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An Infamous Tradition: The Real Weight Behind the Confederate Flag in Sport

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Cover Page Footnote

This work is an extension of an essay the first author wrote in partial fulfillment of the undergraduate, upper-division course titled "Sport, Media, and American Popular Culture" (KINE 324, during the Fall 2021 Quarter, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo). The first author completed the course as part of his general education coursework for his undergraduate degree. The first author earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Chemistry (June 2023) while this work was in review. The second author was the course instructor to KINE 324, and he serves as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Kinesiology and Public Health. He helped the first author tailor the work for publication and revise the essay following feedback from the reviewers. The authors thank the reviewers for their instrumental feedback on the merits of the submission and ways the write-up could be improved. Their feedback strengthened the write-up of the present article.

An Infamous Tradition: The Real Weight Behind the Confederate Flag in Sport

Introduction

What is the weight of a flag? This question surfaces when considering the seemingly intractable issue of Confederate symbols in sport—the most ubiquitous being the battle flag. Through an undergraduate course on sport, media, and American popular culture, we had a chance to contemplate the debate on whether to keep or remove Confederate symbolism from sport. NASCAR, for example, banned display of Confederate emblems (e.g., flags) within the track-arena, and vendors and proponents responded by displaying them within the parking lot outside the arena and selling merchandise adorned with the Confederate symbols (Bever & Moyer, 2015). The deeply troubling anti-Black racism that continues to lead to murders has been the recent catalyst pushing public protest to remove Confederate emblems from public spaces, including sporting events (Martinez & Cagle, 2022). Before, display was advised against by sport officials in NASCAR and other leagues (including the NFL), and periodically individual leaders would speak out against endorsement of the flag or its use as a symbol of sport team identity, including Steve Spurrier in 2007 and 2015 (Head Football Coach, University of South Carolina) and Tommy Tuberville in 1997 (Head Football Coach, University of Mississippi Football) (Follet, 2015). But the larger culture was at an impasse, as work by James Martinez and Mary Cagle confirms (Martinez & Cagle, 2022):

A poll conducted following the June 17, 2015, Charleston (South Carolina) murders revealed public opinion on the flag had not appreciably changed since 2000. In the CNN/ORC poll, 57 percent of the country saw the flag as a symbol of Southern pride, including 66 percent of all whites and 75 percent of Southern whites. However, 72 percent of African Americans viewed the flag as a symbol of racism. (p. 357)

They go on to further write:

By the end of 2020 [about 7-months after George Floyd's murder], Virginia had removed more Confederate monuments than any other state (71), followed by North Carolina (24). Alabama (12) and Texas (12) were tied for third place. At least 167 Confederate symbols were removed after George Floyd's death, including one Arizona Confederate symbol that was stolen from public property. By comparison, 58 Confederate monuments came down between 2015 and 2019. As of February 2021, 704 Confederate monuments remained on public display. (p. 359; authors cite the Southern Poverty Law Center, 2021)

While to a neutral outside observer it would seem arguments against using Confederate symbols in sport as emblems of celebration and identity should have the moral high ground, the aforementioned public opinion polls suggest there has been little to no shift within the court of public opinion on what social institutions, like sport, should do with Confederate symbols. From the viewpoint, however, of those in favor of keeping the Confederate Flag (and other symbols in sport), calls for their removal are equally perplexing, as highlighted in the 2015 video report by CBS News titled, "Confederate Flag Sparks Debate Over School Mascot." This impasse has the hallmarks of a controversy: that is (a) "a dispute, especially a public one, between sides holding opposing views"

(The American Heritage Dictionary, n.d.) and (b) “a lot of disagreement or argument about something, usually because it affects or is important to many people” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.).

This essay, first written during the 2021 Fall academic quarter as a term paper assignment analyzing controversies in sport in relation to fandom and politics¹, represents the first author’s attempt to further understand why the infamous Confederate iconography (the Battle Flag) remains part of many subcultures in sport (Follet, 2015), even after decades of civil protest arguing for their removal, which seems quite reasonable from his viewpoint, given the historical facts surrounding the emblems (Martinez & Cagle, 2022). The second author introduced detail on how sport fandom could perpetuate larger social issues, through assigning as reading and discussion the book chapter titled, “Names, Logos, Mascots, and Flags: The Contradictory Uses of Sports Symbols” by Stanley Eitzen (2016) from his book titled, *Fair and Foul: Beyond the Myths and Paradoxes of Sport*. This essay analyzes discourse for and against Confederate iconography in sport, using several theoretical lenses on: (a) fandom (b) politics and (c) institutional socialization vis-à-vis norms, historical practices, and organizational policies. Using research and discourse analysis, this essay explores the premise that some fans cling to the Confederate Flag as a unifying symbol whilst overlooking the societal and racial ramifications that come with their fandom.

Discussion

During the 2021 Fall Term (September-December 2021), the first author took an undergraduate college course on sports, media, and American popular culture to learn how sport is culturally significant and intertwined with ongoing social issues. His term paper for the course aimed to better understand how opposing views toward the Confederate Flag are juxtaposed with sport and fandom. Similar to previous student-led inquiry into social topics and issues in sport (Balido et al., 2022; Keefe, 2009), we analyzed popular culture media presenting opposing viewpoints towards the Confederate flag in sport (Napolitano & Thomas, 2023), with a specific focus on opposing viewpoints towards the issue reported in the news article by Bever and Moyer (2015), titled, “NASCAR Faces ‘Southern Thunder’ as Confederate Flags Fly at Daytona.” Principles for conducting inquiry in sport sociology to examine social issues were used (@KDKasi, 2017; Sage et al., 2019a). This essay focused on why there is ongoing conflict on the topic of Confederate symbols in sport evident in the United States today (CBS News, 2015). This essay presents conclusions on potential ways to move forward, in addition to results of critical contemplation on this matter using sociological inquiry and theoretical perspectives to understand the ways society interconnects.

The Confederate Battle Flag is one of the most divisive modern controversies due to the deep-rooted and divergent meanings ascribed to the emblem. One view of the Battle Flag is that it preserves Southern US heritage without any affiliation to racism (Martinez & Cagle, 2022). Another view is that modern-day usage of the Confederate Flag perpetuates ideals of White supremacy (Martinez & Cagle, 2022). Notably, the former view depends upon the fallacy that the meaning of symbols are singular, devoid of context, and cannot change over time (Martinez & Cagle, 2022). The opposing view against Confederate symbols in sport argues that the modern-day usage of the Confederate flag perpetuates ideals of White supremacy and “Old South” beliefs (Martinez & Cagle, 2022). Both views are significant, furthering the divisiveness of the controversy. While it is relatively unlikely that both sides will ever see eye to eye, it is important that both sides are able to

¹A previous iteration of this published essay was submitted for publication consideration and peer-review to the journal in November of 2022 (about one year after the course was completed).

communicate their views, provide constructive discourse, and endeavor to advance towards a more accepting and equitable society.

A similar assertion was made in a piece published in the *International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities*, by Heather M. Lawson (2019). Lawson's essay asserts socially constructed frameworks exist where the same statements may be either correct or incorrect. That is, what is correct is subjectively understood. Kretchmar and colleagues underscore this point with the statement, "In other words, science cannot prove itself" (Kretchmar et al., 2017, p. 72). While each side certainly has their own ideas of what is correct and incorrect when it comes to Confederate symbols in sport, it is important to make the distinction between which side carries more weight in order to move forward. This acknowledges that "truth" is relative, and that ethical decisions can be reasoned through education, transparent debate, challenging contradiction to values, which supposedly should unify disparate groups of people residing in a larger community—values such as liberty, equality, and justice (Kretchmar et al., 2017b). "It must be granted that moral claims cannot be proven, at least not in any strict sense," write Kretchmar and colleagues (2017b, pp. 101-102). They go on to say, "...Rather, moral conclusions rest on rational judgments that must be accepted" (Kretchmar et al., 2017b, p. 102). While it is the case that many moral dilemmas in sport are not objectively clear, Kretchmar et al. (2017b) remind us that around the world, many societies have reached consensus on ethical behavioral standards; that is, a sort of set of expectations akin to what many sport leagues and clubs extend to fans and spectators attending games and events (e.g., National Football League, 2008). "Ethical insight is possible [and] our ethical knowledge has improved over time...[and we] can be reasonably confident that we have identified at least some characteristics of the good life" (Kretchmar et al., 2017b, p. 102). This is seen with the name change from "Redskins" to "Commanders" made to the Washington NFL Football team between 2020 and 2022 (Boman, 2022). To this latter point, because Confederate symbols are a constant reminder of years of historical wrongdoing to one side, and a mere symbol of fandom for the other (conveniently ignoring the fact that the symbol has also been adopted by many perpetuating race-related murders in the past decade) (Martinez et al., 2022), the idea that one side carries more weight begins to take shape. It is also important for the side that feels negatively about the flag to take a step back and not necessarily conflate fandom with racial prejudice, but rather recognize and understand how each inter-relate (Chaplin & Montez de Oca, 2019).

The Confederate Flag issue is inherently political, and the politics of sport governance interact with this controversy because the decision would be made by a sport organization and the effects would affect supporters and the sport itself. The article by Bever and Moyer (2015) supports the notion that politics of sport governance come into play as it mentions that during one weekend in 2015, NASCAR asked fans at 30 racetracks to "stow their Rebel flags" in an attempt to end the problems the flag bears. The politics eventually became so intertwined that NASCAR chose to stand with their reformed position to publicly discourage its use by personnel and teams within events and tournaments (Bever & Moyer, 2015). People of color in the South rejoiced as it was a monumental step in eradicating a historic symbol of hate and demagoguery. This political phenomenon shows the power of sport as a vehicle of change in society, supporting the notion that decisions by sport governing bodies could be precedents for greater inclusivity and equity in sport set forth by other regulators, including federal and state government entities (Sage et al., 2019b). Given its significance and imminence in the lives of many, sport will likely remain at the forefront of efforts by reformers to mitigate against racism, namely the conflation of supremacy with Whiteness and narrow views of noble character (Chaplin & Montez de Oca, 2019). In 2020, NASCAR once again made a decision regarding the Confederate Flag at its events, choosing to completely ban the symbol in the wake of George Floyd's death (Levenson, 2020). This proves the lasting controversy of the symbol and advances the idea that the sport of NASCAR and its governance and the politics surrounding the

Confederate Flag and its history are intertwined. It is critical to examine sport's role in upholding or refuting the symbol's place in American culture and politics over time.

Fandom is important to understanding the basis of this controversy. Fandom and socialization processes involving the flag cause people to hold the symbol in extremely high regard, viewing it as a symbol of heritage of the Southern United States devoid of historical considerations (Follet, 2015; Martinez & Cagle, 2022). Fan identity, however, is socially constructed and is maintained by identification with symbols about values, traditions, and group identity (Wann, 2006, SB Nation, 2016). Symbols like the flag, and other Confederate iconography, become a part of someone's identity, providing the reasoning for why groups of people are unwilling to compromise about the Confederate Flag's place in sport (Chaplin & Montez de Oca, 2019). Symbols, however, often have political and social consequences like those seen with the Confederate Flag, where one group feels marginalized and attacked while another has the feeling of being an agent of social power. The Toporek (2015) article touches on the social processes of fandom, showing how symbols that become a part of someone's fan identity socialize them to be defensive about their identity. One example shown was a school district in Texas that experienced a "sadness in the district" because a rebel mascot that represented "school pride and community" was voted to be removed permanently (Toporek, 2015). This sadness resulted from "generations of fans rallying Hays High School with the 'Dixie' fight song and 'rebel' mascot," which describes the social need to feel connected to others in one's hometown through fandom (SB Nation, 2016). Additionally, this shows that not all fans love the symbols due to what possible social power they could be upholding, but simply because of the way they have grown up with these symbols as a part of their traditions, which they later in life do not want to lose. To compare, Eitzen (2016, p. 48) brings up the fact that "using symbols to achieve solidarity and community is a common group practice," further supporting the idea that the iconography chosen, the Confederate Flag, could simply be a symbol that has achieved solidarity for some for so long that it has become a traditional part of a place's identities (Eitzen, 2016).

Critical race theory can also explain the opposing viewpoint when it comes to controversial iconography. Using the theory to frame the ordinariness of racism when looking at the Confederate Flag, one might realize that an entire group of people could simply be ignoring the fact that racism exists in sport and society under the guise of heritage and love for the traditions where they come from (Thomas, 2021). This trend could be applied critically to greater North American society and could help explain the ways that inherent and systemic racism still largely exists in our society. The trend of people who cling to problematic iconography often correlates with those who deny systemic racism exists. When people say that the Confederate Flag has no connection to racism, they are overlooking the years of historical usage of the flag as a symbol of hate and power. In the Bever and Meyer (2015) article, one NASCAR fan from Florida says, "it's just a southern pride thing, not a race thing," with another fan asserting that "the Confederate flag has nothing to do with slavery." The blatant write-off of the history that is associated with the flag by these fans indicates the type of ordinary racist ideas that still roam freely within segments of our society (Tatum, 2017). Connecting back to fan identity, it is easy to see how the defensiveness and pride that fans take in a sports team and its logos also connect with their identity within society outside of the world of sports, which may deny or not understand how they are implicitly involved in (or related to) the perpetuation of racism regardless of their racial or ethnic identity (Tatum, 2017). Many people are fiercely defensive of symbols that they have grown up with and used as a source of pride, such as the Confederate Flag. This is a clear example of symbolic interaction theory because it shows that for two distinct groups of people, the same symbol has different meanings.

When diving deeper through the symbolic interaction theory lens, we can see some of the factors at work in halting constructive conversation on how to resolve impasse on the controversial

debate of the Confederate iconography's place in society today and in the future. With the same symbol's meaning being virtually opposite for the opposing sides, both sides are correct in asserting what the flag means to them, according to Martinze and Cagle (2022). Symbols have the property of social representation, meaning the true meaning can morph between groups and timepoints. Symbols can hold a multitude of meanings simultaneously, and do produce real and divergent consequences, according to the tenets of symbolic interaction theory. It could be more constructive in understanding the complexity of the controversy to pay attention to the effects of discourse mediated through traditions and environments that affects proponents for a particular meaning from understanding factors influencing the other side's opinion, including political motives of varied interest groups as raised by critical race theory's interest convergent principles (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Zirin et al., 2012), suggesting psychic and economic interest discourage those profiting in some way from a white-centered society from analyzing exploitation issues centered around racialized difference historically and within the present day (Follet, 2015; Martinez & Cagle, 2022).

Those developing educational and other strategies attempting to move the needle on the controversial debate may not recognize that their efforts lack attention to the fundamental property of symbols.² Symbols cannot be limited to a single reference point in time; all of the meanings of the symbol over time must be considered when thinking about the symbol's true weight (Martinez & Cagle, 2022). Most people would understand the Confederate Flag as a mere sign by inferring what they perceive has only a narrow set of possible meanings that is consistent across time and situation and that any reasonable person would agree to. However, socialization around the debate to see the symbol as good versus evil presents an "us-versus-them" mindset because neither side is considering the concurrent true meanings of the symbol for the other parties of the debate, potentially, and others wanting to keep the Confederate flag a wedge issue, may fan the flames of controversy using the propagandic nature of sport (Martinez & Cagle, 2022), which readily feeds the public that societal discriminations are largely a thing of the past (Sage et al., 2019c). This paper sought to bring some of this debate to light, to allow for everyone to understand why historical weight is such an important consideration in deciding on the flag. It was through this lens that the first author started to shape his ideas about one side's argument having more efficacy overall. Though proponents of the symbol argue the glorious and noble actions of their forefathers in the 1860s, this neglects the fact that later historical usage of the symbol was to advance a racist narrative in the USA, as the symbol began to appear as a rallying cry for those upholding inferior views of African Americans (Martinez et al., 2022). Furthermore, as Martinez and Cagle (2022) note, "Everyone in the 1860s (except small children or mentally challenged persons) knew the stakes. If the South had won the war, its leaders were determined to establish a slaveholding republic. Victory was measured as independence for a new nation dedicated to the proposition that black men, women, and children must be held in bondage in perpetuity" (p. 348). The side against the flag must also understand that while the symbol has been used for many nefarious purposes, rhetoric arguing for a more noble true meaning focused on widely universal community values (e.g., faith, family, valor) made it difficult for proponents to recognize anything else but their meaning for Confederate iconography—that is the emblems and their integration in mainstream (sport) culture is their heritage which should be and does need defending (Follet, 2015; Martinez & Cagle, 2022). While this doesn't take away from the full history of this symbol, it does allow for one to view adversaries as humans rather than objects to overcome, which might allow for a better discourse and forward progress.

²There is an inherent difference between a sign and a symbol, Martinez and Cagle (2022) explain. "A sign can be open to interpretation" but will have a narrow window of possible meanings, whereas symbols like the Confederate Flag are "abstract and open to multiple, competing interpretations (Martinez & Cagle, 2022, p. 348).

Following the issue for the year after initially completing this research has demonstrated the continued stagnation of the debate. The current instances where the Confederate Flag has come up in news events reinforce the fact that the controversy over the flag is a stagnating issue that does not seem to be reaching a solution. Throughout the past year as the present essay was being readied for publication (January 2022-November 2022), a quick internet search at any point would reveal many unique instances of the Confederate Flag's divisiveness (e.g., Lonas, 2022; Patterson, 2022; Richard, 2022). One article was titled "Saskatchewan Senior Hockey Team Says It Plans to Remove Confederate Flag from Its Logo" (Patterson, 2022). In September 2022, the Assiniboia Rebels, a senior high school hockey team in Saskatchewan, Canada chose to ditch their old logo that featured a bugler over a background of a Confederate flag. Citing concerns over the logo making certain people feel unwelcome in public recreation spaces, the management of the team chose to ditch the logo completely as soon as it was financially possible. This story is unique in the fact that it takes place in Canada, showing that the Confederate Flag as a controversial symbol is not contained to only the United States; rather, the iconography and its underlying symbolic meanings are ubiquitous and widespread (Demby & Meraji, 2021). Though progress is being made to get rid of the symbol in more public places, the fact remains that few are willing to address the root causes of why the icon causes so much pain and how those systems perpetuate that same pain in contemporary society. It is certainly a step in the right direction, but as this more recent example highlights, there remains further discussion in the public domain required to address the root issues underpinning the controversy of Confederate symbols in sport (Talbert, 2017).

Conclusion

The Confederate Battle Flag has been a well-contested piece of iconography in the United States for many years. Even today at the time of this article's publication, discussions are ongoing about the legality and the ramifications of the flag in public spaces, especially in sport settings. While it means something different to everyone, it is important to understand the historical context of the flag for all groups of people. Weighing whether the iconography should stay in sport neglects the question of who stands to lose more from the eliminating the symbols from public settings and events. Is it the people who have been marginalized for decades under such a flag that stands to lose? Or is it those that grew up with the flag as a part of their identity and view it as a traditional piece of their heritage? Seeing the broader scope of symbols and understanding what cultural norms they uphold and what kinds of systemic racism they could reinforce is important in realizing the real weight of this symbol in society (Tatum, 2017). As pointed out in this paper, it would be beneficial to continue to expose people to the real weight of the issues to hopefully achieve some sort of compromise moving forward. A quick search of news pertaining to the issue of the Confederate flag provides a host of recent events related to the controversy, which really emphasize that this discussion is one that is of utmost relevancy moving forward. Until this symbol and other forms of iconography stop being used to promote views that marginalize the pain of an entire group of people, the debate will persist, as it should (Demby & Meraji, 2021). Though there is not a clear solution to the Confederate Flag problem, it is worth exploring using sport as a vehicle for social change by positively influencing people's beliefs through fandom.

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