

# Black Lives Still Matter to NBA Players Even If the League Doesn't Think So

What has been obscured by statements about NBA progressivity is the fact that players, and not the league itself, are leading the resistance.

This essay discusses state-sanctioned violence and Black death

**By Aja Witt**

**Positioned at the intersection** of a global pandemic, a presidential election, and nationwide protests against the repeated killing of Black people by police, 2020 was easily a record year for activism. May through August have even been dubbed [“the summer of activism”](#) by NBC. George Floyd’s murder under the knee of a Minneapolis, MN police officer in late May was identified as a [“breaking point”](#) for American and international activism, both on and offline, with the video of Floyd’s murder serving as further irrefutable proof of police brutality. Everyday people took to the streets, marching and protesting in Floyd’s name. Months later, sporting leagues resumed their seasons with an apparent activist focus, holding [moments of reflection](#), and [taking a knee](#) before games.

But one league’s activism stood out, head and shoulders, above the rest—or at least that’s what CNN wanted us to believe. In August of 2020, just one month following its 2019-2020 season restart, the NBA was said to [“routinely \[lead\] the way in sports activism”](#). While it’s true that the NBA has historically been more activist focused than other leagues, and has done more for the visibility of the Black Lives Matter Movement in sport than the NFL, the MLB, and *certainly* the [NHL](#)—which couldn’t be bothered to cancel games after the police shooting of Jacob Blake on August 26—it is the WNBA that has represented a model of consistency when it comes to activism that is much more revolutionary than anything we’ve seen from the NBA. What is also obscured by statements about NBA progressivity is the fact that players, and not the league itself, are leading this resistance.

In 2016, when former NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick began kneeling to protest police brutality, NBA Commissioner Adam Silver demanded his players [“line up in a dignified posture along the sidelines or on the foul line”](#) during the anthem. The NBA, choosing to uphold a rule issued in 1981, was even prepared to penalize players and teams with suspensions and fines for violating that rule. But players still banned together, locking arms during the anthem since they were prohibited from kneeling, and discussing state violence off the court through their [social media](#) and in interviews. Not much has changed as the NBA is still *highly* selective about what forms of activism make it onto their courts. When Miami Heat guard Jimmy Butler wanted to wear a blank jersey without a name plate on it, instead of a league-approved “social justice jersey” to represent who he’d be if he weren’t an NBA player, the league said no and Butler was forced to change.



Jimmy Butler before the Miami Heat vs. Denver Nuggets game on August 1, 2020 (*USAToday Sports*).

Three months following Butler’s protest, in October of 2020, Commissioner Silver announced that social justice messages would be delivered “off the floor” for the 2020-2021 season in a “return to normalcy.” The league would soon remove the “Black Lives Matter” logo it displayed at center court beginning in July of 2020.



The New Orleans Pelicans and Utah Jazz kneel during the national anthem on opening night of the NBA’s 2019-2020 season restart (Ashley Landis-Pool via Getty Images).

For Silver, “normal” must mean pretending that, in a league where [74 percent of players are Black](#), they can simply ignore issues plaguing the Black community. For the NBA, support for a social justice movement must mean only when it’s popular or convenient. The 2020-2021 season

hasn't seen much of anything addressing anti-Black state violence from most sporting leagues. Sports journalist Terence Moore asked in January of this year, "[Where has the sports world's support for Black Lives Matter gone?](#)" and largely, it has "gone" to the players who continue to support the movement in spite of the league.

Miami Heat forward, [Bam Adebayo has remained vocal](#), finishing every virtual press conference by saying "Black Lives Matter." On February 5, Adebayo even recognized what should have been Trayvon Martin's 26th birthday and stated "everybody tell Trayvon Martin happy birthday" to end an interview. In mid-February, led by players Fred VanVleet and Norman Powell, the Toronto Raptors announced a partnership with Toronto-based artists [Adeyemi Adegbesan](#) and [Mark Stoddart](#) to launch a fundraising effort where 100% of the proceeds would go to local non-profits in support of the Black community.

Similarly, beginning in February, and continuing throughout the remainder of the season, the Chicago Bulls, together with players Zach LaVine, Thaddeus Young and Coby White, have launched their "bigger than basketball" campaign. [LaVine](#) has utilized social media to address police brutality, while [Young](#) has used interviews to comment on "the talk" he's had to give his sons — just 9 and 6 years old — about racism and police violence. [White](#) has chosen to raise awareness for the fight against anti-Black violence and "unsung heroes in the Black community" through hoodies worn throughout the month of February which he later posts to social media.

It is clear that, despite the NBA and Commissioner Silver's rejection of the movement, players throughout the league are embracing activism and social justice during the 2020-2021 season. Global sports-media conglomerates like the NBA have long presented themselves, and are presented by mainstream news media, as "progressive", but maintain a hesitancy to include politics that might alienate their fanbase. For the NBA, that fanbase is *not* majority white as is seen with the NFL, MLB, and NHL. In fact, the NBA is the only top North American sporting league with a [majority Black fanbase](#) at 45 percent of its viewers. Still, in a league where the overwhelming majority of owners, offices and coaches are [white men over the age of 40](#), one might expect issues important to Black lives to be overlooked. Luckily, players, who are some of the most visible figures within the Black community, are not allowing that to happen.

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