

ADDRESSING THE

National protests during sporting events have sparked debate and controversy at the national, state and local level about the ethics of athletes protesting during games.

BY ALEXANDER ROBINSON
Sports staffer

Their names are synonymous with protest. Tommie Smith, John Carlos, Sandy Koufax, Muhammad Ali and other professional athletes challenged the status quo by using their athletic platforms as a means of expressing dissent. In doing so, they set a precedent that endured long after the 1960s and '70s, one that has recently recaptured the national spotlight. Athletic protests have recently ignited debates concerning the American flag and national anthem after former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick knelt during the anthem on Sept. 1, 2016 to protest police brutality.

President Donald Trump later criticized the National Football League during a campaign rally for Alabama Senator Luther Strange over a year later on Sept. 22, 2017 in Huntsville.

"Wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, 'Get that son of a

b**** off the field right now. Out. He's fired,'" Trump said.

This national debate has raised questions concerning the utility of athletic protests. Dr. Joey Gawrysiak, Assistant Professor of Sports Management at Shenandoah University, and a 2012 graduate of the University of Georgia, believes that athletic protests effectively bring attention to racial issues.

"It brings about the awareness, which is what a protest should do," Gawrysiak said. "It started against police brutality towards African-Americans. That's why Kaepernick started this whole thing. When he did it, other people started doing it. They voiced their opinion."

Although Gawrysiak believes national protesters have gained immense attention, he feels they might not be successful in initiating immediate change.

"What they're protesting doesn't have a simple solution or a simple change," Gawrysiak said.

"It's an ideological change and a shift in a

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dominant way of thinking, which is never easy or quick to change. It takes a long long time for progress to change these types of things."

2012 CCHS alumnus and current NFL free agent Marquez Williams, a former Jacksonville Jaguars fullback, sees both sides of the argument as both a football player and a concerned citizen.

"I haven't (protested), but I know that some teammates have," Williams said. "Others have in the NFL, and I don't blame them. I try to be open-minded, so I understand how some people could be upset about as to how it can disrespect the country or the people who fight for the country, but at the same time those same people fight for you to exercise your opinions and your rights."

Although Williams respects both arguments, he believes that players are entitled to protest as a freedom of expression.

"Some people view it as being disrespectful, while others see it as people exercising their rights," Williams said. "If we're all going to stand under that

flag and call America a great country, then we should be able to exercise those same things that the country and the flag are supposed to represent."

The same debate was raised on a local level after the Cedar Shoals High School cheerleading team knelt during the national anthem. The team has done so six times since Oct. 5. CSHS head cheerleading coach LaKisha Bolton, who supported her team in their decision to kneel, feels all students should be able to express themselves in such ways.

"We spend a lot of time in education teaching kids what their freedoms are, what their rights are, how civil disobedience is a good thing," Bolton said. "We can't teach that and then say, 'Oh you can't do this because...' We have to allow kids to make the conscious decision to protest."

Bolton compares freedom of speech to freedom of religion, and believes the concepts should be treated equally.

"I look at kneeling for whatever purpose you have as the same thing

Illustration by Suncana Pavlic



as separating church and state," Bolton said. "If a kid belongs to a certain religious group that did not pledge allegiance to the flag, there would not be any backlash to that because that's their religion. Your social purpose should be treated the same."

Senior CSHS cheerleader Brianna Aguilar participated in all of her team's protests, and says they collectively knelt to protest police brutality.

"We were trying to help send a message," Aguilar said. "Police brutality is not right. It's been going on for years. The flag is supposed to stand for freedom and equality, but among people of my color, it doesn't seem that way. (Kneeling is) not about disrespecting the people who fight for (our country)."

Aguilar believes others should accept that athletic protests are not meant to disrespect veterans or the U.S. military.

"I think it brings about the awareness, which is what a protest should do. A protest should bring about conversation and increase people's awareness of whatever situation is being protested."

-- DR. JOEY GAWRYSIAK, Assistant Professor of Sports Management at Shenandoah University

"My father is in the military and my mother's a police officer," Aguilar said. "I know for a fact that I'm not being disrespectful. I asked for my mom's opinion. None of us are disrespectful children. We don't do things just to seek bad attention. I don't want to be looked at in that light."

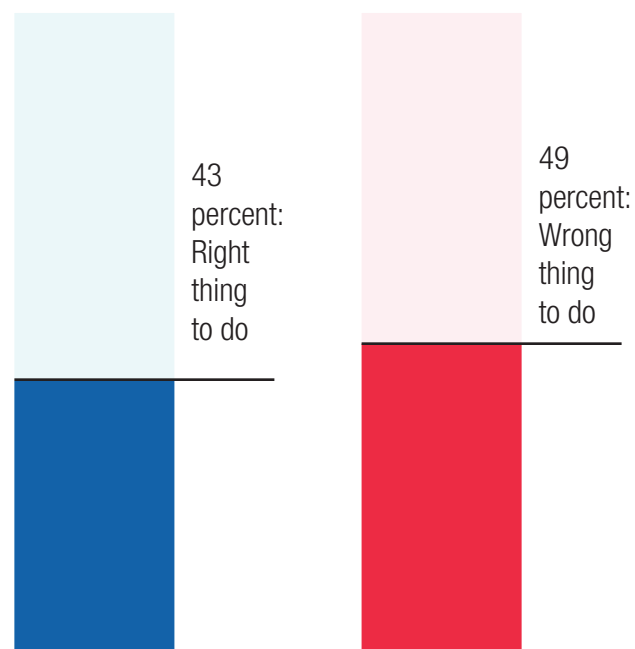
Clarke Central High School Principal Marie Yuran believes all student athletes have the right to protest, as they are not legally committed to do otherwise.

"On a high school level, it's very different than someone who is a professional athlete," Yuran said. "They're not being paid to participate in those sports. They're not under contract or anything. There's a long-standing law that allows students to protest."

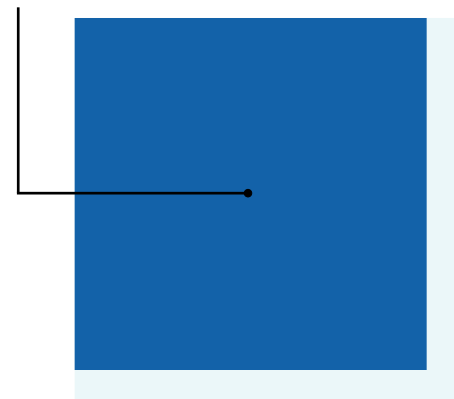
CCHS Athletic Director Jon Ward says CCHS has a uniform policy concerning athletic protests.

"The same rights that are afforded to students in the classroom are passed on to whatever extracurricular activities they might be participating in, in this case athletics," Ward said. "Just as a teacher cannot make a student stand for the pledge

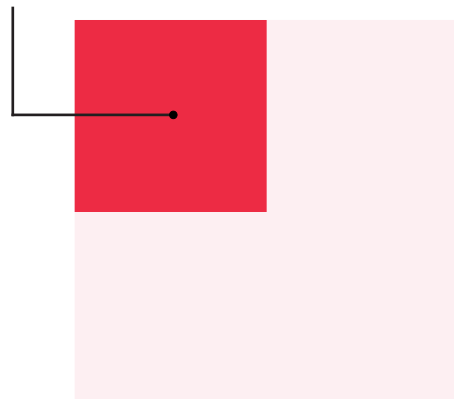
Americans' opinions on protesting during the national anthem



86 percent of Democrats say that President Trump did the wrong thing by criticizing protesting players.



26 percent of Republicans say that President Trump did the wrong thing by criticizing protesting players.



Six in ten

Americans say that President Trump did the wrong thing by criticizing the protesting players

52 percent

Of Americans under the age of 45 say that protesting during the national anthem is the right thing to do

59 percent

Of Americans over the age of 45 say that protesting during the national anthem is the wrong thing to do

24 percent

Of Americans say they plan to boycott the NFL's games, broadcasts and products as a result of the protests.

49 percent

Of Americans say that the NFL should require players to stand during the national anthem.

* Statistics compiled by Katie Grace Upchurch from CNN.com
Layout by Katie Grace Upchurch

or the national anthem in a classroom, a coach cannot make an athlete do something like that in an athletic setting."

Despite the athletic department's policy, CCHS head football coach David Perno would handle an athletic protest differently.

"I wouldn't let it happen," Perno said. "I'm not against protests, I'm just against them (protesting) in a team setting that's about uniting people and bringing them together for a cause. That's kind of contradictory. You can spin it any way you want, but that's against our country."

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-- DAVID PERNO, Clarke Central High School head football coach

CCHS senior varsity punter Zander Dale believes all athletes have the right to protest, but thinks that they should not interfere with the games or the fans.

"Sports is a way for a lot of people to get away from the rest of the issues and sort of focus on one thing, have a place to go out and do what they like to do," Dale said. "You don't want to bring that in too much because it could take that fun away from other people and ruin the game."

CCHS sophomore varsity wide receiver and tight end Chris Johnson believes the whole controversy is overblown, especially when compared to other forms of protest.

"If people nowadays, specifically Neo-Nazis, can do their protests, athletes should be able to do the same," Johnson said. "We're just explaining and expressing how we feel about certain situations. It's not violent and it's not hurting anybody."

Senior CCHS varsity football linebacker Adorian Williams believes no school or athletic official could stop him from kneeling, but chooses to express his concern in a different way on the field.

"People have the freedom to protest," Williams said. "It's their right to take a knee during the national anthem, but I personally don't take a knee out of respect for the military and the army. They're risking their lives for us. I don't put my hand over my heart, though, because our nation is in fact hurt. There is a need for change."

