

The National Football League's blacklisting of quarterback Colin Kaepernick

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The National Football League (NFL) opens its season Thursday night without any team having signed quarterback Colin Kaepernick. Last season, while playing for the San Francisco 49ers, Kaepernick began the practice of kneeling during the playing of the national anthem in protest against police killings of African Americans in the United States.

Kaepernick is a 28-year-old biracial man who was raised by the white parents who adopted him. Explaining his actions, he said, "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color. To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder."

Kaepernick added, "This is not something that I am going to run by anybody, I am not looking for approval. I have to stand up for people that are oppressed. ... If they take football away, my endorsements from me, I know that I stood up for what is right."

Despite a concerted media effort to vilify Kaepernick's protest as "anti-American" and unpatriotic, he has gained widespread support from his teammates as well as players on other teams. In the weeks that followed his initial action, several of his teammates joined Kaepernick by kneeling or sitting during the anthem, and several players from other teams engaged in acts of protest. Similar protests by high school and college players took place across the country.

Kaepernick began his career with the San Francisco 49ers in 2011. In his second season he replaced the 49ers' injured starting quarterback and led San Francisco to the Super Bowl. In 2013 he led San Francisco to within one game of the Super Bowl and established himself as the best dual threat (passing and

running) quarterback in football. In 2014 San Francisco failed to make the playoffs and fired its coach. In 2015, in mid-season, Kaepernick lost his starter's job, and subsequently had shoulder surgery and missed the rest of that season.

Last season, when Kaepernick launched his protests, he was still recovering from shoulder surgery and began the year as San Francisco's backup quarterback. He regained his starting position by game six, and was the starting quarterback for all but one of the season's remaining 10 games. His season totals were 2,241 yards passing, sixteen passing touchdowns, four interceptions, and 468 yards running.

Kaepernick finished with a 90.7 quarterback rating last season--higher than some of the NFL's leading quarterbacks such as Eli Manning, Phillip Rivers and Joe Flacco, among others.

After last season, in part because of San Francisco's poor record and chaotic coaching changes--four different coaches in four seasons--Kaepernick opted out of his contract, thereby making himself a free agent available to be signed by any team for this season.

During the eight months of his free agency, no team has offered Kaepernick a contract. The league and its media promoters have asserted that the refusal of any team to offer him a contract stemmed from his poor on-the-field performance and had nothing to do with his protests against police violence.

This claim, however, has been repeatedly belied by coaches and players throughout the league. In June, Seattle Seahawks' coach Pete Carroll said, "Colin's been a fantastic football player and he's going to continue to be.... He's a starter in this league. And we have a starter. But he's a starter in this league, and I can't imagine that someone won't give him a chance to play."

Last month, superstar quarterback Aaron Rogers of the Green Bay Packers told *ESPN Magazine* that “I think he [Kaepernick] should be on a team right now. I think because of his protests, he’s not.”

Richard Sherman, a cornerback for the Seahawks, has insisted that Kaepernick is being blackballed because of his protests. “He played in Chip [Kelly]’s system last year and went 16-4 [touchdown-to-interception ratio] on a bad team. He played well because he’s a good football player. He may not be the best, but he’s better than a lot of these dudes starting.”

Sherman, an all-pro entering his seventh season and a member of the NFL Players Association’s executive committee, doesn’t merely criticize owners, general managers and the NFL commissioner for how the Kaepernick drama has played out. He thinks fellow NFL players--many of whom he believes share his sentiments--need to speak up too.

“Not a lot of guys are willing to step out there,” he said. “So the guys not speaking up for him are doing him a disservice. There should be a lot more guys saying something. Most guys are like, ‘I don’t want my job to end up the same way.’”

We’ve been rivals,” Sherman said. “But it goes beyond football. On the field, I’m an adversary. Off the field, we’re cool. Cordial. You just don’t ever want anything like this to happen to anybody. It’s unfair. He’s out there sacrificing for more people than himself.”

With numerous players and coaches having undermined the NFL’s official line that Kaepernick’s unemployment was entirely football-related, John Mara, the owner of the New York Giants, came forward in late May to acknowledge that Kaepernick’s protests were a problem. He indicated he had received letters from many fans who claimed they would never come to another game if any player did what Kaepernick had done.

However, Kaepernick continues to receive widespread support from players and fans. There are just under 1,700 players on active NFL rosters each season, and Kaepernick is ranked number 39 in merchandise sales, the only inactive player in the top 50.

In August over 1,000 people protested in support of Kaepernick in front of the NFL’s headquarters in New York City. On August 20, during the Cleveland Browns

preseason game against Mara’s Giants, members of the Browns staged the largest anthem protest yet, involving over a dozen players, including several white players.

Mara’s claim that by denying Kaepernick employment he and presumably his fellow owners were merely carrying out the wishes of football fans not only serves as an admission that the outspoken quarterback is being blacklisted for his constitutionally protected protests, but owners are using the alleged sentiments of right-wing fans as a cover to defend their own interests and their billion-dollar industry.

Of the NFL’s 32 owners, a little less than half are multi-billionaires, with the others being near-billionaires. The value of each NFL team ranges from a low of \$1.5 billion (Buffalo) to a high of \$4.2 billion (Dallas), and league revenue is expected to exceed \$13 billion this year.

Kaepernick’s protests were acts of personal courage. While many of his comments have remained within the identity politics framework promoted by such groups as Black Lives Matter that deliberately seek to conceal the class character of police violence, Kaepernick’s protests have been viewed as acts of defiance to the financial aristocrats who rule over the NFL and as a symbol of emerging opposition to the ruling class as a whole. Thus the blacklisting of Kaepernick is another element of the official campaign to intimidate and suppress political opposition.



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