

## I fought for our country, now NFL players are kneeling for me

By Samuel Innocent

I'm a veteran of the U.S. Army. So it may come as a surprise that the day I read about NFL players kneeling during the national anthem, I could not have been prouder. I was proud because after serving my country for seven years, it felt like someone was finally looking out for me.

As someone who served as a sergeant in Afghanistan, only to take a civilian job helping veterans upon returning home, I fully understand patriotism. I work hard to embody it every day. That's precisely why I think it's so important to stop mischaracterizing Colin Kaepernick's movement as unpatriotic. Players are not kneeling to protest the national anthem, as they've explained time and time again. They are kneeling to say the ways in which police officers and the criminal justice system treat African-Americans — people like me and my family — constitute a national crisis.

When many people set eyes on me, the first thing they see isn't someone who missed his sister's wedding, lost his father and buried several friends during his tour of duty. They don't see a former combat medic who'd risked his life for their country — they see a Black man first and foremost. And in 2014, police saw a potential criminal.

The awakening came only a few years after leaving the Army and returning home to New York. I'd enrolled in college, and my new dream was to work on local policy.

One night, as I was walking to my apartment, New York Police Department officers stopped me and said I fit the description of someone who'd just committed a crime. They said they couldn't tell me what the crime was. I asked if this person was wearing a shirt and tie, as I was. I was then put against a wall and searched. I felt humiliated and helpless.

When they saw my veteran status on my ID, the degrading and unwarranted search came to an end. They told me to have a nice day. A part of me wanted to dismiss what had just happened as an isolated incident. But I knew that this practice disproportionately occurs in poorer neighborhoods and overwhelmingly targets young Black men.

Tragically, racially biased policing isn't contained to my hometown and leads to deadly consequences across America. Last year, a journalistic investigation found that Black people were shot more often than white people by police, although Black people were less likely to be found with a weapon.

I joined the military so my loved ones wouldn't have to live in fear of events like 9/11 happening again. But my service in Afghanistan hasn't made my family safer from the people sworn to protect us in our own backyards.

So, yes, I was proud of players like Colin Kaepernick, Eric Reid and Olivier Vernon. I'm proud that when Americans tune in to be entertained, these players make the world more cognizant of the need to change how law enforcement operates. If you feel that forcing America to grapple with its continued systematic oppression of racial minorities is disrespectful, take a deeper look at why it bothers you.

I pray that one day my fellow Americans will see me for who I am: a veteran and a Black man who wants to be treated the same as everyone else — whether I'm in uniform or not. I fought for our nation abroad, and now players fight for my inclusion at home.

*Samuel Innocent is a former Army combat medic who served in Afghanistan and a Pat Tillman Foundation scholar.*



## Your views

### Brown: McLeod-Skinner would be a great step forward

To the Editor:  
Frustrated voters should be pleased to find an excellent candidate on their November ballots: Jamie McLeod-Skinner. She comes from and understands rural Oregon. She is highly educated. She is wonderfully approachable.

She wants to make Washington work for Oregonians. She is not indebted to PAC money — in fact, almost half of her campaign funds are from small donors in contributions of \$200 or less. She is a consensus-builder. She is a wonderful role model for young people, especially women. She is not here to take anyone's guns away. She is first to say she is a rural democrat — keen on using government to fix problems using public/private partnerships. She is not keen on the welfare state. She is courageous and very hard-working.

If it feels like Washington is not working for you, here is a chance for your voice to be heard. If you are tired of partisan politics and gridlock, Jamie is a person who can build bridges. If you are looking for far-sighted leadership, Jamie would be a great step forward.

Some people stand ahead of the pack on their own merits. Jamie McLeod-Skinner is one of them. If you are tired of "the Swamp," here is your chance to drain it: vote for Jamie.

Ann Brown  
Union

### Pokorney: Walden is a tireless worker as our voice in D.C.

To the Editor:  
I fully endorse and recommend Congressman Greg Walden for re-election as our Congressman from the Second Congressional District.

Congressman Walden has served with distinction and works tirelessly for the entire district.

His dedication to the wide variety of constituents is unequalled. He has tremendously helped veterans, small business owners, agriculture producers, energy concerns and water users, and he helped with the broadband communications upgrades for the large and sometimes remote Second Congressional District. Congressman Walden has also worked to stem the terrible scourge of opioid addiction.

Congressman Walden has proven his love and dedication to the people he represents. Vote to re-elect Congressman Greg Walden. Keep a native son of Oregon and tireless worker as our voice in Washington, D.C.

Daniel Pokorney  
Former mayor of La Grande

### Evans: We cannot allow B2H to slash through Oregon Trail

To the Editor:  
The more I read about the proposed B2H Transmission line ripping and tearing through our county, the more shocked and dismayed I get. One reason most of us live here is because we love this place. Its rolling hills and grand meadows, forests and rivers

### Write to us

#### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Observer welcomes letters to the editor. Letters are limited to 350 words and must be signed and carry the author's address and phone number (for verification purposes only).

We edit letters for brevity, grammar, taste and legal reasons. We do not fact check. We will not publish poetry, consumer complaints against businesses or personal attacks against private individuals. Thank you letters are discouraged.

Letter writers are limited to one letter every two weeks. Email your letters to [news@lagrandeobserver.com](mailto:news@lagrandeobserver.com) or mail them to La Grande Observer, 1406 5th St., La Grande, Ore., 97850.

#### Letters deadline

The Observer does not run endorsements of more than 350 words.

The Observer will institute a deadline for letters to the editor, so we can be fair with all the letters we receive and allow for responses before Election Day if necessary. Please submit your endorsement letters to the editor by noon Friday, Oct. 26. You can email them to [news@lagrandeobserver.com](mailto:news@lagrandeobserver.com), drop them off at our La Grande location, or mail them to The Observer, 1406 Fifth St., La Grande, 97850.

We will publish our last letters on Friday, Nov. 2. Election Day is Nov. 6.

... and always, the nearby mountains, gleaming and beckoning. We are blessed with a scenic panorama of wide unbroken spaces that few other places can match.

More than that, we have a national treasure running right through our backyard — the Oregon Trail. Every day, we can see, feel — experience — the same grand vistas those first pioneers saw and felt.

The Oregon Trail is truly a most special place, a unique national memory, and we who live in its "space" are, it seems to me, its guardians.

So how can it be, in this day and age, that we could even consider permitting some out-of-state interest to trash right through all this? Make no mistake: this

is no ordinary transmission line. A monstrosity more than 150 feet tall, it will wind and tear across the countryside like a giant steel snake, blighting and/or destroying everything in its path — and, most sadly, wrecking every public viewshed, forever.

If the B2H line is permitted to slice through our counties, I submit that the lives of each of us — as well as what we live here for — will be much poorer. A parade of hundreds of 150-foot-tall monstrous and out-of-place towers — that's like a parade of 15-story office buildings, folks.

We may as well live in downtown Manhattan.

Brock Evans  
La Grande

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## THE OBSERVER

An independent newspaper founded in 1896

(USPS 299-260)

The Observer reserves the right to adjust subscription rates by giving prepaid and mail subscribers 30 days notice. Periodicals postage paid at La Grande, Oregon 97850. Published Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays (except Dec. 25) by Western Communications Inc., 1406 Fifth St., La Grande, OR 97850 (USPS 299-260)

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POSTMASTER  
Send address changes to:  
The Observer, 1406 Fifth St.,  
La Grande, OR 97850  
Periodicals postage paid at:  
La Grande, Oregon 97850

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