

## OPINION

# How Dallas could be a model for the NFL to stop fighting about kneeling

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Pastor Richie Butler of St. Paul United Methodist Church talks with basketball coach, Dallas Police Sr. Corporal Tramese Andrews, center, as the police and local pastors hold the "Together We Ball" event to promote togetherness in the community at Cobb Fieldhouse in Dallas on Sunday, August 9, 2015. (Louis DeLuca / Staff Photographer)



By Richie Butler|Contributor

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Sports have traditionally served as a unifying force in our community and around the world. Think about it; what is the one place where all of God's children come together, no matter where they're from?

Rich and poor, black, white or brown, they are equal on the court or field of play and unified in the stands.

After Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, the sign that the city was back was not when churches or schools reopened, but when the New Orleans Saints played their first game after the storm in the Superdome.

As a former football player at Southern Methodist University, I personally understand the unifying power of sports.

Four years ago, I sought to use sports as a way to get us on the same team in our city. In the wake of police involved shootings and deaths of unarmed black men, and the divide it fostered between law enforcement and people of color nationwide, we launched a basketball event called Together We Ball: Police, Pastors and Community. The event allows law enforcement, faith, business, community, civic and political leaders to participate in an afternoon of community engagement that features a basketball game among those leaders and law enforcement officials.

In the past we have had the likes of Paul Quinn College president Michael Sorrell, Dallas Independent School District board member Miguel Solis, pastor Jeff Warren of Park Cities Park Baptist Church and Ken Hersh, president of the George W. Bush Presidential Institute, to name just a few North Texas leaders who have participated in previous years.

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People get to see police officers out of their uniforms and on the court playing alongside others. Kids get on the court with law enforcement. We get to encounter each in a time of community calm instead of community crisis. Further, we recognize we are all on the same team. With our collective understanding and will, we believe we can address the problem of a disproportionate number of people of color being shot by police.

Our fourth annual game takes place on Sunday, the day the Dallas Cowboys play a preseason game.

Yes, out of the suffering and pain felt on all sides in Dallas — for the community and the police — we, in *common unity*, made the decision to take steps toward healing the wound separating us.

This is the opportunity now for the NFL, NFL players, and our Dallas Cowboys when it comes to the complex issues commonly known as the national anthem controversy. All it takes is a decision.

First, we must face the facts. The pain over zero tolerance on players kneeling during the national anthem is generating disengagement and a great division. This has bled into our communities. We have households divided. Some plan to watch their beloved Cowboys while others are so frustrated by the zero tolerance they refuse to watch the team they love. Instead of eagerly anticipating the sport of the game, the game for too many is tuning in to see who's standing and who's kneeling.

Secondly, we must recognize that this is an issue of justice to all sides, players, owners and consumers. History teaches us this truth, which all sides share in common: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," as Martin Luther King correctly stated.

Third, rules — and words — matter. Ironically, if an NFL player does drugs and is sexually abusive there has not been a zero

tolerance position. Yet, when players seek to bring attention to social injustice — the reason Colin Kaepernick knelt in the first place — rules and words turn harsh.

And the cycle continues this season.

Stop! Apply the Year of Unity Challenge: listen, learn and engage so we make smarter choices. These are decisions owners, players and consumers can make today to take corrective action and close the NFL wound.

What we should be discussing is how we change course, change attitudes, acknowledge and address unconscious biases on all sides so that everyone gets home alive — both police officer and civilian.

I recommend that the NFL owners, league management and players embark on a listening tour in the community to understand why players are protesting. I am confident that if the NFL could see the player issues as community issues that are as important as their commitment to other official NFL endeavors in underresourced communities, we can change course quickly.

I am asking Jerry Jones and Dak Prescott to join with me and our sisters and brothers in blue in the Dallas Police Department to unite with Project Unity to help end this destructive cycle afflicting the NFL, its players and its fans. Project Unity is proof that you can get behind the community and the police at the same time and solve problems.

Dallas and the Dallas Cowboys are uniquely qualified to become the role model for the nation for how a city faced the facts involving police-community relations, recognized the injustice on all sides, and made the proactive decision to listen, learn and engage to make smarter choices.

Mr. Jones, Mr. Prescott, we can do this. Together, we can become a unifying voice to solve some of our most pressing problems and issues.

History also teaches us another truth. There is a price for not addressing the problem. If you have an open wound and you do not treat it, then that wound will become infected. Ultimately, an untreated infection can lead to one's demise. Players kneeling is an outcry that our national community has an open wound that needs tending to.

*Richie Butler is senior pastor of St. Paul United Methodist Church and the founder of Project Unity. He wrote this column for The Dallas Morning News.*

## What's your view?

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