

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT ATHLETES BE ALLOWED TO SPEAK THEIR MIND

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One of the contradictions of the United States is that we believe in free speech as long as the person talking is saying something with which we agree. And while this has become especially true in the age of Trump, the shadow of intolerance for unpopular words or actions has frequently darkened the Bill of Rights. Just ask anyone impacted by the McCarthy Blacklist.

What makes this intolerance especially scary right now is that our values are most strenuously tested during bad times, not good. When we all agree – or mostly agree – it is easy to defend free speech. But we show our real character as a nation, our real commitment to freedom, when we can allow the voices of dissent to be heard in difficult times.

In 1906, the British writer Evelyn Beatrice Hall penned these words: “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.”

The same should be true when it comes to defending the right of non-violent acts of protest. If Rosa Parks

had not refused to sit in the back of the bus would things have changed? If there had not been sit-ins at segregated lunch counters would things have changed? If tea had not been thrown into the harbor in Boston would things have changed?

The various protests by athletes involving the national anthem – whether it is taking a knee, staying in the locker room or linking arms – need to be removed from an emotional context and placed in an intellectual one. Those are not acts of disrespect of the flag but rather acts of great respect for what the flag stands for: The unfettered right to protest.

Those are not acts that disparage the men and women in uniform who have fought and died for this country but rather they are acts that emphasize why they fought, what they fought for: To defend our right to disagree; to defend our freedoms.

Here is why I think these protest are particularly important and must be allowed to occur and why I applaud the National Football League owners who have defended the rights of players who express their opinion.

Sports have always been a petri dish for social change in this country. Things happen in sports before they happen in the general society. In a way, ideas are tried out in sports. Sport has always been in the vanguard in social change.

Jackie Robinson integrated baseball in 1947. It was not until 1954 that the Supreme Court struck down segregated public schools in Brown vs. The Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas.

The PGA erased the Caucasian Only clause in 1961, four years before Congress passed the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act. Althea Gibson integrated the LPGA in 1964, at the height of the Civil Rights movement.

And football had as much as anything to do with integrating colleges in the South when the University of Southern California waxed Alabama 42-21 in Birmingham in 1970.

John McKay's USC squad was the first fully integrated team to play in the state of Alabama. And there are many who feel that Alabama coach Paul "Bear" Bryant knew exactly what he was doing in inviting McKay's team to Birmingham, making a wordless plea for integration.

There are those who feel that athletes should not use their public platform to express their personal beliefs. But doesn't everyone have not only the right but also the responsibility to stand up for what they believe? Isn't that what belief is all about? And isn't it the responsibility of those with power, those with a platform, to speak up for the powerless?

At a time when thought has been reduced to 140-character sound bites and when social media makes it possible for us to live in a world where everyone agrees with what we think, it is more important than ever to allow unpopular views to have exposure. This should be an American value we all rally around.

I struggled with whether or not to write this column. I live in the world of golf. My income is derived from the world of golf. Trump is big in the world of golf. It is possible, perhaps even likely, that writing this will impact my earnings potential in the world of golf.

But if I am not willing to take that risk, what do I stand for, what do I believe in? Set aside the issues at the heart of the national anthem protest and reduce the issue simply to one: The right to protest. How can I not stand up for that? It's what being an American is all about. Otherwise, we open the door to another McCarthy Blacklist.