

Racism and the National Football League (NFL): The Unspoken Truth Behind the Colin Kaepernick Story

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Featured image: Colin Kaepernick (Source: [ESPN](#))

*“The spectacle is the nightmare of imprisoned modern society which ultimately expresses nothing more than its desire to sleep. The spectacle is the guardian of sleep.” - **Guy Debord**, *The Society of the Spectacle**

It is generally accepted that sports, especially spectator sports, serve many social purposes, good and bad, and that they function to distract people from the cares and worries of everyday life, or the “real world.” No doubt this is true. The etymology of the word sport, derived as it is from the word “disport” - divert, amuse, carry away - tells us that. But often a distraction can also be a reminder, even when that reminder remains shrouded in unconsciousness or forgotten in the moment. Sometimes, however, the reminder can be linked to memories that bring a startling clarity to the present.

Two recent sports news items have reminded me of incidents from my own athletic past. And those memories in turn have brought my reflections back to the current news regarding the failure of any National Football League (NFL) team to sign quarterback **Colin Kaepernick** to a contract, and the recent boxing match between **Floyd Mayweather** and **Conor McGregor**.

Kaepernick’s case is well-known and much discussed. He took a valiant and principled stand last football season by taking a knee during the national anthem to **protest the violent treatment of black Americans by the police and American society in general**. History was on his side, unless one was a clear-cut white racist and ignorant of American history. But as a terrific football player and a well-known athlete, his stand was unusual in the world of sports where political protest is very rare and not being reminded of the “real” world is the key to success. The NFL, in particular, is a very conservative organization, long infused with a super patriotic ethos wrapped in the American flag and the song that celebrates it, and Kaepernick’s protest was a diversion from the diverting spectacle on the field and not welcomed by NFL owners, to put it mildly.



Source: [notey.com](#)

So as of this writing, Kaepernick, a very good football player who would clearly strengthen an NFL team, remains without a job. That this is because he lacks talent is ridiculous. While pressure against the NFL from multiple media and organizational sources is growing to reverse this situation, even well-meaning writers have implicitly used racist language to

describe the situation by saying that Kaepernick is being **blackballed**. Ironic as it is, our language is filled with such subtle reminders of the white mindset that equates white with good and black with bad.

But there is a deeper irony involved, and language once again reveals it.

First, however, let me briefly tell you of my memories, not because the details are important in themselves, but because they are examples of how we bring to our present perspectives past experiences that can both help to clarify and obfuscate current events. The saying “where you’re coming from” contains truth; our past experiences deeply influence how we see the present.

When I was 19-20 years old, a senior in high school and a Division I college freshman on an athletic scholarship, I was involved in two incidents involving sports and violence. The sport was basketball, not football or boxing, and the violence was minimal, but both are etched in my memory. As a young man, I was rarely involved in fighting, but when I felt abused and disrespected, my Irish temper got the best of me and I would physically defend myself. Otherwise, I was a normal young athlete, fueled by the competitive nature of high-level sports and testosterone. But these incidents taught me that the propensity for violence is in us all, and that certain situations and social arrangements can inflame and promote it, especially when you are most unaware and naïve.

But what do these memories have to do with the news about Kaepernick and Mayweather/McGregor? What I saw in both sports stories was violence; one quite obvious with boxing, the other involving Kaepernick, less so.

I realized that violence has many faces, whether it be minor or major, fisticuffs or “blitzes,” face-to-face or helmet-to-helmet, physical or verbal, racial or political, institutional or personal, etc. It’s largest and most savage one is war, and endless war and preparations for war are the large canvas within which the others lie. Sometimes remembering one’s individual inclinations toward violence can help one see the larger picture.

As usual, the United States is currently waging multiple wars, and is fomenting many others, including a nuclear one. Most of the victims of U.S. violence are considered “other,” the expendable people, as were slaves, Native Americans, and other people of color. Nothing has changed since that other heroic black American dissenter said that America is “the greatest purveyor of violence on earth.” And we know that **Martin Luther King** was murdered by those violent U.S. government forces he criticized in his opposition to war, racial inequality, and economic injustice for all Americans.

I am not equating Kaepernick with MLK, but his protest follows in the King tradition and that of other black athletes who have taken political stands: **Mohammed Ali, Tommy Smith, John Carlos**, et al. All suffered for their courageous positions.

Of course, Colin Kaepernick has a right to play football, just as Ali had the right to beat people up in the ring. Yet boxing, despite the Mayweather/McGregor extravaganza, has generally been recognized for the brutal “sport” it is, and has grown less popular over the years, perhaps in part because of Ali’s “pugilistic brain syndrome.” Not football. It has grown to become America’s number one sport, despite the growing evidence of what may be called “football brain syndrome,” and all the violence and other crippling injuries suffered by former players, revealed as far back as 1970 when **Dave Meggysy**, a former NFL

linebacker, published [*Out of Their League*](#), his expose of the dehumanizing aspects of football.

But the unspoken truth in the Kaepernick story is that football is the war sport par excellence, extremely violent, and deeply tied to the spectacle of cruelty that dominates American society today and that has caused so much suffering for black people and other people of color for centuries. In the 1960s, Brazilian television, in an effort to distinguish football (soccer) from American football, aptly termed it “military football.” And while it, like other sports, has been an avenue to wealth and “success” for some black Americans (a tiny minority), its war-like structure and violent nature is noted with a nod and a wink. Heck, it’s fun to play and exciting to watch, and is just a colorful spectacle that we can’t do without.

That it’s a conditioning agent for the love of war and violent aggression is usually passed over. Its language, like all good linguistic mind control, becomes powerfully invisible. Colin Kaepernick, like all quarterbacks, is the field general who throws bombs to flankers as he tries to avoid the blitz. Each team defends and conquers the enemy’s territory, pushing its opponent back through frontal assaults and pounding the enemy’s line. This is mixed with deceptive formations and aerial assaults behind the opponent’s line. When none of this works and the enemy goes on the offensive, a different platoon is brought in to defend one’s territory. One’s front line must then defend against a frontal assault and hit back hard. The analogies are everywhere, and as with many aspects of “everywhere,” what’s everywhere is nowhere – its familiarity making it invisible and therefore all the more powerful.

In a society of the spectacle, football is the most spectacular and entertaining mass hypnotic induction into the love of violence that we have. Yes, Mayweather and McGregor beating the shit out of each other satisfies the blood lust of gamblers and a much smaller audience, but boxing is small peanuts compared to football. Most American parents wouldn’t bring their children to a boxing match, but football is deeply ingrained in the American psyche and structured into the fabric of our lives from youth onwards, concussions and violence be damned. It is a microcosm of our militaristic, war-loving culture. Our love of violence disguised as fun.

As an American man, I understand its appeal. I am sometimes drawn in myself, but against my better nature, which embraces MLK’s non-violent philosophy. I appreciate the great athletic prowess of football players, and know that it is enjoyable and a way to recognition for many, and for a smaller number a scholarship to college, and, for even less, a lucrative job in the NFL. But as an opponent of American militarism, I find its violent ethos and the way it disfigures the bodies and minds of participants and spectators alike to be appalling. It functions as an arm of the Pentagon and the growing militarization of the country’s police departments.

As for **Conor McGregor**, the slum boy from south Dublin, they say he is an artist, a mixed “martial arts artist.” That violence is an art is good to know. I have been living in a bubble, thinking that art was a counterbalance to violence. When I grew out of my adolescent readiness to defend my dignity with my fists and grew into art, I had hoped that the world would grow up with me. No luck. No luck of the Irish. Conor should read our Irish ancestor, the great poet **William Butler Yeats**, and take the money and run.

“Too long a sacrifice/Can make a stone of the heart.”

So too Colin Kaepernick, whom I greatly admire for his courage to take an ethical stand. He deserves to be offered a job by an NFL team. If he is, I hope he turns it down, and speaks out on the propagandistic nature of the sport that made him famous, on its school of violence and its art of war. In doing that, he would be carrying on the legacy of MLK, Malcolm X, Mohammed Ali, and other black leaders who said violence must stop now, war must stop, the violence on people of color must stop, and let it begin with me.

He would be disclosing the taboo truth of an American sporting distraction that does violence to its participants while it brainwashes its fans into the martial spirit. He would be waking an awful lot of people up from the slumber of the spectacle of cruelty that has this country in its grip.

Many people would take a knee in gratitude.

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