

As Trump presses owners to fire protesting athletes

NFL commissioner says football players should stand for national anthem

By Alan Gilman
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On Wednesday, National Football League (NFL) Commissioner Roger Goodell held a press conference to discuss the team owners' response to ongoing protests by professional football players during the playing of the national anthem. Goodell said, "We believe our players should stand for the national anthem. It's an important part of our policy and the game. It's important to honor our flag and our country and I think our fans expect that."

When asked what the NFL would do if an owner attempted to discipline a player for kneeling, Goodell said, "We want players to stand and will continue to encourage them to stand and we will continue to work on these issues in the community, but I am not willing to address hypotheticals."

Goodell claimed that only six to seven players were still involved in the protests and that he hoped to work with the players to reduce the number to zero. The NFL commissioner said this was financially important to the league and its sponsors, many of whom blame the protests for falling TV viewership.

Goodell spoke after the conclusion of a team owners meeting in New York City. On Tuesday, the owners met with the National Football League Players Association (NFLPA) and 12 players at the league's headquarters in New York City to discuss the players' national anthem protests and potential rule changes that would compel them to stand.

At the conclusion of the October 17 meeting, the owners and the NFLPA issued a joint statement affirming how they can work together to promote positive social change and address inequality. The statement went on to state that the NFL community has a "tremendous respect for our country, our flag, our

anthem and our military."

When asked by the press if the players were told they would have to stand for the anthem, Goodell simply stated, "We did not ask for that."

Trump was clearly displeased with the NFL's ambiguous response and its refusal to mandate players' anthem compliance. He tweeted his reply Wednesday morning: "The NFL has decided that it will not force players to stand for the playing of our National Anthem. Total disrespect for our great country!"

During last Sunday's games, six San Francisco players kneeled, while another six to seven players on other teams engaged in similar protests. Players on most other teams continued the new practice of locking arms during the anthem.

The protests began last season when San Francisco 49er quarterback Colin Kaepernick began kneeling during the anthem to protest police killings of African-Americans. Many of his teammates and players from other teams began engaging in similar anthem protests.

This season, Kaepernick has been blackballed by the NFL, with no team offering him a contract despite being considered as good as if not better than many other signed quarterbacks. Kaepernick earlier this week filed a collusion grievance against the NFL.

The anthem protests during this season's first two weeks involved relatively few players, and the issue seemingly had dissipated. Then on September 22, two days before week three's games, Trump exhorted an ultra-right crowd in Alabama by bellowing, "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 provocative threats incited the players who responded during that weekend's games by engaging in widespread anthem protests that involved many more players, and in some cases entire teams. Many of the owners, fearing they would lose control of their players, who are 70 percent African-American, joined with their players in issuing "unifying" statements of support, and in some instances agreeing to kneel with their players before the anthem and then rising in unison as the anthem was played.

By the following week, the matter had again seemingly subsided as most teams took a unified response, having all players kneel in unison before the anthem and then standing in unison during the playing of the anthem. Other teams had players link arms during the anthem. Several players from various teams, however, continued to kneel or raise fists, while a few others chose to remain in the locker room during the anthem.

With the anthem issue once again dying down, Trump on October 8 sent Vice President Pence to Indianapolis to attend the San Francisco 49ers-Indianapolis Colts game in Indianapolis. San Francisco was Colin Kaepernick's former team, and several of his teammates had continued to kneel during the anthem and had indicated they would be doing so for the rest of the season.

Immediately following the anthem, in which several San Francisco players knelt, Pence and his wife, in a pre-planned walkout, left the stadium and issued a tweet. "I left today's Colts game because I will not dignify any event that disrespects our soldiers, our Flag, or our National Anthem. ..."

Trump then chimed in on Twitter, writing: "I asked [Vice President Pence] to leave stadium if any players knelt, disrespecting our country. I am proud of him and [Second Lady] Karen."

Later that day, Jerry Jones, the billionaire owner of the Dallas Cowboys and one of the six NFL owners who contributed \$1 million to Trump's inaugural committee, issued a threat to bench and carry out other disciplinary actions against protesting players. "We know that there is a serious debate in this country about those issues, but there is no question in my mind that the National Football League and the Dallas Cowboys are going to stand up for the flag. So we're clear. ... But if there's anything that is disrespectful to the flag,

then we will not play. OK? Understand? If we are disrespecting the flag, then we won't play. Period."

In response to Jones's statement, Trump tweeted, "A big salute to Jerry Jones, owner of the Dallas Cowboys, who will BENCH players who disrespect our Flag. Stand for Anthem or sit for game!"

To convince more owners to follow suit, Trump tweeted on October 10, "Why is the NFL getting massive tax breaks while at the same time disrespecting our Anthem, Flag and Country? Change tax law!"

The next day, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell, concerned about the financial damage that this controversy could cause, from both Trump's threats and from sponsors, sent a letter to all team owners discussing a possible rule change that would force all players to stand while the anthem plays. It read in part, "Like many of our fans, we believe that everyone should stand for the National Anthem. It is an important moment in our game. We want to honor our flag and our country, and our fans expect that of us."

Goodell and the NFL are trying to navigate between players who come from overwhelming working-class backgrounds and who in many cases have seen families and friends victimized by the police, and billionaire owners and affluent season ticket holders and sponsors, who are generally the beneficiaries of social inequality and the criminalization of the poor.

Trump, however, knowing how these protests incense his ultra-right base, continues to provoke both players and owners with his actions and statements. In turn, he expects the NFL's billionaire owners, many of whom are his friends, to ultimately discipline the players for their defiance, and thus have their authoritarian actions serve as a template of how all social opposition should be dealt with.

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