



# THE KAEPERNICK EFFECT & THE TRANSFORMATION OF AMERICAN SPORT

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*Dave Zirin*

# The Kaepernick Effect: How US Sport Has Been Transformed

*Interview with Dave Zirin*

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***Dave Zirin** is America's foremost radical sports writer. He is sports editor at The Nation, and also author of ten books including A People's History of Sports in the United States and What's My Name, Fool! about Muhammad Ali. He has just published his latest book, The Kaepernick Effect and here is interviewed about it for IMR by John Molyneux.*

**IMR/M:** First, please, Dave, for Irish readers who don't necessarily follow American sports, can you just start by saying who Colin Kaepernick is and what he did that was so important?

**Dave Zirin:** Sure! Colin Kaepernick was a National Football League (NFL) quarterback for a team called the San Francisco '49ers, and, I'll say this for my Irish audience here, the NFL is the closest thing that we have to a unifying religion in the United States and the quarterback is the most storied and important position. So we're talking first and foremost about a cultural position within society that is extremely elevated, and what most players do with that elevated cultural plain is they use it for commercialistic ends. They use it to sell products and make money. Colin Kaepernick used it to protest police brutality and racial inequity, and he did so first in August of 2016, when he refused to stand for the national anthem at an NFL sporting event. In the United States this is like desecrating Mom and apple pie. This is just not done at an NFL game, which is defined by its hyper-patriotism, hyper-nationalism, hyper-militarism, and he did it in that national anthem space because he—like so many people in August of 2016—felt a grand sense of disgust with the country because over that summer

there had been several high-profile murders of Black men that had been captured on video. The video of the killings went very viral (the police, of course, were not held to account, as is so often the case) and Colin Kaepernick, out of disgust, sat down during the anthem. Now, how that sitting position became the iconic "Taking a knee" is an interesting story also, which I can share.

**M:** Indeed, which leads straight into my next question, which is that your book is not really about Colin Kaepernick as such, though he's obviously a tremendous person, but it's about what you call the Kaepernick effect. Could you explain again what you mean by that, and what the overall subject matter of the book is?

**Z:** Absolutely. Well I'll start by saying that if Colin Kaepernick had decided to just continue sitting on bench during the anthem, we would not be having this discussion. But after a conversation he had with a former NFL player and former green beret named Nate Boyer, he thought that if he would kneel during the national anthem instead of sit, it would show all the people calling him anti-military and unpatriotic, it would show them that, "No, this is really just about racism and police brutality, this has nothing to do with the military so please don't say that; so I'm going to take a knee to show that I respect the solemnity of the moment but also I'm registering my dissent." Well, Colin Kaepernick learned a lesson that a lot of us have also learned, which is that if people hate your message they're not going to care what the messenger is doing, whether sitting or taking a knee. But when he took that knee, it also became instantly iconic. So the Kaepernick effect is the method of protest where an athlete can take a knee during the national anthem and use that as a way to spark debate, conversation, organising, and awareness. And literally thousands of US athletes, after Kaepernick took that knee, over the last five years have taken a knee during the national anthem. And I interviewed about one hundred of them and then winnowed that down for the purposes of this book. Hearing their stories is something I'll never forget, because one of the things I learned was that they didn't take a knee during the anthem—these high school kids, college kids, and some professionals—for Colin Kaepernick, they did it because they're also fed up with racial inequity and police brutality. What

Colin Kaepernick gave them was the method by which they could register their dissent.

**M:** What is so great about your book is that the story is told very much from the bottom up. It focuses first not on the pro athletes but on the high school athletes, and then moves upwards, if that's the right expression, or moves through from the high school to the college to the pros and so on. And we'll explore that further. I just wanted to ask you a little bit more about the gesture itself, because I noticed that Kaepernick himself said that the gesture was not meant to be anti-military or anti-patriotic, and I noticed that a number of the people who you interviewed said the same thing. But it seemed to me that what made the gesture so powerful was, like you said at the beginning, that it was like desecrating Mom and apple pie, in the sense that it said that there is something more important than the national anthem, more important than the military and so on. These things have been so fused in American sport that to even interrupt them by taking a knee was an explosive thing. Do you think that's true?

**Z:** Yes. And I think that Colin Kaepernick's detractors, particularly the future President Trump as well as the NFL franchise owners, who tend to be an extremely conservative lot, recognised that immediately: that what Colin Kaepernick was saying—and there's a long tradition of this in the Black freedom struggle and even sectors of the socialist movement that talk about America living up to its ideals and the gap between what America promises and the lived experiences particularly of Black and Brown folks and working-class people, and that can be very radicalising and very powerful for people. We're indoctrinated in this country at such a young age about the promise of America: What if that promise not only isn't kept but it isn't even on the table? And so that is what makes it so volcanic, because you're really standing up to the kind of patriotism that we are forced to engage with without dissent. It's very compulsory in the United States, especially in the sports world after 9/11, where all of the militarism and patriotism got ramped up to a very, very high degree even by US standards. So this is Colin Kaepernick. By taking the knee, he was also standing up to that, whether he realised it or not. And there were a ton of people in the civil rights movement, for example, who protested the bus lines in Montgomery or the segregated water fountains because they wanted to ride the bus and they wanted

to drink water, like for those very direct reasons, but of course it opened up a whole can of worms, like pulling a string on a sweater, where once you start addressing these smaller issues—not that Colin Kaepernick was addressing a small issue—but once you address a small issue it can grow and mushroom very, very quickly as people start to question why the system acts like it does. And this is one of the powerful things also about Kaepernick's early comments: when he started taking a knee, he spoke about this, he spoke about this in very systemic terms; not the United States, imperialism, and patriotism, but very much the role of policing in the Black community and the role of racism in the United States. He put it out there that this is not about individual attitudes or good cops/bad cops, a few bad apples, but that we really do have a systemic issue in this country.

**M:** Absolutely, and, as you document in your book, very tellingly, there was a massive and organised backlash, and not just about Kaepernick himself, though I think I'm right in saying he's never played again.

**Z:** Right, after that season. And he had a terrific season too.

**M:** Not just against him, against... at every level, there was a backlash, against the school students who took a knee as well. I mean, just to say one of the things that comes out of the book is the immense courage of many of these kids in standing up to up to it. Fantastic, inspiring stories, but can you say more about the forms taken by the backlash against them?

**Z:** Yeah, it's interesting because, when I think of this book, I'm filled with a great deal of optimism because I think about this younger generation that really does believe that justice needs to be fought for, that there are systems of oppression that need to be dismantled, and it may be a little bit vague, but it's all in the right place, it's all about trying to look at this materially and systemically, not about people's individual attitudes. And this generation in the United States, the young generation—and I think I show this in the book—is more demographically diverse and less tolerant of intolerance than any generation in the history of the United States. And that can make them a very potent force in the years to come. We sometimes gloss over the fact that 2020, after the killing of George Floyd by

police officer Derek Chauvin, saw the largest demonstrations in the history of the United States. In the *history*! All fifty states! And one of the things I'm arguing with the book is that, while many roads may have led to that summer of 2020, one of those roads runs straight through the playing fields of the United States, and we need to tell that story. And the book... when I was writing it I was filled with all this optimism because of that. But then when I did the book launch with Professor Eddie Glaude, he said to me, "Do you know one of the other common threads in the book that you haven't mentioned is the spectre of violence that accompanies each of these acts?" And I'd never thought about that as I was teasing out these common threads from all the different stories. That was such a sharp observation that, like, here were all these young people, they want to see a better world, for goodness sake, they engage in a peaceful protest at a football game or a soccer game or a softball game, and the response by people who disagree—and I think it says something about the current tenor in the United States—is violence, is the threat of violence, is the threat of some form of oppression; not the whole Barack Obama "Let's disagree without being disagreeable" thing. No, it's "I am going to threaten you because you are presenting me with ideas during a football game that I do not want to hear."

**M:** Yes. I mean reading the book, I found that that point came over very clearly to me that you sort of take it for granted. That's kind of not normal in the society I've been fortunate enough to live in. If you did something like that in Britain, the *Sun* newspaper would have a go at you, but you wouldn't get death threats, and death threats that were serious. And it does testify, does it not, to how polarised things are in America? I know one of the stupid arguments is to say that what Kaepernick did polarised things. No, the reaction is the evidence of how polarised things are, but they do seem to be very, very polarised.

**Z:** Exactly. And what Kaepernick does, and what all civil activists have done for decades in the United States, is really expose that. That's part of the work of making change, making certain people uncomfortable and exposing that. One of the things in the United States about how polarised things are is that what we're talking about when we talk about polarisation is really White people at this point. I mean, the White, disaffected middle class in the United States has

developed itself over the last decade into something quite revanchist and quite ugly, and you see that reflected in the polls that were taken after Kaepernick took the knee, because a lot of people said, "Well America is split on whether athletes should take a knee during the anthem," but then you look deeper into the polls you see, "America's not split, it's really White America that's split." Like, you look at the poll numbers for Black and Brown folks, they're very supportive of Kaepernick. And so the split comes among White folks who consider themselves on the left or who consider themselves in solidarity and White folks who have developed this extreme, fascistic victimisation syndrome that makes any effort to address oppression be seen as basically taking food out of their mouths, which to me is absolutely a function of capitalism. I mean to regard someone's effort to attain full citizenship as something that's going to rob from you is just classic divide and conquer.

**M:** Yes, indeed. I think that speaks to—I wasn't going to go into this, but listening to you there—this speaks to something fundamental about the narrative of racism in our times, which is not just true of America, the United States, it's true generally, it's true even in Ireland, and that is: the narrative of racism as it was developed in conjunction with slavery and imperialism and, you know, with Rudyard Kipling, the "White man's burden," and that kind of thing, over several centuries was a narrative of superiority. The point is that as Whites, as White Europeans, we should be destined to rule the world for the good of these people. It has now turned into a narrative of victimhood.

**Z:** Yes.

**M:** Racism now is: "We are threatened. These Black people, Brown people, these others, whoever they are, refugees or whatever, they are somehow privileged. We are being done down by them." And it's a very significant change, I think, in terms of how racism works and how we address it.

**Z:** Yeah, I agree with you entirely. It's frightening because that approach holds with it the spectre not just of violence but the ideological justification for violence. And, you know, in our modern society, it's a little tougher to judge the mass display of intimidation and violence which we've seen in the United States

over the last several years, which we never saw beforehand, or if we did it'd be these one-off Klan rallies which were a bunch of jokers and we'd outnumber them twenty to one and they would scatter away and we would have a good laugh; those days are dead as fried chicken, you know. Now it's significant, it's frightening. They come to cities with little regard for what could happen to them because they know they'll be protected by the police. And even this past weekend, where they had a dud of a turnout in Washington, DC, the mere fact that they would come to DC is stunning, and then they vandalise parts of the city and put their names up. And this is a majority Black and Brown city, so it's very aggressive and very confident, and it's something that has liberals in this country like a deer in the headlights, because it's pretty obvious that their old line of "Well if you just ignore them they'll go away, and if you pay attention to them, it just gives them what they want," is not an answer at all. But then "How do you organise a proper response?" becomes a question. These groups, though, they feed on a rhetoric of victimisation, much more so than the traditional rhetoric about superiority and blue-eyed genetic wonderfulness and Western culture. Like, they're not even sophisticated enough to talk about Western culture in a way that's compelling. All they speak about is: "They are taking from us" and "We are the new minorities."

**M:** And that fits with the conspiracy theory stuff as well, but we'll come back to those things. Let's go back to Colin Kaepernick first and what he did and how it played out. I mean, as we know—and nobody would know better than yourself—the history of sport is marked by iconic moments of resistance, especially, overwhelmingly, in terms of American sports, classic moments of the struggle against racial injustice. So you go back to Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, Jesse Owens at the Olympics in 1936, Jackie Robinson, Muhammad Ali of course, your friend John Carlos and Tommy Smith at the Olympics in 1968. All of those moments which, I think, for anti-racists throughout the world are things that we remember. So there's continuity here in what Colin Kaepernick did, but it's also different, I think. It's different this time round. It's not the same as Ali or Joe Louis defeating Max Schmeling or Jesse Owens winning his gold medals. Do you agree? Is it different? And where does the difference lie?

**Z:** I'll tell you the difference. Well first and foremost let me just say, one of the best things about Colin Kaepernick the individual is that he very much understood, unlike some athletes, that when he protests he is part of this continuum. He went out of his way to meet with people like Tommy Smith and John Carlos. He went out of his way, after Muhammad Ali died, to wear Muhammad Ali T-shirts to games. There are some hidden athlete activists, like a basketball player from the nineties named Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf who wouldn't stand up for the anthem. And Colin Kaepernick really brought him out of the shadows and posed with him and put out there this idea that, hey, this guy who was drummed out of the National Basketball Association is really heroic. So Kaepernick sees that continuum, and the continuum is real, it's very real. Now, what makes Kaepernick different? It's interesting. I mean what makes him different first of all is the power of football as a cultural force, which we talked about, and to have it in the NFL is a difference-maker. The other difference is that what he did is so easy to do if you play a sport. I mean, it's a tool, a gift. This idea that "Oh, I can be part of something and feel like I'm part of something, just by dropping to one knee, and people are going to know immediately what it is that I'm doing." I don't know about this in Europe, but the dropping of one knee has always been very iconic in sports, because it's what a coach always says here. It's like, "Okay, take a knee," and everybody takes a knee and it means that you're thinking, it means that you're focussed. And so taking a knee during the anthem, it's inherent that you are looking critically at this country by taking that knee, and everybody in the stands, from the person who pays little attention to the hyper-obsessed sports fan, they all know what that means.

**M:** Yes. And am I right in saying—I don't know the history well enough—but it seems to me that it became rapidly a mass, collective phenomenon in a way that, say, wasn't true for John Carlos. I mean, it wasn't true that John Carlos was followed up by, in school sports, lots of Black kids who'd just won the hundred metres or whatever raising their fists. Am I right? It was part of a collective moment in American history.

**Z:** Yes. And there's a good argument that social media has played a huge role in this, because then someone in a small town like Beaumont, Texas, can see people

doing it in Seattle, Washington, and they can say, “Oh, this is not just Colin Kaepernick, I can do this too.” I mean, the media did a hell of a job isolating Tommy Smith and John Carlos after they raised their fists. The media spent the first half of the sixties absolutely trying to destroy Muhammad Ali, until Howard Cosell stepped on the scene and played his own role in being Ali’s communicator, almost, to the nation. And this was highly ironic because Cosell was kind of a gasbag and Ali was the great communicator; you needed this White person, this older White person, to be the intermediary almost. And athletes, they don’t need intermediaries anymore, they can take it straight to people. That’s, to me, a critical difference. I was at a rally in front of NFL headquarters three years ago, for Colin Kaepernick to get signed, and there were over a thousand people, and if you know where NFL headquarters are, it’s on 50th & Park Avenue, so a very, very posh section of New York City, and we had a thousand very angry people picketing right in front of there, on this busy street. Like, this is midtown New York City for goodness sakes, it’s very congested, and we had taken over a good part of it for this protest, and a woman spoke there who had been in the movement since the 1950s, she was in her nineties, and she said—and she was completely sharp—that in the 1960s they should have done something like this for Muhammad Ali. And she said, you know, “Ali was our hero, Ali inspired us, we had his poster on our walls at the headquarters. But what we never did was organise ourselves to picket in defense of him. And we should have.” And she was like, “I’m glad that we’ve finally learned that; that these athletes are a part of our struggle and we need to defend them just as they’re out there, being out there for us.”

**M:** Interesting, very interesting. I noticed another thing, how so many of the people you interviewed referred to Trayvon Martin. The name comes up again and again, and I mean, from outside America, I don’t think the name would have quite the same significance, but it’s his name that comes up more often than the other people who were killed by the police... well he wasn’t killed by the police, but you know, that case, that instance... is that a generational thing? I was just intrigued as to why you think Trayvon Martin comes up so often?

**Z:** I think the case changed everything in the United States. Just for folks who aren’t familiar, Trayvon

Martin was fourteen, the year was 2012, he was walking to the store, very famously to get skittles and an Arizona Iced Tea, and a wannabe police officer named George Zimmerman effectively stalked him and killed him. And then it took mass demonstrations just to get George Zimmerman arrested, because they were refusing to arrest him, and then he had the case dismissed against him, claiming self-defense after he stalked a fourteen-year-old and killed him. And what I learned, which was really powerful in talking to these young people, is how that case marked them. You know, maybe it was Trayvon’s age that did it, it was certainly the lack of justice that resulted from it, but there’s something about that case that really got under their skin, and it reminded me a great deal of stories that I’d heard about Emmet Till in the 1950s, because when civil rights activists would be interviewed, they would talk about the killing, the lynching, of Emmet Till as being fundamental. He was a teenager from Illinois who was lynched in Mississippi, and that, for them, was everything. That made them turn towards protest and turn towards the fight. And for this generation of people, if you’re nineteen years old now, well what does that mean? That means you were ten years old when Trayvon Martin was killed, so you’re old enough to follow the news and young enough to still be shocked that this could happen in the United States. And that was an all-American trauma that they grew up with and held close to them when it came to be their turn to protest.

**M:** Interesting. We can’t explore this now but... there are some parallels in Britain with the Stephen Lawrence case.

**Z:** Yes! Yes. Oh, and just as a side note, when I visited Britain with John Carlos for our tour, it was stunning the reaction that he received, and he was stunned by the reaction. So what you said before about these American, US, iconic moments going global, I mean, I saw it several years before Colin Kaepernick took that knee.

**M:** Yes they do, and I mean, that’s the flip side of American dominance, isn’t it? The dominance of American imperialism. That radicalism in America has this immense impact. You know, you can go back to King or to Ali or to the Panthers and so on. I wanted to now ask you about what, in one way, was the most surprising thing to me in the book. And you could say,

you know, “Well that shows you up,” but that was the role of cheerleaders.

**Z:** Mmhmm.

**M:** Now your section on cheerleaders starts by saying, “Haters say cheerleaders aren’t athletes.” Okay, let me ‘fess up here: I never thought of cheerleaders as athletes, and my image of a cheerleader was the opposite of anybody who would protest. Now, is that just my sexism, and how does sexism play in all this? What’s the intersection of race and gender in this whole situation? That’s a very specific and a bigger question.

**Z:** In the second section I spoke to many women, many young women who also took a knee. I wanted to make sure there was gender balance in the book, partly because I didn’t want them written out of this history and partly because women in this country, Black women, have been the backbone of the Black Lives Matter movement, and that has represented itself in sports, and that should be something that’s made very, very clear. The cheerleaders... what I found interesting about talking to the cheerleaders is that they take very seriously the idea of being, like, the face of the school, and that can have, I think, a very conservatising effect, which is understandable, about why our minds might not go to cheerleaders as being at the tip of the spear of resistance, but the immensity of the movement outside of the school pushed them to say, “Well where is our school in terms of what’s happening? And shouldn’t we be a link in the chain of trying to push back? Shouldn’t our school represent those ideals as well?” And oftentimes, also, the cheerleaders were frustrated because—you know, maybe this is, connected to sexism as well—they were, several I spoke to were like, “We wanted to wait for the football team to do it first, and then the plan was to support the football team.” But then when the football players wouldn’t do it because they were nervous about losing scholarships or status or entitlement or just didn’t agree politically, whatever the reason might be, they stepped forward, and they were like, “Then we have to fill that vacuum.” And there’s something very powerful there about feeling like, “We’re representing our school, and our society is a disaster, therefore our school, if we are an educational institution, needs to put forward that very forthrightly.”

**M:** And, I just want to mention one name here. Again this is just partly personal in a sense, but to ask you about Megan Rapinoe...

**Z:** Yes.

**M:** I saw an interview with her on television and I was *so* struck by her because it wasn’t like an interview—I’ve seen quite a few interviews with political sportspeople who’ve taken a political stand, sometimes very good ones—but the interview was like they were speaking to... were speaking Naomi Klein or someone similar. In other words, speaking to her, she was completely politically sussed, it was like she had a complete programme, she was sorted on all the issues, and I thought that perhaps someone like that, who is the captain of your women’s football team, was just extraordinary, and it spoke to me of profound changes in American society...

**Z:** Definitely. Interviewing Megan Rapinoe for the book was terrific, too, because I have Megan’s email address from before she became known to the world, and, you know, since she’s become known, understandably, it’s more difficult to get in touch with her on that personal level because they have people who help them do that when you’re at that level, but when I emailed her about, “Can I interview you for this book, *The Kaepernick Effect* because you’re so important to that history as the first White athlete of any prominence to take a knee, male or female?” she got back to me in minutes and was just like, “Let’s do this, let’s absolutely talk about this.” So the level of political seriousness that she brings to the project of building a better world is really impressive, and she comes about it very, very honestly, you know. Her background is from a working-class family in California. Her brother spent significant time in prison, and she was one of the first out LGBTQ athletes on the soccer team, and this really has pushed her to also try to come up with a way to understand a world... she’s also been at the forefront of equal pay for men’s and women’s soccer. So, you know, this is a highly political person, so therefore, when you have someone this political, when she took her knee—especially as a White woman—she knew she’d better have a very clear explanation for not just defending her right to take a knee, to push back against the right-wing hordes (because you need to have that too), but she also needed to be able to explain to what is a

fractured left in the United States about why White people need to fight racism. And that made her a must to speak with for the book.

**M:** And what you said about her leads directly on to my next question and that is how class plays in all this. I mean, you've referred to the particular role played by American football, as the national religion and so on: Am I right in thinking that American football is more a blue-collar, working-class game in terms of its fan base than any of the other sports?

**Z:** Well it's an interesting reflection of the United States because the games are too expensive for blue-collar, working-class people to attend, but they are the backbone of the fan base. So it's an interesting class dynamic in terms of who watches and imbibes the NFL. Huge numbers, I think, it's over 45 per cent of women are NFL fans as well. That's why I talk about it being like a religion or like a shared language. It's not a shared working-class language, it's a shared nationalist language, which also means that it can oftentimes be quite reactionary.

**M:** Yes. If you'd asked me before all of this happened which sport is the least likely to be the focus for a radical revolt? I would have said football...

**Z:** Of course!

**M:** ...and I would have expected track and field, athletics, even baseball or certainly basketball to be more in the forefront.

**Z:** Well football—this is important to say for a European audience—American football is the only major sport that does not have guaranteed contracts. So you can have signed a five-year contract and be cut after the first year; there's no job security. And that breeds a certain small-c conservatism, because, you know, if you speak out, your contract isn't worth a damn. Also it's a sport that's brutal on the body, it's got a 100 per cent injury rate, but it's also a sport that's highly dependent on Black labour and the exploitation of the Black body, yet there's not one Black franchise owner and very few Black coaches and executives, so a football player named Michael Bennett once said to me: "You know, a lot of people think the NFL is integrated, but it's actually not integrated. It's segregated between those who play and put their bodies on the line and those who watch and make

billions." Those who own, I should say: those who own and make billions.

**M:** Yeah, and do you think there was a kind of class element in that revolt?

**Z:** Oh yes! Very strongly. I think that that was what made the NFL ownership class completely freak out. That's why Colin Kaepernick never got a job again. Because they decided, even though he's a very talented player, they decided he has more value as a ghost story to haunt a young generation of players than he does as someone who can help them win games. And so, there's that deep, deep concern that in this hyper-authoritarian sport, players are going to stop doing what they tell them to do, and that's the class element part. So, even separate from the fight against racism and police violence, there's this idea that the workers are restless in a sport where the racial contradictions are very intense.

**M:** Right. But that leads me on to asking you about the international impact. Now, I'm very struck how the idea of taking a knee has spread in European and British football. And I think I slightly disagreed with you about this, because you said it's kind of approved of and therefore—yes, that's true—but I do think it's very important because if you go back to the seventies and eighties in Britain, when fascism, neo-nazism and the National Front and so on was very much on the rise, a lot of it was based in among football fans. And even more recently with the English Defense League and so on, a lot of this was football supporters. So the fact is that English footballers were taking a knee, and sections of the fans were booing them for this, and the government's initial response, the Tory government's initial response, was to defend the fans.

**Z:** Yeah.

**M:** Now they were caught because they kind of have to be officially anti-racist, but it was very significant that after the English soccer team did well in the European football—nearly won the championship—after that, Boris Johnson asked them to an official reception, and they refused to go. I mean that's an astonishing thing.

**Z:** Powerful. Yeah, I'm really glad you said that because I've talked about—and I do stand by this—that there's a political difference between a team doing



it as a sanctioned activity and somebody stepping out from the team and taking a knee.

**M:** Yes, of course

**Z:** it's a different kind of dynamic, but in any of these societies, whether you're talking about Great Britain or whether you're talking about the United States, when you have people—particularly White athletes, frankly—step out against racism, that forces the fan, who is going there, most likely, to not think about these issues, to have to confront these issues in themselves, and I think we assume too much that by confronting that within themselves they're going to draw reactionary conclusions and say, "I don't want this," but that's not the case. I mean, from all of my work in looking at this, you see that there are of course some who draw those kinds of conclusions, like, "How dare you do this! I'm going to threaten you with violence now so you stop." But there are other folks who really think about it

**M:** Yeah. And what the taking a knee movement has interacted with is of course the police murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter explosion—I mean Black Lives Matter was around before, but that huge new level that it went to, as you say, that they had the biggest street protests in American history—and that also resonated around the world, and it was very striking here that it wasn't just solidarity. It wasn't like, say, anti-apartheid where there's this bad thing going on in South Africa and you stand with the people of South Africa against the injustice of apartheid. It wasn't just that. It became a rallying cry for Black people everywhere, about the racism they were facing in their own society.

**Z:** Yes. And this is great talking to you because I'm formulating stuff I hadn't thought about even with all these months of sitting with this book. When we were talking about what makes Kaepernick different, in terms of his effect, from some of these athletes in the past, this is certainly very high on the list. This idea that people immediately saw themselves in what he did and saw their own communities in what he did. Now, some of that has to do with the fact that *everybody* was outraged about the killing of George Floyd, so everyone is experiencing that at the same time, but it also forces you to look locally and ask yourself could this happen in my community, and far

too often in the United States that answer is an unequivocal yes.

**M:** Absolutely. And even in Ireland, which has been largely White until recently, and you don't have a community of color on anything like the scale or as established as you do in Britain, but nevertheless it all resonated. There was a huge demonstration, by Dublin standards, in solidarity with Black Lives Matter, organised by Africans in Ireland, and Black students. It was right at the height of COVID when nobody was demonstrating and suddenly there were thousands, perhaps ten thousand people, on the streets of Dublin, which is, you know, a massive demonstration. So it had a huge impact, and then, similarly, you know, when you've got somebody killed by police, a Black man, George Nkencho, killed by the police, people didn't know how to deal with that. It was the first time it had happened, and it produced all sorts of confused reactions among people. Nevertheless, the symbolism was there. At the demonstration on O'Connell Street in Dublin, people were taking knees. And there's a longstanding case of a young White, Irish, working-class lad, Terence Wheelock, killed by police in a Garda station sixteen years ago. They demonstrated outside the Irish parliament, sixteen years they've been campaigning for justice for this boy, but now they were using the language from Black Lives Matter.

**Z:** Amazing.

**M:** "Say his name!" "Terence Wheelock." The call and response: "Say his name!" Okay. My last point is that in the book, one of the things that's great in the book, is how in all the individual stories you see the interconnection to what's going on in the society as a whole, that each little episode becomes—and I think history works like this—a microcosm of wider social causes and wider changes and so on. And the sporting moments, when you look back, were part of a wider history—Joe Louis and Jesse Owens were part of the 1930s and anti-fascism, Muhammad Ali was part of the sixties, civil rights, Black power, and so on; they were a product of that. It's clear that this, the taking a knee and Black Lives Matter and so on—which are themselves connected—are part of the emergence of a new left, if that's the right way to put it, in America. I have watched this unfold over the last twenty years, really. Occupy was a moment in it, Bernie Sanders was a moment. I remember the shock I got when I first

saw Bernie Sanders, someone who calls themselves a socialist, looking like he was going to win a primary... and saying, "My God, something is happening." And then you get AOC and the squad, the DSA, the Me Too movement, Standing Rock... It's clear, in sum, that there is a general shift, partly generational, but partly wider, social—maybe class based—occurring, and you say in the book that you're very optimistic about this generation and about how the Kaepernick movement will fit into that and so on. Actually, I share your optimism. My last question to you is—obviously none of us know—but how do you see all of this playing out? Where do you see it going from here? What are your thoughts about it, just to conclude?

**Z:** First and foremost, before I say where this is going, I just want to say that I feel like my optimism is a new optimism and it's rooted very much materially in these months of conversations that I've had with these young folks. I mean, I was not feeling, with the onset of COVID, very optimistic about prospects for positive change. And one of the reasons why is the inequality in the United States, which really is epic and historic. It splits both ways: it builds the left *and* it builds the right, and that's very frightening; to see the right become what it is in the United States. But I'm still optimistic, even with that, and I'm optimistic for the reasons I said earlier: this generation is simply not going to settle for things that other generations were willing to settle for. You know, they want a world without police violence, and what that world looks like and whether it's a capitalist society or not... I mean all those questions get thrown up. You look at the statistics of the number of young people who call themselves socialists and who self-identify that way, it's staggering. It's really staggering. And the right calls socialism, on Fox News they call it the Frankenstein monster, because it refuses to die. And frankly I think that's a much more apt definition of fascism. I view socialism, not like Frankenstein's monster, but I view it as somebody who's been very human, very alive...

**M:** Mary Shelley would be on your side there.

**Z:** Yeah. Very human, very alive, very flawed, and for the first time in a long time getting to its feet and presenting itself to the world. And that makes me very optimistic as well. Where this goes... the only thing I know for sure is that the wine is out of the bottle, and

the idea of saying that athletes can't be political or that you can't challenge the logic of the national anthem and everything it represents, those days are as dead as fried chicken.