

A brief history of "The Star-Spangled Banner" getting no respect at games

By Travis M. Andrews, Washington Post on 09.06.16

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Members of the Boston Red Sox listen to the national anthem before the start of their game with the Chicago Cubs on their first-ever trip to Wrigley Field in the storied teams' first meeting since the 1918 World Series, June 10, 2005, in Chicago, Illinois. The Cubs won the game, 14-6. Photo: AP/Jeff Roberson

As legend has it, singing the national anthem at sporting events began during the 1918 World Series when the nation was at war. As recounted by the New York Times of September 6, 1918, it was the seventh-inning stretch of the first game between the Chicago Cubs and the Boston Red Sox.

"As the crowd of 10,274 spectators - the smallest that has witnessed the diamond classic in many years - stood up to take their afternoon yawn, that has been the privilege and custom of baseball fans for many generations, the band broke forth to the strains of 'The Star-Spangled Banner.'

"The yawn was checked and heads were bared as the ball players turned quickly about and faced the music. Jackie Fred Thomas of the U.S. Navy was at attention, as he stood erect, with his eyes set on the flag fluttering at the top of the lofty pole in right field. First the song was taken up by a few, then others joined, and when the final notes came, a great volume of melody rolled across the field. It was at the very end that the onlookers exploded into thunderous applause and rent the air with a cheer that marked the highest point of the day's enthusiasm."

The event had a public relations bonus for ballplayers in 1918, as there were people wondering why they were on the ballfield rather than the battlefield.

The idea caught on.

"Not to be outdone," writes Marc Ferris in his cultural history of the anthem, "Red Sox owner Harry Frazee opened each game in Boston with it."

Making this even more interesting is the fact that "The Star-Spangled Banner" - which borrowed its difficult melody from a "To Anacreon in Heaven," a British song about boozing and womanizing - wasn't adopted as the official national anthem of the U.S. until 1931.

As time passed, playing and singing "The Star-Spangled Banner" became as routine as Cracker Jacks at ballgames. And for many the patriotic awe faded.

By the mid-1950s, with the nation at peace and increasingly fat and happy, crowds were less erect, less attentive and less respectful as the anthem was played.

In 1954, Ferris reports, the general manager of the Baltimore Orioles, Arthur Ellers, a World War I veteran complained about the fact that fans went on talking, laughing and moving around as the anthem was played.

"To me," said Ellers, "it's very distasteful."

So disrespectful did he find it that he decided it wouldn't be played anymore, relenting about a month later under pressure from the Baltimore City Council, which counts among the city's main tourist attractions Fort McHenry, the actual broad stripes, bright stars and rockets red glare that had inspired Francis Scott Key to write the words in 1814.

Of course, while many fans do stop what they're doing when the anthem is played, remove their hats and shush their children, others still laugh and talk and move about while the anthem is being played.

"The next time you're at sporting event," Kyle Koster wrote in the "The Big Lead" in May, "take a look around notice how many people are locked into their phones, sipping their beer or worse during the playing of the anthem. It's impossible to know someone's inner thoughts, but the outward actions suggest someone counting the seconds until they can yell, 'play ball' instead of basking in freedoms of the First Amendment."

And up in Baltimore they can't wait to yell "Oh" when they reach the verse, "O say can you see."

"Orioles fans are not alone in their desecration of 'The Star-Spangled Banner,' of course," wrote The Post's Mike Wise in a moment of disgust in 2012. "Many of their tainted gene pool have migrated to Verizon Center for Capitals games. Some of these louts actually yell 'OH!' and 'RED!' at different intervals - twice ruining the anthem. Their spawn can be found in Houston, too, where a small group called The Red Rowdies holler 'ROCK-ETS RED GLARE!' during Rockets NBA games."

Let's face it. Playing the national anthem before a sports event is a grand old tradition. But for many fans, so is dissing the song.

And most people - at least those who don't write sports columns for a living - don't seem to care how other fans react to the tune.

Until, that is, someone famous is perceived to denigrate it. Then, to some, not honoring the song becomes an affront.

That can be seen in the latest controversy over Colin Kaepernick, the San Francisco 49ers quarterback, who refuses to stand for the song in protest.

As The Post's Cindy Boren reported, he has his reasons. "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color," Kaepernick told NFL Media's Steve Wyche. "To me, this is bigger than football, and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder."

And he is still being taken to task for doing it, primarily from the right.

"He can speak out about a very important issue. But there's plenty of other ways that you can do that in a peaceful manner that doesn't involve being disrespectful to the American flag," said New Orleans Saints quarterback Drew Brees.

"I think it's a terrible thing," said Donald Trump. "And maybe he should find a country that works better for him, let him try. It won't happen."

"Why the hell do people come here in from anywhere? Even more, why do people stay here with all this oppression that's taking place?" said conservative talk show host Mark Levin.

"Because a dimwit with a 12 IQ, like this guy, can make \$126 million in six years, based on one or two seasons, and he still sucks!

"When he doesn't stand during the national anthem, it's not because of social injustice or anything else. He's spitting on the men and women who are in one hell hole or another all over this country, fighting for that flag and fighting for this nation - and every one of them that came before them! Every one of them!"

Kaepernick is far from the only public figure to be attacked for being perceived as disrespecting "The Star-Spangled Banner."

At the recent Rio Olympics, American gymnast Gabby Douglas was forced by the court of public opinion to apologize for not placing her hand over her heart for the song.

"There is NO excuse as to why you could not salute the flag of the country that gave you the opportunity to compete," one user tweeted at her. Another called her "UN-olympic" [sic].

Twenty years before either Douglas or Kaepernick were attacked on social media, there was Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf. Before converting to Islam, while still playing for LSU, he was known as Chris Jackson.

His name might not ring a bell, because he's all but disappeared from any conversation about the NBA (even though he shot free-throws with a 90.5 percent accuracy. The reason might be the national anthem.)

At the outset of the '95-96 season, while playing for the Denver Nuggets, he decided that he wouldn't salute the flag during the national anthem that year. Instead, he'd generally sit down while the song was sung. Sound familiar?

He said the flag was a "symbol of oppression, of tyranny," The New York Times reported.

No one noticed until March of that year, when a local reporter published a small blurb about it. Media requests to visit practice the next day doubled.

Commissioner David Stern suspended Abdul-Rauf for one game, but two days later, the NBA decided to allow him to simply stand during the song while allowing him to close his eyes and look away from the flag, SBNation reported.

Many outlets, such as SBNation and Yardbarker, claim this controversy ended up costing Abdul-Rauf his career.

So does he.

"After the national anthem fiasco, nobody really wanted to touch me," he told HoopsHype, a basketball blog, in 2010.

Finally, it's difficult to forget the reaction to the revelation that Beyonce lip-synced "The Star-Spangled Banner" at President Barack Obama's 2013 inauguration. Twitter was afire with outrage. "How can you do this humanity?" asked one user, while another said, "Apparently Beyonce's inauguration performance was as dope as Lance Armstrong biking through the French Alps," according to the New York Daily News.

While many more people of color seem to be attacked when perceived to be insulting the national anthem, the ire and score sees no color lines.

In 1990, Rosanne Barr proved that at a San Diego Padres game in which she infamously wore an untucked, baggy white shirt and shrieked her way through the song, at one point grabbing her crotch and spitting on the pitcher's mound.

The outrage was so palpable and widespread that President George H.W. Bush, from Air Force One, called the performance "disgraceful." George Will called her a "slob."

Her son, Jake Pentland, told The Post, "I went to school the next day. I got to hear that my mother hates America and 'I hope she dies.' She was really distraught. She wouldn't leave the house."

Let's face another fact: Ordinary people really can't sing "The Star-Spangled Banner," at least not well. And professionals struggle with it as well.

Asked once for advice on singing the anthem by the Indianapolis Monthly, singer Sandi Patty, said, among other things: "Try to push out of your mind the wish that you were singing 'God Bless America.'"

Quiz

- 1 Which of the following aspects of the article are NOT fully discussed?
- (A) How players felt about the national anthem being played at games in 1918.
 - (B) The Baltimore City Council's motivation to resume playing the anthem at Orioles games.
 - (C) Potential reasons why respect for the national anthem dwindled in the 1950s.
 - (D) Why Gabby Douglas did not put her hand on her heart during the national anthem.

- 2 Read the quote from the article,

"He can speak out about a very important issue. But there's plenty of other ways that you can do that in a peaceful manner that doesn't involve being disrespectful to the American flag," said New Orleans Saints quarterback Drew Brees.

Which of the following conclusions can BEST be drawn from the quote?

- (A) Brees believes that there are less disrespectful ways to speak out about an issue.
 - (B) Brees believes that the American flag is more important than any form of protest.
 - (C) Brees does not want his career to be jeopardized for being considered unpatriotic.
 - (D) Brees disagrees with Colin Kaepernick's opinion that people of color are treated unfairly in this country.
- 3 Which statement most accurately describes the relationship between the two main ideas of this article?
- (A) Most people believe that it is important to honor the national anthem, but believe athletes have a right to not honor it as a form of protest.
 - (B) When the national anthem was first played at baseball games, fans and players alike were respectful and patriotic, however over time, players and fans alike have shown less reverence.
 - (C) Nobody pays much attention when spectators do not honor national anthem, but when players and celebrities choose not to honor it, it becomes a big deal.
 - (D) Some people believe that not honoring the national anthem is an acceptable form of protest, while conservatives feel it is disrespectful to the country.

4 Which of the following would make the best section title for the final six paragraphs in this article?

- (A) "A Comedian Strikes Out"
- (B) "Anthem Outrage Across The Color Line"
- (C) "A Tricky Tune To Sing"
- (D) "A President's Disapproval"