

St. Louis football players protest Michael Brown murder in pre-game ceremony

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On Sunday, St. Louis Rams pass receivers Tavon Austin, Chris Givens, Jared Cook, Kenny Britt and Stedman Bailey entered the Edward Jones football field using the “hands up, don’t shoot” gesture popularized by protests over the police murder of Michael Brown. The professional football players said they wanted to express their solidarity with the people of Ferguson, the St. Louis suburb that has been put under siege by police and National Guard troops.

“We wanted to show that we are organized for a great cause and [hope] something positive comes out of it,” said wide receiver Britt of the act. Continuing, he added, “I don’t want the people in the community to feel like we turned a blind eye to it... That’s our community. We wanted to let the community know that we support the community.” Expressing his solidarity with the protesters, tight end Jared Cook added, “It takes some guts, it takes some heart, so I admire the people around the world that have been doing it.” Cook expressed his interest in joining those protesting in nearby Ferguson in the upcoming days.

The act was immediately condemned by representatives of the St. Louis Police Officers Association. “As the players and their fans sit safely in their dome under the watchful protection of St. Louis’s finest, they take to the turf to call a now-exonerated officer a murderer, and that is way out of bounds,” stated SLPOA spokesperson Jeff Roorda in a heated letter to National Football League (NFL) executives.

The letter continued, “I know that there are those who say that these players are simply exercising their First Amendment rights. Well I’ve got news for people who think that way. Cops have First Amendment rights too, and we plan to exercise ours.”

In addition to calling for the banning of the players’ right to free speech, Roorda demanded that the NFL

punish them. “Here’s a sports league that penalizes and fines players when they do an end zone dance... There’s certain behavior that should be saved for off the field and this, I think, is one of them,” he stated.

The NFL has indicated that it does not tend to intervene in the issue. “As far as the choice that the players made, no, they were exercising their right to free speech... They will not be disciplined by the club nor will they be disciplined by the National Football League...,” stated Rams’ coach Jeff Fisher on Monday.

In a mealy-mouthed comment, Rams’ chief operating officer Kevin Demoff said his organization believed “it is possible to support both our players’ First Amendment rights and the efforts of local law enforcement to make this a better community.” He added that, following Sunday’s game, he had phoned St. Louis police chief Jon Belmar in order to “[express] regret for any perceived disrespect of law enforcement.”

The players’ act of courage, taking place amid pre-game ceremonies in a sport known for its promotion of nationalism and militarist aggression, demonstrates the degree to which anger over the wave of police killings and military style repression of protesters has gripped the population both nationally and abroad. Demands that the players be silenced are demonstrative of fears felt within ruling class that they are the ones under siege and therefore must resort to ever greater repression.

The Rams players’ act comes as protests have swept the country in response to the St. Louis Prosecutors’ Office decision last week not to charge Officer Darren Wilson in the shooting of the Brown. Protests have continued in recent days, with students at a number of high schools in California, New York, and Maryland staging walkouts in opposition.

In the period after the August 9 killing, protesters opposing police violence have been met with militarized police forces and National Guardsmen in an attempt to break up protest demonstrations across the country. Hundreds of protesters have been swept up in a series of mass arrests for peacefully demonstrating their opposition to the killing.

A number of professional sports athletes have spoken out against the police and in solidarity with the protesters in Ferguson and elsewhere. Benjamin Watson, tight end for the New Orleans Saints expressed his anger with the decision not to prosecute Wilson in a widely publicized comment on the Facebook social media network last week. In the days immediately following the murder of Brown, the entire secondary line of the Washington Redskins adopted the “hands up, don’t shoot” gesture during a game. Speaking of the team’s decision to do so, safety Ryan Clark stated, “Everybody was in it. Everybody was together. It was a really good opportunity to make a statement and be more than football players.”



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