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Jay-Z, Roger, and Kaepernick

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - JAY-Z, ROGER, AND KAEPERNICK
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The National Football League is about to begin its 100th season of play. This will be celebrated *ad nauseam* and the 2020-2021 season will be celebrated as the 100th Anniversary season of the NFL. The marketing folks at the NFL no doubt spend weeks and months figuring out how to milk this milestone for as long as possible. This points to the self-evident proposition that the National Football League is all about marketing and only incidentally about actual football.

One obstacle in the NFL marketing orbit is the persistent set of issues surrounding Colin Kaepernick and the National Anthem protests. Three years ago, and it seems much longer, the San Francisco Forty-Niner's quarterback went down on one knee during the playing of the anthem during an exhibition game in San Diego. This was Kaepernick's form of protest over police violence in the African-American community. He said he wanted to call attention to the issue and provoke some discussion of it. Initially Kaepernick's action attracted very little comment.

Several things followed. First other NFL players joined the protest and negative comment began to appear. Second, Donald Trump jumped into the fray just as it seemed to be subsiding. Third, the protest then grew and spread to college, high school, and youth football. From there it spread to other sports and non-sports venues. With a lot of help from across the spectrum of society, Kaepernick's goal was reached.

The ramifications have been many. Knowing he would be released by the Forty-Niners, Kaepernick opted out of his contract. Subsequently he has not found another team willing to sign him. The NFL has bounced back and forth trying to please supporters and opponents of Kaepernick, especially players, the president, and fans. It has been, among other things, a PR nightmare for the league. It has tested the leadership of the NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell, and he has not performed well.

At the last Super Bowl the NFL found that, led by Jay-Z and his Roc Nation, a significant number of prominent African-American musical artists declined invitations to perform in the half-time

show. This was one more PR problem for the NFL. The league had been seeking to increase its connections to the African-American fans and it was facing considerable criticism. The lead cut, APESHIT, on Beyonce and Jay-Z's album "Everything Is Love" featured the following lyric message to the NFL:

"I said no to the Super Bowl

You need me, I don't need you

Every night we in the end zone

Tell the NFL we in stadiums too."

So what to do? As usual, the NFL moved to dangle some money in front of a significant figure or group in an attempt to co-opt them by playing on two basic human traits: greed and the desire for power. Somehow the Commissioner needed to be transformed into a compassionate hipster who related to a major African-American entertainer. And so it was last week that Roger Goodell wearing a casual polo shirt in a vain attempt to look hip, held a press conference with Jay-Z looking every bit the role of Jay-Z. It was one of those moments that took the air out of the room.

The NFL will give Jay-Z and Roc Nation control over entertainment at the Super Bowl and other high profile NFL events. In return Jay-Z and Roc Nation will support the NFL's social justice initiatives such as "Inspire Change." There is no indication of the financial arrangements of the deal, although there are reports that Jay-Z will become part owner of an NFL team. For the NFL the PR benefits are incalculable and any enlargement of its demographic translates into dollars.

"We don't want people to come in and necessarily agree with us; we want people to come in and tell us what we can do better," Goodell said at the press conference. "I think that's a core element of our relationship between the two organizations, and with Jay and I personally."

So there it is, Rog and Jay, now pals and working together for the betterment of the NFL and all mankind. Compassionate Capitalism is not dead.

So what about Colin Kaepernick? What does he get? Certainly nothing in this deal. After three years out of football he is not likely to find an NFL team, including those who have critical quarterback needs that will sign him. Jay-Z dismissed Kaepernick by claiming that his protest had been a great success as it focused attention on injustice. Now it was time to move on past Kaepernick, "I think we're past kneeling. I think it's time for action" said Jay-Z, words that were music to the Commissioner's ears.

The reaction from Kaepernick's supporters has been loud and highly critical of Jay-Z. He has been called a sell-out, a hypocrite, and a callous capitalist billionaire. Perhaps more surprising has been the support for Jay Z from prominent figures in the African-American community, including Harry Edwards the sports sociologist and leading critic of racial discrimination in sport and across society.

Edwards sees the deal as important to the NFL and believes that Jay-Z will be able to use his position to shape NFL entertainment "artistically, to project the right message to we the people, because you can do a whole lot through art." Edwards says that Jay-Z has the "intellectual capacity and the artistic chops to get that done."

Maybe so, but in the short run the big winner is the NFL, as it almost always is. Colin Kaepernick, much to the relief of Roger Goodell, now becomes yesterday's news. Or does he?

On Sport and Society his is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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