

Floyd's death reignites NFL debate over racial protest

Donald Trump takes side of New Orleans star who opposes kneeling during national anthem



Colin Kaepernick, centre, sparked controversy when he led other American football players in 'taking a knee' during the national anthem to protest against racial injustice © AP

Sara Germano in New York YESTERDAY

As demonstrations against police brutality spread across the US following the death of George Floyd, divisions over how to address racial inequality returned to the nation's most popular sport — American football.

The game has been grappling since 2016 with the legacy of [Colin Kaepernick](#) and his controversial decision to “take a knee” during the national anthem because he did not want to “show pride in a flag for a country that [oppresses black people](#) and people of colour”.

On Wednesday, Drew Brees, the star quarterback of the New Orleans Saints football club, reignited the debate over the issue when he said he was against kneeling during the national anthem because it showed a lack of respect for the US flag, [according to an interview](#) with Yahoo Finance. His remarks drew near-universal opprobrium from athletes in football and beyond, including basketball superstar LeBron James.

“WOW MAN!!” [he tweeted in part](#). “You literally still don’t understand why Kap was kneeling on one knee??”

Mr Brees later apologised for his remarks [in a post on Instagram](#), saying he condemned “the years of oppression that have taken place throughout our black communities and still exists today”.

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Rick Burton, Syracuse University

But his comments increased pressure on the National Football League to revisit its opposition to the protest by Mr Kaepernick, 32, the former San Francisco 49er quarterback who has not played professional football since the 2016 season, and last year settled a [collusion lawsuit](#) against the league.

[Roger Goodell](#), commissioner of the league, responded to the demands on Friday in a video. “We, the National Football League, admit we were wrong for not listening to NFL players earlier and encourage all to speak out and peacefully protest. We, the National Football League believe Black Lives Matter,” he said.

Underscoring the magnitude of the debate, [Donald Trump weighed in](#) on Twitter, saying on Friday that he was a fan of Mr Brees and [regretted](#) that the quarterback apologised. “There are other things you can protest, but not our Great American Flag,” he said. “NO KNEELING!”

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An analysis of online forums shows football supporters have reacted with sadness about Mr Brees and “satisfaction and amusement that finally, the time has come for the NFL to apologise to Colin Kaepernick”, according to Beni Gradwohl, chief executive of behavioural analytics group Cognovi Labs.

“My feeling is the NFL has no choice but to address this aggressively,” said Rick Burton, professor of sports management at Syracuse University. “If the NFL doesn’t become ‘woke’ there will be pushback from audiences who say, ‘You’re tone deaf, you don’t get it, you’re out of touch, you can’t wrap yourself in patriotism without taking steps towards awareness.’”

Mr Burton said there was precedent for taking such a risk: [Nike's decision](#) in 2018 to feature Mr Kaepernick in an advertising campaign. Despite widespread backlash and calls for boycotts, the global sporting goods maker saw sales rise 10 per cent in the subsequent quarter.

Mr Gradwohl said the advertisement was a shrewd play for Nike, which knew its customer base and had a history of passionate advertising. “By design, they’re an emotional, arousing brand. Before that ad, Nike started losing its emotional edge, but when it launched, it invigorated its base,” he said.

KeJuan Wilkins, a spokesman for Nike and a member of the team which developed the campaign, said the company never considered the possibility that the ad might alienate a portion of the NFL’s fan base when it decided to proceed.

In an email to the Financial Times, Brian McCarthy, NFL spokesman, pointed to initiatives by the league to improve community relations with law enforcement across the US, including more than \$44m in contributions to non-profit groups and social justice causes.

Kenneth Shropshire, chief executive of the Global Sport Institute at Arizona State University, said he had examined statements by US sports leagues and teams in the wake of Floyd’s death, and that while many had expressed support for diversity and inclusion within their organisations, not enough had explicitly condemned police brutality.

“This is a tangible movement that sports could lead, as opposed to discussion about diversity and inclusion,” he said. “You can certainly do both but you can’t leave out police brutality.”

An exception, he said, was a video posted by the [Green Bay Packers](#) on Thursday, in which a handful of players condemned oppression, injustice and police brutality, and called for change.

“The events that usually bring us together are gone because of the pandemic,” Mr Shropshire said. “And while there is a leadership vacuum at the highest levels of this country, there is an opening and athletes are stepping in.”