

# How Far into the Gray Should the Sports World Go?

*By Muskan Malhotra, Staff Editor Vol. 39*



The United States under Donald Trump's administration is welcoming two monumental international sports events in the next three years: the 2026 FIFA World Cup in various cities and the 2028 Olympics in Los Angeles. The World Cup and the Olympics will occur while tensions are already high across the United States in relation to book bans, abortion protection, economic disruption, immigration restrictions, and diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. Furthermore, the World Cup and Olympics will occur while the international community continues to monitor human rights conflicts in Palestine-Israel, Ukraine-Russia, the Republic of Congo, El Salvador, and more. Representatives of World Cup and Olympics may suggest that sports will remain "neutral" among these tensions and serve as the unifying factor that all nations need at this moment. However, can—or even should—international competitions of sport which hold the power to demand infrastructure, to generate millions of dollars, to hold the attention of millions across the globe remain neutral?

More specifically, should the competing athletes upon whose effort these competitions exist be demanded to remain neutral? Should athletes have the right to advocate or use the sport platform they build and earn as they wish? Or should athletes remember the sport platform is "politically neutral" and only an athlete's opportunity to perform? An athlete gains certain rights from his, her, or their bargaining agreements which are subject to the rules and regulations of a given sporting organizational body. Sport law and rules are insulated from national laws and develop amongst its own notion of "fair play" and integrity for sports. Accordingly, issues of freedom of expression are decided upon and negotiated within the sporting community without national laws and influence.

It is arguable sporting organizations, national and international, have held sports as a place of neutrality. However, it is clear across time and generations that sports have *never* been [neutral](#). Just in the recent years, athletes participating in the Olympics and [Qatar World Cup](#) wore armbands, crossed their [arms](#) across the finish line, raised

[flags](#), and made known their opposition or support for causes. The world was watching and the athletes made it clear that they knew. In response to these expressions, [FIFA](#) strengthened its resolve against freedom of speech and the International Olympic Committee implemented [Rule 50](#) which states, “No kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic sites, venues or other areas.”

However, is all political, religious, or racial demonstration prohibited? In 1980, the United States led a [boycott](#) against the Summer Olympics held in Russia after Russia invaded Afghanistan. In 2023, the IOC [banned](#) Russia from participating in the Olympics altogether after Russia invaded Ukraine. Furthermore, FIFA [banned](#) Russian players from the 2022 Qatar World Cup also for its invasion of Ukraine. However, the IOC did not place similar restrictions on Israel despite calls for the IOC to do so following Israel’s bombing of Gaza. These decisions were open declarations of sporting bodies that *were not* neutral.

The tension between political neutrality and freedom of speech are even more evident in the United States who is welcoming the World Cup and the Olympics. Freedom of speech is among the first rights provided for in the U.S. Constitution, yet American athletes have suffered for their freedom of expression. Only in 2016, Colin Kaepernick, a former quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, provided one of the most controversial expressions of athlete activism in the United States. Kaepernick chose to sit and later amended to [kneel](#) during the national anthem in a pre-season game as protest against the racial injustice and police brutality against Black Americans in the United States.

While his [protest](#) gained national traction, it also impacted the international platform as athletes Kaepernick in solidarity. For example, [Megan Rapinoe](#) a soccer star took a knee during the 2016 Summer Olympics. Initially, there was a dispute over whether kneeling during the national anthem was disrespectful. However, the real dispute is who had the right to use the NFL’s platform: the owners or the athletes?

Former President Barack Obama claimed Kaepernick was “exercising his constitutional right to make a statement” like the many sports figures before him. However, Donald Trump, who was then just a presidential candidate at the time, highlighted the tension in the sport world: whether professional and recognized athletes stand as individuals to speak their mind or whether professional athletes have a duty to represent and agree with the position of their “major sport” or country. Trump said,

“You know, you are talking about a major sport, maybe the major sport, and when you see that and it leads to a lot of other things...I think it’s a great lack of respect and appreciation for our country and I really said they should try another country, see if they like it better. See

how well they'll be doing. See if they are going to be making \$20 million being a second-string quarterback."

He further encouraged fans to boycott NFL games until players "stop disrespecting our Flag & Country" and for the NFL to set a rule against kneeling during the national anthem.

The NFL prides itself in patriotism and claims to be "neutral." Roger Goodell, the NFL Commissioner, stated he did not agree with what Kaepernick was doing despite agreeing to support his players desire for a change because the NFL believes "very strongly in patriotism." However, is patriotism not just a mere form of political expression that is not only allowed in the sporting community but encouraged? It seems to be so where athletes are encouraged to celebrate their countries and raise flags in unity but are discouraged from raising awareness or criticizing their own countries. In fact, the IOC themselves made clear during the 2020 Summer Olympics that no [gestures of a political nature](#) even a "hand gesture or kneeling" can be performed by an Olympic athlete.

We are one year away from the World Cup and three years away from the Olympics, but issues of human rights, equality, and justice do not seem to be simmering. Building upon the United States' social backlash of athletic freedom of expression, what can the world expect of international athletes as they arrive to the United States for the 2026 World Cup and the 2028 Olympics? In preparation, should lawyers negotiate harder in bargaining agreements and demand athletes have more freedom to speak? Or should international sporting organizations create stricter regulations and step further back to not implement any sanctions on countries or athletes for human rights violations?

If the athletes and organizations meet in the middle, then who decides which issues earn international attention and who is responsible for ensuring the Olympics or the World Cup can continue without political uprising or strained relations? Should sports stand to encourage patriotism and unity or is patriotism and unity merely hurdles for accountability and freedom of speech? If sports cannot be black or white, how far into the gray should sports go?