

ANN KILLION

Kaepernick and Floyd: 2 knees, 2 reactions, 1 issue



Marcio Jose Sanchez / Associated Press 2016

Maybe if we had listened to Colin Kaepernick four years ago, we wouldn't be here.

Maybe if we had embraced Kaepernick's peaceful protest, had taken it seriously, had paid attention to the issue he was trying to address, we could be working toward change instead of witnessing

the chaos, anger and violence in our streets.

Because this was exactly what Kaepernick was protesting. Not the anthem. Not the flag. Not the military. But unchecked police brutality against people of color in our country.

It has been an issue as long as we have been a nation. Horrifying instances of brutality and murder continue to take place, whether or not someone pulls out a phone to record it, as happened in the case of George Floyd. For every one incident that happens to be recorded, think of how many hundreds took place without public exposure.

Kaepernick, the former 49ers quarterback, couldn't change that history, of course. Not alone. But he turned a focus on it, using the enormous platform of the National Football League in the age of social media. Everyone noticed.

Back then, in 2016, we — as a nation — had a chance to have a real

Darnella Frazier/
Facebook

The image of Colin Kaepernick, left, kneeling peacefully during the national

anthem has been
contrasted with
Minneapolis police
officer Derek Chauvin's
knee on the neck of
George Floyd.

conversation about systemic brutality.

And we whiffed.

Kaepernick, who on Friday announced on his Instagram page that his "Know Your Rights Camp" was starting a legal defense fund to pay for lawyers for those arrested during protests in Minneapolis, tried to

address the issue without violence. Without broken windows or flaming cars. In the long tradition of nonviolent protest embraced by Martin Luther King Jr.

He was vilified for it. He was blackballed from the NFL.

The disturbing irony of Kaepernick being made into a monster for taking a knee during the anthem in protest, in contrast to Minneapolis officer Derek Chauvin taking a knee on Floyd's neck and killing him, is not lost on anyone.

LeBron James posted the two images side by side on his Instagram page, with the words "This ... is Why." Steph Curry posted the same image of Chauvin on Instagram with a statement emphasizing the humanity of the victim: "George has a family. George didn't deserve to die. George pleaded for help and was straight up ignored, which speaks loud and clear that his black life didn't matter."

You want to tell these men to "stick to sports?" Too bad. There are no sports to stick to right now. Not in the middle of a pandemic.

But athletes like James and Curry and Kaepernick and the Sharks' Evander Kane — who pleaded with all high-profile athletes regardless of race to speak out — have voices. They have platforms. They are some of the most well-known, highly regarded people of color in our society. They also know that there but for the grace of God, they are George Floyd. Or Ahmaud Arbery, gunned down while jogging. Or Breonna Taylor, the EMT shot to death in her apartment. Or Jaylan Butler, the Eastern Illinois swimmer who found himself face down in the snow with the muzzle of a police officer's gun on his head.

High-profile people have an obligation to use their platform. The fortunate must speak out against injustice perpetrated against the less fortunate. And now, without games being played and the pitiful concern about "distractions," is the time for all to speak out.

Athletes have tried to have the conversation before. Think back to the summer of 2016, more than a month before Kaepernick began his protest, when some members of the WNBA's Minnesota Lynx team wore Black Lives Matter Tshirts in warm-ups. Four members of the Minneapolis police force — off-duty cops working security at the game — walked out in protest of the players' statement.

One of those players, Maya Moore, took off last season and announced she would not play again this season, as she dedicates herself to fighting for criminal justice reform and overturning the conviction of a man she believes has been wrongfully imprisoned. She has helped pay for the legal fees of his appeal. Her concern is not a stunt.

James wore a T-shirt with the words “I can’t breathe” during warm-ups back in 2014. That was in reference to Eric Garner, who uttered those final words before dying after he had been put in a choke hold by police who were arresting him for selling single cigarettes on the sidewalk. Those are the same words that Floyd said before dying with Chauvin’s knee on his neck.

But when athletes protest, when they show concern, they are often mocked. Fox News pundit Laura Ingraham told James to “shut up and dribble.” In response to a tweet by the first lady calling for “peaceful protests,” Kaepernick’s mother, Teresa, pointed out that Melania Trump’s husband had called her peacefully protesting son “a son of a bitch.”

Vice President Mike Pence tweeted condemnation of violence, saying, “We will always stand for the right of Americans to peacefully protest and let their voices be heard.”

But in 2017, I was in Indianapolis and witnessed firsthand that the vice president disrespected that right. At taxpayer expense, he flew to his home state, ostensibly for a halftime ceremony retiring Peyton Manning’s jersey. But he held his convoy outside the stadium, went in for a few minutes at the start of the game, when — as everyone could have predicted — several members of the 49ers kneeled during the anthem. Pence then stormed out, tweeting his outrage behind him, and flew back across the country. At taxpayer expense.

No one wanted to honor Kaepernick’s peaceful protests. No one wanted athletes to use their platform for change. No one wanted to have the conversation.

And here we are. Again. With our hearts and nation broken.

Ann Killion is a San Francisco Chronicle columnist. Email: akillion@sfchronicle.com Twitter: @annkillion