INTRODUCTION

The artist must take sides. He must elect to fight for freedom or for slavery. I have made my choice. I had no alternative.

—Paul Robeson, June 24, 1937,
in a speech at London’s Royal Albert Hall denouncing fascism during the Spanish Civil War

By 1937, Paul Robeson was well into his theater and film career. The movie version of the stage sensation *Show Boat* had come out a year earlier; 1933 had seen him showcased in *The Emperor Jones*. He was still more than a decade away from the U.S. government’s quest to bury his performing career as punishment for what it claimed were traitorous remarks—remarks that it called upon none other than Jackie Robinson to refute in front of a congressional committee.

Robeson’s athletic career was even further behind him. He had left Rutgers University in 1919 after earning letters in football, basketball, baseball, and track and becoming a two-time All-American in football. His last year playing the sport—after three seasons in the National Football League, even before it officially took on that name, and long before it instituted its “gentlemen’s agreement” against signing Black players—was 1922.

Sports had put him on the national radar, but his many other pursuits throughout segregated America had kept him there.
In 1937, those pursuits put him on the stage at Royal Albert Hall in London, with numerous dignitaries and celebrities supporting the side of democratic rule during the Spanish Civil War. Authors Virginia Woolf and C. S. Lewis were in the audience. Pablo Casals was broadcast in from Bucharest. The program for the event was designed by Pablo Picasso. Robeson, however, was the marquee name, the face and voice the organizers wanted most to pack the biggest punch.

They knew that he could move the crowd like none other, and only in small part because of his unmatched, world-renowned baritone. Nothing defined Robeson’s life at that point more than his utter fearlessness. He had been the only Black student at Rutgers when he enrolled, just the third ever to attend, and was the first ever on the football team; the day he reported to practice, his teammates attacked and beat him severely enough to break his nose and dislocate his shoulder. Four years later, his presence defined the program and the university.

For this event, Robeson had planned on recording a speech to be played over the loudspeakers. When organizers expressed fears that the opposition would try to jam the signal (and that Robeson’s broadcasting from Russia, where he was speaking and performing, would send the wrong message on such a night), Robeson hit back by recording his speech anyway—and then traveling to London to give it in person.

It was, as expected, a thunderous rebuke of fascism, racial and ethnic oppression, and tyranny against not just the common people but their art, culture, education, and individual expression.

At the heart of Robeson’s speech were the words that begin this introduction. He reinforced those ideals with this statement:

Every artist, every scientist, every writer must decide now where he stands. He has no alternative. There is no standing above the conflict on Olympian heights. There are no impartial observers.
By then, to repeat, he was thirty-nine years old. He no longer was running, throwing, hitting, or leaping for his or any other country, for a scholarship or a paycheck, or for the admiration of the crowd or the scores of a judge. Technically, he didn’t need to add athlete to artist or the other professions.

But athletes had sides to take and choices to make too. They did in the 1940s and 1950s, when Robeson was blackballed and saw his livelihood and freedom taken away. They did in the years before and after his death in 1976. They did at the turn of the twenty-first century, and they do to this day.

Those who did, and do, choose Robeson’s path have become as immortal as he is. And then . . . there were those who decided that they had an alternative, who thought that they could stand above the conflict.

They generally believed that they had chosen to say nothing.

They were wrong, and Robeson was right. Their choice had told the world everything.
“Passing the baton” is such an appropriate metaphor for handing the responsibility for leading the fight for freedom and equality to the next generation. You don’t have to have ever run track—and the athlete asked to pass the baton doesn’t have to have ever run track—to grasp the image. Even when it seems as if there is no actual finish line, whatever is out there at the end to mark victory gets closer with every handoff.

This particular race has not been a straight line—no line that connects Jack Johnson to Jackie Robinson to Bill Russell to Tommie Smith and John Carlos to Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf to LeBron James to Colin Kaepernick to Naomi Osaka can ever be described as “straight.” But one way or another, the relay continues, and the hopes that someone is out there to take the baton next remains alive.

But the baton has been dropped a bunch of times. Or the next runner never showed up on the track. So often, it was the superstar, the world-record holder, the odds-on favorite, the one who could have won the race and ended the competition by himself who blew the exchange.
The Michael Jordans. The O. J. Simpsons. The Tiger Woods-es. The list is excruciatingly long. But those names are at the top. They’re the place to start.

“They would’ve been the handoff,” Kenneth Shropshire, the Global Sports Institute leader and sports and society scholar, told the Sporting News. “But they didn’t [take it].”

Every library in America could be filled with the theories on the obligations of celebrities to use the platform they have to change the world for the better—not just how they could but whether they should. But, as Paul Robeson famously said, it is always a choice. Throughout the history of this country and society, athletes of the greatest status and magnitude have chosen not to try, not to sacrifice what they have, not to put the effort that they put into building and ascending that platform into using it as a means to wrench society in the right direction. They have chosen to let someone else take the next handoff, to drop the baton and leave it where it lands, to skip the race altogether.

When asked, or told, or ordered to shut up and dribble, they dribbled.

Those choices broke the continuum. They created a chasm, spanning a good four decades, in the history of athletic resistance that always has to be explained away. That chasm has inadvertently inflated the activists of the 1960s in stature, even beyond the impressive truth of their own accomplishments, and shed a different light on the pioneers who preceded them. It demands study of how the movement found a way to restart after it hit that dead spot and of how the activists of today use the decisions of the greatest names in the annals of sports as cautionary tales, faults to avoid or to overcome.

This absence of activism among the great ones of this period invites a reevaluation of the standards of greatness itself. As activism has continued to expand throughout the 2010s and early 2020s, the legacy of James and his place in National Basketball Association (NBA) history has been debated constantly, endlessly
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(and largely annoyingly, thanks to the stubborn inability to frame the eras of play to fairly analyze each one's stars). The argument has frequently gone off on wild tangents. But one tangent that on the surface seems the most illogical actually offers a fascinating window into what the basketball-admiring public deems the most important.

In other words: yes, debate the numbers all you want, the championships, the trips to the finals, the marketing, the global draw, the visceral impact on the game, the approach to the finances. But off the court, as a role model, as an advocate for his people, as someone constantly willing to speak out and act out against the systems that need to hear and see it—to use the platform to its fullest? Who could rationally argue that James doesn’t beat Jordan hands-down?

That has been the cloud over Jordan throughout his public life, or at least since he started the journey to become the figure that he is, as a professional with the Chicago Bulls in the mid-1980s. That cloud didn’t come into truly sharp focus until 1990, when he made the notorious comment on political engagement that would cling to him from that moment on: “Republicans buy sneakers too.”

To make a long story that’s been recited for more than three decades short: In the 1990 race for the U.S. Senate in North Carolina, a Black Democratic candidate, Harvey Gantt, was facing the incumbent white Republican, Jesse Helms, one of the most repellant figures in the long, loathsome history of Southern political racist demagoguery. Public pressure began to mount for Jordan, who had grown up in Wilmington and was an icon under Dean Smith at North Carolina, to endorse Gantt and call for an end to the tyranny of Helms’s tenure once and for all. Jordan did not, and Helms won by a narrow margin. While it seems to many that they had been hearing the reported Jordan quote since at least the middle of that race, the quote about sneakers would not actually be seen in print until 1995, in a Jordan biography by Chicago sportswriter Sam Smith, Second Coming, tied to Jordan’s return from his bas-
ketball retirement and his detour into pro baseball. But the silence that the quote excuses was enough.

Jordan spent years dancing around whether he ever actually said those words. Even if he largely was not believed, fighting his plausible deniability was ineffective. He may or may not have been misquoted, and it may or may not have been blown out of proportion, but it was such convenient shorthand for his choice of riches over activism that it was certain to live forever.

Then came the spring of 2020, and he stopped dancing . . . in *The Last Dance*.

The ESPN documentary series about his career and the end of the Bulls’ 1990s dynasty was filmed, produced, and edited with Jordan’s approval, so there was instant skepticism about how transparent he would be on the most controversial moments of his career. How he addresses the “sneakers” comment gives one answer: He admits that he said it and tells why.

It was “in jest” and “off the cuff” with his teammates, Jordan says. He actually supported Gantt that year but did not want to publicly endorse somebody he did not know. He never thought of himself as “an activist” or “a politician,” but as someone who poured all his energy into basketball and did not regret it.

Everything revealed in *The Last Dance* about the heartless, remorseless competitor that Jordan was confirms all of this self-characterization. But nothing illustrates his stance on speaking out more than this statement:

> It’s never going to be enough for everybody, and I know that. I realize that. Because everybody has a preconceived idea for what I should do and what I shouldn’t do. The way I go about my life is I set examples. If it inspires you? Great, I will continue to do that. If it doesn’t? Then maybe I’m not the person you should be following.

It fairly screams out, “That’s not my baton. Keep that away from me. I’ve got my own race to run.”
To understand Jordan, though—and to understand those who largely walked in his footsteps, single-mindedly toward their safest careers and not toward speaking out—it is best to go backward. It seems cruel to tie him to Simpson, in light of what Simpson’s public image has become and what is revealed about him in yet another ESPN-produced documentary series . . . but Simpson was the next best candidate for the continuum, and he strode right past it.

Simpson, remember, was a titanic figure in American sports even while in college, long before the National Football League (NFL), TV commercials, movies, broadcasting, live courtroom drama, and the tabloid life. He was big enough to cast a shadow over football and track and field—which places him back in the chaos of the run-up to the 1968 Olympics. With the Games taking place in the unusually late time frame of October, he chose not to compete for a berth on the U.S. team in favor of playing his senior year of football at the University of Southern California (USC). He was going to continue his sprinting mastery that spring, until Dr. Harry Edwards and the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR) staged the boycott of the indoor meet at Madison Square Garden. Simpson found an excuse not to attend, splitting the difference between honoring the boycott and not sounding like he was giving in to a group of Black agitators who scared much of the white sports hierarchy.

He was far from alone in making that choice—Jimmie Hines, the eventual Olympic 100-meter champ and lifelong resenter of Smith and Carlos, backed out of the meet as well, hinting that his life had been threatened. (Edwards, in fact, has been quoted as suggesting that Hines needed to remember his football prospects and stay healthy for them by honoring the boycott, but whether that was intended to be a threat is up for interpretation.)

In the documentary on Simpson, *O. J.: Made in America*, Edwards recalls talking to the soon-to-be Heisman Trophy winner about using his name, talent, and visibility for the movement that Edwards was heading up. He was personally aware that Smith, Carlos, and Evans were just as big and had as much to lose as Simpson did, but they were always vocal, present, and willing to face real
It Was Always a Choice

Edwards says that Simpson’s explanation for staying clear of all of that was “I’m not Black, I’m O. J.”

It was not only an ethos by which Simpson lived (until a certain high-profile trial years later); it was one that U.S. advertisers bought into and sold to its sports-loving audience. When he hit major stardom in the early 1970s, by breaking the two-thousand-yard single-season rushing mark and becoming one of the faces of the NFL back when doing so in Buffalo seemed impossible, he put himself in line to become one of the very first widely marketed Black athlete endorsers. This was still new territory—one that was punctured and finally blown apart in a big way by Nike and the aforementioned Jordan. Hank Aaron, while chasing down and breaking Babe Ruth’s home-run record, was still a scarce sight on commercials. Such basketball icons as Julius Erving were still a few years away from prominent ad time. The famous Mean Joe Greene Coca-Cola commercial, in which he throws his jersey to a little boy at the game, hadn’t been made yet. Simpson cleared the way with his Hertz ad campaign, which began in 1975 and is still a legend in the industry, with images of him racing through airports and leaping over suitcases, accompanied by the earworm of a jingle: “the superstar in rent-a-car.”

Through the documentary, though, viewers see how carefully these images are curated. No other Black face is shown in the spots. The elderly woman who cheers him on (“Go, O. J., go!”) is designated to be white. The commercial and its central figure are designed for maximum inoffensiveness. Simpson went along with it and reaped the rewards.

That exemplified the 1970s, the decade following the one that had ended with war in Southeast Asia still raging, antiwar demonstrations, assassinations seemingly coordinated to put a halt to the civil rights movement, and an Olympics protest that split the na-
tion and sports. Sports in the 1970s seemed purposely constructed to reverse course on the activism of the 1960s. The 1980s and, in some ways, the 1990s appeared to strive to keep the momentum going. These decades put the 1960s in the rearview mirror, with athletes straying further from what the Alis, Russells, and Smiths and Carloses stood for and not fearing the negative comparisons.

Thus the observations about dropping the baton, and of that period being a wasteland for athlete activism, the opposite of the principled 1960s. Compare, for instance, the reactions by two prominent athletes to whom Edwards reached out at volatile times. Simpson said what he said. Edwards also made a point to connect with Toni Smith-Thompson after she made her protests during the national anthem as a senior off the beaten path at a Division III basketball program.

“The costs have been different for me,” Smith-Thompson would later tell the Sporting News:

Because I wasn’t a professional, I wasn’t on an Olympic stage, it didn’t strip me of a career because I didn’t have one, or my endorsements because I didn’t have them. But it’s a real loss. . . . It’s not just losing an activity, it’s really losing a part of my identity. The court is often where I drew my achievement, my abilities, my excellence—the court was always the place where I could exercise mastery.

As extraordinary as her sacrifice was, in that context it was even more so. Simpson chose not to sacrifice anything.

Woods, the standard-bearer of the 1990s and 2000s, ascended the stage just as Jordan and his final act with the Bulls was exiting. Woods, though, resolutely aligned himself with Jordan on the rigid wall separating himself from outspokenness on any subject besides his sport—and, eventually, by embracing Donald Trump.

A case could be made that Woods flung the baton away most egregiously of all. The argument rests on the promise that came
not only from his ascent in golf, the ultimate country-club sport, one that had steadfastly kept Black people in their place at the expense and service of white people, but also in the tease of breaking those doors down forever.

Woods’s father, Earl, became famous himself for his vision of the effect that his son would have on the world, through his dominance of his sport and the sports landscape as a whole. His actual words have been mangled over the years: Earl did not actually tell a reporter that Tiger would have a greater impact than Nelson Mandela, Gandhi, and Buddha, but he was asked whether his prediction covered the impact that those figures had had. His answer, however (in the *Sports Illustrated* cover story when the magazine selected Tiger as its 1996 Sportsman of the Year), is still grandiose:

He has a larger forum than any of them. Because he’s playing a sport that’s international. Because he’s qualified through his ethnicity to accomplish miracles. He’s the bridge between the East and the West. There is no limit because he has the guidance. I don’t know yet exactly what form this will take. But he is the Chosen One. He’ll have the power to impact nations. Not people. Nations. The world is just getting a taste of his power.

Nike built its initial marketing campaign around that theme—“I am Tiger Woods.” It was prophecy, in a way: The demographics in the galleries changed overnight. So did the demographics of those playing the game at nearly every level. Players on the tour today, male and female, claim him as an influence growing up. Earl’s logic about his son’s potential global reach was sound. But in hindsight, the athlete who fit those parameters best, in his prime and afterward, was Muhammad Ali. Tiger, however, only gave the most superficial acknowledgment of the racial barrier-breaking that he represented. Like Jordan, he made his game the limit of his influence, preferring to be an example. He refused to speak out on any-
thing, when his voice—and, as his father said, his larger forum—could have changed everything. Nike’s inclusive, expansive slogan ended up occupying a similar space as Simpson’s ethos of “I’m not Black, I’m O. J.”

The greatest star of his era, a Black man yet again, shied away from any obligation to use that influence. The world more or less accepted it—and, of course, portions of the world applauded it, in the unshakeable belief that athletes, especially Black athletes, should conduct themselves exactly that way.

By 2016—when Kaepernick began kneeling and when Trump was elected president—the bar of expectations for Woods was essentially on the floor. It couldn’t sink much lower once the world was reminded that, like Tom Brady and many others, Woods and Trump had moved in the same celebrity circles for a long time. The two had known each other throughout Woods’s public life. They had golfed together often and continued to do so during Trump’s term. When the president’s online campaign against protesting athletes started to rage endlessly in 2017, Woods had no discernible reaction. After a tournament in Paramus, New Jersey, in August 2018, a reporter asked him what it meant, or should have meant, to be friends with someone so openly contemptuous of Black athletes in particular. Woods said, “Well, he’s the president of the United States. You have to respect the office. No matter who is in the office, you may like, dislike personality or the politics, but we all must respect the office.”

The office, in turn, honored Woods. Shortly after Woods won the 2019 Masters after a long, injury-induced drought, Trump awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom. The honor had historically recognized a high standard of contribution to American society and culture by civilians, and Woods certainly fit the criteria, no matter which chief executive would have someday rewarded him. But at that point, this president was handing the medals out like rewards for patronage and loyalty, signified by the fact that he also gave one to shamelessly racist and misogynist radio
host Rush Limbaugh. The Woods award gave off the stench of a gift to an old pal, a boast about all the famous people whom Trump knew, and a middle finger to everyone who castigated him for his constant condescension and smears directed at Black athletes who weren’t properly humble and grateful.

That baton had hit the ground long before. The promise of Earl Woods years ago now comes off as a mean-spirited joke, in the same category as the once-innocent-sounding racial and ethnic designation that his son had created for himself: Cablinasian. (In one of his first major TV appearances after his breakthrough Masters victory in 1997, the then-twenty-one-year-old Woods told Oprah Winfrey that the term described his Caucasian, Black, American Indian, and Asian heritage. His multitude of Black fans recoiled at what appeared to be a minimization of his Black identity.)

Compare Earl’s grand notion of where Tiger could go with the skill and opportunity he had to what Dr. Glenn Bracey, a Villanova sociology professor, said (in a 2018 Sporting News interview) about those opportunities in the proper hands:

That’s why black athletes are such potentially powerful activists. It’s not just that they have platforms, it’s not just their visibility, it’s not just their money. It’s that their physical being is a public display of competence, of discipline, of overpowering whites quite often, that is a permanent opportunity to display opposition to white supremacy.

The athletes who approach the position that Woods held—and potentially still does—are not the stars of the sports with large Black participation and followings. Serena and Venus Williams, Osaka, and, from earlier eras, Arthur Ashe and Althea Gibson fit more neatly into Woods’s category. Tennis holds its own with golf as a white-dominated, white power-supporting, elitist, and separatist sport. All of those players affirmed their allegiance to the cause. Ashe may have done so more courageously than the others
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(at the risk of minimizing the oppression that the Williams sisters and Gibson have endured as women as well); when the rest of the activist sports world demanded separation from South Africa and its apartheid allies, Ashe fought to get into the country, speak his truth to power, and reach out to the Black majority to give them access to his services and his play. Collectively, they did not shirk their duties—they didn’t even seem to consider them duties.

Woods was, and is, fine with letting others carry that load.

While the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s came off as the era of disconnect, the current era that encompasses Kaepernick’s protests tends to reveal disconnects as well. If indeed everyone with a platform faces a choice, then the choices that many have made reveal much about who they are and who they very likely would have been in previous eras, whether around Johnson and Robinson and Robinson and the 1968 Olympics . . . or in the desert that followed.

Jerry Rice, for instance, stands alone as the unquestioned greatest wide receiver who ever played the game, and as one of the two or three greatest football players of all time. His origin story has become legend, from his upbringing in Mississippi, helping his father build houses, catching and throwing bricks and building his legendary hands in the process, and then emerging from historically Black Mississippi Valley State University and setting numerous college receiving records—and still being passed over until the sixteenth overall pick in the 1985 draft, before embarking on an unprecedented twenty-year run of excellence in the NFL.

Even as someone who didn’t share with the world his personal beliefs on society, or possibly because he didn’t share them, Rice remained a benignly beloved figure long past retirement. Then Kaepernick began kneeling . . . and Rice’s reaction online was this: “All lives matter. So much going on in this world today. Can we all just get along! Colin, I respect your stance but don’t disrespect the flag.”

Rice was immediately dragged all over social media, to the point where plenty of online posters (not just anonymous trolls, but recognizable NFL followers) decided tongue-in-cheek to demote Rice
on their lists of all-time greatest receivers, from first to roughly three thousandth. Rice had to apologize a day later, claiming that he had been unaware of the Black Lives Matter movement. It was not convincing in any way. It was even less convincing four years later, when Rice and several former 49ers teammates attended a White House ceremony at which Trump issued a pardon to the team’s former owner, Eddie DeBartolo Jr.—who had been suspended by the NFL and forced to give up control of the team in 1997 after a bribery conviction. It was one of many pardons handed out by that administration to cronies who had been convicted of or had pleaded guilty to crimes.

All the former players in attendance heaped praise on the former owner; Rice made sure to add, “I take my hat off to Donald Trump for what he did.” By that time, in early 2020, Trump had also spent considerable time slandering NFL players and all athletes who protested, without a word of reaction from Rice.

As for the jibes about where he now stood on the list of all-time greats in the hearts of fans . . . in 2018, Randy Moss was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame, and as he gave his acceptance speech, he wore a tie on which the names of thirteen victims of police violence were embroidered. (Moss may have started a trend that bears watching in the near future: A year later, safety Ed Reed eschewed the standard polo shirt under his Hall of Fame jacket as he was introduced at the Hall of Fame exhibition game, instead wearing a T-shirt with the faces of nine victims of police violence.)

Rice was far from the only active or former NFL player who, facing the renewed scrutiny of how they chose to use their platform ushered in by the Kaepernick era, chose to either sidestep any mention of the rise in activism by their brethren or to push back against it, and against Kaepernick specifically.

Black fans had regularly come to Michael Vick’s defense after the explosive, genre-shifting quarterback’s return to the NFL after serving time in federal prison for his notorious dog-fighting conviction. By 2017, he had wrapped up his thirteen-year playing
career when he went on a football studio show on the Fox Sports Network to talk about what might be next for Kaepernick, who had not been signed in the season following his protests.

“The first thing we got to get Colin to do is cut his hair,” Vick said. “I don’t think he should represent himself in that way in terms of the hairstyle. Just go clean-cut. Why not?”

He went on to explain that he was thinking about the image and perception that Kaepernick projected and that trimming his lengthy Afro “had to be a start for him.”

Almost everything Vick has said since then about Kaepernick, and about advocacy in general, has been tainted by that comment. Like others who expressed that Kaepernick had to “do something” to get back in the good graces of the league and its supporters, Vick was trashed mercilessly for pandering to exactly those people. Seeing an iconic figure like Vick fall prey to stereotypes about “dangerous” looks or “unacceptable” hairstyles, and the respectability politics that accompany them, was hurtful to many. Vick soon backtracked, insisting that what he said “was not in malice,” but also not taking back his words.

Vick’s soundbite disappeared from the public’s radar soon after. The 2018 observations of Dak Prescott did not wash away as easily. They may have been from currency bias, borne of Prescott’s being an active NFL player, unlike Vick, Rice, and others who would not engage or who missed the point when they tried to. But a factor in how Prescott addressed the climate in the league and in society at the time was clearly who he was, what position he played, and what team and owner he played for.

Quarterback is exactly the influential position it’s portrayed to be. “Quarterback of the Dallas Cowboys” raises the influence, power, and visibility a few more notches. Owner Jerry Jones, meanwhile, had not only scolded his players about kneeling or otherwise protesting during and after the time Kaepernick had sparked the movement; he had put his weight behind the NFL’s punishments against kneeling during the anthem that were so oppressive that
the league and players’ union soon agreed to halt putting them in effect. On top of that, Jones clearly had a line of communication to the White House, curried the president’s favor, served as his conduit to other owners . . . and even was mentioned as a party in Kaepernick’s labor grievance over his blackballing.

That is the context in which Prescott—who had risen meteorically from fourth-round pick to starter and focal point on the league’s marquee team and a play-off contender—spoke about anthems, flags, kneeling, and other activism. Jones had just declared that he expected his players to stand respectfully for the anthem, with “toe on the line.” Prescott—born and raised in, again, Mississippi—was asked during an interview session at the Cowboys’ training camp what he thought about using the anthem as the backdrop for protest:

I don’t think that’s the time or the venue to do so. The game of football has always brought me such a peace and I think it does the same for a lot of other people, people playing the game, people watching the game, and any people that have an impact on the game. So when you bring such a controversy to the stadium, to the field, to the game, it takes away. It takes away from the joy and the love that football brings a lot of people.

The reaction by many was summarized in a six-foot-by-ten-foot mural spray-painted by local artist Trey Wilder on a wall in West Dallas the next day: the face of Prescott, in pads and jersey, as the main character in the horror-racism movie Get Out—a character who is hypnotized into falling into “the sunken place,” a space of obedience and appeasement to the movie’s white community. The imagery was spot-on, and those who felt let down by Prescott’s bending to Jones’s authority found it hilarious.

Prescott did not literally “get out” of Dallas; three years later, in early 2021, he signed a massive contract extension to stay with the Cowboys for the near future. Cowboys fans debated whether he
truly was the quarterback to return them to glory. Over time, his acquiescence to the owner faded as a topic.

Cam Newton never got the *Get Out* mural treatment. He did, however, create the standard for distancing oneself from the protest movement that Prescott had challenged. Plenty of eyes turned to Newton in 2016, when Kaepernick’s protests first came to light. One of the early theories about the long-term success of Kaepernick’s efforts was whether fellow players would support him, and which players would—that is, would the league stars stand up for him, protest themselves, or even support his position? Newton became a major focus because he was in as unique a position as any player ever has been—one of the only Black quarterbacks ever drafted first overall, the league’s reigning Most Valuable Player (MVP), a man who had led his Panthers to the Super Bowl the year before, and someone who had worn his individuality on his sleeve throughout his career, including that previous year, when he was constantly scolded by fans about his on-field celebrations and his postgame fashion choices. Their verdict: That man, regardless of whether he was one of the most magnetic and dangerous players in any given game, needed to be more humble.

Newton addressed the elephant in the room in a press conference at the Panthers’ headquarters as the Super Bowl approached in early 2016, when he said of the relentless criticism: “I’m an African-American quarterback that may scare a lot of people because they haven’t seen nothing they can compare me to.”

Much of the nation’s Black fandom appreciated his bluntness. They were less appreciative the following season when, after a protracted stretch of silence on the burgeoning protest issue, Newton expressed his feelings during an interview with ESPN. To summarize, he had found the fence, and he was going to straddle it as best he could:

What I can’t, you know, fathom is, how does one-eighth of an inch—something so small—be the difference and such a big commodity in our whole lifetime. And that’s the thickness
of our skin, one-eighth of an inch. Under that, we’re all the same color, and that’s the big picture.

On Kaepernick, a colleague and someone he respects as a competitor—once, when the teams met, they switched off doing each other’s signature touchdown celebrations—Newton said: “Who am I to say that it’s wrong? Who am I to say that it’s right? Either or, it’s still personal.”

The lines seemed fairly clearly drawn on who would embrace the spirit of the 1960s and give the 2010s and 2020s a chance to be compared favorably . . . and who was more aligned with the void between those eras. Naturally, the lines weren’t as distinct as one would assume. Into the fray, again, came Jordan. In July 2016—after the killings of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile and after the ESPYS speech by the NBA stars, but before Kaepernick began protesting—Jordan took to the pages of ESPN’s *The Undefeated* to do very much what he had insisted he would never do: Get involved.

“I am saddened and frustrated by the divisive rhetoric and racial tensions that seem to be getting worse as of late,” Jordan writes. “I know this country is better than that, and I can no longer stay silent. We need to find solutions that ensure people of color receive fair and equal treatment AND that police officers—who put their lives on the line every day to protect us all—are respected and supported.”

With that, he announced $1 million contributions to two organizations: the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Legal Defense Fund and the Institute for Community-Police Relations, created by the International Association of Chiefs of Police.

A few looked askance at a massive donation to a police organization in that climate—but even with that, it was not just incredibly generous, it was publicly so, as Jordan had become someone who steered far from publicizing his charitable efforts, even ones that belied his reputation as someone who didn’t reach out to help
his own people. More importantly, it was his most definitive public statement on behalf of freedom, justice, and equality of his life.

It was a quarter century after “Republicans buy sneakers too.”

Yet as proof that no one who wades into those waters can wade back out easily, in 2018, Jordan was pulled into the then-latest stage of Trump and James’s war of words. In an interview with CNN, James answered a question about what he would say to Trump if he were sitting across from him by stating, “I would never sit across from him.” The president weighed in on social media with a reply that was, as often was the case, not new to the tactics of white supremacy—use one prominent Black man as a weapon against another. “I like Mike!” he posted.

Jordan was not a personal friend of Trump, however, as his fellow 1990s icon Woods was. He also was no longer focusing his energy on playing at the expense of speaking up.

“I support LeBron James. He’s doing an amazing job for his community,” Jordan replied.

Time will tell whether the long-overdue baton handoff went cleanly.