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Samantha Russo  
*Seton Hall University*

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# The Politics of Sports

*Samantha Russo*

Samantha Russo is a graduating senior majoring in Political Science with a minor in Criminal Justice. After graduation, she is seeking a career in the Criminal Justice field or in politics. The objective of her paper is to bring awareness to how athletes are treated by the media when voicing their political opinions.

A billboard larger than life stands tall above San Francisco on the roof of a city building while the most recent photos, icon, and header on the Twitter page of this company reflects the new advertisement. On all of this is a close up of Colin Kaepernick, a professional athlete and ex football quarterback, with the words “Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything.”<sup>1</sup> A few months later, the iconic celebration pose from Megan Rapinoe, a U.S. Women’s National Soccer athlete and Olympian, is printed on the next campaign ad with the slogan, “Become the best in the world. Fight for what matters. Or do both.”<sup>2</sup> These two athletes, who are constantly finding themselves in the spotlight for more than just their athletic ability and big wins, are the new faces of the Nike: Just Do It campaign for 2019.

Athletes speaking out about their political opinions is not something new, but it is something that has recently been getting the attention of both the fans of the sports and the media that reports on them. While there are positive ad campaigns for both athletes, like the Nike one, this is not always the case when the athletes speak their minds using their large national platforms. Seeing the recent positive advertisements by this major company on social media brings forth the question: how has the media treated NFL athletes and the

USWNT when it comes to their political opinions?

When reporting on the political stances of these major sports figures in today’s world, this paper will show that the media has limited coverage of the stories and advanced its own narrative of the athletes. It has branded the athletes in a certain way that this study will look into and have pushed its own views of these athletes onto the public to change the narrative of these political movements.

In regards to the limited coverage of the media, this paper will look into Kaepernick and his relationship with Nate Boyer, how Kaepernick’s activism is flying under the radar, and how the media is only focusing on the USWNT 2019 lawsuit, rather than both lawsuits. In regards to Rapinoe, this paper will look at how the media only focuses on the World Cup win rather than the women’s continued fight for gender equality. When it comes to the media’s own narrative of the athletes, this study will look at how Kaepernick is seen as someone who is unpatriotic, despite what he is fighting for, and Kaepernick’s Nike ad plus the revenue it brought into the company. This paper will also look at Rapinoe’s bold personality, like her hair and her goal celebration, rather than her political statements that she consistently backs up with facts.

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<sup>1</sup> Beer, Jeff. 2019. “One Year Later, What Did We Learn from Nike’s Blockbuster Colin Kaepernick Ad?” Fast Company. September 5, 2019. <https://www.fastcompany.com/90399316/one-year->

[later-what-did-we-learn-from-nikes-blockbuster-colin-kaepernick-ad](https://www.fastcompany.com/90399316/one-year-later-what-did-we-learn-from-nikes-blockbuster-colin-kaepernick-ad).

<sup>2</sup> Nike. 2019. September 23, 2019. <https://twitter.com/nikefootball/status/1176226238127431680>

This paper will be a case study, looking at the NFL and USWNT but more specifically, football player Colin Kaepernick and soccer player Megan Rapinoe. This study will start from the first time Kaepernick kneeled, back in 2016, and the first lawsuit Rapinoe filed with her team, back in 2015. It will follow their continued struggle with balancing their individual sports careers and their political activism. It will also follow how the media has reacted to their bold personalities and divisive statements in which they strongly believe.

Before reading this paper, it is important to understand several, critical articles when it comes to Kaepernick and his fight for racial equality and the end of police brutality. The most important one is the open letter that Nate Boyer sent to Kaepernick regarding his protest.<sup>3</sup> The importance of this article will be discussed later in the paper but it is necessary to be familiar with this letter in order to understand Kaepernick's fight. Another important website to understand before continuing this paper is Mapping Police Violence.<sup>4</sup> In order to form an opinion on Kaepernick's protest, it is necessary to understand why he was kneeling. In regards to Rapinoe and the women's soccer team, it is essential to read the report by Bleacher Report<sup>5</sup> which lays out the fight the women's team is having against the USSF and how it is facing a gender pay gap in the professional sport.

The significance of these two major events and how the media is treating the athletes will be the final part of this paper. While this is something that is happening right now and affecting other athletes, it is important to look at the other ways these events will impact other professional athletes political opinions and how the media will treat those people as

well. From a power perspective, this paper will look at more examples of athletes currently speaking their political minds and what this could mean for the upcoming election, legislation and future athletes.

The media chooses the best stories to share on its sites and television stations. It will pick and choose which topics it wants to cover and how deep into the subject it wants to go. When it reports on a topic, it does not have the luxury of telling the entire story and will therefore pick and choose what parts of it that they want to tell. By doing this, the media leaves out important pieces of the story that could influence a reader's impression of a person or topic. Two important examples of this is how the media has left out pieces of Colin Kaepernick and the USWNT's stories that could completely change a person's mind on them once they get the full picture.

Colin Kaepernick, former quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, decided to sit down during the National Anthem at a preseason game in August of 2016. This game was also his preseason debut but all the media could focus on was Kaepernick on the bench instead of standing with the rest of his team. After the game, Kaepernick addressed the press where he stated that he was, "not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color."<sup>6</sup> Despite a loss from the 49ers but a relatively good game for Kaepernick, the only thing the media reported on was Kaepernick's Anthem protest. Major news sources began putting out articles that had very different headlines. The NFL's website reported on the protest with a headline saying "Colin Kaepernick explains why he sat during the National Anthem." NFL.com dedicated the first article about Kaepernick's protest to why he decided to sit

<sup>3</sup> "An open letter to Colin Kaepernick, from a Green Beret-turned-long snapper." - Boyer 2016

<sup>4</sup> <https://mappingpoliceviolence.org>

<sup>5</sup> <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/2844656-megan-rapinoe-calls-on-fifa-us-soccer-for-equal-pay-after-uswnt-world-cup-win>

<sup>6</sup> "Colin Kaepernick Sits During National Anthem Before Packers vs. 49ers" - Wells 2016

down. On the other end of the spectrum, Fox & Friends released its own article stating that “Colin Kaepernick Sat During National Anthem to Protest ‘Oppression’.” Immediately in the title of the article, it implied that why Kaepernick was kneeling was not something that really exists, based on their use of quotations around the word oppression. His protest was struck down by Fox & Friends and it gave no other coverage or information about why he was sitting unless it was to point out what he was doing wrong.

The headlines were not the only major difference in how the media reported the Colin Kaepernick story. Right after he sat, Kaepernick received a letter from Nate Boyer, a veteran and former Green Beret in the US Army. Boyer saw Kaepernick sitting and decided to send him an open letter about his protest. In his letter, Boyer shows his support for Kaepernick and says that he understands that protesting is a right no one can take away from him. Boyer told Kaepernick that his initial response to watching him sit on the bench for the anthem was anger. He felt like Kaepernick was disrespecting the country and the people who fight overseas for our freedom. Boyer goes on and says that he listened to what Kaepernick was saying about protesting and changed his opinion on Kaepernick’s demonstration.<sup>7</sup> He ends his long letter to Kaepernick saying that he knows racism still exists in this country and in others, and that he has seen oppression first hand on his tours so he understands why Kaepernick is protesting. Instead of downright dismissing him, Boyer says he is trying to see Kaepernick’s side to the protest. He promises that he will keep an open mind for what Kaepernick is protesting for and that one day, he hopes to see Kaepernick once again stand proudly for our nation’s song.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> “An open letter to Colin Kaepernick, from a Green Beret-turned-long snapper.” - Boyer 2016

<sup>8</sup> - Boyer 2016

Following this letter, Kaepernick contacted Boyer so they could sit down together and discuss how to move forward. Together, the two of them and Kaepernick’s teammate Eric Reid spoke for over 90 minutes.<sup>9</sup> As they spoke about what Kaepernick could do instead of kneel, Boyer suggested standing and bowing his head. Kaepernick was not satisfied with standing just yet so Reid, Kaepernick’s teammate, suggested kneeling. Boyer explained to the two men how kneeling was more respectful than sitting and that he should try and kneel next to his team instead of being separated. Boyer said that taking a knee in the military is done when someone is exhausted on a patrol, or in front of a brother’s gravesite. Together, they were able to find a better solution for Kaepernick’s protests while still allowing him the chance to express himself during the Anthem.

When Kaepernick first knelt after his long conversation with Boyer, headlines began reporting on his new choice of protest. *The New York Times* released its own article about Kaepernick’s protest titled, “This Time, Colin Kaepernick Takes a Stand by Kneeling.” The article failed to mention the conversation Kaepernick had with Boyer and Reid which led to the ultimate decision in kneeling. While reporting on the “Take a Knee” movement by Kaepernick, news outlets only showed their own piece of his story and left out major parts, including his conversation with a U.S. veteran who helped create this major event for Kaepernick.

Meanwhile, since Kaepernick decided to kneel, he started receiving support from a group of people that nobody thought would support him. US military veterans decided to take to social media in order to come out in support of Kaepernick and what he is

<sup>9</sup> “From a seat to a knee: How Colin Kaepernick and Nate Boyer are trying to effect change” - Wagoner 2016

protesting. By the Tuesday of the very first week he began kneeling, a new hashtag was trending on Twitter, #VeteransForKaepernick. In this trend, many veterans spoke out in support of Kaepernick saying that they fought to defend his right to free speech, which included kneeling. Many of the veterans said they wanted others to stop speaking for them and saying the veterans are being disrespected. They said that they can handle their own feelings and in fact, they stand with Kaepernick.

Veterans posted pictures of themselves in their uniforms with captions titled “I will always fight for the right to speak,”<sup>10</sup> and “#VeteransforKaepernick because I didn’t volunteer to defend a country where police brutality is swept under the rug.”<sup>11</sup> These military veterans trended their hashtag for Kaepernick and showed their support for his silent protest. They said that Kaepernick’s right to protest was a form of free speech that they signed up to defend. While they did this, more major outlets failed to recognize the hashtag trending worldwide on Twitter for over a day. The only way people saw their support was by going on social media or subscribing to different types of news outlets rather than the major ones, like CNN and Fox. Both of these news sources failed to show his support from veterans and continued pushing their own versions of Kaepernick onto the public.

Three years later and Kaepernick is still receiving major press time for his silent protest, despite no longer being in the NFL. Nate Boyer, after watching the backlash due to his form of protest, decided to finally speak out publicly in support of Kaepernick’s right to protest. While he does not agree with

kneeling, Boyer supports Kaepernick’s right to do so during the Anthem. He believes that no one is a perfect patriot, including himself, so people should not be so quick to accuse Kaepernick of hating this country. He mentions that he understands it is difficult to defend someone with whom you disagree but it is what makes this country special. He believes it is alright to be different and that Kaepernick is just demonstrating his right to silently protest. Boyer is trying to urge people on both sides of the political spectrum, “to embrace and respect conflicting viewpoints.”<sup>12</sup>

Once Boyer spoke out a second time in support of Kaepernick, the media began reporting on who he was and about the major role he played in his protest. While it still left out parts of his influence on Kaepernick’s decision to kneel, their long conversation and the ways to show support for veterans, they managed to finally cover a crucial part to his story and what influenced him into kneeling.

During his meeting with Kaepernick, Boyer also brought up a charity that he felt needed attention: 22kill. This is an organization that brings awareness to the fact that roughly 22 veterans commit suicide a day. Kaepernick added 22kill and the mental health issues he learned that veterans face to his list of reasons to protest. While he was still kneeling, Kaepernick decided to create The Million Dollar Pledge. This is where he donated \$1 million to different organizations that will help out oppressed communities in America. Some of the organizations he pledged to help dealt with issues like, “homelessness, at-risk families, education, community-police relations, prison reform, inmates’ rights, reproductive rights, hunger and more.”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> “Colin Kaepernick is getting a ton of support from military veterans” - Szoldra 2016

<sup>11</sup> - Szoldra 2016

<sup>12</sup> “Nate Boyer speaks out on Colin Kaepernick” - Schwartz 2018

<sup>13</sup> “While you were arguing about the anthem, Colin Kaepernick just finished donating \$1 million” - Willingham 2018

For the last \$100,000 of his million dollar pledge, Kaepernick created a project called the 10x10. He partnered with different celebrities to give to different organizations to help people and charities all across the country. In the 10x10, the celebrity, which included people like Usher and Serena Williams, would donate \$10,000 to a charity of their choosing and Kaepernick would match that donation. Together, these celebrities and Kaepernick gave back to the youth community and at-risk kids. His Million Dollar Pledge also brought awareness to what Kaepernick was kneeling for allowing him to donate over \$1 million towards organizations that could use the money to better society.

His entire million-dollar pledge was hardly mentioned by the media because it only covered his Anthem protests. It failed to focus on the positives of Kaepernick's kneeling and the activism that came out of it. It only covered the negative press he received. His Million Dollar Pledge and 10x10 with other celebrities was only shown on his website and sports news sites, rather than major news outlets. His donations and activism did not get any real coverage from the news. Instead, the media chose to focus on the hate he has received and the controversy surrounding his decision to kneel.

Megan Rapinoe, a soccer star for the U.S. team, also took a stand with Kaepernick and knelt during her soccer match as a sign of solidarity with him. She was the first non-football athlete to protest alongside him because she said that as, "a gay American, I know what it means to look at the flag and not have it protect all of your liberties. It was something small that I could do and something that I plan to keep doing in the future and hopefully spark some meaningful

conversation around it."<sup>14</sup> Following her protest, the only sites that commented on what she did were sports news outlets, like NBC Sports and Bleacher Report, and social media, like Twitter, where she went viral for kneeling with Kaepernick.

While the news left out parts of Kaepernick's story, including Rapinoe's decision to kneel with him, it also left out major events from her and the United States Women's National Team's World Cup win back in 2015. Less than a year after they lifted up the trophy, five members from the soccer team filed a wage-discrimination action against U.S. Soccer. The five players who became involved in the lawsuit were Carli Lloyd, Alex Morgan, Megan Rapinoe, Becky Sauerbrunn and Hope Solo. Jeffery Kessler, who represented the athletes, stated that, "U.S. Soccer responded by suing the players in an effort to keep in place the discriminatory and unfair treatment they have endured for years."<sup>15</sup> At first, U.S. soccer responded by saying it was disappointed in how the athletes were handling this issue and then came out and said that they are, "committed and engaged"<sup>16</sup> in negotiating with them. U.S. Soccer believes that women are paid justly for how much revenue they bring in for the sport.

This first wage-discrimination action occurred three years ago. Today, the women's national team is still fighting and filing new lawsuits against the United States Soccer Federation (USSF) trying to get equal pay for equal work. In March of 2019, players like Alex Morgan, Megan Rapinoe, Carlie Lloyd, and Mallory Pugh filed a second lawsuit against U.S. Women's Soccer. They filed a complaint, "for the violations of the Equal Pay Act and class action complaint for violations of title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> "USWNT's Megan Rapinoe kneels during National Anthem in solidarity with Colin Kaepernick" - Salazar 2016

<sup>15</sup> "U.S. Women's Team Files Wage-Discrimination Action vs. U.S." - ESPN 2016

<sup>16</sup> "U.S. Women's Team Files Wage-Discrimination Action vs. U.S." - ESPN 2016

<sup>17</sup> "U.S. women's national team lawsuit against U.S. Soccer" - 2019

In their new lawsuit, they demanded a jury trial. They mention how the men and women's soccer teams perform the same job responsibilities and participate in international competitions for their single common employer. Despite this, the women's soccer team has still been paid less. Even more so, the women's team has managed to win world championships, something the Men's National Team has been unable to do.

Throughout their current lawsuit, the women mention the need for gender equality and being paid fairly for the same work. They bring up that in 2017, current President of the USSF, Carlos Cardeiro admitted that, "our women's teams should be respected and valued as much as our men's teams, but our female players have not been treated equally."<sup>18</sup> Yet nothing has come out of his promises so far.

In August of 2019, the United States Soccer Federation and members of the USWNT reached an impasse in their attempts to reach equal pay. Molly Levinson, a spokesperson for the U.S. players, said after the meeting that, "today we must conclude these meetings sorely disappointed in the Federation's determination to perpetuate fundamentally discriminatory workplace conditions and behavior."<sup>19</sup> According to Levinson, it is clear that the USSF still plans on paying the women's team less than the men's team, despite them being more successful than the men. During the meeting, the USSF said that the USWNT were aggressive and took an unproductive approach in trying to reach an agreement. The USSF believes they are being painted unfairly by the USWNT but despite that, they still want to continue their discussions with the other side. There is currently no new mediation scheduled for the USSF and USWNT.

<sup>18</sup> "U.S. women's national team lawsuit against U.S. Soccer" - 2019

<sup>19</sup> "US Soccer, Team Talks Break down; Likely Head to Jury Trial." - Peterson 2019

Many news outlets have only reported on the most recent lawsuit regarding the U.S. soccer team and gender equality, yet this is not something new they are fighting. It has been nearly impossible to find equal attention on either side of the news outlet spectrum regarding the 2016 lawsuit and even less about the mediation between the USSF and USWNT that happened in 2019. Sources like ESPN and Yahoo Sports have been quick to report on what is happening between the two sides in this gender pay gap battle. Others like CNN and Fox have not been so generous in their attention on the women's team's legal battle with the USSF and how they plan on getting paid equally for equal work.

In July of 2019, the Women's National Soccer Team defeated the Netherlands 2-0 to win the FIFA Women's World Cup for the second time in four years and the fourth time overall. The media, like Fox Sports and Sports Center, was quick to cover the game, but it was also quick to show Rapinoe's comments about the White House and her team not going there. The news outlets also failed to show the big moment at the end of the game with the fans in the crowd in France. At the Stade de Lyon, where the final match was held, the bleachers could hold nearly 57,900 people.<sup>20</sup> "It was a sold out final match where, by the end of the game, the entire stadium was chanting "equal pay." While the TV media failed to show the footage from the stadium of people supporting the USWNT or mention the differences in their earnings between the men and the women's teams, social media was quick to post about it and bring everyone's attention to what was happening. Social media, like Twitter, showed people how much support they were getting from soccer fans around the world.

<sup>20</sup> "Crowd in stadium chants 'equal pay' after U.S. women's soccer World Cup victory" - Wise 2019

For winning the World Cup, the women's national team could receive about \$260,000 in maximum earnings. However, if the men won the World Cup, they could receive \$1 million.<sup>21</sup> While the media failed to report the earnings differences and the crowds full support of the women's soccer team, people like Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was quick to take to Twitter to say that, "at this point we shouldn't even be asking for #EqualPay for the #USWNT - we should demand they be paid at least twice as much."<sup>22</sup>

The only attention the women's team seemed to receive for their gender pay gap fight was from social media. There was limited coverage on their original lawsuit and their mediation with the USSF, and even less on the support these women received from fans around the world. During their ticker tape parade after their big win, an estimated 300,000 people flooded the streets to help celebrate with the women's team.<sup>23</sup> As the women went by in their floats, chants of "equal pay" started up all around them and people of all ages held up signs demanding equal pay for equal work.<sup>24</sup> While television news managed to cover their parade and some of the speeches the women gave, it did not show the thousands of fans screaming for equal pay alongside the USWNT. Videos of the chants and pictures of the signs were only found on news outlets dedicated to sports and athletes. The media gets to choose what kinds of stories to show or write about for their websites and often times, it leaves out the most important parts of the story in order to get the point across faster. These are just two examples of how athletes have had their political fights shut down by the media by not reporting the full stories and only focusing on certain aspects of what they have said or done.

The first words that come to mind when Colin Kaepernick's name is said is either positive or negative, never anything in between. There is either a strong feeling that what he is doing is right and will make a change. People can see that Kaepernick is a patriotic American standing up for people who do not have the same platform he does. The other side is that he is unpatriotic and he is disrespecting not only the troops but the country as a whole by his silent protest during the NFL season. The same could be said for Megan Rapinoe. She is seen by a lot of women and children as someone who fights for them. She is not afraid to stand up for what she believes in and she is ready to make a change in the country and lead the fight for gender equality. On the other side, some people see her as someone who is too cocky, too outspoken and fighting a losing battle that does not really exist to some.

The media and different news outlets do not help change the opinions of people when they already have their own narratives. Instead, it decides to air it or write it for their websites. It will use certain labels to describe a person or an event and it will shape the story in a way that it wants its viewers to hear and process it. Instead of trying to change someone's mind on something, it reinforces what the person already believes depending on the outlet they watch or read. It is no coincidence when the media uses certain words to shape a topic the way it wants. Depending on the station, the way they frame a certain topic for the public will be how they want the viewer to perceive it. They will create their own optics on different social events and present them in the way they want the viewers to react to them.

Existing narratives of Kaepernick and Rapinoe can influence someone's perception

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<sup>21</sup> - Wise 2019

<sup>22</sup> - Wise 2019

<sup>23</sup> "Fans gather to celebrate USWNT World Cup title at parade: 'This is a huge deal'" - Reyes 2019

<sup>24</sup> - Reyes 2019



of them by just a topic sentence or using them as a new campaign ad, because the media plays a role in how someone understands and interprets a story. They already have certain labels that are associated with them. Certain news outlets, like Fox, will use those existing labels to further enforce how they feel about the two athletes. This type of attention could be positive or negative and it could also further the divide on how people feel about these athletes and their political demonstrations.

Reuters is an international news organization that occasionally reports on sports news and conducts polling and research. Nearly two weeks after Kaepernick first decided to kneel in 2016, Reuters created a poll where 72 percent of Americans that were surveyed found Kaepernick's decision to protest during the anthem to be unpatriotic and disrespectful to America and the veterans that served this country.<sup>25</sup> Out of those 72 percent, 64 percent said that they believed Kaepernick had a right to protest but that they still do not agree with his methods.<sup>26</sup> While reporting on this poll, different local news outlets, like the *Dallas Morning News* and the *Washington Post* had headlines calling him unpatriotic. The headlines seemed like a clickbait article, or "content whose main purpose is to attract attention and encourage visitors to click on a link to a particular web page,"<sup>27</sup> to get consumers to read their articles. Instead of reporting on the positive outcomes that has resulted in Kaepernick's protest, the media has continued to focus on the negative aspects, further reinforces a narrative personification of him.

Kaepernick was painted as unpatriotic by the media and by current President Donald Trump. Trump used his political platform

during the 2016 election to speak out against Kaepernick's protest. He tweeted about Kaepernick and used his campaign rallies to speak about him and his unpatriotic actions. Trump used this anger towards Kaepernick to rally his base. On CNN and Fox News, Trump's speech aired where he said that Kaepernick kneeling was, "a total disrespect of our heritage. That's a total disrespect for everything we stand for."<sup>28</sup> Trump used his platform and his screen time on the news outlets to push his narrative of Kaepernick being unpatriotic onto the people and the media. By airing these speeches and writing these headlines, he helped drive it forward.

While Kaepernick has been painted as unpatriotic and un-American by the media and the President, he continues his donations to charity and his activism. He never received equal screen time for the work he has done for the people yet he continues to do so behind the scenes. Despite being called unpatriotic, Kaepernick has worked alongside veterans and donated to charities to help bring awareness to different organizations. Later in the paper, his activism will be looked into more in depth, but it is important to realize that Kaepernick is seen as someone who does not stand for this country or its values, when in reality, he has taken a stand to make this country better.

When he is asked about kneeling and why how he feels about the media and others painting him in a certain light, Kaepernick has said that, "I am not looking for approval. I have to stand up for people that are oppressed. If they take football away, my endorsements from me, I know that I stood up for what is right."<sup>29</sup> Kaepernick is aware of the negative narrative being created by the media of him. Despite this realization, he continues to be

<sup>25</sup> "Most Americans disagree with Kaepernick, but respect his right to protest" - Tennery 2016

<sup>26</sup> - Tennery 2016

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/clickbait>

<sup>28</sup> "Trump: NFL owners should fire players who protest the national anthem" - Tatum 2017

<sup>29</sup> "Colin Kaepernick explains why he sat during national anthem" - Wyche 2016

vocal for what is just and right. He has vowed to continue his activism by donating to charities while demonstrating a positive attitude regardless of the negative media attention that has fostered around his actions.

When it comes to the other side, however, Kaepernick is being painted by the media, more specifically Nike, in a positive light. In 2018, Nike celebrated its 30th anniversary by creating an ad campaign featuring different celebrities and their take on the “Just Do It” slogan. In their campaign, they made Colin Kaepernick the face of one of their newest ads. The nearly three minute long advertisement followed different people facing adversity. It showed athletes from the average person playing in their backyard to superstars like Serena Williams, Lebron James, Megan Rapinoe and Colin Kaepernick. At the end of the video advertisement, Kaepernick tells the viewers, “don’t ask if you’re dreams are crazy...ask if they’re crazy enough.”<sup>30</sup> Nike finished their campaign ad by creating photos of the athletes with the slogans mentioned in the beginning of the paper regarding their political battles. For Kaepernick and Rapinoe, their ads were found on the billboards and all over social media.

Immediately, this sparked outrage from NFL fans and other critics of Kaepernick. They posted videos and pictures of them destroying their Nike shoes, cutting up their socks and burning any clothing they had from the brand. People began to boycott any Nike item due to the new face of the campaign. On social media, #BoycottNike trended all day and President Donald Trump even took the time to tweet about what a bad decision they made<sup>31</sup>. People believed that Nike made a mistake making a controversial athlete who

has been a controversial topic of discussion. Nike used Kaepernick as the voice over for its three minute ad and it used his face all over its social media and on large posters and billboards. The consumers and others still saw Kaepernick as someone unpatriotic and not a true American and decided to take it out on the company for this bold move. Following this ad release, the brand took an immediate 3% dip, which was equivalent to a \$4 billion loss<sup>32</sup>. It was seen as a major mistake by some for making Kaepernick the face of this campaign.

A few months later, however, Kaepernick’s ad became a popular one on social media and the stock hit a new all-time record. Products were selling out more frequently and more people were investing in Nike. Since its controversial ad of Kaepernick, Nike’s market value has risen by \$6 billion and its shares up over 36%.<sup>33</sup> His jersey began selling out more frequently. In the NFL, there are nearly 1,700 people playing professional football and despite not playing for three years, Kaepernick’s merchandise sales remain in the top 50 every year.<sup>34</sup>

This “Dream Crazy” advertisement remained so popular that in 2019 during the Creative Arts Emmy, it won for ‘outstanding commercial.’ This was the first time in 17 years that Nike brought home the award for this category and it was all thanks to Colin Kaepernick being the face of their campaign. Despite taking a big risk and choosing Kaepernick to be the face of their newest, and biggest, campaign, Nike managed to walk away making more money than originally thought with a Creative Arts Emmy to go along with it.

<sup>30</sup> “Nike’s Controversial Colin Kaepernick Ad Wins Emmy for Best Commercial” - Papenfuss 2016

<sup>31</sup> “Nike won its first ‘outstanding commercial’ Emmy in 17 years for an ad featuring Colin Kaepernick” - Mitra 2019

<sup>32</sup> “Colin Kaepernick Pushes Nike’s Market Value Up \$6 Billion, to an All-Time High” - Reints 2018

<sup>33</sup> - Reints 2018

<sup>34</sup> “Colin Kaepernick has some of the NFL’s best-selling merchandise even though teams don’t want him” - Thomas 2017

Megan Rapinoe has also seen her share of negative and positive press. The media has managed to paint her as some wild soccer player with crazier hair to match. They often fail to focus on her activism and empowering speeches, choosing rather to cover her purple hair and iconic World Cup celebration pose. Just like Kaepernick, she has been at the center of some tweets from President Trump. Before winning the championship with her team, Rapinoe mentioned how she has not, “done the roll call, but I don’t think anybody’s interested in visiting Trump<sup>35</sup>.” President Trump immediately fired back a tweet saying that, “Megan should WIN first before she TALKS! Finish the job!”<sup>36</sup> Despite Rapinoe having a great World Cup and managing to bring home a championship with her team, all the media could focus on was Rapinoe’s “disrespect” to the President and how she handled herself before they even won.

Despite the negative picture the media was painting, she was invited on Anderson Cooper for “AC360.” On this show, she was asked about women’s equality and the gender pay gap. She mentioned how equal pay for soccer is like an investment into the women. The women’s team influences the youth who will one day grow up and possibly play soccer for the U.S. She sees the equal pay as investing in the youth, investing in the players and the coaching staff.<sup>37</sup> Rapinoe believes that the men’s team is constantly being invested in by different sponsors and by the USSF as well. She says that the men’s side of all sports is seen as, “this exciting opportunity, business opportunity that needs to be invested in.”<sup>38</sup> For the women on the other hand, Rapinoe

said it’s like, “how cheap can we do this while sort of keeping them happy?”<sup>39</sup>

On AC360, Rapinoe came out with some strong words about the pay gap and why she feels like it is unfair that equal work isn’t resulting in equal pay. After this interview came out, however, no one paid any attention to her remarks about investing in the women’s soccer team and why it is a good idea to pay them equally. Instead they were focused on her strong words to Trump and why she was not going to the White House with her team. Anderson Cooper gave Rapinoe a platform to send a quick message to Trump and to state her true feelings. While looking into the camera, Rapinoe told Trump a powerful message, how she feels like his, “message is excluding people You’re excluding me. You’re excluding people that look like me. You’re excluding people of color. You’re excluding Americans that maybe support you.”<sup>40</sup>

This powerful speech about why the women should be invested in, why the pay gap should be fixed and how the USWNT feel about being paid significantly less than the men was ignored by the media in order to stir up more drama on the “Rapinoe v. Trump” situation that went on throughout the World Cup. The media, like Fox & Friends, used the already existing narrative of Rapinoe being cocky and bold to push her conversation with Trump and her message about feeling excluded as a sign of her disrespect and her personality. Just like Kaepernick, she is viewed as someone who is unpatriotic and disrespectful to this country due to the way she presents herself. Due to the media’s narrative of her and how it feels she presents

<sup>35</sup> “Megan Rapinoe: Meeting with President Trump wouldn’t change his mind” - Schad 2019

<sup>36</sup> “Megan Rapinoe doing something right if she’s setting Donald Trump off” - Armour 2019

<sup>37</sup> “Megan Rapinoe says fight for equal pay is about more than money. It’s about investment in women’s soccer” - Simon 2019

<sup>38</sup> - Simon 2019

<sup>39</sup> - Simon 2019

<sup>40</sup> - Simon 2019

herself, Rapinoe's activism and drive to make change often goes unnoticed

Rapinoe has been one of the most polarizing athletes since Colin Kaepernick. Just like him, she has had to face negative and positive narratives of her created by the media. Despite the hate and negativity thrown her way, Rapinoe has not let it stop her activism. Like Kaepernick, she was included in the Nike "Dream Crazy" campaign ad. She is seen with her teammates celebrating their World Cup win. She even managed to get her own poster campaign ad from Nike, where her work of both fighting for what is right and being an amazing soccer player is being celebrated. Rapinoe has signed both lawsuits for the USWNT and their fight for equal pay. She has proudly knelt alongside Kaepernick in his fight for bringing awareness to police brutality and she has inspired people across the country, both young and old, to stand up for what they believe in.

During the ticker tape parade, she left the crowd of thousands by saying that, "we have to do more. We're here. We're ready. Everyone's ready to do more? Good!"<sup>41</sup> She has been influencing people to get involved and work with her to make a change and fight for what is right. Despite the negative press, she has managed to stay true to her beliefs and has allowed the Nike campaign to paint her in a more positive light alongside Kaepernick. Rapinoe is still fighting for gender equality despite the way the media talks about her.

Athletes voicing their political opinions is not something new. From Muhammad Ali protesting the Vietnam War, to Tommie Smith and John Carlos bowing their heads and raising a fist in protest at the Olympics, to LeBron James opening up his own school to help underprivileged kids and Fencer Ibtihaj Muhammad openly protesting the Muslim Ban

and educating young people on why it is a dangerous policy, Kaepernick and Rapinoe's protests and activism is not something uncommon in the sports world. The two athletes have been influencing other athletes by using their large platforms to speak their minds about issues they are passionate about and receiving all types of backlash for doing so. Since they have been so bold in their opinions and unafraid to stand up for what they believe is right, other athletes today have been following in their footsteps. When it comes to a power perspective of looking at how athletes political opinions can have an impact on this country, it is important to see it from the way they can influence upcoming elections, legislation and future activists who want to get involved and educated.

In regards to how Kaepernick's rare position as an athlete with a big platform and an activist, he was able to create an idea called the "Know Your Rights Camp." Kaepernick's entire reason for kneeling is police brutality so he decided to use his resources to make a free camp to, "raise awareness on higher education, self empowerment, and instructions on how to properly interact with law enforcement in various scenarios".<sup>42</sup> Together, Kaepernick and his team travel to cities across the country and speak to underprivileged youth in a free event in order to educate them. More than 200 students attend each camp and receive essentials for their school education in order to give them a better chance of making it through. The students learn about civil rights and get a lesson on equality and racism in this country.<sup>43</sup> Kaepernick's goal in this camp is to give opportunities to children who have not had the same chance as everyone else. He is directly impacting their lives and giving them a chance to grow up and make change the same way he is doing.

<sup>41</sup> "In speech, Megan Rapinoe praises Colin Kaepernick: 'He's still effectively banned from the NFL'" - Bumbaca 2019

<sup>42</sup> "Know Your Rights Camp" - Kaepernick

<sup>43</sup> "Colin Kaepernick's "Know Your Rights" Program is Providing the Youth With Major Keys to Success" - Hodge 2017

Kaepernick is also bringing awareness to the Black Lives Matter movement. This movement which is committed “to imagining and creating a world free of anti-Blackness, where every Black person has the social, economic, and political power to thrive.”<sup>44</sup> In 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement is creating the “What Matters 2020” where it will get Black citizens motivated to vote and get out to the polls. It will promote candidates that line up with their ideals and try to engage members of this movement to run for office. It will run candidates on a platform of racial and LGBT equality, criminal justice reform and common sense gun laws among other points.

The Objective of the "What Matters 2020" movement is to get candidates into office that will represent their beliefs on a bigger platform. Kaepernick’s movement has been about Black Lives Matter and supporting some of the same ideas that this movement does. Kaepernick decided to kneel to protest against police brutality, the same way the Black Lives Matter movement was created to protest the unjustified killing of Trayvon Martin.<sup>45</sup> Together, What Matters 2020 and Kaepernick are encouraging young Black Americans to get involved in the political process and to have an vote in the 2020 elections to make sure their voices are heard.

Kaepernick has been able to directly impact the elections and voting in this country and influence people to stand up for what they believe. Together, the Black Lives Matter movement and Kaepernick have been able to push forward their ideas of stopping police brutality and fixing the system all while mobilizing their own version of a political party for the 2018 midterms and 2020 elections.

Rapinoe and her team have been fighting for gender equality and equal pay since 2015. Despite barely receiving media attention from

their first lawsuit and their struggle to receive equal pay, the team pushed on and kept the fight going. After their second lawsuit, the equal pay for equal work movement caught on and people began supporting the idea of paying the USWNT what they rightfully deserve for their back-to-back championship wins.

Nevertheless, the gender pay gap does not stop with professional athletes. As of August of 2019, “the median full-time female worker makes just 80.7 cents for every dollar her male counterpart makes.”<sup>46</sup> Rapinoe and the team’s fight have led to more women demanding equal pay for their own work. Due to this newfound push for gender pay gap equality, potential candidates and politicians are now voicing their support for fixing the wage gap.

Due to the big push in fixing this gender pay gap, candidates and politicians have been taking on this new battle alongside the women’s soccer team. They have been coming out in support of creating legislation to fix the issue and putting their support behind the USWNT. Since Rapinoe decided to get involved and make this issue the main part of her activism, she has inspired other politicians to talk about this issue and get involved in finding ways to fix it which could bring about new legislation conversations during the 2020 election. Mayor Bill de Blasio, who held the ticker tape parade for the women’s team has come out in full support of fixing this gap. He promised that if he were in the office of the President, he “would insist that Congress pass an amendment to the Amateur Sports Act requiring equal pay for men and women in all national sports teams. And if they didn't do it,

<sup>44</sup> “Black Lives Matter: What We Believe”

<sup>45</sup> “Black Lives Matter: What We Believe”

<sup>46</sup> “7 charts that show the glaring gap between men and women's salaries in the US” - Kiersz, Sheth, Gal 2019

I'd use an executive order.”<sup>47</sup> The 2020 presidential candidate Bernie Sanders has also come out in support of fixing the pay gap because he, “believes wage discrimination based on gender is wrong and must end. He has supported legislation throughout his career to help women secure equal pay.”<sup>48</sup>

Political activism from athletes can be seen on an international level as well. In China in June of 2019, activists began protesting against the Chinese Communist Party and its repressive behavior. Hong Kong is part of China in a “one country, two systems arrangement.”<sup>49</sup> This means that Hong Kong has some autonomy, or the right to self-governing. The people of Hong Kong have more rights than they do in China. In June, China passed a bill which would allow criminal suspects to be extradited to mainland China<sup>50</sup>. Protestors feared that this new bill could target activists and journalists who speak out against Communism in China. The protestors in China have come out with five demands that China has to follow in order for them to stop protesting and taking to the streets.

So what does this have to do with athletes and political opinions in the United States? Daryl Morey, the General Manager for the Houston Rockets, wrote in a tweet, “Fight for Freedom. Stand with Hong Kong.”<sup>51</sup> He quickly deleted the tweet but it was too late. Tilman Fertitta, the Rocket’s owner, sent out a tweet saying that Morley, “does NOT speak for the @HoustonRockets...and we are NOT a political organization<sup>52</sup>” in order to lessen the damage his employee’s tweet caused. The

Chinese Basketball Association, which is headed by a former Rockets player, Yao Ming, went as far as to suspend cooperation with the Houston Rockets. As a result, the Rockets lost a \$1.5 billion deal and games are no longer streamed in China. Texas Republican Senator, Ted Cruz, took the time to tweet out that, “As a lifelong @HoustonRockets fan, I was proud to see @dmorey call out the Chinese Communist Party’s repressive treatment of protestors. We’re better than this; human rights shouldn’t be assisting Chinese communist censorship.”<sup>53</sup>

By discouraging athletes from expressing their political opinions, it limits their free speech. By allowing Morey to have an opinion on what is happening in China has brought new attention to the protests and new awareness for the battle being fought there. NBA Commissioner Adam Silver came out and said that the NBA would no longer, “put itself in a position of regulating what players, employees and team owners say or will not say.”<sup>54</sup> Following this, basketball fans began showing up to games with signs saying “Free Hong Kong”<sup>55</sup> and showing their support for the Hong Kong protestors. People who attended the games began wearing shirts and bringing posters with sayings like “Human Rights Matter Here + There!”<sup>56</sup> Over 300 activists showed up at a Houston Raptors game to show their support for Hong Kong.

Political activism does not just end in the United States. By allowing these NBA managers and players to have a political voice, awareness was brought to the Hong Kong protests. Fans of the sport and others were

<sup>47</sup> “2020 Candidate Bill de Blasio Uses USWNT Parade to Campaign” - Reints 2019

<sup>48</sup> “Bernie Sanders on Equal Pay” - Sanders

<sup>49</sup> “The Hong Kong protests explained in 100 and 500 words” - BBC News 2019

<sup>50</sup> - BBC News 2019

<sup>51</sup> “Houston Rockets GM Apologizes For Tweet Supporting Hong Kong Protesters” - Neuman 2019

<sup>52</sup> - Neuman 2019

<sup>53</sup> - Neuman 2019

<sup>54</sup> “China and the NBA are coming to blows over a pro-Hong Kong tweet. Here's why.” - Perper 2019

<sup>55</sup> - Perper 2019

<sup>56</sup> - Perper 2019

able to learn about an event happening overseas that they might not have had the opportunity to educate themselves on because of a former athlete's decision to tweet about it. Since Morey's tweet, America has begun to show its support against communism in China and for the hard work the protestors are doing in Hong Kong against the system.

Even though the tweet had consequences for the sport, Morey's tweet about Hong Kong allowed a new group of activists to become educated about these protests and come together to help fight for something they believe in. Without Morey's tweet, this may have not been possible. It shows how big an impact an athlete's activism, including just a single tweet, could have on a group of people. It allows for awareness about a situation to come to light and brings together people who are ready to fight to make a change. An athlete has a large platform that they can use to inspire others politically to make a difference. When the media works with them to show the aspects of the story and the positive narrative that comes from it, it could influence elections, voting, legislation and even future activists.

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