

CHARLES UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
Institute of International Studies
Department of International Area Studies

Master's Thesis

2021

Michal Hromádka

CHARLES UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
Institute of International Studies
Department of North American Studies

**The shift in NFL's stance towards racial issues since
Colin Kaepernick's protest in 2016**

Master's thesis

Author: Michal Hromádka

Study programme: North American Studies

Supervisor: PhDr. Mgr. Kryštof Kozák, PhD.

Year of the defence: 2021

Declaration

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on

2. 5. 2020

Michal Hromádka

References

Hromádka, Michal. *The shift in NFL's stance towards racial issues since Colin Kaepernick's protest in 2016*. Praha, 2021. 68 pages. Master's thesis (Mgr.). Charles University, Faculty of Social Sciences, Institute of International Studies. Department of North American Studies. Supervisor PhDr. Mgr. Kryštof Kozák, PhD.

Length of the thesis: 93 911 characters

Abstract

This paper aims to analyze NFL's stance and approach towards racial issues since Colin Kaepernick's protest in 2016. Colin Kaepernick is an African American athlete who started to protest against racial and social injustice by kneeling before NFL games when the national anthem was played. His protests caused many controversies because many people saw his actions as disrespectful towards the military, flag, national anthem and towards the USA. NFL's stance is analyzed through a qualitative content analysis of all NFL statements, which were issued since the beginning of Kaepernick's protest until the end of 2020. The statements are analyzed by use of the critical race theory, which focuses on the topic of race, white supremacy and institutionalized and hidden racism. The results of the analysis are that NFL's stance towards racial issues changed substantially. In 2016 and 2017, the primary concern of the NFL was the form of Kaepernick's protest as it was understood as a disrespectful and un-American act. In these years, NFL was trying to have a discussion with players about the causes of the protests, however, its primary concern was the form of Kaepernick's protest. In 2018, NFL briefly introduced a set of rules, which prohibited players from taking a knee during the national anthem while being on the football field. This rule was put on hold shortly after its introduction. In 2020, NFL completely changed its approach and started to support African Americans in their causes much more, NFL even admitted making a mistake in not listening to players' protests before.

Abstrakt

Cílem této práce je zanalyzovat postoj NFL vůči rasovým otázkám od protestu Colina Kaepernicka v roce 2016. Colin Kaepernick je hráč amerického fotbalu černé pleti, který začal v září roku 2016 protestovat proti rasismu a zabíjení černochů zákonnými složkami. Kaepernickovy protesty probíhaly nenásilnou formou, před zápasem během přehrávání americké národní hymny si poklekl. Jeho nenásilný protest však byl vnímán mnoha lidmi, včetně několika vrcholných manažerů NFL, jako neuctivý vůči americké armádě, americké vlajce a národní hymně. Postoj NFL je analyzován pomocí kvalitativní obsahové analýzy všech oficiálních vyjádření NFL na adresu Kaepernicka a rasových otázek od začátku Kaepernickova protestu do konce roku 2020. Vyjádření jsou analyzována pomocí kritické rasové teorie, konceptu, který se zabývá otázkou rasismu, bílé nadřazenosti a

institucionalizovaného rasismu. Výsledky analýzy prokázaly, že postoj NFL k rasovým otázkám se od roku 2016 změnil poměrně výrazně. V letech 2016 a 2017 se NFL zaměřovala zejména na způsob Kaepernickova protestu, který se jí nelíbil a neřešila tolik důvody protestů. V roce 2018 NFL nakrátko představila několik pravidel, které nově zakazovali hráčům a zaměstnancům týmů a ligy klečat na hřišti při přehrávání národní hymny. Tato pravidla byla však po krátké době suspendována. Rok 2020 představoval absolutní změnu přístupu NFL. Ve svých vyjádřeních liga uznala existenci systematického rasismu a veřejně podpořila protesty hnutí Black Lives Matter. NFL se dokonce omluvila za své předchozí vyjádření vůči protestujícím, za to, že jim nenaslouchala tak, jak si to zasloužili.

Keywords

NFL, USA, racism, Kaepernick, football, inequality, patriotism, protests

Klíčová slova

NFL, USA, rasismus, Kaepernick, americký fotbal, nerovnost, patriotismus, protesty

Title

The shift in NFL's stance towards racial issues since Colin Kaepernick's protest in 2016

Název práce

Změna postoje NFL k rasovým otázkám od protestu Colina Kaepernicka v roce 2016

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my gratitude to the supervisor of this paper, PhDr. Mgr. Kryštof Kozák, PhD. and to Lucie Kýrová, M.A., Ph.D, the leader of the Thesis Seminar, for their valuable advices and their professional guidance.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	2
1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	5
1.1 Critical race theory.....	5
1.2 Racial issues in sports	9
1.3 Role of the NFL	12
2. METHODOLOGY	16
2.1 Content analysis.....	16
3. BRIEF HISTORY AND RECAPITULATION OF KAEPERNICK’S PROTEST	18
4. ANALYSIS OF OFFICIAL NFL STATEMENTS	22
CONCLUSION	39
SUMMARY	42
LIST OF REFERENCES	43
MASTER'S THESIS SUMMARY	50
LIST OF APPENDICES	52

Introduction

Football has become the most popular sport in the United States. Last year, over 100 million viewers watched the most popular annual event in US sports, the Superbowl.¹ When we talk about US sports, football is usually a sport which comes first to mind, maybe together with baseball. For many Americans, football is much more than just a sport – it is a way of life and a crucial part of American culture. On Sunday, when most of the games are played from September to December, many families gather together and watch their favorite team's game. Football games on Thanksgiving Day have become a much-welcomed tradition by Americans, and Superbowl is always one of the most anticipated events in the United States. Even people, who are not interested in football, often watch the broadcast as well. According to Syracuse², 41,7 % of households tuned into the Superbowl broadcast in 2020, while Major League Baseball final series hit a record low in 2020 with only 14,35 million average viewers in the deciding game.³

Football is a sport where most of the players are African Americans; however, the situation in executive positions is very different. While approximately 70 % of all the National Football League players are African Americans, only a handful of them are general managers or head coaches (in 2017, only 25 % of head coaches of the 32 NFL teams were African Americans).⁴ At the beginning of the 2020 season, the situation was even worse, with only 3 African American head coaches of the total of 32⁵ and only two African American general managers.⁶ The discrepancy in the ratio of African American players and African American executives is apparent, and it remains a big problem, which plagues the league for a long time. This paper will aim to show and evaluate how the NFL reacted

¹ Geoff Herbert, "How Many People Watched the Super Bowl? 2020 Ratings up from Last Year," Syracuse, February 3, 2020, <https://www.syracuse.com/sports/2020/02/2020-super-bowl-ratings-102-million-viewers-up-from-last-year.html>.

² Ibid.

³ Tom Bassam, "World Series TV Ratings 32% down on Previous Low," SportsPro, October 29, 2020, <https://www.sportspromedia.com/news/mlb-world-series-2020-tv-ratings-down>.

⁴ Nikhil Sonnad, "The NFL's Racial Breakdown Depends on Where You Look," Atlas (Quartz), May 24, 2018), <https://theatlantic.com/charts/BJ8fvBNym>.

⁵ Seth Trachtman, "Ranking the Head Coaches for the 2020 NFL Season," Yardbarker, October 2, 2020, https://www.yardbarker.com/nfl/articles/ranking_the_head_coaches_for_the_2020_nfl_season/s1__32709875#slide_1.

⁶ Scott Stump, "Most NFL Players Are Black. So Why Aren't There More Black Head Coaches?," NBC News, September 15, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/most-nfl-players-are-black-so-why-arent-there-n1240131>.

towards racial issues from the now-famous kneeling protest of Colin Kaepernick, an African American quarterback, in 2016 until 2020. Kaepernick began to kneel during the US national anthem, which is being played before every NFL game. His reasoning for kneeling was simple – to protest racial inequality and the oppression of Black people in America.⁷ His protest sparked a significant reaction in American society. There were those who supported his protest, including many players who started kneeling as well because they shared his sentiment. There were also those who felt that Kaepernick disrespects the anthem and the country and wanted him to be banned from the league. One of the most prominent figures in the National Football League, Jerry Jones, owner of the Dallas Cowboys team, said that any Cowboys player who would kneel during the anthem would not participate in games.⁸ Even former President Trump expressed his feelings on the protests, as he condemned Kaepernick and advised fans to stop watching the league and even leave the stadium if they see players kneeling during one of his rallies in Alabama.⁹ Kaepernick's protest sparked a league-wide discussion about the discrepancy between the percentage of black players and the rate of black executives in the league.

Because of football's popularity in the US, NFL represents a platform for African Americans, where they can express their feelings and opinions, which may not have been heard, had they not been football players. In 2020, many players had names of victims of systemic racism or police brutality in the US from recent years, such as Breonna Taylor, George Floyd or Ahmaud Arbery on their helmets, as the league allowed players to show their support to the victims.¹⁰ Many players also engage in charitable activities, where they support children without proper education or people from excluded areas which is their own way of fighting against racism and trying to solve racial issues, which are very present

⁷ Analis Bailey, "On This Day Four Years Ago, Colin Kaepernick Began His Peaceful Protests during the National Anthem," USA Today, August 26, 2020, <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/sports/nfl/2020/08/26/colin-kaepernick-started-protesting-day-2016/3440690001/>.

⁸ Rob Goldberg, "Jerry Jones Says Any Cowboys Player Who 'Disrespects' the Flag Won't Play," Bleacher Report, October 9, 2017, <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/2737631-jerry-jones-says-a-cowboys-player-who-disrespects-the-flag-wont-play>.

⁹ Bryan Armen Graham, "Donald Trump Blasts NFL Anthem Protesters: 'Get That Son of a Bitch off the Field,'" The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, September 23, 2017), <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2017/sep/22/donald-trump-nfl-national-anthem-protests>.

¹⁰ Geoffrey Arnold, "NFL to Allow Names of Victims of Systemic Racism on Helmet Padding: Report," OregonLive, August 31, 2020, <https://www.oregonlive.com/nfl/2020/08/nfl-to-allow-names-of-victims-of-systemic-racism-and-police-brutality-on-helmet-padding-report.html>.

in today's United States.¹¹ In the past five years, the league attempted to react to the more and more palpable racial question in numerous ways, such as the innovation of Rooney Rule (a rule which requires teams to interview ethnic-minority candidates for head coaching and senior football operation jobs), which was established in 2003.¹² Through a qualitative content analysis, this paper will show how has the approach of the NFL towards protests for social and racial justice and towards political activism changed during the last five years and which measures the league took to make itself more inclusive and to promote minorities. It will also underline some of the issues that may not be apparent initially but are still present and need to be dealt with for the league to be non-discriminatory and truly inclusive for everybody.

¹¹ Blake Stilwell, "The Most Amazing Charity Work Done by NFL Players," We Are The Mighty, October 30, 2020, <https://www.wearethemighty.com/mighty-sports/amazing-charity-work-nfl-players/>.

¹² Kevin Patra, "NFL Instituting Changes to Rooney Rule," NFL.com, May 18, 2020, <https://www.nfl.com/news/nfl-instituting-changes-to-rooney-rule>.

1. Theoretical framework

To help us better understand racism and racial problems in sports, we can use several theories that deal with these issues. One of them is critical race theory (CRT), which sees racism as a part of many American citizens' everyday lives. It also presents the right tools for the research of this topic. Using the CRT, we might highlight some of the issues that could usually be overlooked because the theory focuses on everyday acts, which might seem normal for most people but might be actually offensive to some others. It also leads us to evaluate everything we do because we might be doing something so long that we might not even realize it is wrong. In the case of this paper, the main protagonist is NFL.

It is also important to note that NFL is not the only sport where player's protests about racism and racial issues happen. That is why a short part of this chapter is devoted to a very important moment in sports history regarding racial issues, the protests at the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City, led by two African American athletes, Tommie Smith and John Carlos. This event is still important to this date and serves as a prime example of athletes using sports and their success as a platform to share their opinions about issues that are very personal to them, which would not have been heard had they not been successful athletes. We can also compare their situation with the protests of Colin Kaepernick and see what the change in the reaction of the public and the organizations under which they competed to their protests was, if there was any at all.

1.1 Critical race theory

According to Richard Delgado, the critical race theory movement "is a collection of activists and scholars engaged in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power."¹³ CRT is a relatively new American theory based upon the sociopolitical history of the United States and questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law.¹⁴ CRT originated in the 1970s, and the founding theorists were mainly black US citizens such as Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Patricia

¹³ Richard Delgado, Jean Stefancic, and Angela Harris, "Introduction," in *Critical Race Theory: an Introduction* (New York, USA: New York University Press, 2017), p. 3.

¹⁴ Ibid.

J. Williams or Camara Phyllis Jones. In the beginning, the questions that CRT tries to answer were asked, especially by scholars and people with legal background. They tried to understand why the changes that were brought by the civil rights movement did not materialize into bigger equality. CRT was built predominantly on the insight of other movements – critical legal studies (CLS) and radical feminism.¹⁵ The main point that CRT theorists took from CLS was the idea of legal indeterminacy – an idea that suggests that not every case has just one correct solution and a case can be interpreted differently, depending on which line of authority one emphasizes. From radical feminism, the central concepts which theorists incorporated into CRT were the hidden patterns that make patriarchy possible without our awareness.¹⁶

CRT often focuses on racism as an unwanted product of other policies or decisions. Often, racism is not even recognized as racism by many because their behavior is perceived as normal and institutionalized and thus, one might not even realize, that his demeanor is racist or could be perceived as racist. For CRT theorists, one of the main problems of dealing with racism is precisely this matter, the fact that racism is often overlooked and not recognized, thus it cannot be eliminated. CRT is considered a radical theory by many scholars because it questions some of the fundamentals on which American society is built. It questions concepts, which are accepted by many as integral parts of the society, concepts that are in place for centuries and do not seem racist at first sight, even to many people of color. It forces one to rethink all his actions and decisions and often finds a problem in unexpected places.

Another important part of the CRT is that it considers race to be a social construct. According to CRT, races are categories people invented for their own personal interest. People are put into groups according to their looks rather than traits like intelligence, personality or moral behavior.¹⁷ It is much easier for society to categorize people by their looks than evaluate each person individually. What CRT also criticizes and what is closely

¹⁵ Janel George, “A LESSON ON CRITICAL RACE THEORY,” *Human Rights* 46, no. 2 (January 2021): pp. 2-5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

related to the previous point is the assumption that each race has its own history and a person is defined by one thing. As Delgado states in his book,

*"A white feminist may also be Jewish or working class or a single mother. An African American activist may be male or female, gay or straight...."*¹⁸

Critical race theory says that even though many believe racism in the United States has been eliminated because there are no discriminatory laws, it is the complete opposite. Racism has just transformed from the apparent racism to a hidden one, which is deeply rooted in the US society, and it is even harder to fight against this type of racism, as it is not so palpable and many deny it even exists.¹⁹

CRT is important in framing of this thesis because everyday racism is, according to many scholars and people of color, present in the current United States, and even though people of color are not directly discriminated by laws, racism is deeply ingrained in American society and it is present in everyday situations. With NFL, we can see examples of institutionalized racism quite often. For example, every year before the draft, when the teams are scouting potential NFL players, there is usually a perception in the media that black quarterbacks are more athletic than white quarterbacks. Usually, this perception is based just on the color of the player's skin, not on his actual playing style. In hand with this sentiment goes the fact that even though black players were considered more athletic than white players, for a long time, black players were considered not smart enough to play a certain position, such as quarterback.²⁰ Nowadays, this notion has been disproved numerous times, with some of the quarterbacks being African Americans, however, there are sometimes voices from high-placed NFL executives expressing just these negative feelings and one can only wonder if their sentiments are coming from a more profound knowledge of the players or only presumptions. The notion that draft experts and executives buy into racial stereotypes has been confirmed in a study conducted by

¹⁸ Richard Delgado, Jean Stefancic, and Angela Harris, "Introduction," in *Critical Race Theory: an Introduction* (New York, USA: New York University Press, 2017), p. 11.

¹⁹ Aída Hurtado, "Critical Race Theory and Questioning Whiteness: Young Feminists Speak Out Against Race and Class Privilege," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 40, no. 3 (2019): pp. 90-116, <https://doi.org/10.5250/fronjwomestud.40.3.0090>.

²⁰ Jim Trotter, "Does Race Remain a Factor in the Evaluation of NFL Quarterbacks?," NFL.com, February 24, 2021, <https://www.nfl.com/news/sidelines/does-race-remain-a-factor-in-the-evaluation-of-nfl-quarterbacks>.

Matthew Bigler and Judson L. Jeffries from 2008.²¹ The study says that black players are consistently rated more negatively in the areas of leadership and intelligence/decision making. On this issue, Jeffries adds:

*"Even though things have significantly progressed, a lot of scouts and coaches when they see an African American quarterback will immediately frame them as someone who is a great athlete, as opposed to someone who is a great quarterback."*²²

This is just one example of how there is a difference in players' perception based on their skin color and not their ability to play. Another glaring example of racism in the NFL is the relatively new case of compensating former players who were impacted by concussions suffered when playing in the league. NFL tests the players and decides if the cognitive decline of players has been sufficient to warrant a settlement. The problem is that the NFL's baseline from which the players have to deviate up to a certain value to be eligible to be compensated is lower for black players than for white players. What this means is that by using "race-norming," NFL assumes that black players' intelligence is lower, and at the same time, the drop-off must reach the same level as white players'. This results in the fact that black players must be substantially more mentally injured than white players to be compensated.²³

Having written all this, it has to be said that in the past few years, NFL as an organization is trying to be more inclusive and is in general much more open for black athletes, which will be later in this paper shown through various statements. CRT is an excellent tool in this case because it can reveal to us underlying issues, which maybe even the NFL does not realize could be problematic. On the one hand, we have big statements and rule changes supporting Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests and minority hirings in the league, on the other hand, we have many points of concern that need to be addressed as well even though they might not be as apparent as other issues especially to the NFL management team.

²¹ Matthew Bigler and Judson L. Jeffries, "'An Amazing Specimen': NFL Draft Experts' Evaluations of Black Quarterbacks," *Journal of African American Studies* 12, no. 2 (June 4, 2008): pp. 120-141, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12111-008-9036-7>.

²² Calum Trenaman, "The NFL Is Confronting Racism, but Are Black Quarterbacks Continuing to Be Stereotyped?," CNN (Cable News Network, October 29, 2020), <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/10/29/sport/nfl-black-quarterbacks-cmd-spt-intl/index.html>.

²³ Ben Natan, "The NFL Is Using Racist Pseudoscience to Punish Former Players," Bleeding Green Nation (Bleeding Green Nation, March 10, 2021), <https://www.bleedinggreennation.com/2021/3/10/22323436/nfl-using-racist-pseudoscience-punish-former-players>.

Even though CRT is a relatively new theory, there are quite a few ways how CRT could be interpreted and used. Though the basic premise remains the same for most scholars, their understanding of the CRT can be a little different. For the purpose of this paper, I will be using the definition and premises used by Delgado in *Critical Race Theory (Third Edition): An Introduction*. In this case, that means mainly focus on institutionalized racism, white privilege and stereotypes. These three phenomenons are very present in the current NFL, and CRT is ideal for highlighting these matters. As all theories and movements, the CRT is evolving, and scholars come with new concepts and ideas quite often, especially in the last few years, when the BLM manifestations were present all throughout America and the question of racism was discussed maybe more than ever. The protests impacted the whole world, kneeling as a gesture of support of racial equality was made mandatory in many European soccer leagues before the kickoff by associations such as FA or UEFA, which claim to be apolitical and have a history of punishing players for expressing their political opinions. Another reason why I chose *Critical Race Theory (Third Edition): An Introduction* as a cornerstone for the purpose of this research is the fact that the book was recently updated, and the authors tried to apply the CRT to the situation at that time (2017). As the research of this paper is focused primarily on the year 2016 and later, I found it critical to use the most up-to-date concepts and ideas and not concepts, which might be outdated by now.

1.2 Racial issues in sports

Sports have long been one of the only platforms for athletes to express their opinions and let their opinions be heard. Even though many organizations claim that sports should be apolitical, there are many cases where athletes used their space in the media to speak about all kinds of issues, from political to social. In this excerpt from "Laws of the Game 2021/21" an official document from the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), the most significant soccer federation in the world, we can see the stance of FIFA towards politics in soccer:

"Equipment must not have any political, religious or personal slogans, statements or images. Players must not reveal undergarments that show political, religious, personal slogans, statements or images, or advertising other than the manufacturer's logo. For any

offence the player and/or the team will be sanctioned by the competition organiser, national football association or by FIFA."²⁴

It also needs to be said that especially FIFA and UEFA have been quite adamant in fining those who do not obey their rules. There have been many examples, of these organizations fining players or even clubs for their fans, such as the Hong Kong protests from 2019²⁵, which were actually quite similar to protests of Kaepernick in that sense, that the fine was given for disrespecting the anthem, the showing of a Catalan flag during the 2015 Champions League final²⁶ or even wearing a poppy symbol on an armband during an international match.²⁷ Nevertheless, there were many notable moments where athletes shared their opinions about social or racial issues, and these were some of the most influential and iconic moments in sports history.

One of the most significant moments in sports history was the 1968 Olympic Games, held in Mexico City. During the United States' national anthem, two African-American athletes, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, raised a black-gloved fist. The gesture was a Black Power salute and it spoke a thousand words, especially in times when the USA was going through enormous socio-economic changes. They also decided to appear on the podium without shoes – this was to bring attention to the poverty of black Americans. Peter Norman, a silver medalist from Australia, wore a human rights badge on his jacket. At the press conference, this is what Smith had to say about the protest:

*"If I win I am an American, not a black American. But if I did something bad then they would say 'a Negro'. We are black and we are proud of being black."*²⁸

²⁴ "Laws of the Game," *Laws of the Game* (Zurich, Switzerland: The International Football Association Board, 2020), <https://resources.fifa.com/image/upload/ifab-laws-of-the-game-2020-21.pdf?cloudid=d6g1medsi8jrrd3e4imp>.

²⁵ "FIFA Fines Hong Kong Soccer Body for China Anthem Protest," CTVNews (The Associated Press, October 9, 2019), <https://www.ctvnews.ca/sports/fifa-fines-hong-kong-soccer-body-for-china-anthem-protest-1.4630798?cache=yes%3FclipId%3D64268>.

²⁶ Steven Goff, "FC Barcelona President Speaks out on UEFA Fine for Catalan Flag Issue," The Washington Post (WP Company, July 26, 2015), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/soccer-insider/wp/2015/07/26/fc-barcelona-president-speaks-out-on-uefa-fine-for-catalan-flag-issue/>.

²⁷ George Ramsay, "FIFA Fines British Teams \$100K for Poppy Displays," CNN (Cable News Network, December 19, 2016), <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/12/19/football/fifa-poppy-fine-england-football/index.html>.

²⁸ "BBC ON THIS DAY | 17 | 1968: Black Athletes Make Silent Protest," BBC News (BBC), accessed April 28, 2021, http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/october/17/newsid_3535000/3535348.stm.

He explains the lack of opportunities to present his opinions in an interview from more recent times:

*"When I talk about it, I tell the kids this: I had to run. I had to win. I had to run through a torn muscle (a painful groin injury in the semifinal). If I do not win, this does not happen. No victory stand. No silent gesture. Nothing that anybody could make real. My wife (Delois) calls it a divine intercession.' We had to do it, because we were chosen."*²⁹

Smith is just one of many athletes, that used his fame or famous moment to speak on an issue he sees as an important one. Sports are, for many people, the only way, how to have their voice be heard or their cause promoted, as many athletes nowadays have their own charities or do charitable work in their communities and support those who do not have many resources or opportunities.

In the aftermath of the protest, both Carlos and Smith were suspended from both the Olympic village and the US team. The International Olympic Committee condemned Smith and Carlos' protest, deeming it a political statement and "a deliberate and violent breach of the fundamental principles of the Olympic spirit."³⁰ Both athletes were sent home to the United States, where they have been exposed to threats and insults from regular Americans and media as well. *Time* magazine called the protest a "public display of petulance that sparked one of the most unpleasant controversies in Olympic history," adding: "'Faster, Higher, Stronger' is the motto of the Olympic Games. 'Angrier, nastier, uglier' better describes the scene in Mexico City last week."³¹ Even though the Mexico City protests were at that time perceived, especially by the media, mainly in a negative way, nowadays Smith, Carlos and Norman are considered by many as heroes, Smith and Carlos were even inducted into the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Hall of Fame in 2019.

²⁹ David Steele, "Tommie Smith: Using His Speed to Attract Attention: Olympic Hall of Fame," United States Olympic & Paralympic Museum, July 31, 2020, <https://usopm.org/tommie-smith-using-his-speed-to-attract-attention/>.

³⁰ Tom Parfitt, "The Iconic Story of the Black Power Salute at Olympics, 50 Years On," The Independent (Independent Digital News and Media, April 24, 2019), <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/black-power-salute-1968-50-years-olympics-tommie-smith-john-carlos-racism-mexico-city-a8587811.html>.

³¹ *Ibid.*

This was, of course, not the only significant event where athletes used sports as a platform to speak on societal and racial issues. It was, however, probably the most significant protest regarding the status of African Americans up to that point, and many people still see it as one of the most important moments in the history of US sports up until now. Even though many organizations still try to exclude politics from sports (e.g., International Olympic Committee confirms its ban on protests and demonstrations during the 2021 Olympic Games in Tokyo³²), politics has long been interconnected with sports, and we can only expect more and more athletes to use sports and their fame as a platform to share their views. Even organizations such as FA (English Football Association), which have long been very vocal in their goal to keep sports apolitical³³, have allowed teams to take a knee before the matches, in the wake of the murder of George Floyd in the current season. Perhaps a glimmer of hope for those who believe that athletes should have the right to express themselves without facing any consequences from the authorities unless they break the law.

1.3 Role of the NFL

For many people, especially those who live outside the US, NFL might be just another sports league without any greater significance. However, as was already outlined in the introduction, for many Americans, the NFL is much more than just a sports league. It is a source of entertainment, hope and identity at the same time. It is the professional athletes whom many kids look up to. People who often grew up in poverty, in a difficult family situation, without many privileges and eventually achieved to become successful, financially stabilized and widely recognized people through their hard work. These athletes are a symbol of hope for many young people out there. They are also the epitome of the American dream – if you work hard enough, you can be successful in life even if you come from the toughest background and life has not been kind to you. Another critical aspect of the NFL is that many fans do not see a gameday just as a sports event; they see it as a cultural event, where the whole family gathers, watches the game, has a barbeque and has a

³² Ioc, “IOC Athletes' Commission's Recommendations on Rule 50 and Athlete Expression at the Olympic Games Fully Endorsed by the IOC Executive Board - Olympic News,” International Olympic Committee (IOC, April 21, 2021), <https://www.olympic.org/news/ioc-athletes-commission-s-recommendations-on-rule-50-and-athlete-expression-at-the-olympic-games>.

³³ “Pep Guardiola: Manchester City Manager Fined over Yellow Ribbon,” BBC Sport (BBC, March 9, 2018), <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/43350447>.

good time in general. NFL provides its fans an opportunity to socialize, an opportunity to identify with their favorite team, an opportunity to belong in a group of like-minded people. Superbowl is annually the most-watched event in the US, many Americans cannot imagine a Thanksgiving without watching a football game. For many, watching the game live or on TV has become a Sunday tradition. Simply put, NFL is a very significant part of the US culture and it is much more than just a league.

NFL also realizes its importance; hence all the social and charitable campaigns it conducts, promotes and organizes. Every year, in the month of October, NFL promotes its "Crucial Catch" cause, a campaign focused on fighting cancer. Here is more information about the campaign from the official NFL website: "The league, its clubs, players, the NFL Player Association, and the American Cancer Society are committed to providing individuals with the tools they need to help them better understand early detection and ways to reduce their cancer risk. Each year, every NFL team raises awareness during their Crucial Catch game, which features on-field and in-stadium Crucial Catch elements. Crucial Catch games also present a special opportunity to honor cancer survivors and those currently battling cancer."³⁴ Every November, NFL promotes its other cause, "Salute to Service." This cause is dedicated to honoring, empowering and connecting US service members, veterans and their families. NFL organizes events such as watching the football games from US military bases abroad with former NFL players or inviting veterans to football games as honorary guests and giving them the honor to do the coin toss. Since 2011, more than 44 million USD has been raised for the league's military nonprofit partners.³⁵

These are just two of many causes which NFL promotes, "My Cause My Cleats" is another example of a league-wide campaign, where the league encourages players to promote their own charities on their cleats and there are many more. Walter Payton Man of the Year award is seen as one of the most prestigious awards, and it is given annually to a player whose actions had the most positive impact on a community. NFL is actively supporting and promoting players' charities and their efforts to improve living conditions and situations in their communities.

³⁴ "Crucial Catch: It Takes All of Us to Fight Cancer," NFL.com, October 5, 2020, <https://www.nfl.com/causes/crucial-catch/>.

³⁵ "NFL Salute to Service," NFL.com, November 18, 2020, <https://www.nfl.com/causes/salute/>.

NFL is aware of its tremendous impact on the lives of Americans, as is clear from this excerpt from the official website:

"Football is not only the foundation of the league, but also the vehicle through which our teams build lasting connections within communities nationwide. Every week, in-season or not, those communities turn up to support us. In an effort to give back, we respond with the everyday acts of volunteerism and philanthropy by owners, players, coaches, and club personnel. The NFL embraces its role as a unifier, addressing key social issues and serving as a constant force for positive change. The league, its partners, and all 32 NFL teams are committed to educating the NFL family, instituting transparent league policies, and actively engaging and supporting communities to constructively impact society year-round. Together, we aim to make a positive difference in America's communities and connect with millions of fans each year."³⁶

With all this being said, it is easier to see why NFL represents much more than just a football league to many people. It changes lives for the better, let it be the players' lives by allowing them to play professionally and rewarding them for their hard work or the lives of those, who have to face many hardships, by doing community work and supporting many of their causes financially. For many, it represents the only way out. It is therefore clear that any statements NFL makes have an immense impact on the whole community. By releasing a statement, they do not speak only to the players or organizations, they speak to the whole of America. So when the Kaepernick protests occurred, the NFL's reaction was much anticipated and sparked many controversies in the whole society. Even former President Trump commented on the issue of kneeling during the national anthem and disrespecting the flag on more than one occasion.³⁷ According to the article on NFL.com, NFL prides itself in unifying society and wants to serve as a constant force for positive change.³⁸

If we take all these things into consideration, we can classify NFL as somewhat of a quasi-official body and it is clear that all its decisions, statements and policies are being closely

³⁶ "NFL Community," NFL.com, accessed February 2, 2021, <https://www.nfl.com/community/>.

³⁷ Chris Bumbaca, "Donald Trump 'Looking Forward to Live Sports,' but Still Sees Anthem Protests as 'Disrespect'," USA Today (Gannett Satellite Information Network, July 21, 2020), <https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/2020/07/21/donald-trump-athletes-kneeling-during-anthem-great-disrespect/5477583002/>.

³⁸ "NFL Community," NFL.com, accessed February 2, 2021, <https://www.nfl.com/community/>.

monitored. NFL, in its own words, has a responsibility much bigger than that of a traditional sports association. It has a responsibility in society, and its actions are much more impactful than actions of just another league. This is the reason why I believe, that the statements and actions taken upon Kaepernick's protest are essential for examination and further research. They not only form the future of the league, but they also help in forming the future of the society of the United States. This is something unprecedented in sports, and NFL has a more significant impact on communities than any other sports league, at least in the United States.

2. Methodology

The analysis will be conducted through a qualitative content analysis of NFL statements on matters regarding social and racial issues since the first protest of Colin Kaepernick in 2016 up to the end of the 2020 season. This paper aims to analyze NFL's approach towards racial issues and explain the reasoning behind the approach through critical race theory.

To analyze the change in the NFL's stance towards racial issues, I chose every official NFL statement and statement from NFL commissioner Roger Goodell regarding social and racial issues or Colin Kaepernick from the beginning of Kaepernick's protest until the end of the year 2020 because they represent the league's official stance. Most of the statements are available on the NFL communications website, some are, however, accessible through other websites such as Twitter. In this specific case, analyzing statements is also one of the only ways how a proper research of shift in NFL's attitude towards racial issues can be conducted. Official statements express league's opinions about these matters and they also put in place rules, which have to be obeyed, otherwise, players might get fined. They also show us how the league expects its players to behave. By analyzing the content of the statements, we will see if there has been a change in NFL's policy or not.

The hypothesis of this paper is, that during the last six years, NFL changed its approach towards racial issues and tries to be more inclusive than ever. This hypothesis will be either confirmed or refuted by a thorough analysis of official league statements and an analysis of measures taken regarding racial issues.

2.1 Content analysis

The analysis of the statements will be a qualitative content analysis. Each statement will be analyzed individually, and the statements will be sorted from the earliest to the most recent ones. This will allow the readers to understand better the change in rhetorics and official policy towards protests regarding racial and social issues. The analysis will focus on the content of the statements, and it will thoroughly examine the differences between the statements themselves with the use of the CRT. It will also point out any potential repercussions that might have come as a result of the statements. Some of the statements

will also be complemented by polls conducted at that time to show the public opinion about the statements and the situation at that time.

There are also some limits to the analysis conducted in this paper. As the analysis is done only by one researcher, it is important to acknowledge the limited reliability of the analysis. If the analysis were done by two independent researchers, it would be possible to compare their outcomes and achieve more accurate results. It is also not possible to apply the CRT to all of the statements because some of the statements are very brief and they do not bring new information to the research, however, they are included in the analysis because they bring context to the whole situation.

3. Brief history and recapitulation of Kaepernick's protest

In 2016, Colin Kaepernick was the starting quarterback for one of NFL's most successful franchises, the San Francisco 49ers. He was one of only five African American starting quarterbacks in the 2016 NFL season, and he was one of the most famous faces in the whole league, even though he was coming of a disappointing previous season.³⁹ It was also his last season, where he played an NFL game. In the offseason, Kaepernick was outspoken on social media about various killings of African Americans by the police, such as the shooting of Alton Sterling, which he called a "lynching"⁴⁰ or the shooting of Philando Castile in Minnesota.⁴¹ In the caption, Kaepernick wrote: "We are under attack."

On August 26, during a preseason NFL game, Kaepernick was photographed sitting on a bench and not standing with his teammates during the moment when the national anthem "Star-Spangled Banner" was played. It was not the first time Kaepernick sat during the anthem, but it was the first time the reporters spotted this. It instantly became big news as Kaepernick had this to say about his actions: "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color. 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."⁴² Kaepernick's protest brought up a massive reaction from the fans, from the media and even from some politicians. His own team, the 49ers, issued a statement to acknowledge the beauty of the national anthem and its meaning. Still, they also recognized Kaepernick's right to express his opinions under the American principles of freedom of expression.⁴³ NFL's statement

³⁹ Andre Vergara, "Final 2016 NFL Quarterback Power Rankings," FOX Sports, January 6, 2017, <https://www.foxsports.com/nfl/gallery/2016-nfl-qb-power-rankings-final-edition-tom-brady-aaron-rogers-dak-prescott-drew-brees-cam-newton-010617>.

⁴⁰ Chris Biderman, "Colin Kaepernick Calls Alton Sterling Shooting a 'Lynching'," USA Today (Gannett Satellite Information Network, July 6, 2016), <https://ninerswire.usatoday.com/2016/07/06/colin-kaepernick-calls-alton-sterling-shooting-a-lynching/>.

⁴¹ Chris Biderman, "Colin Kaepernick: 'We Are under Attack' While Other 49ers React to Castile Shooting," USA Today, July 8, 2016, <https://ninerswire.usatoday.com/2016/07/07/kaepernick-we-are-under-attack-while-other-49ers-react-to-castile-shooting/>.

⁴² Steve Wyche, "Colin Kaepernick Explains Why He Sat during National Anthem," NFL.com, August 26, 2020, <https://www.nfl.com/news/colin-kaepernick-explains-why-he-sat-during-national-anthem-0ap3000000691077>.

⁴³ Ibid.

was following: "Players are encouraged but not required to stand during the playing of the national anthem."⁴⁴

During the next few days, Nate Boyer, former NFL player and Green Beret, who is supportive of Kaepernick's cause, wrote a letter to Kaepernick suggesting a new form of protesting – kneeling alongside his teammates. Boyer explained that kneeling is sort of a middle ground because soldiers kneel to show respect to their fallen brothers, so the protest is not disrespectful to the military.⁴⁵ Later on, during the final preseason game, one new teammate, Eric Reid, joined Kaepernick in his protest, kneeling alongside other players. This act was condemned by many, such as Ted Cruz: "To all the athletes who made millions in America's freedom: stop insulting our flag, our nation, our heroes."⁴⁶ Kaepernick, however, quickly dismissed any notions that he is anti-American or anti-military. He added that he has the utmost respect for the US military; he just wants to spread the message that there are many problems in the country and that many people of color are being oppressed and are not treated equally. He stated that he simply wants to bring awareness to these issues and that he is not looking for public praise; he just cannot stand and watch from the sidelines any longer.⁴⁷ In the following days, President Barack Obama defended his protest, saying that it is his constitutional right to make a statement and that sports figures have a long history of doing so.⁴⁸ Probably the most significant comments from the league's point of view came on September 7, 2016, when the NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell broke his silence on the protest: "I support our players when they want to see a change in society, and we don't live in a perfect society. On the other

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Tadd Haislop, "Colin Kaepernick Kneeling Timeline: How Protests during the National Anthem Started a Movement in the NFL," Sporting News, September 13, 2020, <https://www.sportingnews.com/us/nfl/news/colin-kaepernick-kneeling-protest-timeline/xktu6ka4diva1s5jxaylrcsse>.

⁴⁶ Ted Cruz, "To All the Athletes Who Have Made Millions in America's Freedom: Stop Insulting Our Flag, Our Nation, Our Heroes.," Twitter, September 12, 2016, https://twitter.com/tedcruz/status/775348594060562432?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E775348594060562432%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fedition.cnn.com%2F2016%2F09%2F12%2Fsport%2Fcolin-kaepernick-nfl-opening-day-reaction-trnd%2Findex.html.

⁴⁷ Tadd Haislop, "Colin Kaepernick Kneeling Timeline: How Protests during the National Anthem Started a Movement in the NFL," Sporting News, September 13, 2020, <https://www.sportingnews.com/us/nfl/news/colin-kaepernick-kneeling-protest-timeline/xktu6ka4diva1s5jxaylrcsse>.

⁴⁸ Daniel Victor, "Obama Says Colin Kaepernick Is 'Exercising His Constitutional Right'," The New York Times, September 5, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/06/sports/obama-colin-kaepernick-national-anthem.html>.

hand, we believe very strongly in patriotism in the NFL. I personally believe very strongly in that."⁴⁹ This statement was critical because the NFL commissioner is the most powerful person in the NFL. Even though he did not ban Kaepernick from protesting during the anthem, his displeasure with the protest was apparent, and it set the tone for the following events. It reassured team owners such as Jerry Jones that they are free to criticize or even punish their players for "disrespecting the anthem and the flag."

As the word spread around, on the first Sunday of the 2016 season, September 11, more players joined Kaepernick's protest in different ways. Some of them kneeled, some of them raised their fists during the anthem as a gesture of agreement with Kaepernick's protest.⁵⁰ Donald Trump, a presidential candidate at that point, condemned the protests the following day, saying that if protestors do not respect and appreciate their country, they should leave the United States. Furthermore, he added that they should try to make that much money in other countries and see if they are successful. Kaepernick continued his protest throughout the whole season and became a very polarizing figure in the public's eyes. Many people saw his actions as a peaceful means of protest against issues, which need to be discussed. On the other hand, many saw him as a disrespectful athlete who does not respect his country, symbols of his country and the US military. After the end of an unsuccessful season for the San Francisco 49ers, a new head coach was hired, and Colin Kaepernick opted out of his contract with reports that he would have been released from the team had he not opted out after a somewhat toxic relationship with the 49ers over the last few seasons.⁵¹ Kaepernick did not know, however, that he played his final NFL game, at least until 2021. In the upcoming offseason, numerous teams were looking for new quarterbacks, with Kaepernick still being on the market. Kaepernick was not signed, however, with reports coming, that NFL teams want nothing to do with him, as they were

⁴⁹ Cindy Boren, "Roger Goodell on Colin Kaepernick: 'We Believe Very Strongly in Patriotism in the NFL,'" The Washington Post, April 29, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/early-lead/wp/2016/09/07/roger-goodell-on-colin-kaepernick-we-believe-very-strongly-in-patriotism-in-the-nfl/>.

⁵⁰ Jordan Heck, "Roundup of #NFL Players Participating in Protests on Sunday. Pic.twitter.com/ToDpZYod7z," Twitter, September 12, 2016, https://twitter.com/JordanHeckFF/status/775308655365230592?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E775308655365230592%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.sportingnews.com%2Fus%2Fnfl%2Fnews%2Fcolin-kaepernick-kneeling-protest-timeline%2Fxtu6ka4diva1s5jxaylrcsse.

⁵¹ David Steele, "Colin Kaepernick, 49ers Cutting Ties Is a Long-Overdue End to Toxic Relationship," Sporting News, March 1, 2017, <https://www.sportingnews.com/us/nfl/news/colin-kaepernick-49ers-contract-free-agency-rumors-salary-cap-kyle-shanahan/60dfzhouq6co1h17qbrkc10uh>.

afraid that it would bring bad publicity and problems to their teams.⁵² The report, coming from one of the general managers, also stated that many owners had developed bad feelings towards Kaepernick during his protests because they did not like them. This was one of the reasons no team was going to sign him. One executive even called Kaepernick "an embarrassment to football".⁵³ And even though Kaepernick announced that he would stand for the anthem next season, as he felt, that his protests achieved what he hoped for, a national discussion on social inequality and some positive changes, he remained a free agent not signed by any team.⁵⁴ During the 2016 season, Kaepernick also donated 1 million dollars to various community organizations helping underprivileged people.⁵⁵

⁵² Mike Freeman, "Colin Kaepernick Sentenced to NFL Limbo for the Crime of Speaking His Mind," Bleacher Report (Bleacher Report, October 3, 2017), <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/2698098-colin-kaepernick-sentenced-to-nfl-limbo-for-the-crime-of-speaking-his-mind>.

⁵³ Mike Freeman, "Mike Freeman's 10-Point Stance: Kaepernick Protest Still Has NFL Teams Worried," Bleacher Report, October 3, 2017, <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/2696245-mike-freemans-10-point-stance-kaepernick-protest-still-has-nfl-teams-worried>.

⁵⁴ Adam Schefter, "Colin Kaepernick to Stand during National Anthem next Season," ESPN, March 2, 2017, https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/18805744/colin-kaepernick-stand-national-anthem-next-season.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

4. Analysis of official NFL statements

All the statements that will be analyzed in this part of the paper are official statements of the National Football League, representing the official stance on the league on racial and social justice issues. Since the beginning of the protest up until the end of the 2020 football season, there have been issued 14 statements, which will be examined in this part. Some of these statements are very brief and somewhat inconsequential, while some of these statements are tone-setting and crucial for understanding NFL's future policies. The full statements will be included in the paper, either directly in this chapter or in the form of an appendix at the end of the paper (in case they are longer) because each statement is analyzed individually and it is thus better to have the statements present in the paper for better understanding of the analysis.

The first official statement was very published on August 27, 2016, and it was a very brief one:

"Players are encouraged but not required to stand during the playing of the national anthem."⁵⁶

This statement only confirmed that players have the right not to stand during the national anthem and that standing cannot be enforced by any means unless the rules are changed. It also highlighted that the league would prefer if the players were standing during the playing of the Star-Spangled Banner.

The second official statement was issued on September 7, 2016, by the NFL commissioner, Roger Goodell. Goodell's statement was the following:

"Well my personal thoughts are... I support our players when they want to see change in society, and we don't live in a perfect society. We live in an imperfect society. On the other hand, we believe very strongly in patriotism in the NFL. I personally believe very strongly in that. I think it's important to have respect for our country, for our flag, for the people

⁵⁶ Steve Wyche, "Colin Kaepernick Explains Why He Sat during National Anthem," NFL.com, August 26, 2020, <https://www.nfl.com/news/colin-kaepernick-explains-why-he-sat-during-national-anthem-0ap3000000691077>.

who make our country better; for law enforcement, and for our military who are out fighting for our freedoms and our ideals.

These are all important things for us, and that moment is a very important moment. So, I don't necessarily agree with what he is doing. We encourage our players to be respectful in that time and I like to think of it as a moment where we can unite as a country. And that's what we need more, and that's what I think football does - it unites our country. So I would like to see us focusing on our similarities and trying to bring people together.

Players have a platform, and it's his right to do that. We encourage them to be respectful and it's important for them to do that.

I think it's important if they see things they want to change in society, and clearly we have things that can get better in society, and we should get better. But we have to choose respectful ways of doing that so that we can achieve the outcomes we ultimately want and do it with the values and ideals that make our country great."⁵⁷

This statement is included here in its full version because it is arguably the most important statement, as it provided the first glance of the attitude of the NFL towards Kaepernick's protest for the public. On the one hand, we can see that Goodell is dedicated to the commitments of the NFL to serve as a vehicle in establishing social equality and justice. Goodell, in his statement, explicitly mentions that he supports players' efforts in changing society for the better. On the other hand, he also mentions that he does not agree with what Kaepernick is doing. He thinks of football as an opportunity to unify society, and he feels that Kaepernick is doing quite the opposite. In his statement, he insinuates that Kaepernick's way of protest is disrespectful to the country, the military and law enforcement even though Kaepernick already mentioned that by his gesture, he does not mean to disrespect any of these institutions. Although Goodell acknowledges the protest, he suggests that it should be done in a different manner and not during the national anthem. He also suggests that playing of the national anthem for him personally is a ritual, which should not be disrupted by any protests, whatever the cause is. In this way, he puts the anthem above Kaepernick's protest, even though he acknowledges Kaepernick's right to

⁵⁷ "Roger Goodell on Colin Kaepernick: 'We Believe Very Strongly in Patriotism in the NFL,'" USA Today (Gannett Satellite Information Network, September 7, 2016), <https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/nfl/2016/09/07/goodell-doesnt-agree-with-kaepernicks-actions/89958636/>.

protest. He also mentions that the league believes very strongly in patriotism, and from his statement, it is apparent that he has a very different understanding of this term from Kaepernick. What could be understood by some people from Goodell's statement is that for him, patriotism and showing respect towards the country during the national anthem is more important than Kaepernick's protest. Kaepernick's actions were being portrayed as anti-American rather than anti-racist.

What is clear, however, is that Goodell's priorities are much different from Kaepernick's. This could be interpreted through the critical race theory as a combination of institutionalized racism and not realizing that people of color deal with racism on a daily basis. That is not to say that Goodell is racist or behaves in a racist manner; rather that his life experience has been probably completely different from Kaepernick's, and he might thus not realize that people of color have to deal with many issues that white people do not such as a routine police control. For Goodell, the important thing is to respect the military, law enforcement, and symbols of the country, such as the national anthem or the US flag. For Kaepernick, it is to point out that there are fundamental issues in the US society, that these issues need to be addressed, and that the principles on which the USA was built are not applied to everybody in the same way.

As we already mentioned in a previous chapter, NFL has a tremendous influence on US society, and a statement on an important issue like this is always going to be very important as it can change and shape the narrative of the situation. To show the public's sentiment towards Kaepernick's protest, we can use data from several polls that were conducted in September and October 2016, shortly after the first protest and after Goodell issued his statement. A Reuters/IPSOS poll conducted online between September 6 and September 12 showed that 61 % of the respondents do not agree with Kaepernick's form of protest. 72 % of respondents felt that not standing during the national anthem is unpatriotic. However, 64 % acknowledged his right to protest, as freedom of speech is granted to US citizens by the US Constitution, and 46 % said the league should not penalize him. There was a significant difference in an overall disagreement with Kaepernick's actions – 70 % of white respondents disagreed with his actions but only 40 % of respondents, who consider themselves a racial minority disagreed with his actions. From the total of 2093 respondents, 1 481 identified as white and 612 identified as racial minorities. That roughly translates to about 2/3 of respondents being white and 1/3 being

racial minorities.⁵⁸ Another poll, conducted this time by Quinnipiac University also in September 2016, showed very similar results to the Reuters/IPSOS poll. In a Quinnipiac poll, 54 % of respondents disagreed with the protests and only 38 % approved of the protests. It also confirmed the big difference in approval of the protest between white people and those who identify as minorities.⁵⁹ According to the polls, public opinion was at that time very similar to the statement of the NFL commissioner, and his statement was viewed by many as appropriate. However, we have to notice the big difference between the opinions of white and non-white respondents. Once again, CRT deals with the concept of existence of white privilege, which might be applied to this situation, as many white Americans have a different life experience and priorities than people who identify themselves as racial minorities, which the polls clearly showed.

The third statement that the NFL issued was another statement from NFL commissioner Roger Goodell on September 23, 2017, one year after Kaepernick's protest. This statement was issued as a reaction to the comments of former President Trump, who at his rally in Alabama heavily criticized the protests and kneeling. He also criticized the NFL for not taking serious actions against protesters. Later on in his speech, he urged people to leave stadiums if players take a knee during the national anthem. He also shared his wish that owners would take serious actions against protesting players a cut them from the team. It was at that rally, where he said a sentence that was later quoted in media all over the USA:

„Wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, 'Get that son of a bitch off the field right now. Out! He's fired. He's fired! You know, some owner is going to do that. He's going to say, 'That guy that disrespects our flag, he's fired.' And that owner, they don't know it [but] they'll be the most popular person in this country.'”⁶⁰

Although Trump has been vocal in his criticism of the protests before, this particular speech warranted an official reaction from the league, especially as he was also criticizing

⁵⁸ Amy Tennery, “Most Americans Disagree with Kaepernick, but Respect His Right to Protest,” Reuters (Thomson Reuters, September 14, 2016), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nfl-anthem-poll-idUSKCN11K2ID>.

⁵⁹ Jesse J. Holland, “White Americans Largely Disapprove of National Anthem Protests, Poll Finds,” PBS (Public Broadcasting Service, October 12, 2016), <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/white-americans-disapprove-national-anthem-protests-poll-finds>.

⁶⁰ Bryan Armen Graham, “Donald Trump Blasts NFL Anthem Protesters: 'Get That Son of a Bitch off the Field',” The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, September 23, 2017), <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2017/sep/22/donald-trump-nfl-national-anthem-protests>.

the falling ratings, the state of the game, the „softness“ of players and even Goodell for his gentle approach towards protesters. The statement of the commissioner was:

„The NFL and our players are at our best when we help create a sense of unity in our country and our culture. There is no better example than the amazing response from our clubs and players to the terrible natural disasters we've experienced over the last month. Divisive comments like these demonstrate an unfortunate lack of respect for the NFL, our great game and all of our players, and a failure to understand the overwhelming force for good our clubs and players represent in our communities.“⁶¹

In the statement, it is quite evident that the league and commissioner disagree with Trump's point of view. Again, Goodell places emphasis on community work and the role of the NFL as a unifier of the whole nation. It is clear from the statement that NFL takes its role and responsibility very seriously and prides itself on the fact that it has been so impactful in the lives of many Americans (charities, fundraising events, various projects focused on eradication of poverty and others). Goodell also rejects Trump's remarks and indicates that President Trump is not aware of all the positive impact the NFL has on the United States. He indicates that Trump does not really understand that NFL is more than just entertainment for its viewers and that NFL means to improve the quality of life of many Americans and be active and helpful in communities. He also disregards Trump's comments as harmful because they are divisive, and they only further polarize the society when in fact the society should be getting closer and more equal. The fact that the President commented on the state of the NFL multiple times and had such controversial remarks only once again shows the importance and influence of the NFL. It is not very common for world leaders to make remarks on sports leagues, let alone multiple times. Goodell was not the only NFL official who criticized Trump's speech. DeMaurice Smith, executive director of the NFLPA (National Football League Players Association), said that the union *“will never back down when it comes to protecting the constitutional rights of our players as citizens as well as their safety as men who compete in a game that exposes them to great risks.”⁶²*

⁶¹ “Statement From NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell,” NFL Communications, September 23, 2017, <https://nflcommunications.com/Pages/Statement-From-NFL-Commissioner-Roger-Goodell.aspx>.

⁶² Ibid.

The next statement that followed closely after the third statement was a joint NFL-NFLPA statement issued on October 3, 2017:

“The NFL and NFLPA met today to discuss the important issue of social activism by NFL players. Roger Goodell, DeMaurice Smith, Eric Winston, Robert Kraft, John Mara, Art Rooney and other player leaders engaged in a productive conversation. We are all committed to an ongoing dialogue.”⁶³

This statement was pretty straightforward and only informed NFL fans that discussions between players, the players association and the league management are still ongoing and that NFL takes this issue very seriously. This statement was probably issued in order to reassure fans that the NFL does care about social issues and that even though the league does not agree with the form of Kaepernick’s protests, it is committed to finding a compromise which both sides will accept. Issuing a statement like this might also deescalate a tense situation.

The fifth statement was issued on October 17, 2017, and it was again a joint NFL-NFLPA statement:

„Today owners and players had a productive meeting focused on how we can work together to promote positive social change and address inequality in our communities. NFL executives and owners joined NFLPA executives and player leaders to review and discuss plans to utilize our platform to promote equality and effectuate positive change. We agreed that these are common issues and pledged to meet again to continue this work together.

As we said last week, everyone who is part of our NFL community has a tremendous respect for our country, our flag, our anthem and our military. In the best American tradition, we are coming together to find common ground and commit to the hard work required for positive change.”⁶⁴

This statement is very similar to the previous one with the difference that this statement is more informative and detailed, however, the purpose of the statement is the same – to inform fans and reassure them that the league executives are working hard with players and

⁶³ “JOINT NFL-NFL PLAYERS ASSOCIATION STATEMENT,” NFL Communications, October 3, 2017, <https://nflcommunications.com/Pages/JOINT-NFL-NFL-PLAYERS-ASSOCIATION-STATEMENT.aspx>.

⁶⁴ “Joint NFL-NFLPA Statement,” NFL Communications, October 17, 2017, <https://nflcommunications.com/Pages/Joint-NFL-NFLPA-Statement.aspx>.

team owners and that they are not ignoring the problem. This statement also specifically mentions team owners, an important part of this whole situation, as they can impose their own rules, which their players in return have to obey if they want to keep their job. Of the total 32 owners of NFL franchises, 31 are white Americans (the only exception is Jacksonville Jaguars owner, a Pakistani-American businessman, Shahid Khan), and all of them are 55 years old or older. According to the previously mentioned polls, there were also considerable differences in opinions between young people and older people. Older people, in general, tended to disagree with Kaepernick's protest more than younger people. It has to be mentioned that even though most of the owners fit the same profile – older white businessmen/businesswomen, most of the owners did not act according to President's Trump advice. There were exceptions, such as Jerry Jones, the Dallas Cowboys owner, who said that any Cowboys player who will disrespect the flag would not play.⁶⁵ Even Jones, however, joined his players in their protest before the game by linking arms and kneeling prior to the national anthem. Many team owners tried to stay neutral in the whole situation and some team owners even expressed their support for their players and their form of protesting.⁶⁶

This statement once again pushed the narrative that NFL unites people and that the NFL is one big community and that if the players, fans and executives work together, they can achieve much more than if they are divided. In this statement, the NFL and the NFLPA tried to play the patriot card by emphasizing that working hard and cooperating is „the best American tradition.“

The next statement that will be analyzed is not an official NFL statement but an excerpt from the commissioner's press conference from October 16, 2017:

„I will tell you though, another issue we spent a great deal of time talking about this morning was how much we believe that everyone should stand for the national anthem. That is an important part of our policy, it's also an important part of our game that we all take great pride in. It is also important for us to honor the flag and our country – our fans expect us to do that. That is something that we continued to focus on this morning. We are

⁶⁵ Rob Goldberg, “Jerry Jones Says Any Cowboys Player Who 'Disrespects' the Flag Won't Play,” Bleacher Report, October 9, 2017, <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/2737631-jerry-jones-says-a-cowboys-player-who-disrespects-the-flag-wont-play>.

⁶⁶ Ted Brauneck, “NFL Ownership Position on Player Protests,” National Football Post, September 6, 2018, <https://www.nationalfootballpost.com/columns/features/all-of-the-nfl-owners-stances-on-player-protests/>.

really talking about the opportunity that exists with our players to try to go and really make a difference in our communities in a positive way.

The fact is, we have about half a dozen players that are protesting. We are hoping to continue to try and work and get that to zero. That is what we'd like to do. We want to make sure we are understanding what the players are talking about, and that is complex.

I understand the way our fans feel about this issue and we feel the same way – about the importance of our flag and the importance of patriotism. I also think our players feel the same way, they will state to you and they will state it to everyone publicly – they are not doing this in any way to be disrespectful to the flag. However, they also understand how it is being interpreted and we are trying to deal with those underlying issues.”⁶⁷

These are just some of Goodell’s responses to reporters’ questions. For the purpose of analysis, I chose these three answers because they can be interpreted through the CRT, and they are probably the most telling as to how NFL really perceives the protests. Some of the questions that were answered during the press conference are also not connected to the protests at all. The transcript of the whole press conference is available as Appendix no. 1 at the the end of the paper.

In the opening statement, Goodell doubled down on his statement from September 7, 2016, where he criticized the form of Kaepernick’s protest. In this statement, he highlighted that the league executives believe that players should stand for the anthem and that there is no discussion to be had about this topic. He also expressed his support for protesters’ cause and confirmed NFL’s commitment to work in the community and reducing inequality. Furthermore, he mentioned that the league is trying to find ways how players could really make a difference without disrespecting the flag and the anthem.

In the second answer, he mentioned that only about six players are protesting and that the league is trying to reduce the number of protesters. By answering the question in this way, many people might have gotten the impression that only six players are unsatisfied with the situation and that these six players are some rebels. This answer could also be interpreted as an effort to marginalize the significance of the protests. The way he talked about the

⁶⁷ “ROGER GOODELL PRESS CONFERENCE AT NFL FALL MEETING IN NEW YORK,” NFL Communications, October 18, 2017, <https://nflcommunications.com/Pages/ROGER-GOODELL-PRESS-CONFERENCE-AT-NFL-FALL-MEETING-IN-NEW-YORK.aspx>.

effort to reduce the number of protesters gave the impression that the NFL is trying to shut down players' protests. Even though that during his press conference, he stated many times that the conversations with players were beneficial and insightful, this answer seems to show that he is mainly focusing on limiting the „damage“ that the protests cause to the league rather than the reasons why players are protesting.

In the third answer, Goodell claims that the players do not want to disrespect the flag or the anthem. He once again emphasizes that for him, the problem is how these protests are interpreted. By saying this, it seems that he cares more about the image of the league than the actual cause of the protests. If we compare this with his other statements from the same press conference where he multiple times mentioned that he personally and the league executives are trying to understand the issues, it looks somewhat as an empty statement. On the one hand, he claims that the league is trying to comprehend the reasons behind these protests, on the other hand, it is clear that the way of the protest is more important than the actual cause of the protest, at least for the league executives. This is what CRT also describes as a combination of white supremacy, and the fact that white people are often oblivious of racism that is still present in society. For the league and the commissioner, patriotism and showing respect to the flag and the anthem is the key, not the problems that are causing the protests. Perhaps the commissioner and the league executives would be more understanding of these issues if they had experienced them personally, however, due to being white, many of these issues could seem non-existent to them.

The seventh statement was a statement from the NFL commissioner Roger Goodell from May 23, 2018. It was a very important statement, as it laid down a set of rules regarding the national anthem, which have to be obeyed by players. This statement was significantly longer than the other statements, so only the most important parts of the statement will be mentioned here, the full statement is attached to the paper as Appendix no. 2:

„The efforts by many of our players sparked awareness and action around issues of social justice that must be addressed. The platform that we have created together is certainly unique in professional sports and quite likely in American business. We are honored to work with our players to drive progress.

It was unfortunate that on-field protests created a false perception among many that thousands of NFL players were unpatriotic. This is not and was never the case.

This season, all league and team personnel shall stand and show respect for the flag and the Anthem. Personnel who choose not to stand for the Anthem may stay in the locker room until after the Anthem has been performed.

*We believe today's decision will keep our focus on the game and the extraordinary athletes who play it—and on our fans who enjoy it.*⁶⁸

This statement was very controversial because it was the first statement since the beginning of Kaepernick's protest that modified the rules regarding the national anthem. This statement ended the discussion between players and the NFL about kneeling during the national anthem because it says that from the beginning of the 2018 season, standing during the national anthem is mandatory. It offers some sort of a middle ground for those who do not wish to stand during the anthem – they might remain in the locker room. However, for those, who are on the field during the national anthem, standing is mandatory, and if they do not oblige, they will be fined by the league, as stated in the later parts of the statement. It seems like NFL cares more about the image of the league than the cause of the protests themselves because, once again, NFL mentions patriotism and the perception that protesters are not patriotic, which is not the case. The statement acknowledges that the issues of social justice, which are being brought up by the protesters, must be addressed, but this form of protest is unacceptable for the NFL.

The last part of this statement says that this decision would help in keeping focus on the game rather than the protests. This seems rather bizarre because NFL is known to be an organization that is quite active in community work and promoting its causes, such as support for the US military, and it is not known for keeping politics out of the league compared to many other sports organizations and associations such as the FA or UEFA. In many statements, NFL mentions that it encourages its players to speak up and fight for social and racial justice and equality and that it is committed to work together with players to achieve that. This, however, seems like a way to shut down protesters and their opinions and appease those fans who disagreed with the protests. Promoting its own causes during every match and then stating that standing during the national anthem „will keep focus on the game“ seems somewhat hypocritical.

⁶⁸ “Statement From NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell ,” NFL Communications, May 23, 2018, <https://nflcommunications.com/Pages/Statement-From-NFL-Commissioner-Roger-Goodell----.aspx>.

The eighth statement was again a joint NFL-NFLPA statement from July 7, 2018, approximately two months after the previous statement and two months before the start of the 2018 NFL season:

„The NFL and NFLPA, through recent discussions, have been working on a resolution to the anthem issue. In order to allow this constructive dialogue to continue, we have come to a standstill agreement on the NFLPA’s grievance and on the NFL’s anthem policy. No new rules relating to the anthem will be issued or enforced for the next several weeks while these confidential discussions are ongoing.

The NFL and NFLPA reflect the great values of America, which are repeatedly demonstrated by the many players doing extraordinary work in communities across our country to promote equality, fairness and justice.

Our shared focus will remain on finding a solution to the anthem issue through mutual, good faith commitments, outside of litigation. “⁶⁹

From this statement, we can see that the talks between NFL and NFLPA are still ongoing and that NFLPA was probably not happy with the rules that the NFL set regarding the national anthem; thus, the national anthem policy from May was temporarily put on hold. NFL and NFLPA also ruled out possible litigation as both organizations are committed to finding a resolution through mutual talks and discussions. Again, community work is stressed as an important part of American values and American culture. In most of these statements, the recurring theme is patriotism and American values. This demonstrates how vital patriotism is for NFL executives and how much they value American culture. This is where CRT questions even the basic premises on which US society is built, which are considered by many as untouchable cornerstones. While NFL highly values these basic concepts, Kaepernick has other opinions. In September 2016, in response to Trump’s comments, Kaepernick said that America has never been great to people of color and that we should try to make America great for the first time.⁷⁰ CRT describes this phenomenon as the ignorance of racism in society because there are no more racist laws. Many people

⁶⁹ “Joint NFL-NFLPA Statement,” NFL Communications, July 7, 2018, <https://nflcommunications.com/Pages/Joint-NFL-NFLPA-Statement---.aspx>.

⁷⁰ Bryan Armen Graham, “Colin Kaepernick to Trump: ‘America Has Never Been Great for People of Color,’” The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, September 27, 2016), <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2016/sep/27/colin-kaepernick-donald-trump-america-people-of-color>.

deny that racism is still present in society because racist laws have been abolished and thus, there is no racism. It is clear that there is a fundamental difference in understanding of racism in US society between white people and people of color.

Later on, in August, the NFL stated that the policy on the national anthem stands but that players will not be fined if they protest during the anthem and violate the policy.⁷¹

The following statement was an NFL-NFLPA joint statement issued on August 27, 2018, just two weeks before the start of the 2018 NFL season:

„Today, we continued our productive dialogue on the issues that players have raised awareness about and we remain committed to working together on solutions. In the spirit of our ongoing collaboration and progress, we will continue the confidentiality of our discussions.“⁷²

This is a pretty straightforward statement that informs fans that discussions between NFL and NFLPA are ongoing and that NFL is listening to the players. They also reassured fans that the league is committed to finding a solution between NFL and NFLPA and that they are not ignoring the issue.

For more information about the public opinion about the protests, we can include a poll conducted by NBC/WSJ in August 2018.⁷³ 54 % of the 900 responders thought that kneeling during the national anthem is inappropriate, while 43 % saw it as an appropriate way to bring awareness to the problems that the protesters cited. Among Republicans, 88 % saw the protests as inappropriate, while only 23 % of Democrats saw the protests as inappropriate. 70 % of black respondents thought that the protests were appropriate, while only 38 % of white respondents thought the same. If we compare the poll results to those from 2016, the results are very similar, and the margin in differences between opinions of black respondents and white respondents remains approximately the same.

⁷¹ Mike Florio, “New Anthem Policy Is in Place, but Violations Won't Result in Player Discipline,” ProFootballTalk, August 10, 2018, <https://profootballtalk.nbcsports.com/2018/08/09/new-anthem-policy-is-in-place-but-violations-wont-result-in-player-discipline/>.

⁷² “NFL-NFLPA JOINT STATEMENT,” NFL Communications, August 27, 2018, <https://nflcommunications.com/Pages/NFL-NFLPA-JOINT-STATEMENT-----.aspx>.

⁷³ Carrie Dann, “NBC/WSJ Poll: Majority Say Kneeling during Anthem 'Not Appropriate,’” NBCNews.com (NBCUniversal News Group, August 31, 2018), <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/first-read/nbc-wsj-poll-majority-say-kneeling-during-anthem-not-appropriate-n904891>.

The next statement regarding Kaepernick was Joint Public Statement issued on February 15, 2019:

„For the past several months, counsel for Mr. Kaepernick and Mr. Reid have engaged in an ongoing dialogue with representatives of the NFL. As a result of those discussions, the parties have decided to resolve the pending grievances. The resolution of this matter is subject to a confidentiality agreement so there will be no further comment by any party.“⁷⁴

This statement is a bit of an outlier because this statement is not focused on policies regarding the national anthem or the protests but rather on grievances against the NFL submitted by two of the most vocal protesters, Colin Kaepernick and Eric Reid, and therefore, it is not very relevant to the analysis. However, it is a statement that explicitly mentions Kaepernick, and it also adds context to the process of NFL’s decisions, that is why it is included in the paper.

The next statement is from November 16, 2019, and it is an NFL statement on Kaepernick workout. As it is a statement that is not directly addressing the protests and racial issues, it is included only as Appendix no. 3 and is not included here in the analytical part. This statement addresses the controversy surrounding a workout, which the NFL organized for Kaepernick. NFL states that the league representatives are disappointed that Kaepernick did not participate in the workout but that he is still an eligible free agent and can be signed by any team at any point.

The following statement is a statement from the NFL commissioner and it was issued on May 30, 2020, as a reaction to the BLM protests:

„The NFL family is greatly saddened by the tragic events across our country. The protesters' reactions to these incidents reflect the pain, anger and frustration that so many of us feel.

Our deepest condolences go out to the family of Mr. George Floyd and to those who have lost loved ones, including the families of Ms. Breonna Taylor in Louisville, and Mr. Ahmaud Arbery, the cousin of Tracy Walker of the Detroit Lions.

⁷⁴ “JOINT PUBLIC STATEMENT,” NFL Communications, February 15, 2019, <https://nflcommunications.com/Pages/JOINT-PUBLIC-STATEMENT.aspx>.

*As current events dramatically underscore, there remains much more to do as a country and as a league. These tragedies inform the NFL's commitment and our ongoing efforts. There remains an urgent need for action. We recognize the power of our platform in communities and as part of the fabric of American society. We embrace that responsibility and are committed to continuing the important work to address these systemic issues together with our players, clubs and partners.*⁷⁵

This statement is very different from all the previous statements because it acknowledges the struggles of the black community and does not mention patriotism and does not address any issues concerning the national anthem, flag, or military of the United States. In this statement, the NFL expresses its support towards people of color and promises that it is committed to changing American society for the better. Even though this promise was present in previous statements, this statement is different because NFL does not address any internal policies or issues with kneeling during the national anthem, it does not push its internal agenda. It seems as if the league executive realized that the situation is much more severe than they thought in the years before. This could be interpreted with the use of the CRT, as the league executives ignored racial and social issues in the US society, whether willingly or not, and they only realized that the state of racial oppression and other issues is much worse than they thought when the images of George Floyd murder and other high-profile cases went viral. CRT mentions that many people live in denial of possible problems because they do not experience them themselves. However, the BLM protests and Floyd's murder were so viral that every US citizen was familiar with these cases and the overall situation. Even though there were still many who disagreed with the notion that American society can be racist and many found the protests unjustified, many people changed their opinions about these issues. This can be proved by comparing the polls from the years 2016 and 2018 to the polls from 2020. According to a poll conducted by YahooNews/YouGov in June 2020 in the wake of the BLM protests, 52 % of all respondents think it is ok to take a knee during the national anthem and only 36 % think it is inappropriate.⁷⁶ 77 % of black respondents answered that they think it is appropriate,

⁷⁵ "STATEMENT FROM NFL COMMISSIONER ROGER GOODELL ," NFL Communications, May 30, 2020, <https://nflcommunications.com/Pages/STATEMENT-FROM-NFL-COMMISSIONER-ROGER-GOODELL-----.aspx>.

⁷⁶ Jay Busbee, "Yahoo News/YouGov Poll: Majority of Americans Now Support NFL Players' Right to Protest," Yahoo! Sports (Yahoo!, July 11, 2020), <https://sports.yahoo.com/poll-majority-of-americans-now-support-nfl-players-right-to-protest-151212603.html>.

while 47 % of white respondents other than Hispanics answered that they think the protest is appropriate. If we compare these numbers to the polls from 2016, the difference in results is substantial. In 2016, 70 % of white respondents disagreed with Kaepernick's actions and only 38 % of all respondents found his actions appropriate.

The next statement came shortly after the previous one and it was a video published via the official NFL twitter account.⁷⁷ In the video, Goodell talks about the BLM protests and the league's commitment to helping eliminate inequality and racism. Below is the complete transcript of the commissioner's speech from June 5, 2020:

„It has been a difficult time in our country, in particular, black people in our country. First, my condolences to the families of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and all the families that have endured police brutality. We, the National Football League, condemn racism and the systematic oppression of black people. We, the National Football League, admit we were wrong for not listening to NFL players earlier and encourage all to speak out and peacefully protest. We, the National Football League, believe Black Lives Matter. I personally protest with you and want to be a part of the much needed change in this country. Without black players there would be no National Football League. And the protests around the country are emblematic of the centuries of silence, inequality, and oppression of black players, coaches, fans, and staff. We are listening, I am listening, and I will be reaching out to players who have raised their voices, and others on how we can move forward together for a better and more united NFL family.“

In this statement, NFL acknowledges its mistakes and displays apologetic words towards protesters. NFL also states that it condemns racism and the systematic oppression of black people. It is interesting to see this being mentioned in the statement, as it is the first time since Kaepernick's protest that words racism and systematic oppression are mentioned in the statements. Even though NFL claimed many times that it supports its players in their fight for racial and social equality, the first time that the league condemned racism and systematic oppression in its statements was almost four years after Kaepernick's protest. In the statement, Goodell mentions that the league was wrong for not listening to NFL players

⁷⁷ Nfl, "We, the NFL, Condemn Racism and the Systematic Oppression of Black People. We, the NFL, Admit We Were Wrong for Not Listening to NFL Players Earlier and Encourage All to Speak out and Peacefully Protest. We, the NFL, Believe Black Lives Matter.," Twitter (Twitter, June 5, 2020), <https://twitter.com/NFL/status/1269034074552721408>.

earlier. What is interesting to note is that he does not mention Kaepernick by name, even though he was the first protester, and the protests are associated mostly with him. Again, CRT describes this as racism that is ignored by many because it is deeply rooted in US society, and many people do not even realize that there could be something such as racist behavior, primarily because of their white privilege. What is clear is that this statement and the previous statement are completely different from all the statements that were issued before the BLM protests. We can only wonder why NFL changed its approach so much, perhaps it was a genuine change of heart that was caused by seeing all the difficulties, inequality and injustice that people of color have to go through in their everyday lives. Or perhaps, the fact that many more high-profile NFL players expressed their opinions on this issue than in 2016 forced the league to change its approach. Perhaps the change in approach towards the protesting players was driven by the public's opinion and all the things mentioned in the statements and the video are just PR. According to the Harris poll conducted in June 2020, two-thirds of the respondents saw the video statement as insincere and 53 % of respondents thought the statement was issued too late.⁷⁸ 61 % of the respondents believed that NFL should issue a public apology to Kaepernick. As of the end of the 2020 season, which concluded in February 2021, no public apology was issued to Kaepernick.

Few days after the video was published, NFL pledged to commit 250 million USD to „combat systemic racism and support the battle against the ongoing and historic injustices faced by African-Americans.“⁷⁹ Whatever the cause for the change in NFL's policy toward players' protests was, it seems as NFL has fully accepted its new course and is trying to make amends for its mistakes in the past. It also takes its role in combatting systemic racism very seriously, as we can see by the large sum committed to combating these issues. NFL's ongoing support of players' speeches on the topic of racial and social issues seems to confirm that NFL is taking its new policies very seriously and is committed to truly make a change. It remains to be seen if the league will stick with this course for a longer period of time or if it will change its approach again in the near future. For the time of

⁷⁸ Kurt Badenhausen, "Poll: 61% Of Americans Say Roger Goodell Owes Colin Kaepernick An Apology," Forbes (Forbes Magazine, June 16, 2020), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kurtbadenhausen/2020/06/15/poll-61-of-americans-say-roger-goodell-owes-colin-kaepernick-an-apology/?sh=149573171f3e>.

⁷⁹ Nfl, "#InspireChange," Twitter (Twitter, June 11, 2020), <https://twitter.com/NFL/status/1271201330963480576>.

being, however, it seems that NFL is committed to its new policies and will try to pursue them at least in the upcoming future.

Conclusion

The main goal of this paper was to analyze official NFL statements on Colin Kaepernick's protests and racial and social issues and find out if there has been a change in NFL policies and approaches towards the protesters and racial issues in general. The statements were analyzed through critical race theory, which helped explain some of the thought processes behind the statements. The hypothesis was that the NFL changed its approach in the last six years and is now more inclusive than ever. The analysis proved that the hypothesis was correct and that there had been a change in NFL's approach. In the beginning, NFL recognized players' right to protest as freedom of speech is an integral part of the US Constitution, the most important legal document in the United States. NFL, however, criticized the way Kaepernick protested because he chose to kneel during the national anthem. This gesture was seen by many as disrespectful to the US military, to the anthem and to the flag. It was often described as un-American and unpatriotic, even though Kaepernick himself said that his gesture was not meant to be disrespectful to the military and the US. By kneeling, he simply wanted to bring attention to the systemic oppression of African Americans in the United States in a peaceful way. Many Americans, however, NFL included, interpreted his protests as disrespectful and they cared more about the form of his protest than the causes of his protest. At that time, Kaepernick's protest was viewed as inappropriate by most of the country, although there were significant differences between the opinions of white people and people of color. From the 2016 and 2017 statements, it seems that for NFL, the form of Kaepernick's protest was very problematic and NFL was trying to stop this form of protest. Even though the league acknowledged the struggles of the black community, it seemed that more than anything, NFL was determined to stop players protesting during the national anthem.

In 2018, new policies and rules were adopted, which prohibited NFL players from kneeling during the national anthem while they were on the field. This policy only allowed players to stay in the locker room if they did not wish to stand during the national anthem. The new rules said that the league would fine every player, league personnel or team executive who would take a knee on the football field during the national anthem. These rules were put on hold shortly after they were implemented. This new set of rules and policies

suggested that NFL cared more about its image than the actual cause of the protests. As NFL mentioned in its statements, the league was trying to reduce the number of protesting players to zero because kneeling during the anthem was seen as unpatriotic and damaging to the league's reputation. By allowing players to stay in the locker room during the national anthem, NFL tried to hide potential protesters from the cameras and the public's eye.

The biggest change in NFL's approach came in 2020 when the NFL completely changed its rhetorics and priorities. In the two statements that were issued during the Black Lives Matter protests and after the murder of George Floyd, NFL expressed full support for African-Americans and their difficult situation. NFL acknowledged systemic oppression and social injustice towards black people and stated that the league is committed to helping to eliminate these issues from society. It also admitted mistakes in its past approach towards players' protests. The change in approach was very radical, however, it corresponded with the change of the public's opinion. In 2016, most Americans did not find Kaepernick's protests appropriate, but in 2020, 52 % of Americans thought that the protests were justified and 61 % thought that the NFL should apologize to Colin Kaepernick for its discriminatory behavior.

The change of NFL's stance towards racial issues in the last five years can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, in 2016, Kaepernick's protests were viewed by many as disrespectful and unpatriotic. Instead of focusing on the things that bother Kaepernick, the main focus was on the form of his protest. His protest was thus misunderstood and he was painted in a negative way as unpatriotic. In 2020, the focus was on the injustice and racism that African-Americans have to deal with. Secondly, even though several players joined Kaepernick's protests, most of the players remained silent or protested differently. In 2020, many high-profile players expressed their opinion about George Floyd's murder and the problems that African-Americans have to deal with. Thirdly, in 2020, the racial issues were brought to attention by several murders of African-Americans and the BLM protests echoed through the whole country. Many corporations expressed their support of the BLM movement and the public's opinion on racial issues changed as well. The support for racial equality was, therefore, kind of expected from the NFL and the question arises if NFL's change of approach was indeed genuine or if it was more of a PR gesture. The most likely

possibility is that NFL changed its approach as a combination of the three aforementioned factors and it remains to be seen how the NFL will continue in the upcoming years with its new policies and the newly adopted approach.

Summary

This paper aims to analyze NFL's stance and approach towards racial issues since Colin Kaepernick's protest in 2016. Colin Kaepernick is an African American athlete who started to protest against racial and social injustice by kneeling before NFL games when the national anthem was played. His protests caused many controversies because many people saw his actions as disrespectful towards the military, flag, national anthem and towards the USA. NFL's stance is analyzed through a qualitative content analysis of all NFL statements, which were issued since the beginning of Kaepernick's protest until the end of 2020. The statements are analyzed by use of the critical race theory, which focuses on the topic of race, white supremacy and institutionalized and hidden racism. The results of the analysis are that NFL's stance towards racial issues changed substantially. In 2016 and 2017, the primary concern of the NFL was the form of Kaepernick's protest as it was understood as a disrespectful and un-American act. In these years, NFL was trying to have a discussion with players about the causes of the protests, however, its primary concern was the form of Kaepernick's protest. In 2018, NFL briefly introduced a set of rules, which prohibited players from taking a knee during the national anthem while being on the football field. This rule was put on hold shortly after its introduction. In 2020, NFL completely changed its approach and started to support African Americans in their causes much more, NFL even admitted making a mistake in not listening to players' protests before.

List of References

- Arnold, Geoffrey. "NFL to Allow Names of Victims of Systemic Racism on Helmet Padding: Report." OregonLive, August 31, 2020. <https://www.oregonlive.com/nfl/2020/08/nfl-to-allow-names-of-victims-of-systemic-racism-and-police-brutality-on-helmet-padding-report.html>.
- Badenhausen, Kurt. "Poll: 61% Of Americans Say Roger Goodell Owes Colin Kaepernick An Apology." Forbes. Forbes Magazine, June 16, 2020. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kurtbadenhausen/2020/06/15/poll-61-of-americans-say-roger-goodell-owes-colin-kaepernick-an-apology/?sh=149573171f3e>.
- Bailey, Anais. "On This Day Four Years Ago, Colin Kaepernick Began His Peaceful Protests during the National Anthem." USA Today, August 26, 2020. <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/sports/nfl/2020/08/26/colin-kaepernick-started-protesting-day-2016/3440690001/>.
- Bassam, Tom. "World Series TV Ratings 32% down on Previous Low." SportsPro, October 29, 2020. <https://www.sportspromedia.com/news/mlb-world-series-2020-tv-ratings-down>.
- "BBC ON THIS DAY | 17 | 1968: Black Athletes Make Silent Protest." BBC News. BBC. Accessed April 28, 2021. http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/october/17/newsid_3535000/3535348.stm.
- Biderman, Chris. "Colin Kaepernick Calls Alton Sterling Shooting a 'Lynching'." USA Today. Gannett Satellite Information Network, July 6, 2016. <https://ninerswire.usatoday.com/2016/07/06/colin-kaepernick-calls-alton-sterling-shooting-a-lynching/>.
- Biderman, Chris. "Colin Kaepernick: 'We Are under Attack' While Other 49ers React to Castile Shooting." USA Today, July 8, 2016. <https://ninerswire.usatoday.com/2016/07/07/kaepernick-we-are-under-attack-while-other-49ers-react-to-castile-shooting/>.
- Bigler, Matthew, and Judson L. Jeffries. "'An Amazing Specimen': NFL Draft Experts' Evaluations of Black Quarterbacks." *Journal of African American Studies* 12, no. 2 (June 4, 2008): 120–41. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12111-008-9036-7>.
- Boren, Cindy. "Roger Goodell on Colin Kaepernick: 'We Believe Very Strongly in Patriotism in the NFL'." The Washington Post, April 29, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/early-lead/wp/2016/09/07/roger-goodell-on-colin-kaepernick-we-believe-very-strongly-in-patriotism-in-the-nfl/>.
- Braunek, Ted. "NFL Ownership Position on Player Protests." National Football Post, September 6, 2018. <https://www.nationalfootballpost.com/columns/features/all-of-the-nfl-owners-stances-on-player-protests/>.

- Bumbaca, Chris. "Donald Trump 'Looking Forward to Live Sports,' but Still Sees Anthem Protests as 'Disrespect'." USA Today. Gannett Satellite Information Network, July 21, 2020. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/2020/07/21/donald-trump-athletes-kneeling-during-anthem-great-disrespect/5477583002/>.
- Busbee, Jay. "Yahoo News/YouGov Poll: Majority of Americans Now Support NFL Players' Right to Protest." Yahoo! Sports. Yahoo!, July 11, 2020. <https://sports.yahoo.com/poll-majority-of-americans-now-support-nfl-players-right-to-protest-151212603.html>.
- "Crucial Catch: It Takes All of Us to Fight Cancer." NFL.com, October 5, 2020. <https://www.nfl.com/causes/crucial-catch/>.
- Cruz, Ted. "To All the Athletes Who Have Made Millions in America's Freedom: Stop Insulting Our Flag, Our Nation, Our Heroes. ." Twitter, September 12, 2016. https://twitter.com/tedcruz/status/775348594060562432?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E775348594060562432%7Ctwgr%5E%7Cwcon%5Esl1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fedition.cnn.com%2F2016%2F09%2F12%2Fsport%2Fcolin-kaepernick-nfl-opening-day-reaction-trnd%2Findex.html.
- Dann, Carrie. "NBC/WSJ Poll: Majority Say Kneeling during Anthem 'Not Appropriate'." NBCNews.com. NBCUniversal News Group, August 31, 2018. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/first-read/nbc-wsj-poll-majority-say-kneeling-during-anthem-not-appropriate-n904891>.
- Delgado, Richard, Jean Stefancic, and Angela Harris. "Introduction." Essay. In *Critical Race Theory: an Introduction*, 3. New York, USA: New York University Press, 2017.
- "FIFA Fines Hong Kong Soccer Body for China Anthem Protest." CTVNews. The Associated Press, October 9, 2019. <https://www.ctvnews.ca/sports/fifa-fines-hong-kong-soccer-body-for-china-anthem-protest-1.4630798?cache=yes%3FclipId%3D64268>.
- FIFA. *Laws of the Game*. Zurich, Switzerland: The International Football Association Board, 2020. <https://resources.fifa.com/image/upload/ifab-laws-of-the-game-2020-21.pdf?cloudid=d6g1medsi8jrrd3e4imp>.
- Florio, Mike. "New Anthem Policy Is in Place, but Violations Won't Result in Player Discipline." ProFootballTalk, August 10, 2018. <https://profootballtalk.nbcsports.com/2018/08/09/new-anthem-policy-is-in-place-but-violations-wont-result-in-player-discipline/>.
- Freeman, Mike. "Colin Kaepernick Sentenced to NFL Limbo for the Crime of Speaking His Mind." Bleacher Report. Bleacher Report, October 3, 2017. <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/2698098-colin-kaepernick-sentenced-to-nfl-limbo-for-the-crime-of-speaking-his-mind>.

- Freeman, Mike. "Mike Freeman's 10-Point Stance: Kaepernick Protest Still Has NFL Teams Worried." Bleacher Report, October 3, 2017.
<https://bleacherreport.com/articles/2696245-mike-freemans-10-point-stance-kaepernick-protest-still-has-nfl-teams-worried>.
- George, Janel. "A LESSON ON CRITICAL RACE THEORY." *Human Rights* 46, no. 2 (January 2021): 2–5.
- Goff, Steven. "FC Barcelona President Speaks out on UEFA Fine for Catalan Flag Issue." The Washington Post. WP Company, July 26, 2015.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/soccer-insider/wp/2015/07/26/fc-barcelona-president-speaks-out-on-uefa-fine-for-catalan-flag-issue/>.
- Goldberg, Rob. "Jerry Jones Says Any Cowboys Player Who 'Disrespects' the Flag Won't Play." Bleacher Report, October 9, 2017.
<https://bleacherreport.com/articles/2737631-jerry-jones-says-a-cowboys-player-who-disrespects-the-flag-wont-play>.
- Graham, Bryan Armen. "Colin Kaepernick to Trump: 'America Has Never Been Great for People of Color'." The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, September 27, 2016.
<https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2016/sep/27/colin-kaepernick-donald-trump-america-people-of-color>.
- Graham, Bryan Armen. "Donald Trump Blasts NFL Anthem Protesters: 'Get That Son of a Bitch off the Field'." The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, September 23, 2017.
<https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2017/sep/22/donald-trump-nfl-national-anthem-protests>.
- Haislop, Tadd. "Colin Kaepernick Kneeling Timeline: How Protests during the National Anthem Started a Movement in the NFL." Sporting News, September 13, 2020.
<https://www.sportingnews.com/us/nfl/news/colin-kaepernick-kneeling-protest-timeline/xktu6ka4divals5jxaylrse>.
- Heck, Jordan. "Roundup of #NFL Players Participating in Protests on Sunday. Pic.twitter.com/ToDpZYod7z." Twitter, September 12, 2016.
https://twitter.com/JordanHeckFF/status/775308655365230592?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E775308655365230592%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.sportingnews.com%2Fus%2Fnfl%2Fnews%2Fcolin-kaepernick-kneeling-protest-timeline%2Fxktu6ka4divals5jxaylrse.
- Herbert, Geoff. "How Many People Watched the Super Bowl? 2020 Ratings up from Last Year." Syracuse, February 3, 2020. <https://www.syracuse.com/sports/2020/02/2020-super-bowl-ratings-102-million-viewers-up-from-last-year.html>.
- Holland, Jesse J. "White Americans Largely Disapprove of National Anthem Protests, Poll Finds." PBS. Public Broadcasting Service, October 12, 2016.
<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/white-americans-disapprove-national-anthem-protests-poll-finds>.

- Hurtado, Aída. “Critical Race Theory and Questioning Whiteness: Young Feminists Speak Out Against Race and Class Privilege.” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 40, no. 3 (2019): 90–116. <https://doi.org/10.5250/fronjwomestud.40.3.0090>.
- Ioc. “IOC Athletes' Commission's Recommendations on Rule 50 and Athlete Expression at the Olympic Games Fully Endorsed by the IOC Executive Board - Olympic News.” International Olympic Committee. IOC, April 21, 2021. <https://www.olympic.org/news/ioc-athletes-commission-s-recommendations-on-rule-50-and-athlete-expression-at-the-olympic-games>.
- “JOINT NFL-NFL PLAYERS ASSOCIATION STATEMENT.” NFL Communications, October 3, 2017. <https://nflcommunications.com/Pages/JOINT-NFL-NFL-PLAYERS-ASSOCIATION-STATEMENT.aspx>.
- “Joint NFL-NFLPA Statement.” NFL Communications, July 7, 2018. <https://nflcommunications.com/Pages/Joint-NFL-NFLPA-Statement---.aspx>.
- “Joint NFL-NFLPA Statement.” NFL Communications, October 17, 2017. <https://nflcommunications.com/Pages/Joint-NFL-NFLPA-Statement.aspx>.
- “JOINT PUBLIC STATEMENT.” NFL Communications, February 15, 2019. <https://nflcommunications.com/Pages/JOINT-PUBLIC-STATEMENT.aspx>.
- Natan, Ben. “The NFL Is Using Racist Pseudoscience to Punish Former Players.” *Bleeding Green Nation*. Bleeding Green Nation, March 10, 2021. <https://www.bleedinggreennation.com/2021/3/10/22323436/nfl-using-racist-pseudoscience-punish-former-players>.
- “NFL Community.” NFL.com. Accessed February 2, 2021. <https://www.nfl.com/community/>.
- “NFL Salute to Service.” NFL.com, November 18, 2020. <https://www.nfl.com/causes/salute/>.
- “NFL STATEMENT ON KAEPERNICK WORKOUT .” NFL Communications, November 16, 2019. <https://nflcommunications.com/Pages/NFL-STATEMENT-ON-KAEPERNICK-WORKOUT.aspx>.
- “NFL-NFLPA JOINT STATEMENT .” NFL Communications, August 27, 2018. <https://nflcommunications.com/Pages/NFL-NFLPA-JOINT-STATEMENT-----.aspx>.
- Nfl. “#InspireChange .” Twitter. Twitter, June 11, 2020. <https://twitter.com/NFL/status/1271201330963480576>.
- Nfl. “We, the NFL, Condemn Racism and the Systematic Oppression of Black People. We, the NFL, Admit We Were Wrong for Not Listening to NFL Players Earlier and Encourage All to Speak out and Peacefully Protest. We, the NFL, Believe Black Lives Matter.” Twitter. Twitter, June 5, 2020. <https://twitter.com/NFL/status/1269034074552721408>.

- Parfitt, Tom. "The Iconic Story of the Black Power Salute at Olympics, 50 Years On." The Independent. Independent Digital News and Media, April 24, 2019. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/black-power-salute-1968-50-years-olympics-tommie-smith-john-carlos-racism-mexico-city-a8587811.html>.
- Patra, Kevin. "NFL Instituting Changes to Rooney Rule ." NFL.com, May 18, 2020. <https://www.nfl.com/news/nfl-instituting-changes-to-rooney-rule>.
- "Pep Guardiola: Manchester City Manager Fined over Yellow Ribbon." BBC Sport. BBC, March 9, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/43350447>.
- Ramsay, George. "FIFA Fines British Teams \$100K for Poppy Displays." CNN. Cable News Network, December 19, 2016. <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/12/19/football/fifa-poppy-fine-england-fa-football/index.html>.
- "Roger Goodell on Colin Kaepernick: 'We Believe Very Strongly in Patriotism in the NFL.'" USA Today. Gannett Satellite Information Network, September 7, 2016. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/nfl/2016/09/07/goodell-doesnt-agree-with-kaepernicks-actions/89958636/>.
- "ROGER GOODELL PRESS CONFERENCE AT NFL FALL MEETING IN NEW YORK." NFL Communications, October 18, 2017. <https://nflcommunications.com/Pages/ROGER-GOODELL-PRESS-CONFERENCE-AT-NFL-FALL-MEETING-IN-NEW-YORK.aspx>.
- Schefter, Adam. "Colin Kaepernick to Stand during National Anthem next Season." ESPN, March 2, 2017. https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/18805744/colin-kaepernick-stand-national-anthem-next-season.
- Sonnad, Nikhil. "The NFL's Racial Breakdown Depends on Where You Look." Atlas. Quartz, May 24, 2018. <https://theatl.com/charts/BJ8fvBNym>.
- "STATEMENT FROM NFL COMMISSIONER ROGER GOODELL ." NFL Communications, May 30, 2020. <https://nflcommunications.com/Pages/STATEMENT-FROM-NFL-COMMISSIONER-ROGER-GOODELL-----.aspx>.
- "Statement From NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell ." NFL Communications, May 23, 2018. <https://nflcommunications.com/Pages/Statement-From-NFL-Commissioner-Roger-Goodell----.aspx>.
- "Statement From NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell." NFL Communications, September 23, 2017. <https://nflcommunications.com/Pages/Statement-From-NFL-Commissioner-Roger-Goodell.aspx>.
- Steele, David. "Colin Kaepernick, 49ers Cutting Ties Is a Long-Overdue End to Toxic Relationship." Sporting News, March 1, 2017.

<https://www.sportingnews.com/us/nfl/news/colin-kaepernick-49ers-contract-free-agency-rumors-salary-cap-kyle-shanahan/60dfzhouq6co1h17qbrkc10uh>.

Steele, David. "Tommie Smith: Using His Speed to Attract Attention: Olympic Hall of Fame." United States Olympic & Paralympic Museum, July 31, 2020. <https://usopm.org/tommie-smith-using-his-speed-to-attract-attention/>.

Stilwell, Blake. "The Most Amazing Charity Work Done by NFL Players." We Are The Mighty, October 30, 2020. <https://www.wearethemighty.com/mighty-sports/amazing-charity-work-nfl-players/>.

Stump, Scott. "Most NFL Players Are Black. So Why Aren't There More Black Head Coaches?" NBC News, September 15, 2020. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/most-nfl-players-are-black-so-why-aren-t-there-n1240131>.

Tennery, Amy. "Most Americans Disagree with Kaepernick, but Respect His Right to Protest." Reuters. Thomson Reuters, September 14, 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nfl-anthem-poll-idUSKCN11K2ID>.

Trachtman, Seth. "Ranking the Head Coaches for the 2020 NFL Season." Yardbarker, October 2, 2020. https://www.yardbarker.com/nfl/articles/ranking_the_head_coaches_for_the_2020_nfl_season/s1__32709875#slide_1.

Trenaman, Calum. "The NFL Is Confronting Racism, but Are Black Quarterbacks Continuing to Be Stereotyped?" CNN. Cable News Network, October 29, 2020. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/10/29/sport/nfl-black-quarterbacks-cmd-spt-intl/index.html>.

Trotter, Jim. "Does Race Remain a Factor in the Evaluation of NFL Quarterbacks?" NFL.com, February 24, 2021. <https://www.nfl.com/news/sidelines/does-race-remain-a-factor-in-the-evaluation-of-nfl-quarterbacks>.

Vergara, Andre. "Final 2016 NFL Quarterback Power Rankings." FOX Sports, January 6, 2017. <https://www.foxsports.com/nfl/gallery/2016-nfl-qb-power-rankings-final-edition-tom-brady-aaron-rogers-dak-prescott-drew-brees-cam-newton-010617>.

Victor, Daniel. "Obama Says Colin Kaepernick Is 'Exercising His Constitutional Right'." The New York Times, September 5, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/06/sports/obama-colin-kaepernick-national-anthem.html>.

Wyche, Steve. "Colin Kaepernick Explains Why He Sat during National Anthem." NFL.com, August 26, 2020. <https://www.nfl.com/news/colin-kaepernick-explains-why-he-sat-during-national-anthem-0ap3000000691077>.

———. “Colin Kaepernick Calls Alton Sterling Shooting a 'Lynching'.” USA Today, July 6, 2016. <https://ninerswire.usatoday.com/2016/07/06/colin-kaepernick-calls-alton-sterling-shooting-a-lynching/>.

———. “Colin Kaepernick Sentenced to NFL Limbo for the Crime of Speaking His Mind.” Bleacher Report, October 3, 2017. <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/2698098-colin-kaepernick-sentenced-to-nfl-limbo-for-the-crime-of-speaking-his-mind>.

Master's Thesis Summary

ZÁVĚREČNÉ TEZE MAGISTERSKÉ PRÁCE NMTS
Závěrečné teze student odevzdává ke konci Diplomního semináře III jako součást magisterské práce a tyto teze jsou spolu s odevzdáním magisterské práce do SIS předpokladem udělení zápočtu za tento seminář.
Jméno: Michal Hromádka
E-mail: michhromadka@gmail.com
Specializace (uved'te zkratku)*: SAS
Semestr a školní rok zahájení práce: LS 2020
Semestr a školní rok ukončení práce: LS 2021
Vedoucí diplomového semináře: Lucie Kýrová, M.A., Ph.D.
Vedoucí práce: PhDr. Mgr. Kryštof Kozák, Ph.D.
Název práce: The shift in NFL's stance towards racial issues since Colin Kaepernick's protest in 2016
Charakteristika tématu práce (max 10 řádek): Tato práce se zabývá analýzou přístupu NFL k rasovým otázkám od protestu Colina Kaepernicka v roce 2016. S americkým fotbalem se pojí řada zajímavých sociologických fenoménů, ať už je to fascinace násilím v americké společnosti, genderová vyváženost nebo rasové problémy. Americký fotbal je zároveň platformou, kde hráči mohou vyjádřit svůj názor na dění ve společnosti a být vyslyšeni, jako to bylo například v případě Colina Kaepernicka v roce 2016, který svým nenásilným protestem vyjadřoval svůj nesouhlas s policejní brutalitou a rasovou diskriminací ve Spojených státech. NFL jakožto jedna z nejvlivnějších organizací v USA má ohromný vliv na celou americkou společnost a proto je její přístup k řešení rasových problémů velmi důležitý.
Vývoj tématu od zadání projektu do odevzdání práce (max. 10 řádek): Původním cílem práce bylo zjistit, proč je americký fotbal ve Spojených státech tak populární a proč pro spoustu Američanů představuje mnohem víc než jenom sport a odreagování. Tato tematika je v práci také částečně zmíněna, nicméně hlavním cílem práce je analýza postojů NFL k rasovým otázkám od roku 2016 do konce roku 2020. Nově se práce zaměřuje především na rasovou otázku a dle oficiálních vyjádření a kroků NFL se snaží zjistit, zda od roku 2016 došlo ke změně přístupu ze strany NFL.
Struktura práce (hlavní kapitoly obsahu): Úvod Teoretický rámec Metodologie Krátká rekapitulace událostí souvisejících s otázkou rasismu v NFL od roku 2016 do roku 2020 Analytická část Závěr
Hlavní výsledky práce (max. 10 řádek):

Práce zjistila, že postoje NFL k rasovým otázkám a protestům za větší rovnost ve společnosti se poměrně dramaticky změnil. Během Kaepernickova protestu NFL zastávala pozici, že protest formou klečení je pro ní nepřijatelný. V roce 2020 však ve stínu protestů Black Lives Matter podporovala snahu o větší zrovnoprvánění společnosti a podporovala své hráče, aby dali najevo svůj názor. Během roku 2020 NFL také přijala pravidlo, které odměňuje týmy za vychovávání funkcionářů a trenérů, jejichž původ patří k jedné z menšin v rámci Spojených států. Týmy, které budou vychovávat funkcionáře a trenéry, kteří budou postupně přijati na nejvyšší pozice v rámci NFL, budou za tuto činnost odměněny výběry v draftu v následujících letech.

Prameny a literatura (výběr nejpodstatnějších):

Crepeau, Richard C. *NFL Football: a History of Americas New National Pastime*. University of Illinois Press, 2020.

Delgado, Richard, Jean Stefancic, and Angela Harris. *Critical Race Theory: an Introduction*. New York, USA: New York University Press, 2017.

Falk, Gerhard. *Football and American Identity*. New York: Routledge, 2012.

Oates, Thomas Patrick, Zack Furness, and Michael Oriard. *The NFL: Critical and Cultural Perspectives*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015.

Oriard, Michael. *Brand NFL: Making and Selling Americas Favorite Sport*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010.

Etika výzkumu:**

Jazyk práce:

Anglický

Podpis studenta a datum

Michal Hromádka 2. 5. 2021

Schváleno	Datum	Podpis
Vedoucí práce		
Vedoucí diplomového semináře		
Vedoucí specializace		
Garant programu		

* BAS – Balkánská a středoevropská studia; ES – Evropská studia; NRS – Německá a rakouská studia; RES – Ruská a eurasijská studia; SAS – Severoamerická studia; ZES – Západoevropská studia.

** Pokud je to relevantní, tj. vyžaduje to charakter výzkumu (nebo jeho zadavatel), data, s nimiž pracujete, nebo osobní bezpečnost vaše či dalších účastníků výzkumu, vysvětlíte, jak zajistíte dodržení, resp. splnění těchto etických aspektů výzkumu: 1) informovaný souhlas s účastí na výzkumu, 2) dobrovolná účast na výzkumu, 3) důvěrnost a anonymita zdrojů, 4) bezpečný výzkum (nikomu nevznikne újma).

List of Appendices

Appendix no. 1: Transcript of Roger Goodell press conference at NFL fall meeting in New York, October 18, 2017 (text)

Appendix no. 2: Statement from NFL commissioner Roger Goodell from May 23, 2018 (text)

Appendix no. 3: NFL statement on Kaepernick workout (text)

Appendix no. 1: Transcript of Roger Goodell press conference at NFL fall meeting in New York, October 18, 2017

Roger Goodell: Good afternoon. Before I get to your questions, I'm pleased to announce that Dallas will be the host of the 2018 NFL Draft. I think you have a release on that. This is the first time we will be hosting the Draft at a stadium complex. We are excited by that. I want to take moment to thank both Chicago and Philadelphia for really doing an extraordinary job to raise the bar. They have set a new standard for the Draft, created a new experience for our fans that was extraordinary, and we are confident that Dallas will raise that bar even further. I'm happy to introduce Charlotte Jones Anderson who is going to give her view of what to expect in Dallas. Again, the ownership is very supportive and we are all very excited to be going to Dallas next April for the Draft.

Charlotte Jones Anderson: Thank you. On behalf of the Dallas Cowboys, the city of Dallas, the city of Arlington and the city of Frisco, we are so excited that the NFL has given us this opportunity to host the Draft in April of next year. We have had so many great civic leaders in Dallas, and across the area, from Arlington and beyond, that have really done a lot of hard work here, hopefully giving a lot of ideas to the staff at the NFL, to Peter and his team. We really think we have come up with an incredible idea and concept that will really make AT&T Stadium shine, but also will deliver a unique experience that is unlike anything that you have seen thus far at the NFL Draft. I think this is what the draft process is all about, it allows the cities to show their unique personality and hopefully invite not only fans from all over our region, in Dallas and the metroplex and beyond, but from those out of state. We welcome them to come to Dallas, to Arlington, to AT&T Stadium, to show their fandom and be a part of the Draft in April. You'll see a little bit of a different variation of it when you get there. A lot of those surprises are in store and will be released throughout the next few months, but again we would like to thank all of those who worked hard on this, but most importantly the NFL for giving Dallas, the city of Arlington and AT&T Stadium the opportunity to host the Draft.

RG: We had a very productive set of meetings here in New York over the last couple of days. We had reports from various committees including the competition committee. We are very excited about the season that we have going on right now. We talked about the six weeks that we have played to date and the margin of victory. We talked about the penalties per game, game presentation and the changes that we have made and we also talked about officiating. There was a lot of very positive feedback on the game.

We also spent a great deal of time talking about our partnerships. We extended and expanded our partnership with Ticketmaster – which we think will be very fan-friendly and give our fans a better opportunity to buy tickets on a secure basis and on a greater platform, which I think will be very positive.

We had a report on our health and safety initiatives and the impact they are having on our game.

Lastly, we had a special visitor today, the commissioner of the NYPD, Jimmy O'Neill, and his chief of police, Terry Monahan. I have been in conversation with them for several months, so this has been quite a while in the making. We are trying to understand how we can continue to expand the relationships between

our clubs, our players, our communities and the NFL. He was very helpful in giving us insight into what their initiatives are with the NYPD and the initiatives that are going on in other parts of the country. I saw those initiatives firsthand in Miami last week and in Philadelphia recently. The relationship between the players, our communities and law enforcement is very important to us. That was very helpful.

Yesterday I made a brief comment, but I'm sure there will be more questions about the meeting with players and owners. We also spent a great deal of time with our owners alone today discussing our efforts with our players. There is a great deal of support for the efforts that our players have identified. They not only support but recognize that these are important issues for our communities. They are American issues and certain things that we want as clubs and as the league that we want to support and be a part of and help lead with our players. I think those are the key issues.

I will tell you though, another issue we spent a great deal of time talking about this morning was how much we believe that everyone should stand for the national anthem. That is an important part of our policy, it's also an important part of our game that we all take great pride in. It is also important for us to honor the flag and our country – our fans expect us to do that. That is something that we continued to focus on this morning. We are really talking about the opportunity that exists with our players to try to go and really make a difference in our communities in a positive way.

In response to your statement yesterday, the president this morning tweeted that both you and the league have disrespected the country – is he wrong about that? And if so, why?

RG: Like I said – we respect our country, we respect our flag and we respect our national anthem. I think if you look at our clubs and what they do on a daily basis, I think if you look at our players and what they did and how they participate in that. We all feel very strongly about our country, have pride and we will continue to do that.

How can you allow the president to bully the NFL when he has expressed support for flag burning?

RG: We are focusing on what we can do and we should be doing as the NFL. I think that we have a great opportunity here with our players to really work together and to try and make differences in our communities. There are things we all believe are necessary to do and that is what we are going to continue to do.

Citing the anthem protocol in the game operations manual – it's not a rule but it's a policy, why not make it a rule since fans seem to want it and the ratings seem to be down.

RG: We need to keep the focus on the fact that we believe that our players should stand for the national anthem. That is an important part of our game and an important moment and we believe in that. We also have to focus on the fact that we have six or seven players that are involved with the protest at this point and what we try to do is deal with the underlying issue and understand what it is they are protesting and what we can do to address that. The important thing for us is to be able to do that and take that opportunity to make real differences in our communities. That is really what will ultimately be the important aspect for us long-term. This is a long-term issue and we need to be sure that we do that in the right way.

Is the NFL image suffering?

RG: I understand the way our fans feel about this issue and we feel the same way – about the importance of our flag and the importance of patriotism. I also think our players feel the same way, they will state to you and they will state it to everyone publicly – they are not doing this in any way to be disrespectful to the flag. However, they also understand how it is being interpreted and we are trying to deal with those underlying issues.

On the league's response if a team disciplines a player for taking a knee:

RG: We just had two days of conversations with our owners and this was a fair amount of the conversation. I think our clubs all see this the same way – we want our players to stand and we are going to continue to encourage them to stand and we are going to continue to work on these issues in the communities. I can't deal with hypotheticals right now, we will deal with those issues if they come up. But right now, that is our focus.

On the effect this is having on your sponsors and networks:

RG: We know how important this is to our sponsors, our partners and our licensees. It's important to us also, so we all share that and we certainly are in great contact with them. They understand the issues. We want to make sure they understand what we are doing and if they can help us, we want them to help us in those issues. All of this is part of the ongoing effort and the understanding of one another, and making sure that we do the right thing in our communities and the right thing to support our players, but also do the right thing to make sure we get back to football. In the meantime, we hope people understand how important our country is and how important it is to make sure that we are doing things the right way to honor our country.

On your reaction to the lawsuit filed by Aaron Hernandez' legal team and the accusation that the NFL is not informing its players about the risks of concussions:

RG: This is a matter of litigation, so that is something that is going to work its way through the litigation. There has been a great deal of focus on this issue of brain trauma. We've been through a great deal of litigation on this issue, and settled a major case on concussions. We will let the lawyers handle that.

When you talk about supporting your players, what form will that take? Some people think that if players really felt that the league is behind them, they would not take a knee. How is this going to manifest itself going forward, because you are putting the shield on the line when you get into sticky political and social debates?

RG: We are not afraid of the tough conversations. That is what we are having with our players. That's what we had yesterday to make sure we understand one another and understand where they are coming from. Out of those discussions, they understand that the owners and the NFL really do care about their issues and what we can do to make their communities better. That is what dialogue is all about, listening and understanding so we can get that kind of understanding between different parties. That is what is complex about this, but that is why it's really important to do because that is where real change happens. That is the opportunity for us in our communities.

Did players ask for anything in these meetings from league or ownership?

RG: We have had discussions with them for over a year. We have a very good understanding of the types of things they are interested in and how they can get support from the NFL to do that, and we want to do that. That could be in legislative matters, that could be in the community participating in ride-alongs to try to make sure we understand what is going on in different communities across the nation. The problems in one market are different than the problems in another market. That involves clubs and players getting together to make sure we truly understand what is going on in those markets. That is where we see a real impact.

One thing we have seen in the polling this week is that there is a big political divide: Republicans identifying as pro football fans are down 50%, Democrats only 3%. What is your reaction to that?

RG: We believe doing the right thing is what you ultimately have to do. Listening to our players and understanding our players, trying to address those underlying issues, and making our communities better is where the real opportunity is. That, long-term, is going to benefit us. That is what our focus is, and that is how we will deal with that.

What about that split between parties?

RG: I don't think that surprises anybody. We are trying to stay out of politics. We are not looking to get into politics. What we are looking to do is continue to keep people focused on football.

You've been in discussion for over a year, more over the last two days – can you tell us how closer you are to resolving this today?

RG: The fact is, we have about half a dozen players that are protesting. We are hoping to continue to try and work and get that to zero. That is what we'd like to do. We want to make sure we are understanding what the players are talking about, and that is complex. I have personally taken the time to go on those ride-alongs, to go and figure out what are the things in our communities that our players are expressing. Our clubs have a much better understanding of that from the meetings over the last several weeks. To hear directly from those players and do the tough work, to try to understand what it is we need to accomplish together, that is where I think the real opportunity is with what is happening.

Did you come out of the meetings with an understanding that teams that have disciplined their players for not standing will not discipline them?

RG: No. We did not discuss that. It was not necessary. We had a real focus on making sure that all of our teams understood the kind of dialogue that took place, the kind of things that they were interested in getting support on, and there was complete support from the NFL, each club supporting their players, and continuing the dialogue we've had on the club level. I will tell you there is unprecedented conversations and dialogue going on between our players, between our owners, between our club officials, between the league, and that is a really positive change for us. We think that ultimately will pay dividends.

Do you understand what they are protesting and can you explain your understanding of that?

RG: Yes. They are very clear about it, and actually incredibly knowledgeable and articulate. They have spent the time to go out into their communities and talk about it. They truly understand it., whether they are talking

about criminal justice reform, bail reform, mandatory sentencing. They are talking about changes that will make our communities better, where there is bipartisan support for across our nation. It is need-focused. They are talking about what we can do to support them to effectuate that legislative change. That is very positive. They are talking about equality issues – making sure we are doing everything we possibly can to give people an opportunity, whether it is education or economic, and what we can do to effectuate that. We believe that, with the players, we can help them and support them. Those are our issues – national issues, American issues – that are all important.

On whether you have communicated with President Trump or have plans to do so, and on pace of play -- are you happy with it so far?

RG: On your first question, I have not. To the second question, we are very pleased with the pace of game changes. We have seen, in-particular what we call the double-ups, the thing that bothered me so much with the commercial format, we've seen a 90% reduction in that this year, which is good for our fans and good for the experience of watching an NFL game – whether you are in the stadium or on the television or on another platform. We said all along, this was not about reducing the length of games, it was the pace of the game. The 40-second clocks is an example of something we put in after the point after touchdown, and after the touchdowns, and had a real impact. Centralizing replay and bringing the surface tablets to the sidelines so the official can see it, all that has sped up what we consider down time. We don't believe that this down time is attractive to our fans. We are happy with it, it's only been six weeks so we have a ways to go, but we are continuing to see what we can do to keep pushing that and we believe that is good for the fan experience.

Source: “ROGER GOODELL PRESS CONFERENCE AT NFL FALL MEETING IN NEW YORK.” NFL Communications, October 18, 2017. <https://nflcommunications.com/Pages/ROGER-GOODELL-PRESS-CONFERENCE-AT-NFL-FALL-MEETING-IN-NEW-YORK.aspx>.

Appendix no. 2: Statement from NFL commissioner Roger Goodell from May 23, 2018

The policy adopted today was approved in concert with the NFL's ongoing commitment to local communities and our country — one that is extraordinary in its scope, resources, and alignment with our players. We are dedicated to continuing our collaboration with players to advance the goals of justice and fairness in all corners of our society.

The efforts by many of our players sparked awareness and action around issues of social justice that must be addressed. The platform that we have created together is certainly unique in professional sports and quite likely in American business. We are honored to work with our players to drive progress.

It was unfortunate that on-field protests created a false perception among many that thousands of NFL players were unpatriotic. This is not and was never the case.

This season, all league and team personnel shall stand and show respect for the flag and the Anthem. Personnel who choose not to stand for the Anthem may stay in the locker room until after the Anthem has been performed.

We believe today's decision will keep our focus on the game and the extraordinary athletes who play it—and on our fans who enjoy it.

POLICY STATEMENT

The 32 member clubs of the National Football League have reaffirmed their strong commitment to work alongside our players to strengthen our communities and advance social justice. The unique platform that we have created is unprecedented in its scope, and will provide extraordinary resources in support of programs to promote positive social change in our communities.

The membership also strongly believes that:

1. All team and league personnel on the field shall stand and show respect for the flag and the Anthem.
2. The Game Operations Manual will be revised to remove the requirement that all players be on the field for the Anthem.
3. Personnel who choose not to stand for the Anthem may stay in the locker room or in a similar location off the field until after the Anthem has been performed.
4. A club will be fined by the League if its personnel are on the field and do not stand and show respect for the flag and the Anthem.

5. Each club may develop its own work rules, consistent with the above principles, regarding its personnel who do not stand and show respect for the flag and the Anthem.
6. The commissioner will impose appropriate discipline on league personnel who do not stand and show respect for the flag and the Anthem.

Source: "Statement From NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell " NFL Communications, May 23, 2018. <https://nflcommunications.com/Pages/Statement-From-NFL-Commissioner-Roger-Goodell----.aspx>.

Appendix no. 3: NFL statement on Kaepernick workout

We are disappointed that Colin did not appear for his workout. He informed us of that decision at 2:30 pm today along with the public.

Today's session was designed to give Colin what he has consistently said he wants – an opportunity to show his football readiness and desire to return to the NFL. Twenty-five (25) clubs were present for the workout, and all 32 clubs, their head coaches, general managers, and other personnel executives would have received video footage of the interview and workout, shot by the Atlanta Falcons video crew. It is important to note the following:

- As stated above, more than three-fourths of NFL clubs were present for today's workout.
- The NFL made considerable effort to work cooperatively with Colin's representatives. We invited his agent to suggest questions for the interview. Yesterday, when Colin's representatives said he wanted to bring his own receivers to the workout, we agreed to the request. In addition, Coach Hue Jackson discussed with Colin's agent what drills would be run at the workout so that Colin would know what would be expected of him.
- Last night, when Nike, with Colin's approval, requested to shoot an ad featuring Colin and mentioning all the NFL teams present at the workout, we agreed to the request.
- On Wednesday, we sent Colin's representatives a standard liability waiver based on the waiver used by National Invitational Camp at all NFL Combines and by NFL clubs when trying out free agent players. At noon today, Colin's representatives sent a completely rewritten and insufficient waiver.
- We heard for the first time last night, around the same time we heard from Nike, that Colin wanted to bring his own video crew. We heard for the first time this afternoon that Colin wanted to open the event to all media.
- We agreed to have Colin's representatives on the field while the workout was being conducted and to allow them to see how it was being recorded. We did so even though we have been clear from the beginning that this is private workout. As is typical with NFL Combines, one video crew was prepared to shoot and distribute video of the interview and workout. We confirmed with Colin's representatives that they would receive both the video that would be sent to all 32 clubs as well as the raw footage from the entire event, which is unprecedented.

The location Colin selected is more than an hour away from Flowery Branch.

We are grateful to the Falcons, who made available the club's first-class facility, along with athletic training, equipment, and communications staff to ensure that today's workout would occur under ideal conditions, to coaches Hue Jackson and Joe Philbin, who were prepared to run a workout that would allow Colin to demonstrate his skill level, and to Jeff Foster and the Combine staff for arranging for other players to participate and for managing the logistics of the workout.

Colin's decision has no effect on his status in the League. He remains an unrestricted free agent eligible to sign with any club.

Source: "NFL STATEMENT ON KAEPERNICK WORKOUT ." NFL Communications, November 16, 2019. <https://nflcommunications.com/Pages/NFL-STATEMENT-ON-KAEPERNICK-WORKOUT.aspx>.