

US national anthem protests at sporting events continue to spread

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Since San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick's refusal to stand for the national anthem before National Football League (NFL) preseason games began in August, in protest of racial injustice and police brutality, his actions have continued to gain support throughout the first three weeks of the NFL's regular season.

Protests have spread throughout the league as well as to college and high school football fields, and to other sports throughout the country. The recent police killings of Terence Crutcher in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Keith Lamont Scott in Charlotte, North Carolina, have contributed to the expansion of the protests.

Last Sunday, protests at NFL games involved more than 40 players representing the Oakland Raiders, Denver Broncos, Miami Dolphins, Los Angeles Rams, Houston Texans, Philadelphia Eagles, San Diego Chargers, Jacksonville Jaguars, Tennessee Titans, Carolina Panthers, Washington Redskins, and San Francisco 49ers.

In Sunday's game in Seattle, Kaepernick was joined by seven other San Francisco teammates who either kneeled or stood with raised fists, up from five players the previous week. Their opponent, the Seattle Seahawks, for the third straight game linked arms together and stood as a demonstration of unity during the national anthem.

In Charlotte, North Carolina, the Carolina Panthers hosted the Minnesota Vikings in the city where angry protests had been taking place in response to the police killing of Keith Lamont Scott.

Carolina Panther star quarterback Cam Newton took the field during pregame warm-ups wearing a black T-shirt emblazoned with the Martin Luther King, Jr. quote, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." Earlier in the week Newton stated that Scott's fatal shooting touched upon a "state of oppression in our community."

Last Sunday also saw Washington Redskins players for

the first time protesting during the national anthem when four players raised their right fists before their game against the New York Giants.

In the Indianapolis Colts game against the San Diego Chargers, Antonio Cromartie became the first Colts player to kneel during the anthem, while five Chargers stood with raised fists, up from two players the week before.

In Jacksonville for the first time, four Jaguars players raised their fists during the national anthem, and their opponent the Tennessee Titans saw two more of their players joining three other teammates in raising their fists.

At the Monday night game between the Atlanta Falcons and New Orleans Saints, after the anthem was played, players and coaches from both teams walked to the center of the field and formed a unity circle by holding hands.

In the days leading up to the Monday night game, many players had expressed their intention of an anthem protest in response to the killings in Tulsa and Charlotte. The NFL, fearing such a protest during its nationally televised game, which took place during the Presidential Debate, orchestrated the show of "unity" in an attempt to diffuse the issue.

Last weekend also saw college and high school football players and students following Kaepernick's lead by engaging in a variety of symbolic protests during the playing of the national anthem.

In most college games, the national anthem is played before the teams take the field. The Big Ten Conference, however, requires their teams to be present during the anthem.

Consequently, players at several Big Ten schools engaged in anthem protests. At East Lansing, Michigan, Michigan State players Delton Williams, Kenney Lyke and Gabe Sherrod held up their right fists during the anthem before their game against Wisconsin.

Several University of Michigan players also had their

fists up before facing Penn State in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Among them were Khalid Hill, Mike McCray, Devin Bush, Elysee Mbem-Bosse and Jourdan Lewis.

At Nebraska, players Michael Rose-Ivey, Daishon Neal and Mohamed Barry also kneeled before the Cornhuskers' game at Northwestern.

Even when players were absent during the anthem, students themselves engaged in protests. Before the University of North Carolina game against the University of Pittsburgh, at Chapel Hill, about 100 black and white students wearing black shirts remained seated with fists raised during the anthem and were joined as at least two UNC band members took a knee, one while raising a fist. Chapel Hill is about 140 miles northeast of Charlotte.

At Baylor, some students in the stands kneeled during the anthem before the game against Oklahoma State.

Earlier at Eastern Michigan University, chanting students marched on the field after last Friday's night game against Wyoming. The students were protesting racist graffiti on the campus earlier in the week.

High school players throughout the country, as well as entire teams (Seattle's Garfield High School) have also participated in similar anthem protests.

Many high school players have been threatened with suspension for such protests, but for the most part, authorities have had to back down.

Junior quarterback Michael Opong at Doherty Memorial High School in Worcester, Massachusetts, said on Twitter that he was told he would be suspended for one game after announcing he would kneel during the anthem before a recent game. It was a decision district officials quickly reversed.

"(Opong) did not violate any school rule when he peacefully and silently protested during the national anthem," Worcester Superintendent Maureen Binienda said in a statement. "He exercised his constitutional rights."

Virtually all coaches and players at Wilson High, a public school in Camden, New Jersey, took a knee during the national anthem. Camden is a predominantly African-American community and one of New Jersey's poorest.

Wilson High coach Preston Brown said he did not ask his team to join him ahead of time, but all but two of his players did so. Afterward, Brown said that he wanted to call attention to social injustices and economic disparities.

"I grew up in poverty, a lot of these kids are growing up in poverty," Brown said. "There's a lot of social injustices and economic disparities. There's issues right here in our own community."

To prevent such protests from spreading to Camden's Catholic Schools, the Catholic Schools Diocese of Camden issued a statement declaring, "We are not public institutions and free speech in all of its demonstrations, including protests, is not a guaranteed right," and players who failed to "demonstrate appropriate respect" by choosing not to stand for the national anthem could face game and team suspensions.

Similar protests by high school football players have taken place in hundreds of schools throughout the country.

In women's professional basketball, a number of players have also participated in anthem protests. New York Liberty guard Brittany Boyd sat on the bench with her head bowed in prayer during the national anthem before Saturday's playoff game against the Phoenix Mercury.

"I don't want to stand up. I choose not to stand up and I sit down and pray," the second-year guard said. "Colin [Kaepernick] and his message about social injustice going on in this country today is something I believe needs change."

Two Phoenix Mercury players who had previously declined to stand, Mistie Bass and Kelsey Bone, knelt through the anthem. Earlier last week, Bass and Bone had drawn national attention for their display before a playoff game against the Indiana Fever, while the entire Fever team also knelt, with the players locking arms.

The willingness of athletes, professional and amateur, to defy the tradition of standing during the national anthem in order to protest police killings, is an expression of an increasing political opposition that is permeating masses of people. While these protests are limited by a racial view of police violence, a problem that effects the entire working class regardless of race or ethnicity, they serve as a healthy example of challenging and questioning the authority of the state.



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