

# Ross Initiative in Sports for Equality



## **THE ATHLETE'S QUEST FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE:** An examination of 2017 Goals and Impact



## Executive summary

2017 was a season of heightened awareness and actions as various NFL athletes used their platforms to raise awareness about social injustice. With the launch of the Players Coalition, the decision of several athletes to kneel during the national anthem to highlight racial injustice, and ongoing discussions between players and league owners aimed at building collective support for fighting inequality, these actions became the center point of a national debate.

This report aims to evaluate the impact of those actions while collating and analyzing a variety of efforts, some public - and some made outside the spotlight - seeking to bring about social change. Informed by Torres-Harding, Siers & Olson (2011), RISE developed five “goals” of social justice work and used them to examine the examples of advocacy we collected during the year. These goals are:

1. **Raising a sense of awareness about inequality** – Actions intended to highlight, educate or otherwise raise awareness about a particular cause, problem or challenge.
2. **Protecting human rights** – Actions geared toward directly protecting the lives of those in disadvantaged conditions.
3. **Empowering individuals** – giving voice – Actions intended to improve the capacity of individuals in disadvantaged and unjust conditions.
4. **Encouraging civic participation and advocacy** – Actions specifically aimed at encouraging more people to participate in civil society and use their voices and actions to bring about a more just society.
5. **Increasing access to resources** – Actions designed specifically to improve access because of the lack of power or control over resources as a major cause of the state of injustice in which many find themselves.

In 2017, NFL athletes sparked a discussion that society desperately needs and have done so in the face of ridicule and critique from voices as loud and as influential as the president of the United States. The athletes were thoughtful, purposeful and strategic in their work forging alliances and are increasingly educated about issues and focused on making direct change. This leadership didn't begin with the 2017 NFL season and likely will continue to grow in influence and impact in future seasons.

## Introduction

The “activist athlete” resurgence was cemented during the 2017 NFL season. Athletes and teams continued and increased their previous efforts to effect change – and received more attention than ever before. When RISE began collating and evaluating athlete advocacy efforts in late 2016, much of the public's perception and framing positioned athletes as activists engaged in “protest”. Our analyses found that while some of the work undertaken by athletes involved what in widespread media reports was referred to as “protest,” there were five other notable ways in which athletes were using their platforms to bring about social change:

- |                      |                            |
|----------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Public statements | 4. Community outreach      |
| 2. Special apparel   | 5. Financial contributions |
| 3. Collective action | 6. Protest                 |

This trend continued in 2017 as many of the athletes and teams to whom we spoke still were engaged in advocacy on many fronts. Our initial report therefore questioned the narrative of athletes simply being “protestors” and suggested they were more broadly engaged in advocacy work. The report on 2016 outlined the ways in which athletes engaged in such work and concluded by making the following recommendations to leagues, teams and other stakeholders seeking to support and grow the sustainability and impact of this work:

1. **Education: On the Issues, Tactics and History.** Create increased opportunities for athletes to learn about policy reforms and solutions to the issues they care about.
2. **Internal: Space for Discussion, Perspective Sharing and Solution Building.** Create a private platform for athletes to discuss among themselves or with mentors the challenges of having to navigate the varied expectations, roles and goals they have for themselves as players and as activists.
3. **External: Building a Network for Collaboration, Support, Training and Strategy.** Provide athletes with a network of support not just from their teammates but their team ownership, league and others in the sports industry.
4. **Engagement: Community Leaders and Beyond.** Develop strong alliances with key stakeholders in the athletes’ own community. These stakeholders include law enforcement, youth, community activists, grassroots organizations, lawmakers and policy leaders.
5. **Moving from Protest to Action: Study Impact, Provide Feedback and Stay Organic.** To enable sustainable change, couple activism with tangible next steps that are informed and supported by the communities in which athletes work.

This year’s report highlights the work that athletes, coaches and sports organizations have undertaken in 2017. It also examines the goals and impact of the actions taken by players. Finally, the report builds on our previous recommendations of how sports leaders can increase impact and sustainability in future seasons.

## Analysis

Our data collection began immediately following Super Bowl LI and focused on compiling reports of athlete-led actions at the high school, collegiate and professional levels from the mainstream media, social media and other sources. Data collection took into account any action taken by a player, organization or team that could be considered related to social justice goals. Social justice in this case describes efforts to promote equality – of opportunity, privilege and access to economic wealth. Data was collected from March 17, 2017 through Dec. 11, 2017. Our team reviewed 1,145 unique instances of athlete activism and coded them into six possible action types identified in the report about 2016 published in February 2017.

A second type of data collection involved interviewing players about their social justice work. These interviews aimed to get a sense of the scope of their work, goals, impact and perceived success. Based on these interviews, player profiles were developed to provide some indication of the breadth and scope of player’s social justice efforts.

Finally, RISE has been fortunate to interact with teams at the professional, collegiate and high school levels. Information has been gathered from them using surveys and other informal processes. The information and knowledge we obtained through these interactions also have been included in our discussion and analysis.

## Challenge combatted

For each activist action that individuals engaged in, a primary area of concern was identified as central to their reason for participation. Of the 1,145 actions examined, 1,112 were identified to have a single reason for activist actions with several others being more general in their aims. Individuals in the sample engaged in activist activities for a wide number of concerns, but overwhelmingly actions targeted racism and inequality.

**More than 70% of all actions that targeted a single challenge attempted to confront racism.**

In fact, more than 70% of all actions that targeted a single challenge attempted to confront racism. Similarly, individuals also engaged in activism for concerns of some individuals not having access to resources or a general lack of opportunities, injustice (in general) and gender inequality or concerns such as domestic violence. Multiple activist activities also centered on natural disasters, with many prominent athletes calling for support in fighting wild fires and the hurricanes impacting Texas, Florida and the Caribbean. Finally, several of the actions were directed at health initiatives, including cancer, multiple sclerosis and mental health.

## Type of action

We classified activism activities into the six categories identified in last year's report.

1. **Collective action** – Any action that calls for unity and a collective voice on a societal issue. Examples would be the players linking arms during the national anthem or an athlete who supports teammates in their own advocacy causes.
2. **Community outreach** – Any action that extends a player's area of influence to a community partner or larger societal cause. Examples would include players participating in a ride-along with local police or visiting local schools or hospitals.
3. **Financial contribution** – Any action that provides financial support to a societal cause. Examples would be donations collected for hurricane relief, the Las Vegas shooting or cancer research.
4. **Protest** – Any action that moves counter to accepted norms in an attempt to demonstrate some inequality or social injustice. Examples would be players kneeling or raising a fist during the national anthem to protest police brutality.
5. **Public statement** – Any action that distributes athletes' views or calls to action toward a social cause or issue. Examples would be an athlete tweeting support for free speech, a public service announcement about suicide prevention or speaking on an activism panel.
6. **Special apparel** – Any action that brings attention to a societal issue because of specially designed apparel or equipment. Examples would be wearing a shirt with a message about social justice, wearing a decal in support of a local cause or the "My Cause My Cleats" NFL campaign.



Detroit Pistons players visit a Detroit area high school.



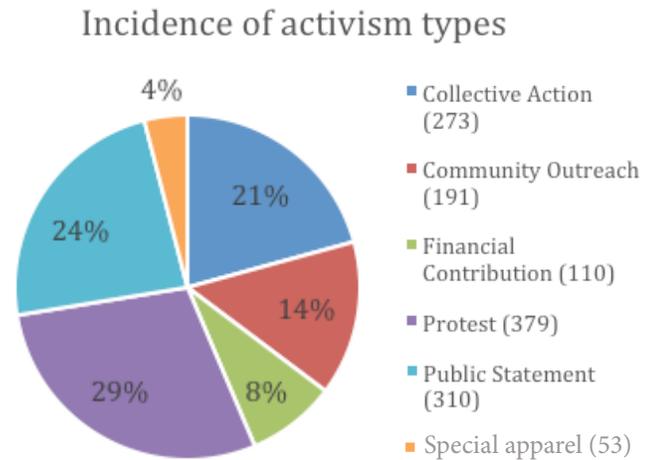
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Indianapolis Colts players wear pre-game warm-up shirts to express what they stand for.

Similar to last year's findings we saw that athletes used their platforms in a variety of manners in hopes that their voices would elicit positive change. The most commonly used was protest, followed by public statements, collective action and community outreach.



**FIGURE ONE: INCIDENCE OF EACH ACTIVISM TYPE BY PERCENTAGE**



## Goals of action

One of this report's aims is to establish that athletes viewed themselves as social justice advocates, and, as such, the goals of their work went beyond simply "protesting." Additionally, by identifying the goals of player advocacy, we hope to see the extent to which their actions were effective. While the data suggests that a large percentage of the activity captured and shared in the media involved the protests during the anthem, it also highlights that such activism represented just a third of what athletes did. This suggests that athletes had other goals in mind as they engaged in their work.

A review of the literature on social justice work suggests that this type of work involves highlighting the injustices that exist and working to dissolve the structures and situations that allow those imbalances to exist and be perpetuated (Torres-Harding, Siers & Olson, 2011). Accordingly, social justice work might be thought of as having five related goals:

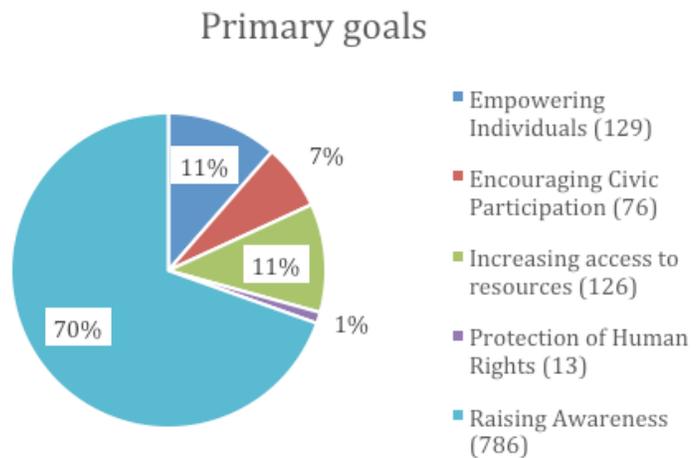
1. **Raising a sense of awareness about inequality** – Actions could be geared toward highlighting a particular cause, problem or challenge. Such work is typically focused on educating others that such an injustice exists and potentially outlining the ways in which the challenge might be addressed. Actions such as protests usually are aligned with this goal of raising awareness or calling attention to a specific issue.
2. **Protecting human rights** – Actions intended to protect the lives of those existing in disadvantaged conditions. This might involve removing them from situations that are physically or life threatening or being involved in work that reduces the incidence and severity of the harm that victims might face.
3. **Empowering individuals** – giving voice – Actions geared toward improving the self-esteem and capacity of individuals who exist in disadvantaged and unjust conditions. These actions build their awareness and capacity so they can remove themselves from unjust circumstances or perhaps sustain their emancipation.
4. **Encouraging civic participation and advocacy** – Actions specifically aimed toward encouraging more people to participate in civil society and use their voices and actions to bring about a more just society. Work in this area is especially driven by the principles of democracy and freedom of speech.
5. **Increasing access to resources** – Actions designed specifically to increase the access the underprivileged have to resources and, ultimately, the power and control they have over their lives and social conditions. A lack of power or control over resources is a major cause of the state of injustice in which many find themselves.

For every instance of activism collected, we coded the perceived goals of the action. Each action could have several goals. Our analysis here, however, is focused on the primary goals perceived to be the main reason for players' actions.

## The most frequent goal for activism actions was raising awareness.

The most frequent goal for activism actions was raising awareness. In fact, raising awareness was the primary purpose of nearly 70% of the activism done. Athletes used these actions to draw attention to some perceived injustice or social cause that was either neglected or not receiving the attention they felt it deserved. Examples of actions that aligned with this primary goal included public service announcements calling for fans to stand against racism, athletes kneeling, athletes tweeting support for various organizations and the New York Red Bulls signing a cancer patient to a one-day contract. Although these actions varied considerably, activists hoped their actions would encourage conversation and awareness of the issue.

**FIGURE TWO:  
INCIDENCE OF PRIMARY  
GOALS BY PERCENTAGE.**



### Effectiveness of activism/action

Ultimately, the effectiveness of activism/action in 2017 must be analyzed against the perceived goals that athletes were trying to achieve. The following section examines some of the advocacy in which players/teams have been involved over the past year and attempts to assess its effectiveness by juxtaposing them against one of the five social justice goals previously identified. Importantly, much of the work in which teams and athletes have been engaged beyond the field hasn't received the same attention as the demonstrations during the anthem. Our involvement and conversations with the players and teams revealed that in many cases social justice efforts have moved beyond demonstrations on the field into the cities and communities in which teams are located. Unfortunately, much of that work is beyond the view of the public, especially players' critics. Understandably, this lack of knowledge also makes attempts to assess their effectiveness challenging. We will therefore examine the effectiveness of raising awareness and then discuss other social justice goals by outlining specific projects and initiatives that may be less visible and discuss their specific criteria for success.

**Anquan Boldin**   
@AnquanBoldin

Another productive mtg this am talking criminal justice reform & police & community relations w/ @SenGaryPeters.



6:37 AM - 30 Mar 2017

## Raising awareness

Looking specifically at the movement in which NFL players have been involved, it's difficult to gauge their level of success. While many of the players' and teams' specific initiatives have been met, there has been a broader question about whether the overarching goals of reduced police brutality and improved accountability have been achieved.

**If the major goal of players in this movement has been to raise the awareness about police brutality and improved accountability, then one may argue it has been successful.**

If, as the data outlines, the major goal of players in this movement has been to raise the awareness about this issue, then one may argue it has been successful. Discussions about race, police brutality and systemic racism are perhaps as common as they had been during the civil rights movement. This prevalence is in large part because of the ability of athletes to reach a wide audience and keep the conversation relevant.

While athletes' efforts and actions have attracted a lot of attention, there are two big questions that are worth consideration regarding effectiveness. The first has to do with whether the root issue that players have tried to address through their demonstrations has received the same level of attention as the demonstrations themselves. While athletes taking a knee and others who have demonstrated have stated continuously that the protest wasn't about the military, those opposed to this form of action have rallied to divert the narrative.

**In some ways the message of oppression, racism and police brutality has been rivaled by voices calling athletes' activism "national anthem protest."**

In some ways the message of oppression, racism and police brutality has been rivaled by voices calling athletes' activism "national anthem protest." Some have argued therefore that demonstrations during the anthem might not be effective because they are distracting. Secondly, a question that should be examined is whether such demonstrations about which the American public is so deeply divided can lead to a unified society. One of the qualities of Martin Luther King Jr.'s work that has received the most acclaim has been his pursuit of equality for all. Some contend that "athlete activism" should focus more on unifying the country than further dividing it. If athletes' demonstrations widen the cracks in the fabric of the society, can they be considered effective?

Understandably, raising awareness was a goal that athletes could achieve easily given their level of fame and the use of social media platforms to reach a large segment of the population directly. It's easy to understand therefore why so many athletes got engaged in demonstrating their support for a wide range of social justice causes. Some contend that while raising awareness about issues of injustice is in itself a worthwhile goal of social justice work – one which athletes have been able to achieve, athletes' efforts should move beyond this goal. We should note that several players who took action focused on raising awareness also got involved in other types of advocacy. Michael Bennett, Megan Rapinoe, Chris Long, Johnson Bademosi and Maya Moore all have been engaged in projects within their communities geared toward increasing access to resources and educating and empowering others to effect social change.

## Empowering Individuals – giving voice

Raising awareness was the main goal for the vast majority of players; however, there were also other goals that athletes and their teams hoped to accomplish. Many players have discussed that the goal upon which they are most focused has been educating and empowering various stakeholders in their communities so that they are in a better position to take advantage of opportunities or to advocate for themselves. Several teams, leagues and players have used mentoring, anti-bullying and other such programs as a means to fulfill this goal. While we saw evidence of several of these programs over the course of 2017, one challenge of such work is that their impact cannot always be assessed immediately. Part of that is based on the lack of metrics built into these types of programming; the other is related to the long-term nature of the work itself.

One of these types of programs in which the NBA, its teams and players have been actively involved across 2017 is known as Building Bridges Through Basketball. In partnership with local community organizations, including Boys & Girls Clubs, police athletic leagues and recreation commissions, the NBA and RISE worked together on leadership programming that aims to strengthen ties between law enforcement and the communities they serve by using basketball as a vehicle to facilitate important but difficult conversations. Launched in early 2017, the Building Bridges program brings together youth, law enforcement, coaches and other youth specialists over a period of 10 weeks to have discussions about race, identity, implicit bias, leadership, trust and conflict resolution. In these sessions officers and coaches facilitate hour-long conversations with youth and then play basketball with them for 90 minutes. This program took place in New Orleans, Detroit and Chicago in 2017 and began in Los Angeles in early 2018. Players (past and present) attend sessions with the participants, and youth also have the opportunity to attend team games or league events. To assess the impact of these programs, participants are given a survey before and after program participation to assess the change in their attitudes, knowledge and satisfaction levels. In January 2018, the NHL started a similar program with RISE in Tampa titled Full Strength: Uniting Communities through Hockey.



RISE, the Detroit Pistons, S.A.Y Detroit Play and the Detroit Police Athletic League team up for the Building Bridges Through Basketball program with local youth.

## Encouraging civic participation and advocacy

One of the goals that is central to the realization of social justice is encouraging and supporting those who have less access to resources to be a part of civil society and the democratic process. If those who traditionally have been without power can overcome the obstacles they face and participate in the civic process, the hope is they can influence the process that determines their circumstance. To this end there have been attempts by players, teams and colleges throughout the year to provide the impetus for increased civic engagement; several of these have taken the shape of town halls or community conversations.

**Community conversations and town halls** – Teams have hosted town halls and community conversations in which their owners, players, lawmakers, fans and youth have been able to have structured, solutions-focused conversations and debate about the state of race relations and the actions that players have taken and would like to take. Focused on empowerment and encouraging advocacy, these conversations allow people from varying backgrounds to hear and articulate relevant perspectives and move the conversation forward in a positive manner. Sometimes, they also have an educational component in which youth and coaches have discussions about these tough issues. At other times, they have subject matter experts who are able to provide expertise and guidance around difficult matters. Some of these conversations have been held with the Golden State Warriors, New York Liberty, Indianapolis Colts and Atlanta Falcons. Others also have been at colleges and universities, such as the University of Michigan and San Jose State University.



University of Michigan and RISE collaborate for an MLK Day town hall in 2017.

To be effective and impactful these conversations need to not only allow stakeholders to discuss the challenges that they face, but they also should remain solutions oriented. An outcome of these conversations in which RISE has been involved is a list of actionable items or next steps that can help teams, schools and communities to chart their way forward.

**RISE to Vote** – Working with RISE, state and local election officials and nonpartisan organizations, several teams in professional sports leagues engaged in discussions about the history and importance of voting and having a voice and, ultimately, registering to vote. The San Antonio Spurs, Brooklyn Nets, Atlanta Hawks, Atlanta Falcons, Los Angeles Rams and Miami Dolphins participated in this program in which Martin Luther King III and others highlight the importance of being informed and engaged citizens. The goal at each session is to inspire team members and players to register to vote regardless of their political affiliation and engage them as leaders among their peers and fans to encourage them to do the same. The project, recent recipient of a Democracy Fund Voice grant, resonates with players and teams and has opened their eyes to the power they can have in their communities.



Martin Luther King III and RISE work with the Miami Dolphins to register players to vote.

## Increasing access to resources

Many athletes and teams have used, to great success, their platform to increase access to resources. Houston Texans player J.J. Watt may have garnered the most attention with his efforts that helped raise more than \$37 million for Hurricane Harvey relief. Watts was able to realize far more than his initial goal of \$100,000, demonstrating the effectiveness of players to advocate for their causes. Players whose social justice initiatives have focused on race and race relations also were successful across the year 2017.

**\$37,068,102 for Houston flood relief was raised  
by JJ Watt and more than 209,000 donors.**

\*Source: [www.youcaring.com](http://www.youcaring.com)

**Miami Dolphins Project Change Scholarship** – As a part of its internal discussions about what the team could do to build its community and empower youth to become leaders advocating for change, the Miami Dolphins recently launched a scholarship that will select one student a year and pay college tuition for them for four years. The goal of the scholarship is to identify and support the education of youth who have been involved in social justice work so they in turn can continue to be better educated and positioned to make a difference in their communities. As part of Dolphins' broader Social Justice Grant program, the team will earmark funds to impact organizations in need that are involved in community engagement, education or justice reform. The Dolphins are also sponsoring the work of the Police Athletic League of North Miami and will host a youth/police conference with the 5000 Role Models Excellence Project.

**Colin Kaepernick** – While much of the conversation about Kaepernick this year has focused on his free agency, he has continued to quietly focus on social justice work aimed at educating, empowering and increasing the access to resources for the underserved throughout the country. In 2016, Kaepernick pledged to donate \$1 million to organizations involved in social justice work, and, by the end of 2017, he had donated \$900,000 to 31 organizations across the country. One important feature of his giving has been tracking the goals and initiatives for which these groups will use the money. Grantees have ranged from the Black Veterans for Social Justice, Center for Reproductive Rights New York, Lower East Side Girls Club, Coalition for the Homeless and DREAM (formerly RBI Harlem). This range of donations by Kaepernick not only underscores his commitment to social justice but also demonstrates his understanding of the intersected nature of race-related and other social justice matters.

## Protection of human rights

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Perhaps the most difficult goal of the five for athletes to achieve is the protection of human rights. The most obvious challenge in this regard is that players aren't always equipped with the knowledge and time to engage in activities that will result in this objective. Some have suggested that players should perhaps focus on some of the advocacy goals that require fewer resources and expertise or they should partner with organizations or individuals who are longstanding leaders in this field. One effective effort that realized this goal in 2017 did just that.

Anquan Boldin and Malcolm Jenkins certainly have been the two most visible members of the Players Coalition, a group who engaged in several discussions with the NFL league office and NFL owners over the past year with the goal of collaborating with the NFL to work toward solutions to the racial inequality players are protesting during the national anthem. Boldin and Jenkins also have visited Congress on more than one occasion over the past year to discuss and advocate for criminal justice reform with lawmakers. They have released several statements advocating their position and the need for more work around social justice and advocacy, and Jenkins also has visited prisons in Pennsylvania and spoken to prison inmates there about the conditions and educational programs behind bars. Notably, their work has been supported by several members of Congress and led to the proposal of a bill, Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act of 2017.

Their work alongside 20 other players, such as Chris Long, Josh McCown, Glover Quin and Andrew Hawkins, also led to the proposal of the Police Reporting Information Data and Evidence (PRIDE) Act in 2017. These players have demonstrated their ability to use their platforms, networks and commitment to influence policy decisions at the highest level in the country. More work like this is needed since these policy and legislative decisions arguably may have some of the most far-reaching and lasting impact in the quest for reduced inequality.

## Other types of advocacy within the NFL

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While the demonstrations around the anthem have been the most publicized examples of action taken by players, there have been other efforts that have been considered effective. One outcome that has emerged from the athletes' movement that many view as impactful has been the formation of the NFL Players Coalition. The coalition was established to provide an opportunity for players to work with the NFL on creating solutions to the issues of police brutality, prison reform and racial injustice. Through the coalition's work, the players and NFL were able to negotiate an agreement in which the NFL will contribute \$89 million over seven years to local and national projects focused on social justice and racial equality. Malcolm Jenkins, co-founder of the coalition, pointed out that when he started his demonstration during the national anthem by raising a fist, he wanted to bring awareness to injustices suffered by communities of color; and, in his opinion, agreeing to this deal provided a better platform for him to continue his social justice work. This agreement has been hailed by many as a significant step by the league to address the concerns that players have had. Many viewed it as a means to end the "protest" that has drawn the ire of many, including the president of the United States.

Simultaneously, this agreement by the coalition has been critiqued by some players as stopping short of what many of them seek: an admission by the NFL that there is systemic racism within the society. One of the players who has knelt during the 2017 season says:

*“If you want to affect change when it comes to race and systematic racism and systematic oppression, the people who are at the top, the people who have all the money, the ones that this doesn’t affect ... it has got to be important to them. If it isn’t then ... it’s always gonna be the people at the bottom, scratching, crawling, fighting to make these issues important to them and ... that’s what’s been frustrating in the NFL. We felt like, if the owners came out and said hey we against racism we are against police brutality, we want accountability in our country we want equality in our country that that would potentially open up the eyes of the people in their circles ... It would have done a lot for the NFL, for the logo, for the shield for the people to see that the people at the top, they understand ...”*

Those players suggest that what they want and what America needs is an acceptance that racism exists. They say the league has done the expedient thing: “thrown money” at the issue as a means of silencing players and by extension the issue altogether. So, while there was progress made in terms of raising awareness and securing funds for projects dedicated to social justice and racial equality, the divide over this development speaks perfectly to the complexity of an issue like racism. It isn’t something to which there is a definitive answer. It also speaks to the range of opinions that athletes have about issues that affect them, their families and society. While the vast majority of athletes view racism as a concern, their opinions about how to address it and the ways in which they have gone about their advocacy have differed greatly.

## **Educating athletes: RISE workshops for NFL rookies**

One of the goals for leagues including the NFL has been increasing the education and preparedness of athletes as they enter professional life. These initiatives have taken different forms across leagues. As part of its work with the NFL on a number of initiatives this season, RISE had the opportunity to deliver workshops focused on race and race relations to teams across the league. As a part of the NFL Rookie Transition Program, RISE developed curriculum and led sessions with 24 teams.

RISE offered teams a choice of two workshops based upon the type of conversation in which teams wanted to engage. One option was a workshop titled “Identity & Diversity: What do you bring to the huddle?” that allowed rookies to explore their identities and biases and reflect on what it means to be a professional athlete. Diversity was discussed as something to be celebrated as it broadens our perspectives and expands our skill base. The second workshop, “Perspective Taking,”



RISE rookie session with the Los Angeles Chargers in December 2017.

focused on implicit biases and how they might impact our interactions. In both workshops rookies were challenged to consider how their experiences inform their individual perspectives, and the facilitators emphasized that successful leaders are those who are able to draw on the strengths of those with whom they engage – on the field, at home and in the community. The identity and diversity session was selected by 71% (17) teams while the other 29% (7) opted for the session on implicit bias.

A total of 360 rookies completed the RISE workshops between June and December 2017. Depending upon how many rookies each team had on their roster, the number of players in each session ranged from 12 to 26. A representative from RISE facilitated each session. In all instances, in addition to players, a staff member from the team (usually the director of player engagement) was present.

As a part of the module, RISE surveyed players about their experience during the session and later in the season added questions to gauge players' attitudes and opinions about social responsibility and racism. Survey results indicated an especially positive rookie experience during the workshop. Specifically, nearly all respondents (99%) thought the workshop was engaging and 96% were very satisfied with the session.

Players were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the following statements on social responsibility and race. The numbers below represent the percentage of rookies who agreed with the statement.

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY QUESTIONS		AGREED
<b>1</b>	I think sessions like these are important for players.	94%
<b>2</b>	I would participate in more sessions like these.	84%
<b>3</b>	I would consider engaging in social justice initiatives in the future.	91%
<b>4</b>	Athletes have an obligation to raise awareness about social justice issues.	73%
RACE-RELATED QUESTIONS		
<b>5</b>	Racism is still a concern in the U.S.	92%
<b>6</b>	Racism is a social justice cause.	95%
<b>7</b>	Too much emphasis is placed on the impact race and racism have on today's society.*	39%

*\*The fact that 39% of athletes agree with this statement means that most of them (61%) believe that race and racism are issues that still impact life in today's society.*

NFL rookies' responses to these questions suggests that a larger percentage of athletes view themselves having an important role to play in today's society in addressing injustice. Our interaction with the teams as a whole and the players more specifically, revealed the commitment many players and teams have for engaging in social justice work.

At the conclusion of each session rookies responded to a number of questions. Highlights of their responses are detailed below.

### 1. What did you like most about the session?

While 96% of players reported that they were satisfied with the session, this question is designed to glean what specifically players liked about the experience. Collectively, there were six aspects of the sessions that players said they enjoyed. By far, the interactive nature of the sessions appealed to players as they felt it allowed them to remain engaged and allowed them to contribute to the session. Fifty percent of rookie responses were grouped into that theme. This was followed by the sharing/reflection, which players felt allowed them to discuss ideas and perspectives with one another and think about their values and position on the subjects covered. Twenty-five percent of player responses fit into that theme. The following table shows the six themes identified and the percent of player responses.

	THEMES	OVERALL
1	Interactivity	50%
2	Sharing/reflection	25%
3	Informative	13%
4	Speaker	7%
5	Everything	3%
6	Miscellaneous	2%

### 2. What did you learn through participation in this session?

While it is good that rookies enjoyed the session and felt engaged, of greater importance is whether they learned anything through the experience. Overall rookies felt they learned about the importance of perspective taking, themselves (their identities and values) and the value of leadership. The value of diversity and accepting others were some other things players felt they learned. These were core goals of the session indicating alignment between what players gleaned and session objectives. The table shows the seven themes identified and the percent of rookie responses.

	THEMES	OVERALL
1	Perspective taking	25%
2	Identity/values	20%
3	Leadership	20%
4	Valuing diversity	19%
5	Awareness	8%
6	Miscellaneous	6%
7	Nothing	2%

## Varying effectiveness

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Many athletes to whom RISE has spoken have expressed a great deal of prudence, hope and optimism about the movement and their work. They note that social change is challenging and slow to accomplish. Accordingly, while there has been success, it has been incremental. They point to the increased conversations that are taking place and the ability to challenge views and use their platforms as definite successes. Kenny Stills of the Miami Dolphins, for instance, has said that “these are conversations that need to be had; we need to be able to see one another’s perspectives.” Others suggest that they may have done their part.

**The athlete’s role isn’t necessarily to become a subject matter expert but rather to support and empower those who are experts in this space to expand their expertise.**

Their role isn’t necessarily to become subject matter experts but rather to support and empower those who are experts in this space to expand their expertise. The athletes’ role, in their view, is to build alliances with those who can implement the education, training and policy changes needed and provide the awareness and support that those partners might not be able to achieve on their own. Accordingly, many athletes who have decided to use their platforms to serve as social justice activists have indicated that their voices are best served trying to raise awareness to causes and issues. Simultaneously, there is overwhelming evidence that athletes, and by extension the teams and leagues to which they belong, already may have the alliances they need to realize far more than just raising the public’s awareness. As we have illustrated through the examples examined above, this season has shown there has been a willingness to forge partnerships not just across teams, ownership and sports but across gender and races, as well.

## Athlete as social justice advocate

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In 2017, athletes were involved in a wide range of social justice causes and found myriad ways in which to provide their support to these causes. Many of today’s athletes are involved with social justice work through foundations and at a minimum work alongside their teams in community events and other charities. What we observed through our study of social justice work over the course of the year has been an increased focus on matters of race, race relations and their intersections with inequality.

Undoubtedly, the actions taken by NFL players over the past two seasons have received the most attention. In large part, the activism/actions of athletes in 2017 have continued a conversation that was reignited a few years ago and steadily has gained momentum (i.e. what role do sports and athletes play in our society). Some of the loudest critics of the recent movement have contended that sports are about entertainment and as such shouldn’t involve discussion about broad societal issues. A look at our data suggests that if that view was ever held, sports certainly have changed. Interestingly, such criticism has been directed at athletes involved in social justice work around racism and police brutality but not athletes working for other causes. Athletes who are involved in charity work to raise money/awareness for hurricane victims or help those with mental and other illnesses haven’t faced the type of critique and scrutiny as players who have opted to “take a knee.”

## **Athletes view themselves as instrumental members of their communities and the wider society and are anxious to use their status, expertise and reach as mechanisms to address inequity.**

Athletes view themselves as instrumental members of their communities and the wider society and are anxious to use their status, expertise and reach as mechanisms to address inequity. Raising awareness about injustices and advocating and encouraging others to take steps to bring about change were things that several athletes see as a natural extension of their role and platform. Interestingly, for many athletes this social justice work is also something that they continue doing when they have ended their playing careers. Swin Cash and Jalen Rose are two examples of athletes whose work is featured in this report. Significantly, this season Players Coalition co-founder Anquan Boldin announced his retirement from professional football to pursue a more active role in social justice work. These three athletes are recent examples that demonstrate players enduring view of themselves as advocates for justice and social change and their view of such work beyond simply a hobby or a pastime but as a career. It is exciting to think of sports as a space that might serve to equip athletes with the aptitude, passion and dedication to undertake fundamental social change. It reaffirms the enduring words of Nelson Mandela:

*“Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope where once there was only despair. It is more powerful than government in breaking down racial barriers.”*

### **Recommendations**

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As part of our mission to educate athletes, teams and leagues and amplify the social justice work in which some already are engaged, RISE made five recommendations that emanated from last year's report.

1. **Education: On the Issues, Tactics and History.** Create increased opportunities for athletes to learn about policy reforms and solutions to the issues they care about.
2. **Internal: Space for Discussion, Perspective Sharing and Solution Building.** Create a private platform for athletes to discuss among themselves or with mentors the challenges of having to navigate the varied expectations, roles and goals they have for themselves as players and as activists.
3. **External: Building a Network for Collaboration, Support, Training and Strategy.** Provide athletes with a network of support not just from their teammates but their team ownership, league and others in the sports industry.

4. **Engagement: Community Leaders and Beyond.** Develop strong alliances with key stakeholders in the athletes' own community. These stakeholders include law enforcement, youth, community activists, grassroots organizations, lawmakers and policy leaders.
5. **Moving from Protest to Action: Study Impact, Provide Feedback and Stay Organic.** To enable sustainable change, couple activism with tangible next steps that are informed and supported by the communities in which athletes work.

We believe that those five still provide great direction to athletes who would like to become involved in this work. We would like to offer three additional recommendations based on our analysis of advocacy over the year 2017, to build on the original five.

6. **Clearly communicate goals and metrics and report on progress regularly to stakeholders and fans.** Currently, a lot of players' work is difficult to quantify. If there is a clear goal and plan for achieving those goals, sport leagues, teams and athletes are in a much better position to highlight the progress they have made and the ways in which they have been able to bring about change.
7. **Find ways to amplify your message.** One easy way to amplify the impact of this work is for players and teams to begin aligning their efforts. If all efforts can be structured under one umbrella or initiative – like “#HurricaneMaria” – there is a greater chance of spreading the message and creating change.
8. **Work with others; know your strengths.** While teams and athletes should be as involved as they would like to be in their social justice initiatives, it may be valuable for them to focus their efforts and limited time on particular aspects of their cause while allowing content experts to focus on other aspects.

# ***APPENDIX***

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# ***ATHLETE PROFILES***

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As we have discussed during much of the report, athletes and teams have been involved in an extraordinary amount of work. While the broader set of actions collated over the period points to particular trends and patterns which underscore this conclusion, we also wanted to highlight examples of actions taken by some athletes at a more personal level. Accordingly, we are providing a close look at the work of some current and former athletes and their perspective about engaging in social justice initiatives. We feel that these profiles demonstrate the thoughtful, personal and strategic approach that athletes have taken to their causes. Perhaps equally as important, we hope that this perspective demonstrates the varied but intersected nature of athletes' social justice initiatives.

Throughout 2018 RISE will continue this research and additional profiles will be published to highlight the work of athletes. If interested in participating, email [info@RISEtoWIN.org](mailto:info@RISEtoWIN.org).

## ALEXIS BROWN

**Age:** 19 | **League/Institution:** Senior; University of California Davis | **Position:** Gymnast

### Athlete activism/social justice work

- Decided she would kneel during the national anthem at all of her gymnastics meets as a symbol of protest against police brutality and systemic racism.
- As an extension of her initial advocacy, Brown founded an African Diaspora Student Athlete Support Group. She recognized the need for a space on campus that allowed this minority group to discuss ideas, issues, share experiences and resources while also creating a larger sense of community on campus.
- Prides her upbringing and coaching in gymnastics as things which encouraged her to speak up for something she believes is right. Gymnastics, she says is a sport in which you are encouraged to express yourself. That's all she is doing through her actions. Brown says she was also acutely aware of the platform that she has to speak because she has been so dominant in her sport.



Support Alexis Brown, UC Davis student-athlete, in her protest of police brutality  
[#AggieEditorial bit.ly/2msjn5P](https://bit.ly/2msjn5P)



### Social justice goals

- Her initial goal was to raise awareness about the issue of police brutality among her circle of family, friends and teammates. She did not expect her actions to receive as much attention as they did. She hoped her actions would enlighten others and demonstrate that something needed to be done. Brown also wanted to empower others to share their experiences.
- Realizing that she has a bigger platform, her goal has moved beyond simply raising awareness to creating a new narrative and challenging views that might be incorrect. She says that there are many people who are unaware or do not believe these are real issues.

### Challenges

- It has been reported in the UC Davis Daily Aggie college newspaper that Brown believes judges at a meet discriminated against her because of her beliefs. She has also faced harassment from fans.
- The biggest challenge Brown believes she has faced thus far is seeing and learning about the perspective of people she cares about. She says it hurts to know that people hold views that are prejudiced and discriminatory. Even more she says, "there is no way to go back to not knowing." Ultimately as a result of her actions, Brown says she has lost friends.

### Recommendations

- **To athletes and others involved in social justice work:** Take it slowly. This work, she says, takes time so you need to be able to dedicate the necessary time to it. Time is also needed to educate one's self on the issues. Gaining knowledge has helped Brown have discussions with those who may not share her point of view and also helped her understand the extent of the nuances of the concern. Brown also believes it is important to connect to resources. Athletes do not have to do this work alone, nor should they try to do things for which they are not trained or educated. She suggests using one's platform to give others who are better educated and experienced an opportunity to speak and get involved.

## SWIN CASH

**Age:** 38 | **League:** WNBA; retired | **Position:** Point Guard

### Athlete activism/social justice work

- Works with community youth organizations such as, Cash for Kids, Athletes for Impact and Strength Has No Gender Campaign, to mentor and teach youth through educational and sports programming. Also involved in fundraising and providing opportunities to underserved youth.
- Serves as a conduit to gather people of different backgrounds and perspectives together to share their thoughts and identify solutions. Connects people to organizations with resources.
- Outspoken about matters of criminal justice reform, race relations and gender equality. Supports the work other athletes and community organizations have initiated.

### Social justice goals

- Increased resources for underserved youth.
- Criminal justice reform.
- Engage and educate respective stakeholders in a conversation around race relations and police brutality. Raise awareness and facilitate conversations around issues that have affected her community and might affect her son.
- Advocate for women to be equal participants and contributors to the solutions. Swin believes all need to be a part of the conversation.

### Challenges

- More room to cover positive aspects of the conversation around such issues. While there has been progress, sometimes it may get lost.
- Deeper understanding of the issues that exist around criminal justice reform and race relations. Not everyone is educated on the issues and how they might impact communities.
- People are scared to deal with their emotions, values and privilege. No one wants to feel like they are racist and as such they don't think enough about the role that they might play to improve the situation.
- People with great influence and power need to be committed and help advocate for change.

### Recommendations

- **To athletes and others involved in social justice work:** Get more people, including other athletes, involved in the conversation and the work that takes places behind the scenes.
- Establish clear goals and metrics for success. Understand that the underlying issues might have been around for a while and need to be revisited at times.
- Start small. Understand that you can make an impact with those who are closest to you. Use the networks that are at your disposal to bring about change. Small steps can allow the conversation and discussion about equality and social justice to progress.



swincash Great panel @milkeninstitute Global Conference on Athletes, Activism & Social responsibility in Sports! Moderated by @risetowin CEO @JocelynBenson w/ @detroitlionsnfl @AnquanBoldin , @nfl Troy Vincent & Stephen Ross (Miami Dolphins owner)... Wonderful discussion and engagement with the audience. Covering all sides athletes, front office, league and ownership! Honored to bring my perspective from @nyliberty front office, @wnba retired player and Ambassador for social responsibility @nbcares #milkeninstitute #business #sports #wnba #nfl #nba #newyorkliberty #socialresponsibility #athletes

## BRANDON COPELAND

**Age:** 26 | **League:** NFL; Third season | **Position:** Defensive End

### Athlete activism/social justice work

- Started Beyond the Basics, a free football camp for minority and underserved youth ages 12 to 17 in his hometown of Baltimore, Maryland. While the youth come for football instruction, they are also exposed to young college-educated professionals from similar racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. Brandon intentionally invites his “cool” young lawyer, doctor, professor and banker friends to not only assist with drills, but also share their own educational and professional journeys with the youth.

### Social justice goals

- From the beginning, Copeland’s camp goals included: introducing youth to positive role models, exposing them to career opportunities beyond football, demonstrating how attainable those careers can be even for people from backgrounds like theirs and highlighting the value of education for both kids and parents.
- Copeland added a service component in 2017, providing youth the opportunity to give back and recognize that they can make a difference regardless of age.



bcope51 To everyone who made this camp a success - you are the REAL MVP (s) From the sponsors, the volunteers, and the youngins who came out to participate for the day We accomplished a lot in a little bit of time 500 Backpacks - 500 Hygiene Kits donated to those in need in #Baltimore #City We were able to give away Tablets, Laptops, Beats Headphones, Ipod Shuffles, Cleats, Training Masks, Gloves and a ton of other gifts but the highlight for me were kids standing up sharing with the entire camp their thoughts on what it will take to be successful off of the field and how to prepare them for life beyond sports 🙌🙌🙌🙌 #Camp #Mission Accomplished 🙌

Copeland speaking with youth camp participants in July 2017.

### Challenges

- Working with and motivating youth. Strategic approaches are required to help youth recognize they need to put effort in themselves and that the support you are giving them is for them and not for you.
- Maintaining long-term relationships with youth and tracking their progression.
- Media preoccupation with negative and/or controversial news, skewing the perceptions of what athletes are actually doing.

### Recommendations

- **To athletes and others involved in social justice work:** Do things you are truly passionate about. Recognize the commitment that comes with this type work and think through the impact it may have if done correctly or incorrectly. Be strategic in your approach to making a difference and practical in one’s hopes and expectations. Partner with others to get more done.

## JALEN ROSE

**Age:** 45 | **League:** NBA; retired | **Position:** Small Forward, Point Guard

### Athlete activism/social justice work

- Founded the Jalen Rose Leadership Academy, a high school which serves a predominantly minority and underserved community in Detroit. He started the school because he says having attended a public school himself he understood the differences between funding for schools in the inner city versus the suburbs or within private institutions. This “education gap” as he terms it, significantly impacts the quality of education youth receive.

### Social justice goals

- Provide underserved youth with an opportunity to receive a high quality education and prepare them to graduate not just from high school but also college.
- Pass on some of the knowledge, expertise and experience he has gained to the next generation of youth in his community.
- Holistic development of students, in the classroom as well as in other areas such as athletics, character and life skills.

### Challenges

- Money allocated to youth in Detroit is not the same as that received by students from other districts, making the operation of the school difficult as the school is itself responsible to generate the shortfall.
- Significant disagreements at times between education administrators with respect to policy. The ability to navigate this divide is an important skill.

### Recommendations

- **To athletes and others involved in social justice work:** Do the things you are passionate as there will be challenges. Focus your efforts on bringing about lasting change, such efforts allow others the chance to achieve their own goals.
- Publicize the good work that’s being done since that publicity allows others to get involved and can assist with funding.
- Recognize that human nature might make social justice work a lonely endeavor. Often some of the work needs to be done on your own. Rose said to remember the saying, “people bring flowers to your funeral, but no soup when you are sick!”



Congratulations to the @JRLADetroit scholars who made @JalenRose Founder's List for having a 4.0+ GPA... keep up the great work!



## KENNY STILLS

Age: 25 | League: NFL; Fifth season | Position: Wide receiver

### Athlete activism/social justice work

- Voted for first time in 2016 and says lead up to the presidential election motivated him to become involved in social justice work. He wanted to do more to combat racism.
- For the past two years has engaged in social justice activities ranging from protesting during the national anthem to ride-alongs with police officers and participating in youth workshops.

### Social justice goals

- Informing the country about challenges that face specific groups and the country more broadly. Hopes such work will allow these individuals to take action and improve their circumstance.
- Initiate the challenging, yet productive, conversations. Stills suggests that people having difficult conversations, even if only “agreeing to disagree,” is a measure of success and a first step to them becoming more informed or changing their views.



October 2017 meeting and ride-along with the North Miami Police Department and Broward County Sheriff's Office.

### Challenges

- People at the top (institutions and society generally) have to be openly and vocally invested in conversation for things to change. Those in power have to be invested, financially and otherwise, to working toward those changes. This commitment hasn't always been shown around this cause so far.
- It is infrequently acknowledged that challenges minorities face in their communities (crime, policing, racism, disparate education/health outcomes) directly impact the NFL and its players since those are the communities from which many fans and players come and in some cases teams are located in those communities.

### Recommendations

- **To athletes and others involved in social justice work:** “Be informed” and learn history. Gaining an understanding of some of the struggles people face daily has been eye opening. People would be more motivated to bring about change if they knew more about it. Race is just one issue of many. There are many things in which athletes and others can get involved, and often these things are intersected.
- Develop a better understanding of other people's situations and perspectives. To do this, we have to diversify the group of people with whom we interact daily. We need to be “comfortable being uncomfortable” and have tough conversations.



From the Miami Dolphins and RISE CommUNITY Tailgates to NHL All Star weekend, fans took the pledge to stand up against discrimination and harassment.

## About us

Founded in 2015 by Miami Dolphins owner Stephen M. Ross, the Ross Initiative in Sports for Equality (RISE) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to harnessing the unifying power of sports to improve race relations and drive social progress. Led by an unprecedented alliance of professional sports leagues, organizations, athletes, educators, media networks and sports professionals, we use sports to promote understanding, respect and equality.

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**Ross Initiative in Sports for Equality**



***THE ATHLETE'S QUEST FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE:***  
An examination of 2017 Goals and Impact

**[www.RISEtoWIN.org](http://www.RISEtoWIN.org)**