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SPORTING

How Did Our Sports Get So Divisive?

By Howard Bryant
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"How did we get here?" I've gotten that question a lot recently, especially since the publication of my book on black athletes and the politics of patriotism at sporting events.

Where is "here"? One point of "here" is Colin Kaepernick and Eric Reid being praised for their courage but jobless for dissenting and filing collusion lawsuits against the N.F.L. Or "here" is, more generally, our era of the protesting black player at sporting events.

In my mind, though, all that cannot be decoupled from what Sept. 11 has done to sports. What was once ostensibly a unifying moment in the country has helped transform sports, with flags and flyovers, kneeling and protests — into the most divided public spectacle this side of Congress.

I think back to that Tuesday morning nearly 17 years ago. I was living with my fiancée on 49th Street and 10th Avenue in New York, Hell's Kitchen, covering the Yankees for The Bergen Record, when the World Trade Center fell. It changed many things. For any American born after, say, 1985, it became the most defining day of their life — their Pearl Harbor, their Cold War, their Vietnam and Watergate.

But it also changed how sports were sold, packaged, perceived and marketed. In ballparks across America, in every sport, sports was a healing balm for a broken country. Particularly in New York during those early years after Sept. 11, Americans could look at one another and feel everything was going to be all right, could mourn the 343 firemen killed during the attacks, the 37 Port Authority personnel and the 23 New York City police officers, and thank the ones who survived — but also get angry, and demand revenge on their attackers and obedience from their countrymen.

It felt appropriate at the time. I remember that first Sunday driving from Hell's Kitchen to Chicago, where the Yankees were going to resume the regular season. Air travel was still shut down, and nobody wanted to fly anyway. I remember the guy at a rest stop in Indiana, a bearded trucker who probably never would have given me the time of day under normal circumstances but who looked at me while we were washing our hands in the men's room. He asked with soft eyes and a warm face, "You doing O.K.?" For the first time, I felt American. No qualifications. Just American.

It all felt right, until temporary grieving turned into a permanent, commercial bonanza — and a chilling referendum on who gets to be American. But then it didn't feel right, like when in 2008, a New York police officer ejected a fan at a Red Sox-Yankees game after he left his seat during a seventh-inning-stretch recording of "God Bless America." Recently a high-ranking Red Sox official told me — nearly 17 years after the towers fell — that he really doesn't know why the team still plays "God Bless America," but he knows this: The team would "get killed" publicly if it was the first team to stop doing it.

There was another major pivot when the Department of Defense surreptitiously began paying sports teams to embed the military in the game — paying to have servicemen strategically seated at games, surprise homecomings as in-game entertainment, American flags the size of the football field — as recruiting tools. The public wasn't told that the displays weren't organic supporters of the troops but a business transaction between military and team. The commercials followed.

Why was everyone — from players to coaches to fans in authentic team gear — suddenly wearing camouflage at a sporting event?

I asked Russel Honoré, the famed American three-star general, what it meant. I said that I didn't want my 12-year-old son secretly recruited by the Army at Fenway Park. I wanted him to be a kid and enjoy the ballgame. The general said: "Sorry, but we've got to man the force, and sports is a great place to find the warrior-athlete. … So hold on to them little SOBs for as long as you can because we need them."

The general added that maybe some little kid attending a Dallas Cowboys game will see an F-14 fighter buzz the stadium and want to join the Army.

The veterans are watching, too, and not all of them like what they see about the current state of sports. They, too, see that nearly two decades have passed since the towers fell, and all the props and touches designed to uplift a wounded country have become permanent. The American flag appears, and it is not a neutral symbol. It is there to keep you in line. It is fixed to the lapels of politicians and broadcasters, stitched into the uniforms of the referees and the players. It is a decal on the back of football and batting helmets. It appears stickered on the backboard glass on both baskets in N.B.A. arenas.

I've heard from veterans who say they are horrified that a profit machine presents an orgy of mismatching military symbols at the stadium, like wearing plaid with stripes. On Memorial Day, the somber day of mourning the dead who fought for this country, Major League Baseball outfits its players in camouflage caps and jerseys, appropriate for active-duty military but not mourning the dead. Indeed, in past seasons, including when the Fourth of July approaches, the day of

barbecues and fireworks, of baseball and celebrating the nation's birthday, teams like the New York Mets, Cincinnati Reds and San Diego Padres have regularly taken the field in camouflage as if it's Veterans Day.

The veterans said that they are grateful that it looks like Americans care about them. But they are also resentful of being used as shields to prevent any criticism of the country or the military. The soldiers know they serve so Americans can speak their minds, not be cowed into obedience.

They also don't want to throw out the first pitch nearly as much as they want jobs and the Department of Veterans Affairs fixed.

All of it is political, of course, but very little of it feels partisan, and certainly not when the veterans call. I talked to William Astore, once an Air Force Lt. Colonel, and Mark Zinno, same rank but of the Army, who live on opposite ends of the political spectrum yet watch the money being made off sports attaching itself to the military and reach the same conclusion: What are we doing?

And yet, in recent years, what is all the talk about? Is it about the politicizing of sports, the appropriateness of it all? No. The focus is not on the selling of war to the sports fan or the runaway commercialism. There was also little talk about the scathing takedown of the entire paid patriotism scam in a joint oversight report in 2015 by the Arizona senators John McCain and Jeff Flake, who said they were personally offended the Milwaukee Brewers charged the Wisconsin Army National Guard nearly $50,000 to perform the national anthem during home games.

No, the focus is on the black athletes, who have returned to the heritage of political activism of Jackie Robinson and Bill Russell, Tommie Smith and John Carlos. The fan attitude of "shut up and play" may be directed at the big, wealthy athlete, but you know it is also designed to shut all black people up. If the public can try to silence LeBron James (net worth about $400 million), what chance, then, to disagree does the average citizen have?

On it goes, the perfectly scripted games, with Law Enforcement Appreciation Night in Dallas and anti-police protests outside a Kings game in Sacramento. Sports have been remade since Sept. 11, and nobody seems to care. People even acknowledge paid patriotism to be a deception, but have decided incongruously that it's a "harmless deception." Ultimately, I reached another conclusion: I no longer ask "How did we get here" but "How do we get out of here?" and do we even care enough to try?

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