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NASCAR bans Confederate flag, leagues, brands take own stands

In a year already packed with one shock after another for the sports world, NASCAR's decision to ban the Confederate flag at its events is a welcome — if not surprising — turn of events.

The stock car racing authority responded quickly and decisively to a call by Bubba Wallace, the sport's lone full-time Black driver, to remove the highly controversial flag from its tracks. For a sport that is especially popular south of the Mason-Dixon Line, the move is both hugely significant and not without the risk of alienating at least some part of NASCAR's fan base.

Sports organizations, individual athletes and brands are stepping up to support the Black Lives Matter movement, which has been surging since the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25. Floyd died after a white police officer knelt on his neck for more than eight minutes, despite the man's pleas that he couldn't breathe. Protests have been taking place for the better part of a month in cities across the country.

Individual superstars like Michael Jordan, Serena Williams, LeBron James and Simone Biles issued statements against racial inequity and police brutality. Yet, supporting social justice causes has been tricky for teams and leagues because the stakes are so high. Taking a stand on polarizing issues risks turning off fans and consumers, and losing lucrative revenue streams, all of which could have far-reaching effects within the sport's ecosystem.

On the other hand, refusing to take a position carries similar risks.

Some angry fans have called for a NASCAR boycott following the Confederate flag ban. But drivers and racing teams rallied behind Wallace at a Virginia race by pushing his car, painted with a Black Lives Matter logo, to its starting position and standing with him during the national anthem.

No spectators were permitted in the



SPORTS MARKETING PLAYBOOK

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stands at Martinsville Speedway in Ridgeway, Va., due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Fans were in attendance at a race later in June at Talladega Superspeedway in Talladega, Ala., however, where signs at the track's entrances prohibited bringing in Confederate flags and items with the symbol on it. Protesters made their presence known as a small plane flew over the track during the event, towing a Confederate flag and a banner saying "Defund NASCAR." A group called the Sons of Confederate Veterans took credit for the stunt, according to CBS Sports.

Ultimately, the impact of NASCAR's flag ban on the organization's bottom line and fan loyalty remains to be seen. But it isn't the only league taking a stand.

In another surprising announcement in June, National Football League Commissioner Roger Goodell admitted that the league should have listened to players' concerns about racism and wouldn't discipline players for taking a knee during the

national anthem when games resume, CNN reported.

Former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick first took a knee during the national anthem at games in 2016 to protest racial injustice. A handful of other players and athletes in other sports began kneeling as well. Amid a storm of criticism, the NFL said that players would be fined for taking a knee, although no player has ever been officially sanctioned by the league for doing so.

According to ESPN, the league is also reportedly considering a number of other actions, including playing "Lift Ev'ry Voice And Sing," which has been traditionally viewed as the Black national anthem, before the Star Spangled Banner during Week 1 NFL games (currently scheduled for September 10). The NFL is also reportedly coordinating with the NFL Players Association to have the names of the victims of police brutality displayed on jersey patches or helmet stickers. Last month, the league also announced plans to donate \$250 million to social justice causes over the next 10 years.

While Kaepernick, a free agent since 2017, remains unsigned by an NFL team to date, he has become a high-profile spokesman for Nike, which has helped to amplify Kaepernick's racial justice activism in a series of provocative ads. The sports apparel giant is unique among brands in that it has steadily supported social causes for several years while retaining a loyal consumer base. Nike also remains the NFL's official apparel sponsor and supplier of jerseys and game day apparel and continues to display its socially conscious corporate values front and center on social media and in advertising.

Rival athletic brands are making efforts to have their voices heard. Puma has called for donations to the Minnesota Freedom Fund, located in the state where Floyd was killed. And Adidas, one of Nike's biggest competitors in both the consumer

and professional sports markets, took the unprecedented step of retweeting Nike's "For once, don't do it," tweet — part of Nike's powerful campaign encouraging its customers to fight racism.

The positions taken by NASCAR and the NFL represent a shift in attitudes that some fans didn't believe they would ever see. Other leagues have made less dramatic, but still highly significant, efforts to support the Black community.

Major League Baseball opened its amateur draft event in mid-June with a pro-Black Lives Matter message and a promise to push for social changes. The MLB also announced that its 30 clubs are donating a total of more than \$1 million to support racial injustice groups like the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, Equal Justice Initiative, Color of Change, Campaign Zero and the Jackie Robinson Foundation.

In the National Hockey League, the least diverse of the Big Four professional leagues, seven current and former players have formed the Hockey Diversity Alliance to address racism in the sport. Headed by San Jose Sharks forward Evander Kane and former Calgary Flames player Akim Aliu, the new organization will promote diversity at all levels of the game. The NHL said in a statement that the Hockey Diversity Alliance will function independently of the league but expects to work together with the alliance where possible.

At the same time, the NHL is launching its own wide-ranging diversity initiative by

creating the Executive Inclusion Council, consisting of five owners, five presidents and two general managers of NHL teams to be announced. The council will address race, gender and social issues with input from committees representing players, fans and youths.

The Player Inclusion Committee will include current and former NHL players, and female players from Canada and the United States. The Fan Inclusion Committee will be composed of NHL teams' chief marketing officers and multicultural project partners. The Youth Inclusion Committee will include parents and leaders of youth hockey organizations, such as Hockey Canada and USA Hockey, according to the NHL.

In the NBA, league superstars like James, as well as most of the teams, have issued statements supporting Black Lives Matter. But a bigger statement by players could be in the works.

The COVID-19 pandemic stopped the NBA's season in its tracks in March, and the league plans to restart its season at the end of July. To keep players and staff healthy, the league intends to play the remainder of the season at Disney Co.'s ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex in Orlando, Fla., where it will also house the 30 teams in a league-controlled quarantine.

Some players, led by Kyrie Irving, a guard for the Brooklyn Nets, are seriously considering not playing in Florida. In a conference call with more than 80 players,

which was first reported in a tweet by The Athletic, Irving suggested that finishing the season and post-season would distract from the momentum gained by the Black Lives Matter movement.

Some players, including teammate Kevin Durant (who is injured and was not planning to play in Orlando), have expressed support for Irving's idea that refusing to finish the season would send a powerful message, but other players are reportedly not on board. Additional concerns complicate the issue, not the least of which is the prospect of being locked down in a state where COVID-19 continues to surge.

After breaking the news about the potential Florida boycott, The Athletic reported at the end of June that the NBA is considering allowing players to replace their names on the back of their jerseys with racial justice messages. The opportunity to play and make a statement at the same time could help bring an end to the dispute.

What happens next could have long-term effects in the sports world and beyond. The next few months will see NASCAR living with its decision to ban a controversial but entrenched symbol and the NFL committing to an attitude adjustment in an environment that may or may not be ready for it. Meanwhile, the NBA is poised to make pivotal decisions about the future of basketball.

It's very likely that more surprises are on the way. After all, the year is only half over.