to discuss next steps to address these issues. The refusal to play a game typically results in “a \$2.5 million fine” to the team if enforced by the league.¹⁵¹ No such thing came from the NBA, however, demonstrating an opportunity to take a different approach. Although the Bucks’ actions caught many by surprise, the owners showed their full support for the players with question. In a joint statement, they clarified their intention to “continue to stand alongside them (the players) and demand accountability and change.”¹⁵² Not only did the owners approve of the protest, but also fully advocated for the issue at hand. Commissioner Silver’s attitude towards political engagement also meant that no negative consequences followed the Bucks’ protest. Instead, a meeting of the 13 remaining playoff teams gathered to decide whether or not continuing their season made sense at a time like this in the United States.¹⁵³ Basketball no longer felt like a first priority. NBA players had the ability to meet and discuss amongst

¹⁵⁰ Liptak, “Trump Stays Silent.”

¹⁵¹ Charania and Vardon, “Bucks Stage Walkout.”

¹⁵² Golliver, “Sports Come to a Halt.”

¹⁵³ Ganguli and Woike, “NBA Players Refuse.”

themselves what to do, instead of league executives deciding for them. Not only did athletes take action, but so did NBA employees when over 100 of them walked out to demand justice for Jacob Blake.¹⁵⁴ Similar to the Bucks, a letter from employees demanded the NBA leaders to directly address these issues and expressed that human lives hold more importance than business. In contrast to the NFL, where players felt isolated for taking a stand on the field, the NBA showed support towards the Bucks' actions. They still maintained a cautious eye, however, as they did not want to see the walkout end the season completely or turn into something much bigger that the organization could not handle.

Although instances of athlete activism in NBA arenas began years before the Bucks walkout, the year of 2020 brought about a new wave of political action in the organization. Other professional sports teams observed how well the NBA handled the situation, choosing to postpone games and discuss issues as a group before continuing with the playoffs. LeBron James and Chris Paul even took the time to speak to political leaders such as President Barack Obama. He provided advice to these players on how to proceed with the situation, and reportedly “urged the players to return to the court and form a committee to help their agenda.”¹⁵⁵ Even though some may have preferred to end the season right then and there, the playoffs continued but with the motivation to keep advocating for these issues. Not only could it be seen on social media or on the streets, but also in the November 2020 election. According to Sean Gregory of Time Magazine, “more than 95% of NBA players wound up registering for the 2020 election

¹⁵⁴ Malika Andrews, “Source: More than 100 NBA Employees Walk out, Join Protest,” August 28, 2020, https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/29759244/source-100-nba-employees-strike-friday-push-social-justice.

¹⁵⁵ Ricky O'Donnell, “How Barack Obama Helped Convince NBA Players to End Their Strike and Return to Play,” SBNation, August 29, 2020, <https://www.sbnation.com/nba/2020/8/29/21406770/barack-obama-nba-players-lebron-james-strike-chris-paul-meeting-call>.

compared to just 22% who voted in 2016.”¹⁵⁶ Actions that occurred over the summer directly impacted how the league made external commitments in later months to support political engagement amongst their fans and employees. During a razor-thin presidential election in 2020, the NBA set up voting locations in several arena such as Atlanta, Detroit, Dallas, Orlando, Phoenix and more.¹⁵⁷ Additionally, those a part of the NBA now know how the organization will respond if a player or a team decides to protest for a social cause in the future. No one will fear pushback from owners or executives, and the guaranteed contracts of the NBA will allow players to continue their careers regardless of their actions.

Overall, both the leaders of the Milwaukee Bucks and the NBA handled the walkout for Jacob Blake with flexibility and patience. Allowing the teams to converse together and determine how the rest of the playoffs would proceed demonstrated not only the freedom of the players, but also the ability for them to organize together effectively. The general public and fans of the NBA felt inspired by the actions of the Bucks and others, taking a step back to realize that basketball was not of the utmost importance at the time. Other sports leagues in season such as the MLB also postponed games in order to advocate for Jacob Blake, bringing attention to issues that mattered much more. Because the NBA gave players the opportunity to mobilize without consequence, it positively impacted the future of activism in the league. Political action remains a significant part of the NBA, endorsed by the commissioner Adam Silver and carried out by both players and coaches each season.

¹⁵⁶ Sean Gregory, “Chris Paul on the Legacy of the NBA Strike, 1 Year Later,” *Time*, August 26, 2021, <https://time.com/6092807/chris-paul-nba-strike/>.

¹⁵⁷ NBA.com, “NBA Arenas & Facilities Being Used for 2020 Election,” Accessed April 17, 2023, <https://www.nba.com/nba-arenas-polling-place-voting-center-2020-election>.

CHAPTER FOUR: OFFENSE OR DEFENSE?

“The guys who are most vocal in the NBA are the best players.”

- Aaron Rodgers, *ESPN Magazine*¹⁵⁸

Over the past century, the National Football League and the National Basketball Association have come to dominate the professional sports scene in the United States. Both started as many smaller leagues that eventually formed into two powerful organizations, learning and growing with the times that surrounded them. Additionally, as integration ensued in the 1940s and 1950s, Black athletes began to emerge as stars in both American football and basketball. This led leaders of the NBA and the NFL to implement certain strategies to keep a clean image, given the negative stereotypical image of a Black man in the twentieth century. No player could cross the line without consequence, no player could speak up without criticism. In modern day America, racism and police violence remains a societal issue. The force of the Black Lives Matter movement led athletes of both the NBA and the NFL to use their public platforms to speak up, especially those who identified closely with the issues at hand. In Chapter Three, I discussed two cases of this type of activism, illustrating how the general public and leaders of each league reacted and responded to players' actions. This final chapter will analyze how the culture and structure of both the NFL and the NBA played a role in their responses to activism, as well as their differences in leadership styles and power dynamics.

¹⁵⁸ Mina Kimes, “The Search for Aaron Rodgers,” *ESPN The Magazine*, August 30, 2017, https://www.espn.com/espn/feature/story/_/page/enterpriseRodgers/green-bay-packers-qb-aaron-rodgers-unmasked-searching.

A militaristic, command-and-control structure in the National Football League turns players into pawns, closely adhering to the demands of their coach and team owners. Chapter One details the foundation of American football, and Walter Camp's strategy of order and obedience on the field. Additionally, the sport grew at a time when the societal structures of the United States began to change into a more industrial one. Most Americans "are employees of corporations or government... given orders by a boss", which can be seen on the football fields when a coach draws a play for offense or defense to follow.¹⁵⁹ This does not mean to say that players such as the Quarterback or the Running Back do not have independent minds when they respond to the defense in a spontaneous way, but coaches and coordinators structure the majority of their plays for them. Limiting freedom and maintaining control over athletes on the field appears unique to American football. In baseball, players respond to the batter and try to get the other team out by throwing the ball across the diamond. Pitchers and catchers do communicate about which type of pitch to throw, but managers must trust their players pitch by pitch, with rare exceptions. Basketball also retains some sort of playbook, usually to set up a screen so that another player has room to take an open shot. What differentiates American football from baseball or basketball is the stop-and-go of the game. Offense and defense squads huddle together to determine their next move, receiving insight from the sidelines and coordinators in the box. The quarterback cannot throw the ball without letting his offense know how to set up, a strict order similar to that of the military. Failure of even one player to do their assigned part can quickly lead to disaster.

Control and obedience not only exist on the football field, but also off the field when the owners and league executives step in. Fines charged towards players, whether it be for excessive

¹⁵⁹ Easterbrook, *The King of Sports*, 265-266.

celebration or any action that could tarnish the NFL’s image, signify that league leaders’ “authority is intact and not to be questioned.”¹⁶⁰ Although Colin Kaepernick never received a fine for his protests during the 2016-2017 season, the NFL had no issue demonstrating their control by completely blacklisting him from the league in the years following. NFL Commissioner Goodell publicly expressed his disagreement with Kaepernick’s actions as well, making his stance apparent to other players as they pondered the consequences of joining in on the movement. American football, a sport “willfully cloaked in Americana,” would never tolerate those who knelt.¹⁶¹ Such action existed outside of the norm, and outside the bounds of obedience and control deeply ingrained in its culture. No matter how many players or coaches knelt in solidarity with Kaepernick, they could not escape the strict structures that employed each and every one of them.

The game of basketball, in contrast, allows for a balance of individuality and cooperation that can be reflected both on and off the court. Instead of the stop-and-go structure of American football, basketball leaves teams with only a matter of seconds to make a basket and gain points before the opponent receives the ball. Therefore, the National Basketball Association’s emphasis on passing to increase ball movement requires “interdependent cooperation” from all players.¹⁶² Some may argue that franchise players dominate their NBA teams, such as Michael Jordan or Stephen Curry whose scoring abilities appear unmatched. Without Scottie Pippen or Draymond Green, however, neither of these star athletes would be as successful on the court in terms of

¹⁶⁰ Phillip Lamarr Cunningham, “‘Please Don’t Fine Me Again!!!!’: Black Athletic Defiance in the NBA and NFL,” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 33, no. 1 (February 1, 2009): 47, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723508328630>.

¹⁶¹ Macur, “Colin Kaepernick’s Anthem Protest.”

¹⁶² David Hollander, *How Basketball Can Save the World: 13 Guiding Principles for Reimagining What’s Possible*, 1st ed. (New York: Harmony Books, 2023), 4.

wins and championships. As professor David Hollander wrote, players like Green work to balance their “individual actions with those of his teammates in order to achieve... a championship.”¹⁶³ Basketball coaches, therefore, create plays that allow the team to work together and successfully complete a field goal before the shot clock runs out. An offensive screen, a pass across the paint, or even a distraction for the defense all adds up to a win, with each and every player contributing. Even with some pre-constructed moves, most of basketball remains quite spontaneous and out of the coaches’ control.

Events during the 2020 NBA playoffs demonstrate that their teamwork not only exists on the court, but also within the very structures that hold the organization together. When the Milwaukee Bucks chose to walkout in protest of the Jacob Blake shooting, coaches, owners, and league executives respected the players’ time and let them converse amongst themselves on how to proceed. No one stepped up and commanded them to go play, instead the Bucks’ owners constructed a statement of support for the team. Actions by NBA commissioner Adam Silver and other organizational leaders exemplified servant leadership, prioritizing their players' needs over their own. Robert Greenleaf, known as the founder of servant leadership, calls for “people within social institutions, including businesses, to take responsibility for their values” when leading others.¹⁶⁴ Therefore, employees of the NBA have more of a voice in decision-making processes, as well as cooperate with their leaders to create positive change. Rather than solely focusing on profits or image when things go awry, the NBA provides an accepting environment for athlete activism and respects their players’ freedoms.

¹⁶³ Hollander, *How Basketball Can Save the World*, 29.

¹⁶⁴ Richard A. Couto, “Social Capital Theories,” in *Encyclopedia of Leadership*, edited by George R. Goethals, Georgia J. Sorenson, and James MacGregor Burns, 4:1450, Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Reference, 2004, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3452500353/GVRL?sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=0bf5939f>.

The NBA's guaranteed contracts provide employees with security, while the NFL replaces their employees often, illuminating a key difference in the freedoms of players in the two leagues. American football teams require a large number of players, as well as a coaching staff that extends from small position-coaches to bigtime coordinators. In comparison to the game of basketball, which has a team size around 12-15 players and only five on the court at a time, American football has many moving parts and requires upwards of 53 players.¹⁶⁵ Therefore, the NFL does not have trouble signing young players that are willing to receive less salary than a well-seasoned player, which leads them to replace fading veterans without hesitation. Franchise players and star quarterbacks tend to stick around, but those that cannot be identified by the average fan rarely endure long NFL careers. Colin Kaepernick's release from the NFL, however, remains a unique case given his background in the league. After the 2016-2017 season when he became a free agent, not a single team looked to hire him as a backup quarterback. His years of experience as a starting player did not matter, as his kneeling angered both fans and employees alike. Teams chose to sign young players with less skill, but also less controversy, which appealed more to owners. Because the NFL has the ability to get rid of those who step out of line and replace them with ease, their tolerance of athlete activism is quite low.

Contracts and pay structure differ greatly between the NBA and the NFL, as NBA players receive guaranteed payments and more revenue overall per player. Matthew Epstein details some of the key discrepancies in the contracts of both leagues:

“When a player signs a fully guaranteed contract, the player will actually receive all of the agreed-to compensation over the term of the contract-with room for more depending

¹⁶⁵ Mike Lukas, “NFL vs NBA: Revenue, Salaries, Viewership, Ratings,” World Sports Network, August 27, 2018, <https://www.wsn.com/nfl/nfl-vs-nba/>.

on agreed-upon incentives. Even if a team cuts that player from the roster, the team must pay out the remainder of the player's contract."¹⁶⁶

Although professional athletes tend to make quite a lot of money, NFL contracts limit the amount that players can receive depending on a few types of “guarantees.”¹⁶⁷ If a player loses skill over the years or stops play due to injury, compensation may decrease regardless of the initial number declared when the contract began. As discussed in Chapter Three, David Niven’s study proved that protesting athletes in the NFL received less guaranteed money the following year due to their actions in the 2016-2017 season.¹⁶⁸ Due to the nature of contracts in this organization, cutting pay for NFL players can occur even when they utilize their freedoms as citizens. If one complains about substantial pay cuts, however, it only hurts the reputation of the athlete and not the franchise. The public views professional athletes as people that make millions of dollars each year, and hearing players ask for even more compensation makes them look ungrateful. Additionally, fans often view management that signs good players at a bargain as smart, given it provides more room in the salary cap to hire others. What often goes unnoticed is that only a small percentage of each team actually receives these high-paying contracts, as revenues cannot be split evenly among 53 players. Coaches would rather keep their best players than increase salaries for those who rarely make it on the field. The frequent displacement of athletes and ability to decrease pay in the NFL allows leaders to maintain full control, discouraging speech on social issues or other types of activism.

¹⁶⁶ Matthew Epstein, “Ball Never Lies: How Guaranteed Contracts Provide NBA Players More Security than NFL Players to Advocate for Social Justice Comments,” *University of Colorado Law Review* 93, no. 1 (2022): 259.

¹⁶⁷ Epstein, “Ball Never Lies,” 260.

¹⁶⁸ Niven, “Stifling Workplace Activism.”

On the other hand, NBA players have the comfort of knowing that they will receive their full salary regardless of any auxiliary factors. Each team in the NBA has a smaller number of players, which allows them to receive more revenues and make higher salaries. No one runs the risk of decreased payment due to injury or participation in activism, as the Milwaukee Bucks walked out with the knowledge that their contract could not be tampered. Additionally, fully guaranteed contracts “severely limit, and arguably eliminate, the flexibility owners have to cut players.”¹⁶⁹ Therefore, a career in the NBA is much more dependable and their athletes do not have to worry about losing the money promised to them by coaches and owners. While the NFL maintains a structure that only allows a few players to experience a long-term career in American football, the NBA can guarantee financial stability for each player from their very first year on the team. Because of this difference between the two leagues, it can be said that NBA players feel more confident in their abilities to speak out on issues of social justice on the court. Other than a potential fine, the Bucks faced no other tangible risks to their careers when they chose to walk out during the playoffs. NFL players, however, must calculate the effects that speaking out on these issues will have on their future. Those with more secure contracts due to their popularity on and off the field may have more freedom, but those less fortunate have less of a choice.

Cultural and structural differences between the NBA and NFL both play a role in their response to athlete activism, but their commissioners as individuals may also have a significant effect. Roger Goodell has been a part of the NFL for over forty years, starting as an intern and moving up through the ranks to become commissioner in 2006.¹⁷⁰ His long career establishes

¹⁶⁹ Epstein, “Ball Never Lies,” 262.

¹⁷⁰ Michael Schotley, “How Roger Goodell Became the Most Powerful Man in Pro Sports,” Bleacher Report, May 8, 2013, <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/1632573-how-roger-goodell-became-the-most-powerful-man-in-pro-sports>.

him as a well-known figure in the sports world, but criticism surrounding his decisions comes quite frequently from both players and fans. For example, Goodell tried to disregard issues surrounding head trauma in the league by covering it up and hiding it from the press.¹⁷¹ Instead of providing care and assistance to both current and former players, he wanted to save face for the NFL and keep a clean image. Other issues in addition to this have led Goodell to experience a career of constant “booing” and a reputation that cannot be fixed. His position as commissioner, however, remains quite secure due to his “bias towards NFL owners.”¹⁷² Because of this, the league tends to shut down or disapprove of any activism that occurs on their fields. Image remains of utmost importance to both Goodell and the owners, and the potential risk of ruining “The Shield” with public protest will not be tolerated. Just recently, a reporter for the NFL Network lost his job after publicly asking Goodell about “the league’s lack of diversity among coaches and executives.”¹⁷³ Even with some minor changes in the NFL’s approach to social justice over the past few years, the commissioner’s focus on keeping a pristine image continues to dominate the league’s decisions.

Adam Silver, commissioner of the NBA, altered the way the league approached social justice advocacy on the court. After graduating from Duke University and University of Chicago Law School, Silver began his career at the NBA in 1992 and served in various executive

¹⁷¹ *Forbes*, “Why Roger Goodell Gets Booed At The NFL Draft...And Everywhere Else He Goes?” May 4, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/cartoonoftheday/2017/05/04/why-roger-goodell-gets-booed-at-the-nfl-draft-and-everywhere-else-he-goes/>.

¹⁷² Schottey, “How Roger Goodell Became the Most Powerful Man in Pro Sports.”

¹⁷³ Madison Williams, “NFL Network Parts With Reporter Who Questioned Roger Goodell About Diversity,” *Sports Illustrated*, March 27, 2023, <https://www.si.com/nfl/2023/03/27/nfl-network-reporter-jim-trotter-questioned-roger-goodell-diversity>.

positions such as Special Assistant to the Commissioner.¹⁷⁴ In contrast to Goodell, his time as a commissioner began at a crucial time in both the United States and the NBA. The rise of the Black Lives Matter movement and the urge that Black athletes had to speak up about issues of race put sports organizations in an interesting position. As mentioned previously in Chapter Three, during his first year as commissioner, Silver banned Donald Sterling from the NBA after tape leaked of him making racist comments. This no tolerance approach came to define Silver's role as an NBA leader as he continues to support those that participate in activism in the league. Additionally, given the power that players in the NBA hold as individuals, Silver works to partner with them on some decision-making processes such as social justice initiatives.¹⁷⁵ His focus on maintaining cooperation, a crucial element in basketball, allows for opportunities such as the meeting of players after the Milwaukee Bucks walkout. Instead of commanding from above as the NBA's leader, Silver and team owners gave time for the remaining playoff teams to talk about next steps. In his visit to his alma mater the University of Chicago, Silver stated the "labor intensive" work of conversing more with these professional athletes in turn creates "mutually beneficial" outcomes.¹⁷⁶ Replacing individuals such as LeBron James or Steph Curry is no option for the NBA, and therefore requires the league's leadership to make well-thought-out decisions. Social justice initiatives in the NBA have become the norm due to the culture that Silver and other NBA leaders established over the years.

¹⁷⁴ NBA Career Opportunities, "Adam Silver," February 2022, <https://careers.nba.com/executive/adam-silver/>.

¹⁷⁵ Cristi Kempf, "Perspectives: NBA Commissioner Adam Silver, JD'88, on Sports, Policy, and Responsibility," The University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy, April 4, 2022, <https://harris.uchicago.edu/news-events/news/perspectives-nba-commissioner-adam-silver-jd88-sports-policy-and-responsibility>.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

The differences between Goodell and Silver as commissioners of these two leagues raise the question of how either of them would perform in the opposite sport. There exists a deep history for the two leaders with their respective sport – Goodell as an intern for the NFL and Silver as a long-time NBA executive since graduating law school. Additionally, Silver’s “lifelong relationship” with basketball, despite never playing or coaching at a high level, makes him a perfect fit for his NBA role.¹⁷⁷ If Goodell had begun his career as an NBA intern instead, he might not have lasted as long unless he adapted to its culture. Social responsibility has been a large part of the league for quite some time, encompassed by owners, coaches, and players. Silver did not completely change the face of the NBA, but merely followed in the footsteps of former NBA commissioner David Stern who also expressed a commitment to social issues in his career.¹⁷⁸ As discussed earlier, the cultures between basketball and American football remain quite different from each other, requiring leaders of a certain standard to maintain these norms. Given the more positive nature of Silver’s career so far, however, some benefits could arise if he led the NFL as commissioner. Despite efforts made by Goodell and the NFL to become more accepting of social justice initiatives, a large shift in their cultural values will need to take place in order to be considered a more progressive organization. If Silver became the NFL commissioner, he may have the opportunity to implement certain changes such as allowing Black athletes to have more of a voice in certain decision-making processes. His academic background in political science and law opens him up to more knowledge about the world around him, and he can better understand the needs of the NFL in order to be successful.

¹⁷⁷ Howard Beck, “Adam Silver’s Lifelong Love of Basketball Will Help Shape Focus in New Role,” Bleacher Report, February 14, 2014, <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/1952962-adam-silvers-lifelong-love-of-basketball-will-help-shape-focus-in-new-role>.

¹⁷⁸ NBA Career Opportunities, “David Stern,” January 2020, <https://careers.nba.com/executive/david-stern/>.

Furthermore, the existing culture of the NBA and NFL may have some influence on how these two leaders adapted to their role as commissioner. Players, owners, and fans do not usually greet dramatic change with open arms, so Silver and Goodell may have chosen to follow closely in their predecessors' footsteps and make gradual adjustments along the way. Ultimately, Goodell and Silver both run major businesses that entertain millions of people. They do what is best to maintain a solid fan base and please team owners, whether that be flashing an American flag or raising a fist.

CONCLUSION

Although activism in sports has existed for decades, the acceptance of it by both team and league leadership has been fairly new. In the past, the NBA did not have the same reaction as they do now towards actions by the Milwaukee Bucks. Recently, however, Silver serves as an example to other sports leaders on how to best approach and incorporate social justice initiatives into a league's structure. Prioritizing the players makes sense, given the amount of revenue and public attention they bring to their teams each year. Using servant leadership and allowing for players to be a part of the decision-making processes of the NBA, creates a more accepting culture overall. Additionally, NBA athletes feel more stable in their career given the nature of their guaranteed contracts. On the other hand, the NFL struggles to change a culture and structure heavily ingrained into their everyday work. Their emphasis on control and masculinity leaves an expectation for players to follow the rules and not ask questions. If they step out of line, much like a soldier disobeying their commander, consequences follow without hesitation. When Colin Kaepernick took a knee in August of 2016, it both inspired and enraged members of the public and sports community. To this day, Kaepernick has not stepped foot on an NFL field to play, remaining unsigned as the league black-balled him for his actions.

A few years later, after the murder of George Floyd in 2020, demands flew towards commissioner Roger Goodell to make a change in their approach to social justice. Although some helmet decals and media posts demonstrated somewhat of a new commitment from the NFL, their control and power over players remains significant. Non-guaranteed contracts make it impossible for NFL athletes to take risks, and only a large transformation of their culture will allow players to enjoy freedoms similar to the NBA. A lot changed in the United States from 2016 to 2020, however, and the differing reactions towards Kaepernick and the Bucks can in part

be attributed to the progression that occurred in those four years. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 forced people to stay in their home and absorb information surrounding police brutality in America quite easily. A call for governments, companies, and other institutions to speak out against racism pushed leaders to make concrete changes, including Silver in the NBA. Even though some NBA players had participated in social justice initiatives beforehand, the response to the walkout closely related to actions by other organizations that year. Further investigation into how the United States changed as a country in the late 2010s could help to explain the public's reaction and response to police brutality.

Additionally, other sports organizations can learn a lesson from the changes initiated by the NBA over the last decade, and we as a society can come to realize that sports and politics are not separate, but one in the same. No one is perfect, and the NBA definitely has room for improvement, but leaders can work to set goals in order to increase Black voices and find ways to support activism on the field or on the court. As Black athletes continue to make up a large percentage of the NFL and the NBA, it remains important to include them on matters once untouched and hire more Black leaders to serve as decision-makers. Instituting these changes will not be an easy task, but recognizing the effects on athletes and the future of sports should open doors for a new type of leadership to arise. As star players in the NFL observe their counterparts in the NBA, they notice the freedom to participate in activism as well as contributions made to solving social issues in a tangible way. Including more Black NFL athletes in future discussions surrounding social justice initiatives can help the league to learn from its own employees and find solutions to become a more inclusive organization. If no efforts are made by Goodell or other NFL leaders, their Black athletes will find another way to retaliate and use their voices to get more fans on their side, possibly risking the massive amounts of revenue

brought in by ticket sales and media interaction. No action leads to reaction, and “the brave” do not wait for permission.

Table 1. Causes and Effects

In order to comprehend how the game structure, league history, and leadership approach have an effect on the response to activism in the two leagues, I have created a table to illustrate how each aspect affects each other. Ultimately, these different causes can help to predict the future of athlete activism in the NBA and the NFL, as well as understand the implications of another athlete or team choosing to protest a social issue in either league.

NBA	NFL
Game Structure	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balance of cooperation & individuality • Emphasis on ball movement • 12-15 players per team • Fast-paced with a 24-second shot clock • More stylistic on offense 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strict order and pre-planned plays • Stop-and-go • 53-person teams • Frequent displacement of players • Obedience towards coaches • Very physical
League History	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Played by people from various racial and ethnic groups in the U.S. • Popular in both urban and rural areas • Integrated during the 1950-51 seasons • Rivalry between Bill Russell and Wilt Chamberlain in the 1960s • “Dark Ages” in the 1970s that targeted drug use and Black culture in the league • Altered rules in order to diminish blackness from their image in the early 2000s • Has become increasingly global, with players and fans in various countries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Once an elite sport that transformed into a working-class one • Reflected the structure of the workplace in the industrial age • Integrated in 1946 after a 13-year ban of Black athletes • Ignorance of Black players for the Quarterback position • Strong relationship with the military <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Pre-game flyover ○ American flags • Identifies as an American sport, with little to no reach in other countries

Leadership Approach	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Socially responsible • Servant leaders • Prioritizing players' needs • Silver's banishment of Sterling during his first year as commissioner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Command-and-control • Image-conscious • Focusing more on needs of team owners • Goodell publicly expressed disagreement with Kaepernick kneeling
How does it alter their response to activism?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Players are a part of the decision-making processes • Fans, coaches, and owners publicly give support • Respectful of individual players and their contributions to the team and community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blackballing players from the league for protesting • Kneeling during the national anthem was interpreted as disrespect towards the flag, which goes against their pro-military image
What does the future look like for athlete activism in these leagues?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More confidence in becoming politically engaged • Face less risk to their careers • Ability to create real change in their communities • Open to new ideas on how to best address societal issues from a sports perspective • Athletes feeling compelled to join the NBA and be a part of this engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being more risk averse • Potential decrease in pay or fines • No job offers • Performative activism through helmet decals and social media • Individual athletes may become more outspoken on social media about the culture • Goodell needs to take time to converse with Black players and make concrete changes

As these two sports leagues continue to maintain popularity in the United States, it is important to understand how they offer two competing visions of American society and citizenship. Differing interpretations of the country affect the actions of fans, players, and leadership when reacting to instances of activism on the field or on the court. The NFL's close relationship with the military and increased patriotism over the years turns athletes into soldiers,

representing their country with strength and masculinity. The game of American football remains fairly secluded by not only country, but also by gender given that women remain mostly on the sidelines as cheerleaders or trainers. Even if women receive the rare chance to be the kicker or play at the youth level, men continue to dominate the sport and the NFL overall. Additionally, team owners such as Jerry Jones have a history of supporting segregation in the United States. A photograph taken in 1957 shows a young Jones in a group of other white men harassing Black students entering a school in North Little Rock Arkansas.¹⁷⁹ When asked about the photo, Jones claims that his presence “was more a curious thing” rather than an explicit act of racism.¹⁸⁰ As a long-time owner of the Dallas Cowboys, Jones holds a lot of power and influence in the decisions of the NFL. As the league continues to face a changing country and world, it will be interesting to see if their vision of America shifts as well.

On the other hand, the NBA has grown into a both a global sport and one that women can participate in as well in their counterpart league, the WNBA. Their league structure allows input from players on how to approach certain issues, giving employees more of a voice on important decisions and creating collaboration between leaders and followers. As an organization that dominates society through entertainment and recreation, the NBA feels a responsibility to support the community and their fans that may face adversity. They also value the individual freedoms of Americans, as seen in their response towards activism on the court. Furthermore, their inclusivity and acceptance of Black leaders early on has allowed the NBA to learn and grow in the past few decades. When Bill Russell became a player-coach for the Boston Celtics in

¹⁷⁹ David Maraniss and Sally Jenkins, “Jerry Jones Helped Transform the NFL, Except When It Comes to Race,” *Washington Post*, November 23, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/interactive/2022/jerry-jones-black-coaches-nfl/>.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

1966, it signified the league's progressive stance on matters of race and the ability for Black men to take on such a role in the NBA.¹⁸¹ Since then, the league has experienced an increase of Black leadership and a diverse community of fans, players, and coaches. Their vision of America is one of racial equity and community, allowing them to progress as an organization and sports league.

Overall, these two differing visions of America in the NFL and the NBA can help us to understand how other organizations may respond to activism given their values, culture, and leadership structures. Future research could discover how companies, entertainment, and other societal institutions have changed or aim to create change in the way that they treat people of color and women, as well as reactions towards the social issues that surround them.

¹⁸¹ Goudsouzian, "Bill Russell and the Basketball Revolution," 61.

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