

The NFL players who take a knee during the national anthem claim that they are just expressing their freedom of speech. That may be true, but it is not really the relevant argument that will win out and ultimately explain whether players will continue to take a knee.

To layout the winning argument, let us start by stating the obvious. Professional athletes are paid entertainers. For anyone who doubts this, consider Tim Tebow. The baseball team, the New York Mets, signed him and he plays in the Met's minor league system even though it is widely acknowledge that he does not have the ability to make the major league team. So why did the Mets sign Tebow? They did so because he had been a college football superstar, and his name recognition draws people to the games, earning the minor league team a substantial amount of money from ticket and merchandise sales.

The next step in the argument requires us to describe the make-up of NFL fans. One thing we know about the NFL fan-base is that everyone who goes to an NFL game or who watches one on TV likes football. However, this group has many different subsamples. You could split these fans up into different subgroups such as: democrats and republicans, men and women, or groups with different views on race relations in the U.S. Let me illustrate the next step in my argument with some numbers. Suppose one million fans will watch a Cowboy's game – either on TV or in the stadium. If the NFL game does not offend any of the subgroups, the Cowboys will have one million people watch the game. However, if the Cowboys put on show that offends a group, that group may stop watching the game. If 200,000 people were offended, then only 800,000 will watch the game, and the Cowboys and the NFL will earn substantially less money.

The NFL seems to have had a bad streak in offending various subsets of their fans. When players take a knee during the national anthem, patriotic fans were alienated. When Cam Newton mocked a female reporter, female fans were offended. When ESPN reporters espouse liberal views on air during a football game or in their coverage of a football game, republican fans are offended.

The NFL will eventually insist that their teams put on a show that does not offend any of the subgroups. If the NFL sticks to football, the team owners will do much better financially than if they let their players make political statements during a game.

It is unfair to the team for a player to make political statements during a game when millions of fans are watching. During the game, the player has access to a huge audience that is paying to watch football. During the game, the player is a paid performer. The expectations of the fans and the owners is that players will not offend the fans during the game. Consequently, the player should reserve his political and social commentary to times when he is not in uniform. Of course, if a player holds a press conference to talk about social injustice, the audience will be so small that you will hear crickets. Very few people care to hear what a football player thinks about various social issues. The drive for profits will ensure that the NFL insists that players pursue their various political and social causes on their own time.

Of course, there is another solution. The NFL owners can stop the tradition of having someone sing the national anthem at games. Without a national anthem, players will not have the opportunity to protest and alienate a group of fans. In sum, the drive for profits will ensure that the NFL prevents its players from alienating its fans; however, this is achievable by the owners insisting that players stand during the anthem or by owners removing the anthem as an element of the show that they put on.

Joe McGarrity is a professor of economics at the University of Central Arkansas. Contact him by email at joem@uca.edu.