

MARKETABILITY OF THE BLACK ATHLETE

by

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## ABSTRACT

When Colin Kaepernick kneeled during the National Anthem to protest police brutality during National Football League pregame ceremonies, the country erupted. Many were proud of his stand for racial equality, many were disgusted. It then brought about a new topic: to what extent, if any should corporations be involved in social justice and politics? When Kaepernick was frozen out of the NFL, it brought about a new question for Black people: why, in 2019, are Black people still being punished for wanting equality? The two aforementioned questions culminated into this research: the Marketability of the Black Athlete.

This research explores racial prejudice, the establishment of racial identity, and how it affects Black athletes as endorsers. By applying critical race theories to marketing materials and the commercialization models of various Black athletes from O.J. Simpson to Colin Kaepernick and analyzing recently released commercials three conclusions were reached. Firstly, strongly-identified Black athletes are marketable and sought out by brands/companies. Secondly, it is uncertain if future and younger Black athletes will choose to publicly and strongly-identify in their blackness because of recent shifts in the marketing industry. Lastly, there is no sufficient evidence to suggest that a strongly-identified Black athlete is more marketable than a weaker-identified Black athlete.



## INTRODUCTION

The existence of the Black athlete in the United States of America is peculiar and unique—on and off the field. Black athletes, especially those at the pinnacle of sport (such as Serena Williams or LeBron James), live under a microscope where every word, every action is widely disseminated and open to criticism. The public image of the Black athlete is always at stake; consequently, the marketability of the Black athlete is always at risk as well. For this reason, marketers (and sometimes the athletes themselves) purposely construct the identity of Black athletes to the point where the athlete is no longer publicly associated with their racial, ethnic, or cultural identities in marketing materials to sell products to Americans. The reason for the scrutinization of Black athletes and the need to disassociate them from their blackness boils down to a simple word: racism.

Though the United States of America was founded on the concept of egalitarianism, equality and normalcy have been privileges reserved for white people, particularly white men. This truth is evident in this country's history and current state. This nation is characterized by institutions and movements meant to relegate Black people to second class citizens: slavery, sharecropping, the Jim Crow South, mass incarceration, and police brutality. In one way or another, these states communicated to Americans, white Americans, that Black people were dangerous, unhygienic, hypersexual, physiologically advantaged, savage, racially inferior, and a host of other things. On the other hand, white people were intelligent, civilized and superior beings charged with constructing and maintaining societal order. The stereotypes from the various institutions and movements created social norms where whiteness is the standard to be achieved. As a result, marginalized groups have seldom been able to express of the full range of their differing race, customs, and cultures in the public eye without punishment personally,

socially, and professionally. Furthermore, marginalized groups have been unable to express the full range of human emotion without criticism or having their emotion attributed to stereotypes.

This dynamic has impacted the way Black athletes (as well as agents and marketers) have constructed, groomed and maintained their image to achieve marketability. The moment Black athletes associate themselves with blackness through cultural expressions, political stances, or social action they become a threat to consumers and corporations with anti-black sentiment. This has negative implications for any brand associated with the athlete because of the associative network (Solomon, 2019). Consumers translate their personal feelings of the sponsor to the brand and/or product. So, if the consumer has a negative perception of the athlete, those negative emotions will be translated to the brand and/or product once the two join forces as part of a sponsorship. As a result, there has been a conscious effort to dissociate Black athletes from their racial and cultural identities.

There has been a vast amount of research surrounding the Black athlete from political and commodification perspectives. Typically, the political nature of Black athletes stems from those who have broken color barriers in sport, like Jackie Robinson becoming the first, Black ballplayer in Major League Baseball; or those who have made staunch political stances, such as Muhammad Ali refusing to fight in the Vietnam war. The research and writings also follow those athletes who are infamous for separating themselves from their blackness and/or remaining neutral on critical issues facing the Black community, much like O.J. Simpson. Regarding the commodification of Black athletes, many writings focus on how a Black Athlete was able to “transcend race” and become an American icon by being non-threatening to white people, such as Michael Jordan. However, there has not yet been extensive research on the marketing success of Black athletes who maintained strong, public ties to their blackness throughout their career

and if there has been a permanent shift demonstrated by marketing materials. Nor is there research exploring if more strongly identified Black athletes are more marketable than weakly identified Black athletes. This area of research needs to be explored because it could potentially change the way Black athletes shape their professional careers. It could give Black athletes more freedom to embrace and express their race, ethnicity, and humanity on a national, and even global, platform. Allowing the athletes to capture lucrative endorsements (and not fear corporate America) while simultaneously advocating for the rights of Black people. In addition, proving the successful marketability of a racially-connected athlete will result increased and more diverse representation of marketing materials, positively impacting the represented communities. It is my aim to determine that in the present day if a Black athlete has strong ties to their racial identity, they are indeed marketable, and maybe even more marketable than weakly identified Black athletes.

In the subsequent sections, I will define critical concepts in how white peoples view the racial identification of Blacks, and by extension, Black athletes. These concepts enable one to understand how whites consume the endorsements of Black athletes. On the other hand, the concepts will also enable one to understand how a Black athlete disassociates from their racial identity, and how doing so endears them to white consumers. Lastly, I will explore the racial identities, commercialization, and promotion of O.J. Simpson, Michael Jordan, Charles Barkley, Grant Hill, Serena Williams, and Colin Kaepernick.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Race & Marketing Theory

When speaking about race, it is typical to solely think of phenotypes like skin color, hair color and texture, and facial features. People also tend to associate cultural elements with race, such as language. However, Lori Martin asserts “Race is not simply about biology. Race is considered a social construct because of the meanings we attach to certain groups (Martin, 2014, p. 3).” Sports has been an avenue for the social construction of race through the process of racial socialization. Racial socialization is a “set of processes by which the dominant racial ideology is communicated throughout society” teaching humans the ways of society and the racial groups to which they belong (Martin, 2014, p. 10). As the purveyors of race, white people have had the privilege of defining race, associating meanings to racial groups, and communicating the dominant racial ideology. The concept of race therefore influences marketing theory because white audiences tend to have a normal attraction or preference for athletes of the same race (Martin, 2014). Additionally, marketing theory (pertaining to Black athletes) is influenced by how white people portray Black males and females in the media to appeal to consumers.

Known journalist and sports broadcaster, Jemele Hill, said white athletes are seen smiling and laughing in media, but “Black sports figures are given a beastly sort of vibe (Martin, 2014, p. 59).” If there is any doubt, it takes a quick Google search of “Serena Williams” or a quick look at article pictures of the tennis superstar to see what Jemele means. Pictures of Serena screaming “C’MON”, grunting, or athletic physique flood the search results. Contrastingly, a Google search of “Maria Sharapova” will lead to pictures of the athlete smiling or striking a pose. Black athletes are often displayed to have monstrous qualities and are depicted to appeal to white perception. For Black males, this means showing aggressive, violent behavior, but in a physical

sense, showing off superior physiological capability. For Black men, emotional expressions are chalked up to competitive fire and the physical build is fetishized and celebrated by whites. The story is quite different for Black women. To be viewed positively by white consumers, Black women must be “lady-like” by subduing their emotions and fulfilling European beauty standards (heterosexuality, slim figured, and non-muscular) to be accepted by consumers (Martin, 2014).

### **Distributing Prejudice**

Black athletes must disassociate from their racial identities because of how white consumers apply prejudice to minority groups. In a study done by Kaiser and Pratt-Hyatt, six tests were conducted to identify how white people distribute prejudice to minorities who strongly identify with their racial identity and those who weakly identify. The valence of racial identity indicates the endorsement, or disbelief, in the status legitimizing worldviews: a just world, a protestant work ethic, individual mobility and status legitimacy beliefs. Meaning there are no barriers to one success and that the differences between racial groups is justified, which then implies the absence of institutional barriers erected against Black people. These status legitimizing worldviews justify the status differences between groups in American society and allows whites to explain their elevated place in society over people of color without recognizing their white privilege. This study produced three outcomes: (1) the Black target with a strong racial identity received less positivity than the weakly identified target because whites inferred a strongly identified Black target would reject status legitimizing worldviews; (2) when status legitimizing worldviews were rejected a strongly identified Black target was viewed less positively; (3) when a Black target had very weak identification, but endorsed status legitimizing worldviews, whites viewed them less positively than Blacks with strong identification because

whites thought the Black target was trying too hard to dissociate themselves from their racial group (Kaiser & Hyatt, 2009).

This prejudice distribution has implications for Black athletes looking to compete commercially. If a Black athlete has a strong identity and/or challenges status legitimizing worldview, white consumers will have a less positive perception of them. So naturally, marketers would want an athlete with a weaker identity; however, that athlete must not be too weakly identified. Simply put, the athletes must groom their image and marketers must construct the elements of marketing materials to make the athlete “black enough” by “[focusing, organizing, and translating] blackness into commodifiable representations and desires that [could] be packaged and marketed across the landscape of American popular culture (Andrews, 2001, p. 7).” Mastery of the “black enough” concept was first seen with the commercialization of O.J. Simpson.

### **Advertising Myth & Enlightened Racism**

Advertising heavily uses myth to sell products. Myths are “partial truths that accentuate particular versions of reality” while minimizing or excluding other versions and “embody cultural values and character-types” to appeal to deep consumer emotion (Jackson & Andrews, 2004, p. 83). By employing myth, advertisements ignore social relations, which makes society’s power groups (in this case, white consumers) feel unthreatened. In addition, myths in advertising can also affirm status legitimizing views. For example, commercials of Black athletes can often carry the myth of the American Dream by highlighting the meritocracy of sport. Convincing consumers that anyone, regardless of race, can achieve success by working hard and those who do not succeed, did not work enough (Jackson & Andrews, 2004). This depiction affirms worldviews and makes the Black athlete nonthreatening to white consumers. For example, a

Nike ad with Jerry Rice embodied sports meritocracy and the American Dream with the following epithet:

*Mother and father told you repeatedly. Crazy people talk to themselves. Still you heard the voice. Loud and clear. JUST DO IT. Learn how to hit a fastball. Work on your left hand shot. Study harder. Study longer. Get a raise. Crazy people talk to themselves. And still you heard the voice. JUST DO IT. Lose the gut. Master a third language. Swim across the lake. Climb the Tetons. Go to the library and learn how electricity works. Crazy people talk to themselves. And still you heard the voice. JUST DO IT. Bench press your weight. Finish a marathon. Develop a backhand. Switch careers. Crazy people talk to themselves. And finally, you realize only a madman doesn't listen. JUST DO IT.*

By associating Black athletes with status legitimizing world views, they can appeal to white consumers. However, these depictions can lead to what the authors call “enlightened racism.” White consumers get to admire respectable, affluent Black people because they are “just like us,” while simultaneously ignoring racist institutional barriers erected against Black people (Jackson & Andrews, 2004). This concept, along with the distribution of prejudice theory, explains how Black athletes can still be accepted to some degree by racist and/or prejudiced consumers.

### **O.J. Simpson – The Juiceprint**

In the late 1960s, Orenthal James “O.J.” Simpson’s powerful strides took the world by storm. The USC football star quickly became a target for marketers despite the current state of race relations, notably police brutality against Black Americans. O.J. landed his inaugural sponsorship with Chevrolet in 1970, effectively making Simpson the first Black national spokesman. The commercial depicted O.J., suited up in football equipment, lined up against the

new 1970 Chevrolet. The company was able to reach Black consumers, while also keeping white consumers at peace because of O.J.'s personal, careful separation from his own blackness. As politics started to push into sports in the 1960s, O.J. remained publicly impartial unlike his contemporaries. Such as Cassius Clay (also known as Muhammad Ali), Bill Russel, and Jim Brown who decided to use their platform to advocate for racial equality in America. His impartiality allowed him to keep the commercial power his contemporaries sacrificed and framed him as the counterrevolutionary athlete white America needed to erase the sports revolutionaries from their minds. This helped him land the endorsement of a lifetime.

Hertz Rent-A-Car changed the marketing landscape forever in 1977 when it released a commercial of O.J. Simpson sprinting and hurdling his way through an airport to his rental car while clutching a briefcase. According to AdAge Hertz's brand recall increased more than 40%, customer favorability increased by 35%, and its net profits skyrocketed 50% in the first year that Simpson began his sponsorship. Hertz's strategy was to "trade [his] athletic prowess and good looks without acknowledging the identity politics that informed the '60s and '70s" (Cupri, 2016). The company made sure that with any commercial, or any other marketing material, O.J. appeared in only featured other white faces cheering him on during his run. Sociologist Harry Edwards says, "O.J. was the first to demonstrate that white folks would buy stuff based on a Black endorsement – as long as it was not pressed as a Black endorsement (Edelman, 2016)."

By erasing O.J.'s identity as a Black man and washing out his culture, he became marketable. This is the moment when separating the racial and athletic identities of Black athletes became a profitable marketing strategy. The partnership between Hertz and O.J. set a precedent for how Black athletes after him would be marketed for companies to take advantage

of the segregated marketplace. Show the athleticism, skill, and charisma of the athlete but avoid revealing the racial identity.

### **Michael Jordan – The Ultimate Commercialization**

*“I’ve been trying to have people view me more as a good person than a good black man.”*

While O.J. Simpson may have laid the foundation for subsequent athletes, The Jumpman may have perfected the Simpson Model. Michael Jordan quickly emerged as a basketball superstar during his collegiate days at the University of North Carolina and made his National Basketball Association debut in 1984 with the Chicago Bulls. Making him the perfect candidate to overturn Nike’s first quarterly loss since the company’s founding. In his first contract, Nike awarded Jordan \$500,000 per year in cash for five years. Jordan would make \$7 million dollars over the next five years through stock options and miscellaneous elements of the deal (Rovell, 2013). In Spring 1985, the Air Jordan shoes hit the stores in a big way, generating more than \$100 million in revenues by year end. Phil Knight called the success “the perfect combination of quality product, marketing, and athlete endorsement (Rovell, 2013).” Michael Jeffrey Jordan was no longer just an athlete, he was a brand, but not without sacrifice. Due to conscious decisions to disassociate from his identity, the Jordan brand has remained strong across multiple generations and racial groups.

*”This kid at North Carolina, he’s the next me.” – O.J. Simpson*

While publicly dissociating from his racial identity, Jordan still lived his private life as a Black man. Jordan never renounced his blackness, he just never affirmed it. This has been seen in multiple occasions when Jordan has passed up the opportunity to speak on anti-black violence in in the U.S. during his rookie year. It can also be seen in his infamous quote “Republicans buy

shoes too” when asked why he had not endorsed another African American running for Senate in North Carolina (Bryant, 2019). Jordan separated himself from key issues facing Blacks in America and seemed to protect the status legitimizing worldviews of white America. Additionally, he had to overcome the appearance of his physique and build an imaged identity to get white consumers to look past his 6’6, 200-pound, brown frame. Jordan had to present the image of the charismatic, “hard bodied All-American,” to appeal to prejudiced consumers. He was ultimately successful in building this identity. As demonstrated by David Halberstam, a white reporter who extensively covered the Civil Rights movement, who had this to say about Michael Jordan: “As Jordan smiled, race simply fell away. Michael was no longer a Black man... The smile was truly charismatic... If Michael Jordan, he of the brilliant smile, was not burdened by the idea of race, why should you be burdened by it either?” Jordan had officially built an image for white consumers to overlook his blackness.

Marketers also played a role in commercializing Michael Jordan. In media, marketing materials needed to normalize his exceptional qualities and make him a spectacle to behold. Hence, Air Jordan. He became a persona, devoid of racial associations to some degree, that any consumer would want to aspire to be, even white consumers. This could be seen in Jordan’s breakout commercial with Nike, “Hang Time.” In the commercial, a fictional Black character named Mars Blackmon played by Spike Lee boasts about his hangtime given by Air Jordan sneakers. In the commercial, the two beings serve to juxtaposition one another. Mars follows a typical stereotypical depiction of a Black man: brash, urban, and disrespectful. Meanwhile, Jordan stands placidly under Blackmon, speaking softly when spoken to. He then leaves Blackmon hanging on the rim, giving a “get a load of this guy” attitude as he walks away. What marketers had done was successfully separate Jordan from prejudiced stereotypes of the Black

male, endearing him to whites. Jordan was depicted to be the Black person who was respectful, quiet, and calm. Business Insider has listed “Hang Time,” along with the subsequent series of Jordan and Spike Lee commercials, as one of the top 25 Nike Ads That Shaped The Brand’s History (Taube, 2013). Which speaks to the significance of the racial representations in the commercial that would continue to frame the thinking of white consumers.

### **Charles Barkley – The Anti-Hero**

Charles Barkley made his NBA debut with the Philadelphia 76ers in 1984. Though he never enjoyed the level of on-court success his contemporary Michael Jordan achieved, Barkley stood out in his own right. Though he was undersized for his position, he was strong, tough, and athletic, earning him the nickname of “The Round Mound of Rebound.” More than anything he was known as the outspoken athlete, but not in a way that connected him to his blackness.

Barkley’s racial disassociation is unique compared to O.J. and Jordan and is embodied in his Nike commercial “I am not a role model.” The commercial shows Barkley on a dimly lit court. During his closeup, he looks directly in the camera and says “I am not a role model” as he continues to ferociously practice dribbling, and his trademark rebounding. Barkley is clearly communicating to consumers that he is not the person kids should aspire to be. This message is Barkley effectively absolving his responsibility to advocate for Black people, a tune much different from what he sings today. Barkley is only concerned with himself. By ridding himself of activist responsibility, white consumers can allow themselves to have positive feelings for Barkley because he isn’t threatening status legitimizing worldviews. By strongly rejecting his responsibility, Barkley is walking a fine line in the commercial.

As discussed in the prejudice distribution study, whites viewed Blacks that weakly identified with their racial identity, but strongly endorsed status legitimizing worldviews less positively. The explanation for this may lie in the stereotypical, physical representation of Barkley in the commercial. Although shot in black and white, half of Barkley's face is covered in pitch-black darkness, leaving half of his face visible to viewers. This emphasizes that Barkley, phenotypically, is Black in the same way the darker-skinned Michael Jordan is Black. The other reinforcing aspect of Barkley's blackness is his behavior in the commercial. He is very physical, going up hard for rebounds, slapping the basketball, and grunting as he performs various moves. The Black athlete is viewed to be an athlete that is athletic, physical and exhibits "machinelike perfection," but lacks the cerebral capacity to be an intelligent player and doesn't have to work hard in comparison to physiologically disadvantaged white athletes (Andrews, 2001).

### **Grant Hill – "Heir Jordan"**

When Michael Jordan left the National Basketball Association in 1994, Grant Hill made his debut. He was the heir to Jordan's commercial throne. Hill was said to have a "Jordan-like" off-court demeanor. With his Jordan-like qualities and squeaky-clean image, Hill was targeted to as a promotional tool. Hill's disassociated racial identity was catalyzed by marketers, even during his collegiate career (Andrews, 2001).

Hill entered the NBA at a time where there was disaffection with "in your face," Black "hoodlums" like Shaquille O'neal, Dennis Rodman, and Chris Webber. In fact, the NBA was said to mirror the discipline problems rampant in society and "the decline in old-fashioned values." Which is coded language referring to the days of society when Blacks "knew their place" and acted accordingly. Hill was the savior sent to deliver an NBA "replete with hoodlums." He was wholesome, innocent and respectable... everything not associated with

Black people. This made him the marketers dream (Andrews, 2001). In 1997, Grant Hill was awarded a seven-year, \$80 million contract with Fila (Bowie, 1997). The largest endorsement deal besides Nike and Michael Jordan. He also entered endorsement deals with Sprite and GM.

Perhaps the most striking Grant Hill commercial is the Sprite “Ka-Ching” commercial. While inside the locker room, Grant Hill says “Sprite” almost every other second, at every mention, or at every positive attribute associated with Sprite, a “ka-ching” sound effect played. With each “ka-ching” a picture of Grant Hill with an increasing number of money bags flashed on the screen. The uneasiness brought on by this commercial is difficult to describe. It was very performative, much like minstrel shows popularized in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In minstrelsy, white actors in blackface would comedically enact racial stereotypes. Watching Hill’s intentional, over the top performance is like watching a minstrel character. For white consumers, this advertisement is nothing more than light-hearted, silly content for their enjoyment.

### **The Williams Sisters – Serena Stands Out**

Venus and Serena Williams crashed what many call the “lily white” tennis world with a level of athleticism, power, and culture that remains unparalleled today. It was the “Ghetto Princesses” from the rough streets of Compton, California against the world. Unlike the Black male athletes discussed earlier, it was as if the sisters did not have to verbally establish a public racial identity, it was asserted by their braids, beads, attitudes, and physiques. However, their parents Richard and Oracene let it be known to the world the sisters were “African American and they should be proud of it.” Consumers were even more aware of the sisters’ blackness because they were athletes in a sport historically dominated, and only played by, white people.

Over time, it has been Serena Williams who has borne the grunt of criticism brought on by her racial identity. Even more so than Black males because the prejudice and racism she faced was compounded by sexism. While Venus tended to be more introspective, Serena was expressive. Venus displayed a tall, thin, and toned frame comparable to white females in the sport; but Serena was muscular, with hips and breasts. By all definitions, she was not built like a tennis player. In fact, with the European beauty standards perpetuated by white society, she was a beast, not a woman.

Even with racial barriers, Serena became a household name. Her racial identity was potent in her emergence as a celebrity sportsperson, and unlike those before her, Serena's blackness was shown to the public in a humanizing way. Perhaps because there was absolutely no way to separate Serena from her blackness. In 2003, Serena landed a five-year contract with Nike for \$40 million dollars. Peter Stern, then president of Strategic Sports Group, said "Nike will find a way to show people different sides of [Serena]" (Kang, 2003). Stern's statements an important differentiation between Serena and other Black athletes, there was possibility to showcase more than her athleticism and some fabricated character that made her more palatable to the majority audience. Stern's statements seemed to reign true in one of Nike's earliest advertisements with the tennis star. In a 2004 commercial, a group of racially diverse, young girls are playing tennis during class. Throughout the course of the commercial, when one of the young girls hits a ball, the coach sees them turn into Serena Williams and then return to their original form. An evolution from Jordan's Gatorade "Be Like Mike" commercial where it just showed clips of young boys, men, and Jordan playing basketball. Serena's commercial shows that any woman could embody the spirit of Serena, a Black woman.

In this decade, police brutality and Black Lives Matter became prominent social issues, challenging the status legitimizing worldview of living in a just world. Before Kaepernick, in July of 2016, Serena took a very public, pro Black Lives Matter stance which strengthened her racial identity and rejection of the status legitimizing worldviews. Winning the Wimbledon title, the most prestigious in all of tennis, she raised her fist to symbolize black power, and spoke about the deaths of unarmed black men at the hands of policemen during her press conference (Davidson, 2016). In September of the same year, she wrote an emotional Facebook post describing the fear she felt when driving past a patrol car that received 155,000 reactions, 4.4K comments, 27,797 shares, and was written and/or talked about all over the sports world (Williams, 2016). Though Serena had always expressed the full range of her humanity and emotion, 2016 launched her expression into the stratosphere. Before 2016, she paid a price for this expression. Best exemplified by her endorsement earnings compared to Maria Sharapova's. Between June 2014 and June 2015, Serena earned \$13 million in off-court endorsements, Sharapova earned \$23 million (Badenhausen, 2015). However, Serena's very public expression marked a pivotal moment for Black athletes. A socially conscious, Black woman at the pinnacle of her sport spoke on a racially charged, highly debated topic and her marketability did not suffer. In fact, it improved. By the end of 2017, Serena was credited as being the most marketable athlete ("Tops of 2017", 2017). Now in 2019, you can see Serena Williams as the face of many marketing campaigns, such as Bumble's "Make the First Move."

### **Kaepernick's Stand**

After leading the San Francisco 49ers to the 2013 Super Bowl, Colin Kaepernick quickly became a household name. According to Digiday, Kaepernick was making at least \$3 million in endorsements by 2015. Including companies such as EA Sports, McDonalds, and Nike. On

August 26, 2016 Colin Kaepernick took a knee when the national anthem was played during the pregame ceremony. That same day, Kaepernick became the most polarizing figure in sports. In the eyes of his detractors, not only did he support a controversial, untrue cause. He violated the very fabric of our nation, the American flag, disrespected the service of military members, and hated patriotism. His protest effectively led to excommunication from the National Football League. When he became a free agent in 2017, no franchise was willing to sign him.

Kaepernick essentially disappeared from marketing materials after being forced out of the NFL. Which, at some level, is completely logical. He may have remained relevant as a celebrity and activist, but he was no longer a professional athlete. However, there was still opportunity for his inclusion that he was not rewarded. He was noticeably missing from Nike's first commercial of the company's "Equality" campaign that launched in February 2017. An ad featuring other politically active celebrity athletes such as Serena and LeBron James. Even figures from the entertainment industry such as Michael B. Jordan and Alicia Keys made cameos in the commercial. How is it that a campaign calling for equality in all areas of life, by way of sport, excludes the very man who sacrificed his career advocating for it?

## **DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS**

### **New Era & New Topics – Rebirth of the Activist Athlete**

Approximately two years after the start of his protest, Kaepernick stars in the first installment of Nike's "Just Do It." 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary campaign in an ad entitled "Dream Crazy." All was not lost for Kaepernick. To understand why after two years Kaepernick seemed to be marketable again, I reached out to two of his agents. I was able to speak to one, Jeff Nalley of

Select Sports Group. In an in-depth interview, I asked Nalley numerous questions relating to race, sports, and marketing. A full transcript is provided in Appendix B.

In Nalley's experience, he has not had trouble securing endorsement opportunities for Black athletes. He says, "a lot of companies feel like their customers buy more from black athletes than other ethnicities." Something companies today should be thanking Hertz and O.J. Simpson for. However, it has taken time for companies to adjust to the new generation of activist athletes in a world where issues polarize society. Athletes such as Serena, Lebron, and Kaepernick have turned the tide in the present day. Overall, Nalley does not know if younger athletes who are passionate about social issues will walk the path laid out before them, but Nike has shown advocating for social justice can pay off.

### **Going Crazy – Nike**

In September 2018, Nike seemingly stopped the world with the new "Dream Crazy" commercial. An ad featuring Colin Kaepernick narrating the various struggles successful amateur and professional athletes overcame. It was so powerful the President himself denounced the advertisement. Amongst all the talk, a racial and generational divide was exposed by a dial test conducted by Morning Consult mapping favorable perception of the ad. The dial test separated viewers into different categories such as political party, generation (Generation Z, Millennial, Generation X, and Boomers), and race ("Watch Nearly 200 Consumers, 2018). The graphs mapping consumer perception can be found in Appendix A.

Lebron James is the first activist athlete to appear in the commercial. Initially, positive perception is relatively stable as Lebron is shown as an athlete, but it turns into a slight decrease amongst Generation X and Boomers once the commercial shows a clip of the star opening his "I

Promise” school. Signifying the love of Lebron, the spectacle, but slight apathy for Lebron the activist. Positive perception then freefalls when Kaepernick is shown on the screen for the first time immediately after Lebron amongst Generation X and Boomers as well. After these moments, positive perception begins to rise. Interestingly, this increase occurs when the U.S. Women’s National Soccer Team is featured, a team that has rejected status legitimizing worldviews. In 2016, five players filed a gender discrimination lawsuit objecting to their unequal, lower wages compared to the U.S Men’s National Soccer Team (Abdeldaeim, 2019). Additionally, Megan Rapinoe, shown briefly in the feature, kneeled during the national anthem while playing for the USWNT in 2016 (Rapinoe, 2016). Lastly, positive perception begins its last nosedive once Serena Williams appears in the commercial immediately before Kaepernick closes the ad. For Serena, there was a decrease amongst all four generations of viewers. Falling in line with the intersectionality of her identity as a Black woman. Additionally, throughout the commercial, positive perception of Black consumers maintained an upward trend and achieved a higher average than the positive perception of white consumers.

“Dream Crazy” may have been a risk, but it was a crazy success for Nike. In just 24 hours, “Dream Crazy” generated \$43 million in earned media (LaVito, 2018). Online sales increased by 31 percent, leading Nike to material second quarter gains: a 10 percent increase in revenue, 14 percent increase in Nike’s brand, and a 10 percent increase in net income (Linnane, 2018; Pasquarelli, 2018).

A few months later, Nike releases the “Dream Crazier” commercial on the heels of the 2018 U.S. Open controversy surrounding Serena challenging sexist ideals in tennis and being called many things, including crazy. In the commercial, Serena Williams narrates the stories of female athletes challenging institutional barriers (such as women not being allowed to compete

in marathons) and addresses our patriarchal society's quest to gaslight women by labelling them as "crazy" when expressing human emotion or fighting for equal rights and opportunities.

Currently, there is no data for "Dream Crazier," but one thing is very clear. "Dream Crazier" is not possible without the success of "Dream Crazy." As Gayatri Sriram, Digital Creative Head at FCB Ulka, stated "With the Colin Kaepernick commercial, Nike proved that they can indeed sell shoes through progressive social commentary." Looking at what Nike has done with both Kaepernick and Serena, the company has pushed its social commentary further and further, showing no signs of slowing down any time soon.

## **CONCLUSION**

In the present day, strongly identified Black athletes are indeed marketable. Not only are these athletes marketable but they are being sought out by companies and brands. Even more remarkably, strongly identified Black athletes are freer now than ever before to be politically active in the most controversial of topics threatening status legitimizing worldviews, such as police brutality. This is quite a recent change in heart by (white) American consumers. In 2011, a study concluded when Black male athletes were product endorsers, perceptions of trustworthiness were highest when engaged in non-controversial activism and held a strong racial identity. Which is another manifestation of the "Black enough" concept because the athlete is not, or is only slightly, a threat to status legitimizing worldviews. Explaining why a Black athlete could be a successful product endorser even when selling to prejudiced consumers. Essentially, product-endorser fit is affected by the positive or negative perception of the athlete's Black identity (Cunningham & Regan, 2011). Recent changes have likely been catalyzed by the presence of Millennials and Generation Z as consumers. Two generations who like to see brands take a stance on societal issues, unlike Generation X and the Boomers. This was evident in the

“Dream Crazy” dial test as the latter two generations seemed to have the most negative perceptions of Kaepernick, Serena, and Lebron. This change is also likely brought about by the power of the Black consumer. In, 2022, the buying power of Black consumers is expected to grow to \$1.54 trillion dollars (McGirt, 2018). Brands can expect the dollars of Black consumers if they are “authentic, socially aware, and responsible.” In the dial test of “Dream Crazy” Black consumers had a very high, positive perceptions about the commercial. Though socially active, strongly-identified Black athletes before Kaepernick (like Serena and Lebron) were marketable, Kaepernick has opened the floodgates for the Black activist-athlete at the right time.

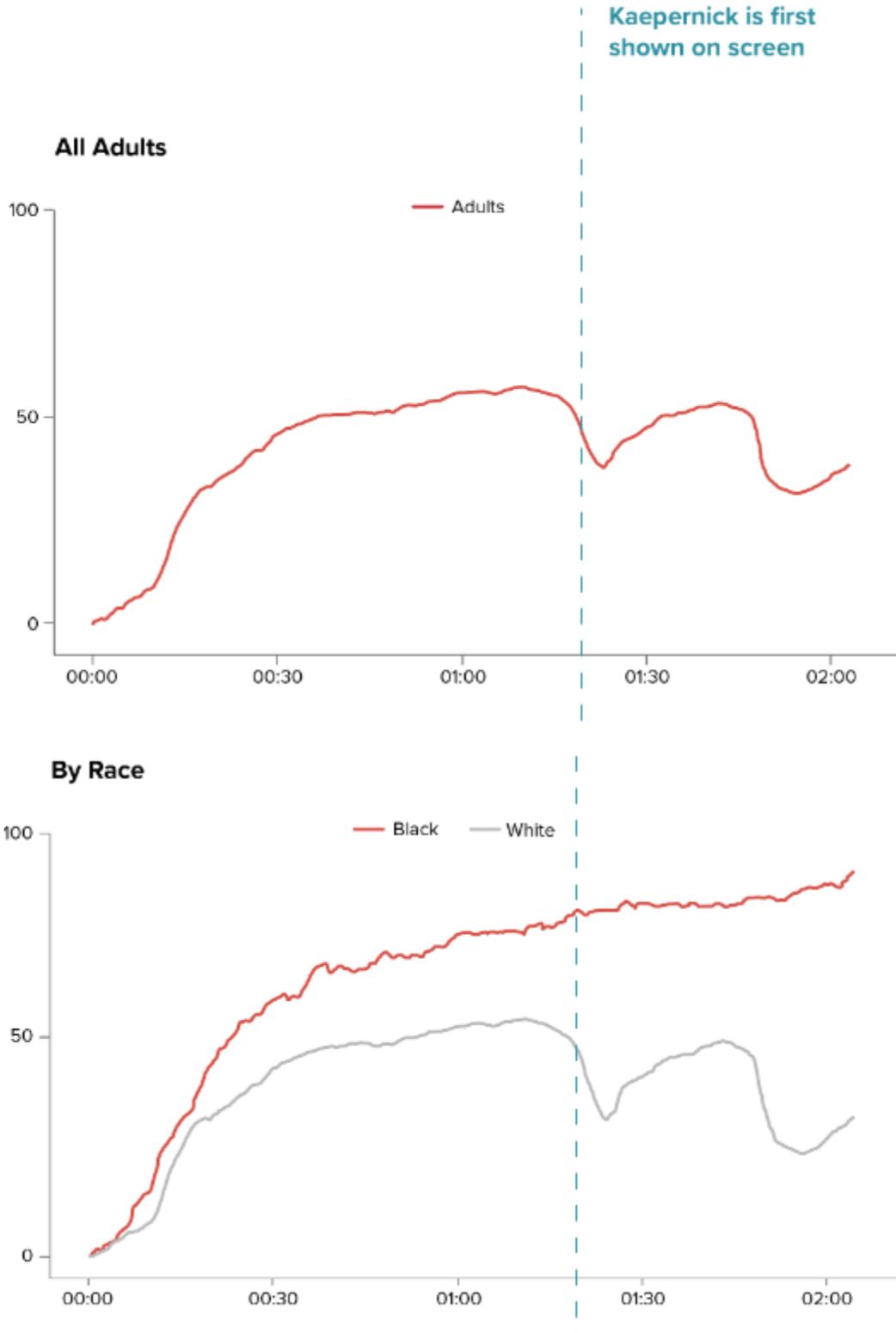
Though it is safe to say strongly identified Black athletes are marketable, it is not guaranteed younger Black athletes will follow the path laid forth for them. After all, displaying political beliefs, social commentary, and the valence of racial identity is a personal choice each athlete is given. It must be considered that for decades Black athletes were not activist for controversial issues of society. Partly because the last generation of activist athletes were present during the Civil Rights Movement and overt racism has significantly fallen since the period. Some, like Charles Barkley, just want to be an athlete, and nothing more. Even more likely, Black athletes recognized the financial risk of speaking out against social injustice. In athletes like O.J. Simpson and Michael Jordan, there is a tried and true way of earning a living outside of sports. A formula that has worked time and time again. However, walking Kaepernick’s path is a daunting task for a young, Black athlete. Only time will tell if Black athletes are moving to become more socially and politically active.

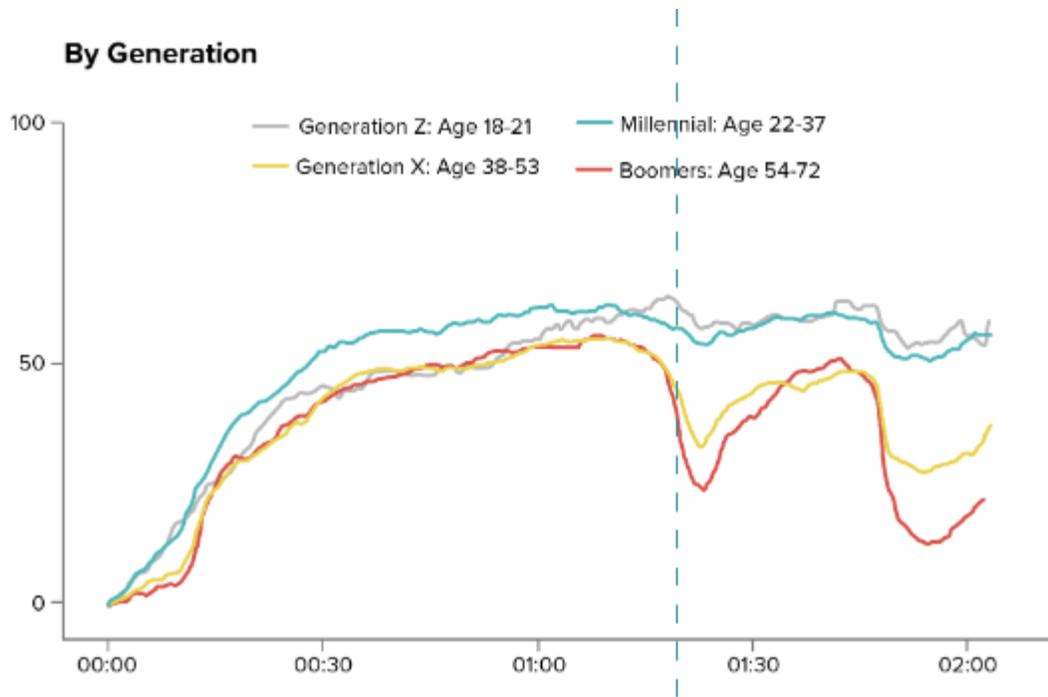
Lastly, it cannot be determined whether a stronger-identified, Black athlete is more marketable than a weakly-identified Black athlete. In Nielsen’s poll of most marketable athletes in 2017, Venus Williams was second behind Serena (“Tops of 2017”, 2017). As one-half of the

“Ghetto Princesses” one reasonably assumes Venus is a strongly-identified Black woman. However, she is easily seen as the antithesis to Serena. Physically, she displays European beauty standards in her tall, thin build. Politically, she is relatively inactive besides proclaiming “all lives matter” in response to Serena’s Facebook post supporting Black Lives Matter (Davidson, 2016). A phrase dipped in racist, anti-Black sentiment created by opposers of the Black Lives Matter movement as to reject the clear and evident suffering of Black people due to police brutality. A moment that allowed people of all races to dissociate Venus from her blackness. Despite the disassociation and lack of political activity, Venus still places a spot above LeBron James, who has vocally supported racial equality on numerous occasions.

In this research, there is proof strongly-identified Black athletes to become and remain successful, powerful endorsers. For a moment consider Serena Williams. As a Black woman, she herself has become a brand most companies want to be involved with, in any capacity. Nike, Intel, Lincoln, JP Morgan Chase, Audemars Piguet, Bumble, the list goes on and on for Serena. As she continues her career, and embraces motherhood, it will be interesting to see what companies will be added to her portfolio in the coming years. We have not reached a post-racial society, as desperately as some might want to believe, but society is slowly reaching a place where expressions of blackness could one day be embraced without significant criticism.

# APPENDIX A





## APPENDIX B

- Caleb Rogers: [00:00](#) Okay. Um, so just to maybe familiarize you with the project, again, I'm doing the marketability of the black athlete and it's just been inspired by recent events are going on in the news. As I've seen. I'm sure you've seen just with athletes becoming, going back more into the activist role that we've seen in the past and just how the express affect their endorsements and their sponsorships. Um, so my first question would be, uh, as a representative of any black athlete, what are some problems that you have run into trying to secure sponsorships for athlete specifically with [inaudible] with their political views or their racial or cultural identity as an African American?
- Jeff Nalley: [00:43](#) Honestly, so I've been doing this, I've been doing this for 25 years and, and I've really ever, I've never had any issues ever with, with a black athlete, um, getting, you know, endorsement opportunities, uh, that are facts. I think. I think a lot of, I think a lot of companies, um, I think a lot of companies are, I think they feel like they're, uh, what do you call it? A lot of companies feel like they're, hold on what this guy just continues to, what is he doing? Um, it was, I feel like there I said, I think they feel like their customers, uh, they, they feel like black athletes can actually sell more, sell more of their products or their customer base then then other, uh, that other ethnicities. Um, but, but I will say, I will say this, I mean, so, so I've literally never, I've never had a problem as, um, as like athletes have become more, uh, you know, the social activism has become more prevalent.
- Jeff Nalley: [01:53](#) I think that that's somewhat, that's, that's really in the last couple of years. And I think, I think initially, I think initially people weren't really sure how to react to it. I mean, obviously calling, let me call. It was really the first one. And especially with, you know, it's, it was more into the social activism. Part of it was because it was, you know, he chose you, he chose the, the platform on which to protest. You happen to be the, the national anthem. And then, you know, that wasn't what the protest was about. But then people, you know, because this country is so politicized and so, so polarized between Republicans and Democrats, Republicans seized on that opportunity, especially the president to, uh, you know, to make it, you know, kind of his issue. So I think initially I thought, I'm not sure people knew how to, you know, people didn't know how to react to it.

- Jeff Nalley: [02:53](#) But really I think, I think, I think, I think the tide, when Nike made Colin Kaepernick, the face of his 30th anniversary, that just do it, campaign, either 25 or 30, and I can't remember of the just do it campaign that really turned the tide. Like, you know, people were like, you know, people were very polarized, weren't really sure how to feel about it. Nike made him the face of that. Just doing campaign obviously rolled out this whole new campaign of, you know, you know, it now. Serena's and Lebron and others, you know, if you think an idea is crazier, make it crazier. You know, he is crazy. I mean, you know, have crazy dreams. The crazier, the better, that type of thing. I think that's really, um, and again, all three of those, you know, all three of those African American athletes have been very vocal in their activism.
- Jeff Nalley: [03:48](#) And so really, I think, you know, again, never had an issue. The social activism started. I think it took people a while to get used to the idea. Again, it's not a, it's not a new idea because, you know, Muhammad Ali and, and, um, uh, Muhammad Ali, uh, uh, I'm trying to remember. Um, Carlos, uh, the two, the two Olympic athletes, track athlete, um, you know, who want gold and silver, you know, they were a couple of five at the time and now they're considered, you know, American heroes. Um, so, you know, it's, it's not a new thing, but it hadn't happened in a while. And this was a dude, you know, this was kind of a new topic. So I think it took, you know, a year, year and a half for people to kind of get used to meet to the idea. And then I think once people realize, hey, this could really be a good thing.
- Jeff Nalley: [04:39](#) Um, I think the tide is totally turned. And, and again, when you look like when you have athletes like colon, Cabernet, Serena Williams in la chains who are considered Natalie, you know, great athletes, but you know, great citizens and model citizens and great role models and, you know, they're being vocal and being active. I think that's, I think that's a really positive thing. So I guess what I would say is I, I really, I think the tide has turned, I don't, not only do I not see any really issues going forward, I think brands will start to reach out to athletes who are socially active and, um, and, and, and embrace them, you know, to endorse the product.
- Caleb Rogers: [05:27](#) Okay. So, uh, just to confirm you, do you, do you think this is a partnership for all athletes or is this just something with people with the star power of Serena Williams or Kaepernick or

Lebron? Or is this gonna be something that you can see, um, being a total shift for all athletes?

- Jeff Nalley: [05:49](#) I mean, look, it's these, these corporate sponsors have always sought out the athletes with the biggest star power, but they always have, I mean, whether it was Michael Jordan or Magic Johnson and Larry Bird or whoever it is, I mean they've always, they've always done that and it's, you know, a lot of them will be basketball players tend to get the most, obviously basketball is a predominantly African American, a dollar a sport. Um, so it's, you know, it's typically been basketball first, then footballs, baseballs, you know, way down the list. Um, so I, I think it's, I guess I would say, I mean, I don't know that that has changed in all, I guess is what I'm saying. Like I think companies have always sought out the athletes with the biggest, with the most star power. And I think now that they're used to the idea of them being more socially active, I think, I just don't see that being an issue. So I think, I really don't think marketing, you know, I really don't think sports marketing is change. I think it just took a while for the sponsors to get used to the idea of them being more vocal, especially on you've got political, political and social issues and now they're like, you know, not only can this be, that lays this out of athlete, this could actually be a, a really good thing.
- Caleb Rogers: [07:23](#) Um, so what makes an athlete controversial to sponsors or to consumers in your opinion?
- Jeff Nalley: [07:36](#) What'd you say? Controversial. Do you mean in a negative way?
- Caleb Rogers: [07:40](#) Um, yes. Uh, so a lot of what I've been writing about and discovering my thesis is that a lot of people tune, a lot of people tend to get a negative connotations of athletes or perceptions of athletes when they're political ideals don't align. So just something along those lines where the politics with the athlete and the consumers or the corporate sponsors don't align.
- Jeff Nalley: [08:03](#) Sure. Okay. So I think, I think a great, I think a great example, it is going to take me a second to remember his name, but do you remember the running back? He was the running back with the Steelers. This is a male and I think it was safe. Am I think of his name? It was second. But here's the running back. I were shod Mendenhall, I believe it was just, I need a new check, the spelling of his name, but he was a first round pick of the Steelers

years ago. I think you played at Illinois Undergrad, the first round pick very, you know, very talented player. And the day that, you know, the day that the government announced that they had found and killed Osama Bin Ladin, he per shot Mendenhall and tweet it out. You know, basically that's, you know, if he was not, he thought that that was sad that people were cheering, that some of it one had been killed and it was like, so I guess what I'm saying is like, that's like, that's controversial, but I think people saw it as the anti American or anti patriotic.

Jeff Nalley: [09:10](#)

Now we get ice. It's again Colin Kaepernick. Initially it was, can kind of consider it the same way even though really what he was doing was standing up for, you know, for the rights of people who have been oppressed. But like that's an example. So when we're been an old, like that's something that's controversial, controversial. There was used like, okay, not only is it controversial but like no one is going to align with, with that political view please her or you know, maybe, maybe 5% of the, of the country or less. And so like I think he, he had a deal with starter and some other big things and they literally all pulled, um, their endorsement deals with him, like with him either that day or was that a couple of days and I don't, I don't think he ever signed a marketing deal again. So I think it know, I think it's a, I think it's a case by case basis.

Jeff Nalley: [10:02](#)

Like it's not just that. No. Because you know, like Michael Jordan famously said, you know, he didn't take sides in elections because Republicans buy shoes too. Like that was say, and you know, I think some athletes today are like, hey, I, I, you know, I don't want to be that neutral. Like I want, I feel like I can make a difference. So to be more vocal, but you know, men and all like, you know, the sponsors and look, I'm not sure, I'm sure part of it is public pressure. You know, once someone, once an athlete takes a stance, you know, there's gonna be certain people, you know, the, then the sponsor has to determine, okay, is this going to hurt our brand by continuing to have this athlete endorse our product? And like, you know, when Bruce Michelle didn't whole said, you know, basically, Hey, I'm, I'm for Osama bin Laden and his family, that's sad. The shower, you know, cheering for this. I think, yeah, I think those sponsors that, hey, we can't, like, we can't align ourselves with this, with this athlete, even though he is exercising his rights to free speech, it's going to really hurt us with our, with our consumer base.

Jeff Nalley: [11:19](#) So I'd like that. That's an example that really jumps out to me. Like, and again, I mean that, that's what's great about this country is it's everyone is free to it, to speak their mind, you know, without, you know, without a, Yup. Yeah. They're making financial repercussions but, but no repercussions other than, you know, outside of that. But that was a case where, you know, for whatever reason, he took know

Jeff Nalley: [11:45](#) those sponsors said, hey, we cannot align ourselves with this guy's political views. So I really, I really think it's a case by case basis because again, a lot of people saw those comments as being anti American oriented patriotic. I think initially some people saw, you know, Collins comments or you know, his, his protest is being an unpatriotic and you know, ultimately I think now people, you know, once people want, again, you also had, you know, politicians, you know, taking advantage of that, the platform, you know, to try to drum up their base. But I think now I think people realize, you know, even though Collin is, it's still, you know, consider, you know, um, you know, hey, look, any, it's, it's crazy. I mean, even the one in this business, and even though I represent Colin Kaepernick, like every party, dinner party, cocktail party, whatever sports bar you go to, like people are talking what, that's a subject.

Jeff Nalley: [12:42](#) And people getting to take sides on that. But I think people now it's seen all the good that he has done and the effect that he has done, you know, that he has had on athletes worldwide. And so I think now it's, it's very, it's very much accepted and, and I think people are now seeing just, you know, the, this, uh, really the, uh, you know, I would say the, the subject matter, like the attention that college has brought to, you know, to that subject matter know, to oppression of, of, of certain of certain groups. I think, you know, regardless of what you agree with that or not, I think everyone can say like, he really brought attention to it and you know, a lot of, a lot of changes have been made because of that. So, so again, I mean, days you're pushing out. I think it's a case by case basis because again, you use those, I mean those, those two examples are fairly similar. But, you know, on one hand, uh, you know, Mendenhall like, like never got another sponsorship and calling on the other hand, um, you know, eventually it became the face of Nike's just do it, you know, the, the anniversary of their just doing campaign

- Caleb Rogers: [13:53](#) as, I just have one more question. By the way. You did a great job. All of these are phenomenal answers and they just really substantiated my project. I don't know if you're at liberty to say this, but, uh, because I was doing some Google googling and I couldn't find anything on it, but did Collin actually lose any sponsorships, uh, throughout this whole ordeal or did he get to keep everything or what was the deal there?
- Jeff Nalley: [14:19](#) Uh, I'm just trying to think. I can't think of, I can't think of any. No, you didn't lose any that he didn't lose it like that. If there are, I can't. If he did, I can't. I can't think of one.
- Caleb Rogers: [17:17](#) Um, well, I do have one more. Maybe you might've already answered this a little bit in your other questions, but, um, what are your thoughts on the intersection between race and sports and has it grown more complicated or simpler in the recent years?
- Jeff Nalley: [17:43](#) I don't know that it's grown. I don't know that it's true and more complicated. I feel like it's, I feel like people are more open to discussing it now. Like after. I feel like in the past, I feel like in the past people just didn't, like it was, it was the issue was always there, but people didn't work. Is there open to discussing it? Like maybe they were more afraid to talk about it and I feel like I feel like the day. Right. You know, good or bad. I feel like when actually I think it's good. I think it's, I think it's good that people are talking about and may look hopefully, hopefully one day. Like, it's, it's, I think all of us, you know, one day it's less of an issue, um, to where, you know, people are aware of it, but, but you know, people don't, people don't have the problems that we have today. So, so I guess I get, I don't, I don't know that it's more complicated, but I do feel like people are more open to discussing it. And so I, I feel like it's, it's, it's more of a topic today maybe than it was, you know, 10 years ago.

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