

Opinion: Freedom of Speech Makes Us Free

Posted by [Naomi Hurley](#) On 09/25/2017

Hollywood, MD—On Sunday, Sept. 24, the Baltimore Ravens and Jacksonville Jaguars played a game at the Wembley Stadium in London, England. It was the Ravens' first international game and for Baltimore fans it was a sad loss with a final score of 44-7. However, the quality of the game itself isn't what is a hot topic among news outlets and social media users alike. Prior to the commencement of the game, around a dozen players on each team knelt during the singing of the National Anthem rather than stand, which is customary.

The action of kneeling down during the National Anthem started with former San Francisco 49ers' quarterback Colin Kaepernick. Kaepernick decided to take a knee during the National Anthem before a game Sept. 1, 2016. To explain his choice, Kaepernick stated to the press during an interview, "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color. To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder." Kaepernick's refusal to stand was met with both backlash and support. Those in favor agreed with his message and his right to freedom of speech, while those against said that Kaepernick was disrespecting our country and our flag, among various other reasons on both sides.

During a speech given in Alabama on Friday Sept. 22, President Donald Trump, while on the topic of athletes kneeling during the anthem, stated, "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. He's fired!'" The Ravens and Jaguars players that chose to kneel during the anthem on Sunday were reportedly doing so as a response to this statement.

This brings to the table the notion of free speech, and perhaps the ethics behind it. Freedom of speech grants us, as Americans, the constitutional right to give our opinions without fear of our government retaliating or censoring. Freedom of speech allows us to post our thoughts on social media, write books, create art—basically anything that involves personal judgments. Freedom of speech does not cover, however, incitement of violence or unlawful actions, libel, and obscenity, among other things. Peaceful protest is, in fact, legal under the First Amendment.

With this information at hand, athletes are legally allowed to choose not to stand during the National Anthem. There is nothing in the NFL Rulebook pertaining to the players' actions during the anthem, although the Game Operations Manual states that the players "should" stand, but it does not say that it is a requirement. NFL spokesman Brian McCarthy was even quoted as saying, "Players are encouraged but not required to stand during the playing of the National Anthem." It actually did not become customary to stand until 2009. Before then, players typically remained in the locker room during the anthem.

However, legality does not always correspond with ethics. For example, the neo-Nazis and white nationalists during the Charlottesville riot were *legally* allowed to protest. Trump himself even stated after the debacle that there were "fine people" on both sides of the riot. Under the First Amendment, we can legally voice our opinions as long as our speech doesn't incite violence or contain libel. However, that also means that under the First Amendment, our opinions can be challenged by others.

Regardless of your opinion involving the players kneeling during the anthem, what's important is that they have the right to do so. Players and citizens have the right to stand with their hand over their hearts, kneel, sit, do jumping jacks, or whatever they deem appropriate when the National Anthem plays—and you can disagree with whatever action they choose. That's the beauty of freedom. Trump describing the players with a cuss word, while hopefully not heard by younger audience members, is also protected by free speech. But what's equally as important as this right to do so is the reasoning behind it. Rather than encouraging a divide between our nation, we all need to strive to come to an understanding. We need to understand why these players are kneeling, and we need to understand why people may be upset by it. Conversation can occur without argumentation, and before an issue can be resolved, it must be examined from all perspectives. One aspect we know for sure is that we have the right to express ourselves, and that truly makes us free.

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