



# The End of Anthem Protests?

A new NFL rule prohibits players from taking a knee during the national anthem. This Q&A will get you up to speed on the nationwide debate over patriotism and free speech in sports. BY REBECCA ZISSOU

**T**HE LATEST SEASON of the National Football League (NFL) hasn't begun, but it's already making headlines. In May, the league announced a new policy requiring players to stand and "show respect for the flag" if they go onto the field during the national anthem—or to remain in the locker room until the song is

over. Players who don't comply could face punishment, and their team could be fined. What's behind the new rule? How have players and fans responded? Read on for answers to those questions and more.

## Why the new rule?

The new policy comes nearly two years after Colin Kaepernick, then

a starting quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, sparked a nationwide debate by kneeling on the sidelines during the national anthem. The protest, he said, was meant to call attention to police brutality against African-Americans and other racial injustices.

Before long, several other players across the NFL had joined the

protest by sitting, kneeling, or raising a fist during the national anthem.

## Why do some people oppose the protests?

A number of people, including President Donald Trump, object to such actions, which they view as unpatriotic and disrespectful to the military. Trump has said that any player who doesn't stand for the anthem should be fired. He has also urged fans to boycott the NFL, the country's most popular—and profitable—sports league.

In recent months, tensions between the president and the NFL have continued to escalate. In June, Trump disinvited the Philadelphia Eagles from an event at the White House to celebrate their 2018 Super Bowl win. (Most of the team had previously said they wouldn't attend, in part because they disagreed with the president's outspoken stance on the anthem protests.)

## What do supporters of the athletes say?

Many players and fans say that raising awareness about issues you care about is just as American as displaying the flag or standing for the anthem. After all, they note, the **First Amendment** to the U.S. Constitution protects free speech and the right to peacefully protest.

According to the NFL players' union, which opposes the rule, the anthem protests are simply an effort to make the nation more equal: "NFL players love their country, support our troops, give back to their communities, and strive to make America a better place."

## Why is the anthem performed at games?

Francis Scott Key, a lawyer from Maryland, wrote "The Star-Spangled Banner" after witnessing the British attack on Fort McHenry in Baltimore during the War of 1812. The song, originally a poem, officially became the national anthem in 1931.

But it's been performed at sporting events since the mid-1800s. The practice became more widespread in the period of intense patriotism that swept the nation during World War II (1939-1945). Today, all four major sports leagues—baseball, football, basketball, and hockey—ask fans and players to stand and remove their hats during the anthem.

That link between patriotism and sports is one reason Americans feel so strongly about the anthem at games—and why the protests have caused such controversy.

According to a recent *Washington Post*-Kaiser Family Foundation poll, 53 percent of Americans think it's "never appropriate" to kneel during the anthem, compared with 42 percent who say it's sometimes appropriate.

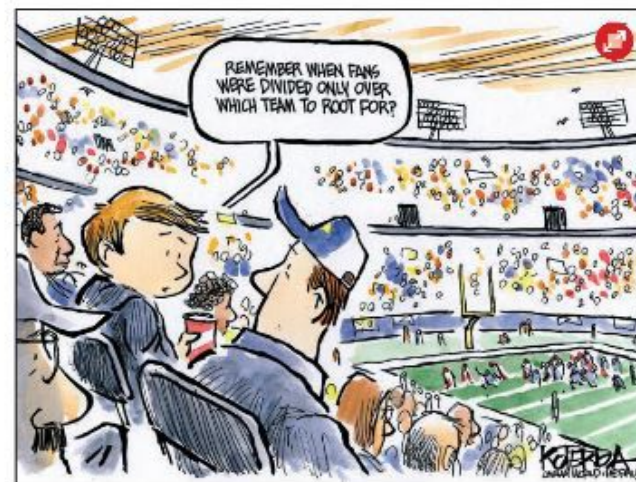
## How have people responded to the rule?

Most team owners have said they approve of the new policy, which they view as a compromise. Many other people see it as an attempt to silence players and appease Trump, who they say shouldn't have gotten involved in the debate.

Still, many players, coaches, and fans say they're eager to put the issue behind them. TV ratings for NFL games fell nearly 10 percent last season, a decrease analysts say was partly related to the anthem protests.

Michael Bidwill, president of the Arizona Cardinals, told reporters that he hopes fans will no longer be distracted by what's happening off the field: "I look forward to getting the focus back on football." ♦

**CORE QUESTION** What do you think of the new rule?



Many fans disagree about whether protesting during the anthem is un-American.