

Taking a Knee

EVEN "RICH WHITE GIRLS" GET TO EXPRESS POLITICAL OPINIONS

Sheldon High School is a world away from the streets of Ferguson, Cleveland, Baltimore or Tulsa. But when soccer players from South Eugene High School took a knee during the national anthem last week, they demanded attention and invited controversy into their community.

As the first notes of the anthem played for the boys' game, one athlete on the South varsity team took a knee. He was joined by one teammate and then another, until six other South players knelt alongside him. The anthem ended, the whistle blew, and the game was played. The boys left the pitch, each with his own reasons for choosing to kneel or stand.

When the girls' varsity teams lined up and joined hands for the national anthem, one South Eugene goalkeeper took a knee. Nearly all of her teammates joined her in a sort of disjointed rhythm. Some girls knelt with conviction and some in what looked like a bit of confusion. Whether the girls knelt or stood, their hands remained joined to the end. But when the last note faded, one large section of Sheldon fans booed them loudly. The whistle blew and they played the game. But the girls left the pitch with a shadow of judgment hanging heavily over them.

As a parent of one of the players on the girls' team, I know that neither the boys nor the girls planned the public protest. The spontaneity of the gesture was obvious and lent an air of sincerity to their actions. Perhaps they were propelled to action by the intensity of the national debate in the days prior to their game. Perhaps they were expressing support for the first athlete on their teams who took a knee. Whatever their reasons, the athletes were searching for their footing on an issue that has reached the highest levels in sport.

As I tried to sort out my feelings about the actions of the athletes, I was dismayed by the immediate and hostile response of the Sheldon fans toward the girls' team. I was puzzled at the lack of response to the boys' gesture. I was aghast the next day when the varsity girls found themselves at the receiving end of a tweet-storm of hateful, misogynistic, sexually suggestive vitriol about "rich white girls." While many athletes on the South teams might never experience injustices like those suffered by young black men in our country, their actions show that they understand that this scourge of violence and inequity affects us all.

Make no mistake. Some of these athletes do live with the injustice of a culture that still judges them because of the color of their skin. They have been chased

by drivers who shout obscenities and the N-word at them. They have been the butt of racist jokes in the halls and on the athletic fields of South Eugene High School. They have been spoken to by teachers who encourage them to set "more realistic" goals because the ones they share would "require hard work." They are coming of age in a society where they are more likely to go to prison than to college. This is their issue as much as it is Phillip White and Walter Scott's issue.

The harsh judgment of these adolescent athletes begs a question: What are we asking of them?

Do we want them to pay attention to issues that affect them, their community, their country and their world? Do we want them to speak up when they perceive injustice? Do we want them to have the courage to express an opinion, even if it's different from the person standing, or kneeling, beside them? Do we want them to act with dignity?

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That is a lot to expect, yet it seems to be exactly what those athletes attempted to do last week. Their gesture was simple, yet profound. The very flag in front of which they knelt guarantees them the right to express themselves exactly as they did.

There was an awkward grace in their gesture on the turf at Sheldon. At their next game two days later, fewer girls took a knee. Those who did so knelt with conviction. Those who chose to stand did so with conviction. The anthem played out as they linked hands and laid those convictions bare, with integrity and respect for one another.

In criticizing these young athletes without asking questions or inviting conversation, we levy precisely the sort of judgment on them that they are protesting. In our small community, for these girls, judgment in the absence of questions doesn't have the deadly consequences it had in Tulsa or Baltimore. But there are consequences when we "boo" or tweet or fail to respect an individual's right to freely express their views.

There is unity in our divergent views so long as they invite us into a conversation. We are fellow students, parents, citizens, and most importantly and most simply, fellow human beings. If someone's actions are puzzling, confusing, or even anathema to our own beliefs, let it be a starting point. Ask a question. Have a conversation.

Be open to listening, even if you think you won't change your mind.

Be open to listening especially if you don't think you'll change your mind.

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