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COMIC BY CONNOR SZREJNA, STAFF ARTIST/THE DAILY CAMPUS

American sports will never be apolitical

by Seth Wallen | CAMPUS CORRESPONDENT | HE/HIM/HIS | savannah.wallen@uconn.edu

On Saturday, Jan 24, Veterans Affairs Nurse Alex Pretti was killed in a series of ongoing protests and clashes with Immigrations and Customs Enforcement in Minneapolis. In the same city, two blocks away, the National Basketball Association postponed the scheduled match between the Golden State Warriors and Minnesota Timberwolves for safety reasons.

The NBA Players Association, alongside sports teams and companies in the state, released statements calling for peace and an end to violence, while several athletes, including former University of Connecticut players Brianna Stewart and Liam McNeeley, showed their support on social media.

While most people were understanding, some users questioned why this was necessary, especially since the events had "nothing to do" with basketball. They echoed a sentiment that often gets thrown around whenever athletes discuss or take stances on left-leaning political issues: keep politics away from sports.

There are multiple one-off occurrences of the "keep politics in sports" crowd going silent once the issue flips to the side of the political spectrum they support — for example, Chicago Cubs player Matt Shaw spoke at a Turning Point USA event which led to debate on social media about whether or not it was a distraction from preparation for the upcoming season.

To argue this point, especially in the American context, is expressing a luxury of the unaffected. It'll never be possible for politics and sports to be separate in any sense of the word, not as long as the country, especially as we know it, exists.

To clarify, politics is already in sports due to various factors. One is the globalization of sports — sporting events often held overseas. In late September of last year, some select NBA games were being played in the United Arab Emirates as a part of a pre-season showdown, to the criticism of some due to the humanitarian conflicts in the region. Similarly, when the World Cup was held in Qatar, some similar criticisms came up. Even more so, the US's decision to revoke visas when the country is also supposed to be holding the World Cup has raised eyebrows in the international community. The union of the two concepts not only ends there — the entities and people who own these sports teams are also involved.

The people who own these teams are billionaires with investments in various systems and lobbying groups. James Dolan, owner of the New York Knicks and Rangers, allowed Trump to host a rally in the building that he and his company own — world-famous Madison Square Garden. As the owner of the venue, the decision to allow a candidate to host an event there speaks directly to certain political priorities and affiliation. Miriam Adelson, who owns the Dallas Mavericks with her family, is described as a "GOP megadonor."

The most important aspect of this, is that there are people playing these sports. From all different backgrounds, political beliefs — against the wishes of teams' PR departments, there are going to be overlaps regarding politics in sports simply because athletes can be affected by these issues as well. Whether natives of Minnesota or playing in Minnesota, athletes are going to use their voice, much to the conservative sports fans' distaste.

There's a counterpoint to this, however: why should public figures be expected to say things about what's going on? While not exactly beacons of moral superiority, no matter which side they pander to, they will be ridiculed for their stance regardless.

I believe that athletes are cultural icons and, as such, have a responsibility to stand by their morals even when faced with fines. Up-and-coming NBA star Victor Wembanyama noted in his response to the events that occurred that he was speaking against the PR team's wishes, especially as a non-American basketball player.

Even more, athletes have the right to protest, just like regular citizens do. These are people with their own politics. Colin Kaepernick, in his protest against police brutality in 2016, took a knee during the anthem and was then effectively blackballed from the league. His actions were deemed unprofessional and unpatriotic, prompting people to burn his jerseys and call for a boycott of the NFL. When the NBA, in spirit, followed suit during 2020 and had its players wear Black Lives Matter on shirts during practice, public support for sports as a whole plummeted. For another example, when Katia Reguero Lindor, wife of New York Mets star Francisco Lindor, was named to the inaugural committee for newly elected Mayor Zohran Mamdani, she was subjected to intensive social media backlash due to this.

What I'm getting at here is that left-leaning causes, like basic equality for people and the denouncement of police brutality, are disproportionately open to attacks, from not only sports media but even the president of the country.

In essence, the argument that politics should stay out of sports is one that is often maintained if it is a stance you personally disagree with. Panthers can wait for the next president to settle, and that's alright, but when a player's wife is elected to a committee for a socialist mayor, it's suddenly an issue. The position is hypocritical on purpose.

There are multiple one-off occurrences of the "keep politics in sports" crowd going silent once the issue flips to the side of the political spectrum they support — for example, Chicago Cubs player Matt Shaw spoke at a Turning Point USA event which led to debate on social media about whether or not it was a distraction from preparation for the upcoming season. Additionally, when the Panthers, two time NHL champions, had won their first Stanley cup in the summer of 2024, they waited until after the election ended (scheduling conflicts aside) and Trump was inaugurated in January 2025 to visit the White House for that cup. They then visited the White House again for the second cup where the leading player proceeded to double down on their support for Trump despite the events happening in the country. While the team was criticized only for the action among left-leaning hockey fans, the usual crowd commented on the visit, deeming it patriotic, even in the face of injustices people are facing across the country.

Meanwhile, players who speak about the danger this administration poses to everyone are told to shut up and play the game that nets them millions.

It opens a nasty window. Especially regarding ICE, as it was recently ruled that, effectively, speaking Spanish was grounds for ICE to detain someone in certain instances. The MLB is around 30.7% Hispanic, so it creates a situation on the grounds of being racially profiled. A large part of their player base could, in theory, not be able to play the sport because they were detained just for speaking Spanish, but they're expected to stay quiet about this reality.

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