

SPORTS HAVE A WAY OF SPARKING ANTHEM ANGER AND QUESTIONS OF RESPECT

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Members of the Boston Red Sox listen to the national anthem before the start of their game with the Chicago Cubs on their first-ever trip to Wrigley Field in the storied teams' first meeting since the 1918 World Series, June 10, 2005, in Chicago, Illinois. The Cubs won the game, 14-6. Photo: AP/Jeff Roberson

Singing the national anthem at sporting events began with the 1918 World Series, during World War I. The New York Times on September 6, 1918, reported it was the seventh-inning stretch of the first game between the Chicago Cubs and the Boston Red Sox.

"As the crowd of 10,274 spectators - the smallest that has witnessed the diamond classic in many years - stood up to take their afternoon yawn, that has been the privilege and custom of baseball fans for many generations, the band broke forth to the strains of 'The Star-Spangled Banner.'"

The story tells how the ballplayers quickly turned, followed by Jackie Fred Thomas of the U.S. Navy to face the flag hanging from the top of a pole in right field. Gradually, they all joined in to sing the anthem. At the end, onlookers burst into "thunderous applause."

Baseball And Cracker Jack

The event made for good public relations for ballplayers in 1918. People then were left wondering why the players were on the ballfield rather than the battlefield.

The idea caught on. Marc Ferris writes in his cultural history of the anthem, that Red Sox owner Harry Frazee opened each game in Boston with it.

As time passed, playing and singing "The Star-Spangled Banner" became as routine as Cracker Jacks at ballgames.

By the mid-1950s, the nation was at peace and people were relaxed. Crowds were less respectful as the anthem was played.

Of course, while many fans do stop what they are doing when the anthem is played, others still laugh and talk and move about.

"The next time you're at a sporting event," Kyle Koster wrote on the sports website The Big Lead in May, "take a look around notice how many people are locked into their phones, sipping their beer or worse during the playing of the anthem."

O Say Can You Sing?

Many baseball fans sing the anthem but shout parts of it as a joke. In Baltimore, fans of the Orioles yell "Oh" when they reach the verse, "O say can you see."

In 2012, The Post's Mike Wise noted in disgust that at the Verizon Center in Washington, D.C., "Some of these louts actually yell 'OH!' and 'RED!' at different intervals - twice ruining the anthem" at Washington Capitals hockey games.

Playing the national anthem before a sports event is a grand old tradition, and so is dissing it. Most people don't seem to care how other fans react to the tune.

That is, until someone famous criticizes it.

One Football Player's Stance

That can be seen in the latest controversy over Colin Kaepernick, the San Francisco 49ers quarterback who refuses to stand for the song in protest.

"I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color," Kaepernick told NFL Media's Steve Wyche. "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 is being criticized, primarily by political conservatives.

"I think it's a terrible thing," Republican Donald Trump said. "And maybe he should find a country that works better for him, let him try. It won't happen."

"Why the hell do people come here in from anywhere? Even more, why do people stay here with all this oppression that's taking place?" conservative talk show host Mark Levin said.

"Because a dimwit with a 12 IQ, like this guy, can make \$126 million in six years, based on one or two seasons, and he still sucks!" Levin said.

Court Of Public Opinion

At the recent Summer Olympics in Brazil, American gymnast Gabby Douglas was pressured by social media's court of public opinion to apologize for not placing her hand over her heart when the song played.

Twenty years before Douglas and Kaepernick, there was Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf.

At the start of the 1995-1996 season, while playing basketball for the Denver Nuggets, he decided that he would not salute the flag during the national anthem that year. He would sit down while the song was sung.

He said the flag was a "symbol of oppression, of tyranny," The New York Times reported.

In March of that year, a local reporter published a small blurb about it. Media requests to visit practice the next day doubled.

Commissioner David Stern suspended Abdul-Rauf for one game, but two days later, the National Basketball Association decided to allow him to simply stand during the song. They said he could close his eyes and look away from the flag, SBNation reported.

Many outlets, such as SBNation and Yardbarker, claim this controversy ended up costing Abdul-Rauf his career.

He says he feels the same way.

"After the national anthem fiasco, nobody really wanted to touch me," he told HoopsHype, a basketball blog, in 2010.

Anthem Anger

While many more people of color seem to be attacked when they are perceived to insult the national anthem, the anger is directed at white celebrities as well.

In 1990, comedian Rosanne Barr, who is white, proved that at a San Diego Padres game. She wore a baggy, white shirt and shrieked her way, some thought offensively, through the song. She also spat on the pitcher's mound.

The outrage was widespread. President George H.W. Bush called the performance "disgraceful." Conservative commentator George Will called her a "slob."

Her son, Jake Pentland, told The Post, "I went to school the next day. I got to hear that my mother hates America and 'I hope she dies.' She was really distraught. She wouldn't leave the house."

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