

National Football League continues blacklisting of Colin Kaepernick

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The first two weeks of the National Football League season resulted in an unprecedented number of starting quarterbacks being sidelined because of injuries. But NFL owners continue to refuse to consider Colin Kaepernick, the star quarterback blacklisted after he led protests over police brutality in 2016.

After only two games of the 16 game regular season, the following quarterbacks are no longer able to play: Andrew Luck of the Indianapolis Colts retired in the prime of his career because of chronic injuries; Nick Foles of the Jacksonville Jaguars is out after sustaining a broken collar bone; Ben Roethlisberger of the Pittsburgh Steelers is out for the year with an elbow injury; Drew Brees of the New Orleans Saints is out at least six games with a hand injury; and the New York Jets are now playing a third-string quarterback after their starter, Sam Darnold, contracted mononucleosis and his backup, Trevor Siemian, sustained a season-ending leg injury.

Despite so many teams in dire need of a quarterback, no team has even attempted to contact Kaepernick to try him out for the sport's most critical position. Kaepernick, who began his career with the San Francisco 49ers in 2011, has been effectively blacklisted by the NFL since the 2017 season in response to the national anthem protests he began during the 2016 season.

In 2012, Kaepernick's second season, he replaced the injured starting quarterback of the 49ers and led San Francisco to the Super Bowl. In the 2013 season he led San Francisco to within one game of the Super Bowl and established himself as the best dual threat quarterback (passing and running) in football. In 2014, San Francisco failed to make the playoffs and fired its coach. In 2015, in mid-season, an injured Kaepernick lost his starter's job, subsequently had shoulder surgery

and missed the rest of that season.

At the start of the 2016 the season, Kaepernick began the practice of kneeling during the playing of the national anthem in protest against police killings of African-Americans. Kaepernick's courageous actions and the subsequent right-wing media assault upon his freedom of speech, inspired widespread protests by other professional athletes around the country, including players from nearly every NFL team. Throughout the 2016 football season, dozens of players took a knee during the playing of the national anthem, raised their fists in protest, or remained in the locker room.

Similar protests were engaged in by both high school and college athletes around the US, an indication of broad support for Kaepernick among the population.

The on-field protests had diminished by the start of the 2017 season, with only a few players continuing to kneel. This changed when President Trump, in an attempt to mobilize his most reactionary supporters, launched a public attack on the NFL for not cracking down more forcefully on protests, declaring, "Wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say 'get that son of a bitch off the field right now, out, he's fired'."

Trump's actions inspired a new upsurge of protests, with entire teams taking a knee or remaining in the locker room before games. In many cases, the players were joined by the coaching staffs and in some cases even the owners themselves. Behind the scenes, however, the owners were terrified of the effect Trump's actions were having on their bottom line and conspired to silence their players with various methods including agreeing, at least implicitly, to having no team sign Kaepernick for the 2017 season.

In response to the NFL's transparent effort to

blackball him, Kaepernick in 2017 filed a grievance against the NFL and its owners asserting that they “have colluded to deprive Mr. Kaepernick of employment rights in retaliation for Mr. Kaepernick’s leadership and advocacy for equality and social justice and his bringing awareness to particular institutions still undermining racial equality in the United States.”

After the 2018 season, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell, who had been meeting with the Players Coalition, a group representing protesting players, announced a seven-year, \$89 million effort to bankroll causes considered important to African-American communities, but pointedly made no mention of Kaepernick.

As to Kaepernick’s grievance, in early 2019 the NFL announced “the parties have decided to resolve the pending grievances. The resolution of this matter is subject to a confidentiality agreement so there will be no further comment by any party.” It was widely believed that the resolution of his grievance involved a significant monetary settlement for Kaepernick.

In August of this year, on the eve of the new season, the NFL announced that it has entered into a multi-year partnership with Roc Nation, the entertainment company led by billionaire rapper and music mogul Jay-Z, to enhance the NFL’s live game experiences and to amplify the league’s “social justice” efforts. Roc Nation will now help “advise on selecting artists for major NFL performances like the Super Bowl.”

This latest “social justice” effort by the NFL produced an immediate backlash. Eric Reid, Kaepernick’s former teammate and fellow protester tweeted, “Jay-Z doesn’t need the NFL’s help 2 address social injustices. It was a money move 4 him & his music business. The NFL gets 2 hide behind his black face 2 try to cover up blackballing Colin.”

Typical of the public backlash were a host of tweets in a similar vein. “How do we stop racism, systematic oppression, and police brutality? Jay-Z and the NFL: Let’s sell t-shirts and throw concerts. That’ll really shake up the system.”

And again: “The NFL and Jay Z announced this morning that capitalism will take us from Protest To Progress.”

Now with so many teams in need of a quarterback, Kaepernick is aggressively trying to sign with a team. “He is actively, actively interested in trying to play in

the NFL,” Mark Geragos, his attorney, told *USA Today* Sports on Tuesday. “Absolutely.”

According to SportsNet New York, Kaepernick’s agent has reached out to multiple teams this week in hopes of landing a job for his client. According to Stephen A. Smith of ESPN, Kaepernick’s representatives have contacted the New York Jets, Pittsburgh Steelers, and the New Orleans Saints, but so far none of these teams have even returned those calls.

Sources close to Kaepernick indicate he has been working out daily and is in the best shape of his life.

The owners’ continuing blackballing of Kaepernick becomes even more blatant when considering the quarterbacks they have signed. Jacksonville Jaguars are now starting Gardner Minshew, a rookie chosen in the sixth round of the draft. The New York Jets are starting Luke Falk, a second-year player who last year never played in a game and was cut by two teams. The Pittsburgh Steelers are starting second-year player Mason Rudolph, who last year was Pittsburgh’s third-string quarterback who never appeared in a game. New Orleans Saints are now starting Terry Bridgewater who had not played since sustaining a catastrophic knee injury in 2016.

The year 2016 was also the last that the 31-year-old Kaepernick played. He began that season as a back-up while recovering from shoulder surgery. He regained his starting position by game six, and was the starting quarterback for all but one game of that season’s remaining 10 games. He finished the season with a 90.7 quarterback rating, which was higher than some of the NFL’s leading quarterbacks such as Phillip Rivers, age 37, and Joe Flacco, age 34, and Eli Manning, age 38.

The disparity in talent and experience between Kaepernick and this new contingent of replacement quarterbacks further illustrates how the NFL’s billionaire owners place punishing and deterring social opposition—and appeasing the ultra-right occupant of the White House before maintaining the competitiveness of their teams.



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