

I love you but no.

The uncomfortable reality facing Boston's high school athletes looking to make a stand

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By Rich Trombetta

Angry and looking to model the behavior of athletes like embattled former NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick, high school junior Aaron Burke informed his basketball coaches in 2017 that he was going to sit during the national anthem.

“The pledge is supposed to be land of the free, home of the brave,” said Burke, a former star at Madison Tech, a Boston public school located in Dorchester. “Standing up for the pledge is B.S.”

Burke was persuaded not to take a stand - and he didn't. He ultimately received a full athletic scholarship to Division II school Eastern State University, something his coaches doubted would have happened had he performed his act of civil disobedience.

As high school basketball season begins this week in Boston there are young players, like Burke, who might be inclined to try and use sports to highlight what they perceive to be social injustice across the city and America. While these students may believe their actions to be noble and courageous, they could unknowingly be igniting a powder keg of community backlash that could destroy their futures.

The reality is that while athletes in inner-city schools in Boston are taught they have the right to free speech, this right comes with a steep price and one that they may not be able to afford. Fans, parents and classmates may never know this season which athletes wanted to sit but stood; who wanted to speak up but remained silent; who wanted to challenge authority but followed the rules.

“I love the conversation,” said Billy Raymond, the boy’s head basketball coach at Madison Tech, referring to times when players like Burke have approached him with difficult topics. “I think I am rare.”

The winners of back to back Division II state championships, Madison Tech has become a powerhouse, with many players like Burke going on to play at the collegiate level. Raymond - part coach, part mentor and part role model for the past 10 years - is a master of the x’s and o’s of the game and possibly even more importantly, in building trust and strong relationships with his players. He describes himself as a person who “coaches with compassion” and places tremendous value on listening.

“My initial reaction was to ask him why he wanted to sit out,” he said. “My job is not to change anyone’s beliefs but to support him. I needed to understand why.”

Believing that a coach at a Boston high school - or a coach anywhere in America - will be trained on how to have a dialogue like the ones Raymond encourages is a poor assumption. Erica Tibbetts, a lecturer at Smith College and contributor to the American Psychological Association’s work regarding athletes and activism, notes that since there is no consistent coaching curriculum in the United States, most coaches are not prepared or skilled on how to have a productive discussion about something as controversial as sitting for the national anthem, especially as the discourse in America becomes increasingly polarized.

“We can’t even agree to disagree,” said Tibbetts. “There’s an inability to share conversational space with people.”

Coaches can also bring personal biases to situations. Joseph Cooper, a professor and chair of the Sport Leadership and Administration program at UMass-Boston, encourages coaches to

reflect on their own values, what they stand for and what they wanted fostered among their athletes.

“All coaches have different ethical orientations and core values,” Cooper said. “We assume they are the same because they are in a position of authority. They’re not.”

In addition to having to possibly engage with coaches that don’t have the ability or desire to partake in controversial discussions, high school athletes don’t have the same supports in place as their older and often more financially secure counterparts at the professional, college or even Olympic level. The idea of young athletes taking a stand like Kaepernick is romanticized; the results of doing so can be devastating.

Kaepernick’s actions started a national debate, one in which President Donald Trump labeled him and the other players who joined his protest as “sons of b-----” and suggested they be suspended without pay. Although Kaepernick has been out of the NFL for three years, he recently agreed to an out of court monetary settlement with the league, the result of a lawsuit he filed against the NFL claiming collusion by teams to prevent him from playing.

“What do high school kids have to fall back on?” asked Phil Anderson, one of Raymond’s assistant coaches and someone who counseled Burke on his decision. “This could cost him a chance to go to school for free.”

Anderson noted that players attending Madison Tech were already “behind the eight ball” compared to students in more affluent communities due to the stereotyping around the way they dressed and the music they listened to.

“[The fans and players in the suburbs] see the hoods. The headsets on,” he said. “They might think we are thuggish, dangerous, hostile. We’ve heard that.”

Anderson supported Burke and wanted him to be able to use his voice. He also knew that Burke's actions would impact the entire team, school and community and could fuel negative perceptions locally and even nationally. All the work that had been done to create a program that was respected could be erased by one emotionally driven decision and Burke, a star player, could feel the impact in the form of a lost scholarship.

"I told him I love you but no. You're playing with fire," Anderson said. "You may win the battle but you will lose the war."

Burke stood for the anthem and does not regret his decision. His choice was not made out of fear but from recognizing that he was part of a team, program and community that needed him to explore other ways for him to stand up for injustice. Encouraged by Anderson to share his story, the mentee has become somewhat of a mentor to current players at his alma mater.

"I don't think I would have been penalized," he said. "Madison Tech would have been penalized. I would have been selfish, a bad teammate. There is a time and a place."

For Boston high school athletes situations like these are a catch 22. Stand up for what is right, try to influence change and then most likely deal with a tsunami of criticism. Or, remain quiet, watch injustice happen but possibly receive the financial assistance needed to go to college. And this conundrum is not unique to Boston as illustrated by the many stories about high school athletes and teams across the country taking a stand; there is no count of the ones never written or shared.

Although the Supreme Court ruled in 1943 that students do not have to stand for displays of patriotism like the national anthem, Raymond used one of the most famous athlete activists, boxer Muhammad Ali, to illustrate how the laws on the books may not be able to protect young students from the reality of the effect of public sentiment.

“They loved him when he was Cassius,” Raymond noted, referring to Ali’s original name, Cassius Clay, before Ali changed it based on religious preferences that led to him protesting the Vietnam war. “He became dangerous when he became Muhammad.”