

MORE THAN T-SHIRTS AND #HASHTAGS

MEASURING SOCIAL IMPACTS

As controversies around kneeling as a form of protest have receded from global headlines, little has been written about what those same athletes and organizations are doing now regarding the issues at the heart of the demonstrations.

At the Global Sport Institute at Arizona State University, we were curious about the actual impact the NFL was having in this “2.0” phase of athlete activism. We asked the NFL for, and received, internal reports on this activism. This represents our second report capturing the end-of-season detail – the first report was done at the NFL season midpoint. We hope we can do the same thing with other professional sports leagues.

In the meantime, we are identifying other cases of social justice activities by athletes in the U.S. and abroad, historical and current, and are working on a more comprehensive report that highlights the convergence of sport and social issues, and how athletes and sport organizations have been sites for challenges to social justice as well as active towards furthering social justice.

HOW WE EXAMINED THE ISSUE

Beginning with information provided by the NFL, we searched for activity by players and clubs over the course of the 2017 and 2018 seasons. Using our judgment regarding the social justice protests as the catalyst for the specific activities, we took that information and verified it via these online searches:

- » We searched for event name and/or participants.
- » We followed links, read news articles, and viewed social media posts with video, photos, and comments.
- » We used articles and media that reported on the occurrence of the event, not just that it was scheduled.
- » We conducted searches on some of the NFL's partner organizations to see when the partnerships began, whether the programs were ongoing, and if the partnerships began after the social justice protest catalyst.
- » We searched for additional activities of the most well-known activists, such as Malcolm Jenkins, Eric Reid, Chris Long, and Dolphins owner Stephen Ross.

At the outset, we realized we would not be able to capture all that is being done because some activities may not have a public record. Some players, as is the case with many philanthropists, have contributed anonymously or quietly. They may have been actively involved in their community for some time, which makes it hard to separate social justice activity from overall activity and to pinpoint the social justice protests as the catalyst. In addition, we are unable to provide an accounting of funding because the dollar amounts are not usually reported and are not easily found through public record.

WHAT WE FOUND

There were eleven takeaways in our mid-season report, and eleven more have been added since then.

1. The NFL established a social justice committee of players and owners in December 2017. The committee has created a social justice grant program to support activities of athletes and clubs.
2. Social justice-specific activities make up only a part of the overall activities. The NFL has identified three areas of attention: education and economic advancement, police and community relations, and criminal justice reform. Criminal justice reform is the new area of attention. The league launched its Inspire Change program January 11, 2019.
3. There are ongoing programs that were operating before the protests (with the Police Athletic League, Boys and Girls Clubs of America, and other national organizations that work with and support youth).
4. Since the 2017 season, 335 social justice activities had been verified as of our mid-season report.
5. Team and athlete involvement is varied. Still, all clubs have had at least one social justice activity or program.
6. Athletes are informing themselves and their communities about important social issues and working on them — going to schools, on ride-alongs with police, participating in and sponsoring voter registration drives, lobbying state and federal government, going to hearings and working through their clubs and personal foundations, etc.
7. The “top” is involved to varying degrees — owners are contributing funding through their foundations, attending events, and responding to local communities. For example, the commissioner attended bail hearings and has partnered with athletes to lobby for reform.
8. There is high interconnectedness — players are working together, and doing so publicly.
9. There is a heightened focus on systemic issues and engaging with policy makers. Players have raised awareness of criminal justice and voting rights issues and pushed for reform in four states: Ohio, Louisiana, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania.
10. There is also LGBTQI support/activism.
11. Athletes continue to carry out international/global activism and missionary work.
12. The full total for social justice activities since the 2017 season has been verified at 417.
13. Colin Kaepernick set a \$1 million pledge to fund community programs in September 2016 and started his “Know Your Rights” campaign.
14. Colin Kaepernick raised/co-raised \$1.28 million by early 2018 for community programs across the country, and partnered with Nike and music artists, athletes, and media personalities, including: Serena Williams, Kobe Bryant, Kevin Durant and Steph Curry, Sean “Diddy” Combs, Nas, DJ Khaled, Alicia Keys, Angela Rye, Nick Cannon, Zendaya, J. Cole, and Quavo.

15. Colin Kaepernick's support impacted programs covering, but not limited to: Native American rights, immigrant rights, police reform, anti-violence against women, homelessness, victims of gun violence, youth justice, and youth mentoring.

16. Women's organizations affiliated with clubs are actively engaged as well.

17. Partnerships for social impact are growing across sports such as the Chicago Sports Alliance, which announced in 2019 it will lend the collective reach and resources of the Bears, Blackhawks, Bulls, Cubs, and White Sox in support of finding innovative solutions to decrease violence in the city.

18. NFL clubs do community relations work incredibly often and actively engage their players by taking them to schools or hospitals.

19. The ratio of tweets dealing with police relations and criminal justice reform vs. education and community relations is very low, there are far more dealing with education and community relations.

20. The donations from the players coalition and NFL to “social justice” causes are often only tweeted with an article link and are wrapped with donations to other causes besides social justice.

21. Most clubs seem to avoid publicizing their support for social justice and their criminal reform activities and focus more on promoting their community service.

There are some strong exceptions. The Patriots tweeted their support for rapper Meek Mill's opinion in the New York Times about criminal justice reform, and owner Bob Kraft is a friend of Meek Mill.

This is one of the rare exceptions of a team openly talking about criminal justice reform.

The Dolphins also nominated Kenny Stills as their Walter Payton Man of the Year candidate. Stills has continued to kneel for the anthem and has openly sided with Kaepernick on many of these issues.

22. The NFL has been recognized for their support and impact on the passing of the federal criminal reform bill known as “The First Step Act” and has taken other specific and notable steps towards criminal justice reform and social justice.

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY TRACKING SINCE THE INITIAL REPORT

- » We conducted a specific search for the activities of Colin Kaepernick and Eric Reid; Kaepernick has donated \$1 million according to his social media accounts and has poured an undisclosed amount into his “Know Your Rights” organization and youth camps. To complement his pledge, he has raised approximately \$350,000 more from others, including Reid, who donated \$50,000 to the “Know Your Rights” youth camps.
- » We also followed the 32 NFL team Twitter accounts and found countless tweets having to do with education and economic advancement, criminal justice reform, community relations, and police relations. These accounts tweet at extremely high rates, so we sampled some of the mentions, including at least one from each team.

WHERE THIS LEADS US

By any measure, there has been an impressive record of activity - 417 verified activities with more we have yet to confirm. The NFL as a community is engaged and socially involved in new ways, at multiple levels, and with greater dedicated resources. At the same time, there have been public rifts between players regarding how this has occurred. The recent firings of several African-American head coaches invites more criticism of NFL ownership and culture. Sport reflects society and what we have seen in the NFL over the last few seasons is the common tug-of-war of social movement - change doesn't just happen and it doesn't generally happen all at once - there are starts and stops, ebbs and flows, deserts and deluges. We don't know how all of this will shake out, but movement is definitely occurring inside and outside sport.

With further analysis, we hope to look at the actual impact across sports as a whole and, if possible, make comparisons between leagues. WNBA players have perhaps been the beacon of unity with their team and cross-team organized protests before games and activities such as the Seattle Storm's Planned Parenthood rally. In the National Women's Soccer League, Megan Rapinoe offered an early gesture in support with NFL players. We would be interested in tracking the additional activities Rapinoe and others, along with their clubs, have been engaged in.

With the NBA, for example, LeBron James has been heavily involved in producing various media and building a school. There are other athletes, to varying extents, building hospitals abroad, funding schools and academies, and starting companies — in addition to running and funding charities. This would be a valuable and daunting task and could not be done effectively without the support of the leagues and their data, and/or athletes themselves.

This report was produced by the Global Sport Education and Research Lab (GSERL), a division of the Global Sport Institute at Arizona State University.

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