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Bob Costas, NBC Sportscaster, on NFL protests and patriotism (full CNN interview)

CAMEROTA: Joining us now is veteran NBC sports broadcaster Bob Costas. Bob, great to have you out so here on the snoring you've seen it all in this business, what's your reaction to what happened this weekend.

COSTAS: The reaction is so universal, including from prominent NFL owners who have supported and donated to Trump's campaign and to his inaugural committee. Bob Pratt, across the board. And you have not heard a single person within the NFL raise a voice in support of what Trump said. Rex Ryan said he's appalled, and now ashamed, that he once introduced Trump at a rally in Buffalo where he then was a coach. What's happened here is that what was already an issue raised primarily by Colin Kaepernick has expanded beyond the specific point that Kaepernick was trying to make, which was a very valid point, and now it's become near-universal disgust with the President's insulting remarks.

BERMAN: Your friend Peter King noted that last week there were fewer than 10 NFL players who kneeled, who did some kind of protest. This weekend, depending on how you count it: 250, including entire teams? How significant is that, to see a movement that—I can't think of anything like that in the NFL.

COSTAS: No, but the president has galvanized players of all backgrounds, of all beliefs. Drew Brees in his complete statement says that he would never feel comfortable not standing for the national anthem. But he would stand locking arms with his fellow players, black and white, with a hand on the shoulder of a black player who was expressing his point of view, and he pointedly said that he found the President's remarks inappropriate. Which is kind.

CAMEROTA: What's interesting is the President could have used this as a teachable moment, to say, 'Here's why I believe we should stand for the national anthem, here's what I believe it stands for,' but he took a different tack. And it has—look we saw, what was happening with just the fans yelling at each other. There is something contagious about divisiveness.

COSTAS: Yeah. And it plays, in certain quarters. You stir people's emotions and resentments, that's actually a business plan in certain quarters of the internet or cable television, it's a business plan. And it's the way President Trump, for better or worse, approached his campaign and approaches his presidency. To give him the extreme benefit of the doubt, extreme benefit of the doubt, you'd say he's insensitive to the racial implications to make comments about this at a rally in Alabama. He likes cheap applause lines and he delivered them.

BERMAN: Which has no football team, by the way.

COSTAS: Well, no pro football team. They're rabid football fans down there. That's to give him the extreme benefit of the doubt. But do you want a President of the United States who, even if you're giving him the benefit of that doubt, is so tone-deaf to the racial implications of this?

BERMAN: It's interesting, because this morning one of the things the President has written, he writes "The issue of kneeling has nothing to do with race. It is about respect for our Country, Flag and National Anthem. NFL must respect this!" Now, if you take your tack there and say giving him the benefit of the doubt....maybe for him, the extreme benefit of the doubt—the issue of kneeling isn't about race, but for the players, especially the players initially to say it isn't about race, that's not true.

COSTAS: Seventy percent of the players in the NFL, roughly, are African American. Virtually every player who knelt in the initial stages of this was black, and the initial impetus from it or for it came from Colin Kaepernick and it was about police brutality and mistreatment of African Americans. You can't separate those two things. Now, if you want to make the point that the national anthem is about something more than the nation's flaws and shortcomings, it's also about its ideals and that people can see some texture to what the national anthem means, and you might prefer that people protest or make their point outside of the national anthem, that's something to be argued. But the idea that this doesn't have something to do with race is preposterous. Michael Steele, African American, former head of the Republican National Committee, was unsparing in his remarks about what Trump had to say. Bob Craft, who contributed to the inaugural committee. You're not going to find many voices of support outside his base, his extreme base, for these remarks.

CAMEROTA: Tom Brady back he said this morning I believe this yeah just this morning on a radio show "I certainly disagree with what he said. I thought it was divisive." Have we heard from Colin Kaepernick?

COSTAS: No and I don't expect that we will because he's been quiet for a long long time sometimes he tweets some things out I think it's actually a good thing that this has gone now beyond Colin Kaepernick and I'll tell you why but we have to give Kaepernick credit. First of all taking a knee the first game he sat and then it occurred to him maybe sitting seems contemptuous. Kneeling can be an act of grace. Tim Tebow knelt at various times. It can be an act of grace and an act of respect but Kaepernick has, whether people know it or not, has raised and or donated millions and millions of dollars to worthy causes. He's walking the walk. He's involved in the community.

But Kaepernick himself was an imperfect messenger. He's given to saying things like "I don't vote because the oppressor will never let you vote your way out of your oppression." So I guess it doesn't matter to him who wound up being president of the United States. It doesn't matter that when he first knelt Barak Obama was president and now someone who many of his fellow African Americans and importantly many of his fellow citizens of all races and backgrounds object to. It doesn't matter to him?

Sometimes what Colin says when he does speak makes it sound as if - and I say this with great respect for his intentions and for what he has done beyond kneeling on the field - sometimes he sounded like someone who took one semester from a radical professor when he was a freshman and that's all he knows about the world so I think it's better that additional voices here, from multiple backgrounds weigh in. Colin Kaepernick despite what some people want to say is not the natural heir to Muhammad Ali or Arthur Ashe or to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar who continues to be a public intellectual. He's tried to do a good thing from his heart. I don't know that he's equipped to carry that baton.

BERMAN: Whether or not he's the right person for he's being punished. I don't think there's any question right he has the talent to be playing football right now and he's now. because of this.

COSTAS: He's better than some starters and better than most backups.

BERMAN: Let me ask you again about a lot of where the debate is about right now because you hear from the President you certainly hear it from his cabinet including Steve Mnuchin and I'm not sure if we have that quote, but the Treasury Secretary went on TV this weekend and said "This isn't about race, it's about respect for the military and first responders and when you kneel you're disrespecting the military and first responders."

COSTAS: Part of what's happened is that sports and patriotism and the flag have been conflated to such an extent that people can't separate out any nuance. If you go to see Hamilton which is about the founding of the Republic no one says wait don't raise the curtain until we hear the national anthem. When you went to see Private Ryan no one said turn off the projector (Saving Private Ryan) no one said turn off the projector until we've had the national anthem. It's in sports where this stuff happens. Sometimes movingly, sometimes I'd submit cynically because wrapping yourself in the flag and honoring the military is something which no one is going to object to.

We all respect their sacrifice we all honor their sacrifice and yet what it has come to mean is that the flag is primarily and only about the military. This is no disrespect to the military. It's a huge part of the narrative. But Martin Luther King was a patriot Susan B. Anthony was a patriot, dissidents are patriots, school teachers and social workers are patriots and yet at Yankee Stadium if we can shift sports not only do they play the national anthem before the game but they play 'God Bless America' at the seventh-inning stretch 81 times a year at home games and in every case they say "Please rise as the Yankees honor a military guest."

I have no problem with that I stand every time in the ballpark no matter what it is. I stand and I certainly respect the military person they bring out there but there's never a schoolteacher, there's never a social worker. Patriotism comes in many forms and what has happened is that it's been conflated with with kind of a bumper sticker kind of flag waving and with the military only so that people cannot see that in his own way Colin Kaepernick ,however imperfectly, is doing a patriotic thing and so too are some of these other players.

CAMEROTA: What do you think this does this season for football? Do you think that it will hurt ratings?

COSTAS: No, I think it increases interest. Just yesterday every telecast including Sunday Night Football on NBC showed the National Anthem. Generally speaking - and this is interesting - generally speaking ,be at baseball, football whatever, the network's try to cover the national anthem. They try to be in commercial. I've heard it in my ear where the producer says "Wait a minute, they may still be in the anthem when we come out of this commercial." and sometimes they are and then you're just quiet for the last few notes and you know that the anthem has concluded. Now, people want to see the anthem. They're interested in it how long it lasts. We'll have to wait and see.

By the way, I did this may this is not as important but in his comments in Alabama, Trump went on to say that "They're ruining the NFL. There's not enough hitting. They're I guess sissifying the game. You wonder how many times people who believe that have themselves been hit in the head. The science is clear and the more that science emerges the more it will become clear that football and brain trauma are linked it doesn't matter how much you like the game they are linked and to deny that is to live in a fantasy world

BERMAN: When you hear people say that sports is about entertainment, sports it is about distraction, sports is about something other than politics, politics shouldn't be in sports.

COSTAS: Largely true, but sometimes they intersect inevitably and to ignore it is to ignore the elephant in the room. When I commented about various issues only occasionally on NBC, be it on football or during the Olympics, it was never during the action it was never at the expense of the action and the drama. It was always in a little niche that was carved out when nothing else was going on in terms of the game itself but you have to acknowledge these things and you have to address them. They're important and very often because sports appeals across demographic lines like nothing else. we live in a niche world, but the one thing that draws not only a large audio but a varied audience outside of the Academy Awards in the Emmys I guess, the one thing that draws that kind of across-the-board interest is big sports events and and very often that's where these issues play themselves out.

CAMEROTA: I heard a little bit of relevant history yesterday that I think is important to just reiterate and that is that before 2009 the players often worked on the field for the national anthem something changed and patriotism became a larger component of all this sometimes paid patriotism, and so yesterday what did you think of the teams that stayed in the locker room for the national anthem. They released statement saying "We believe in patriotism, we believe in our flag and we believe in our first responders." But they stayed in a locker room. What did you make of that?

COSTAS: I was ok with it. I think what Mike Tomlin said - the coach of the Steelers - made a lot of sense. We don't want our players to have to choose. They may feel one way, they may feel another, they may be apolitical, so we'll stay off , though, in a way, one of the players for the Steelers who was an Army Ranger in Afghanistan came out of the locker room and stood at the edge of the field - not on the field but sort of at the at the lip of the runway that would lead to the field - with his hand over his heart and that was his decision to make and I would respect that to.

BERMAN: What crossed the line specifically, do you think? What broke the damn here?

COSTAS: Well, when you call people's 'sons of bitches' across the board, that offends everybody - white and black. They've stood shoulder-to-shoulder on those fields, in those locker rooms what kind of a statement is that to make? And I don't think it's irrelevant that clearly the President had more passion and conviction for those remarks than he did when he finally got around after equivocating to distancing himself to some extent from white nationalists and neo-nazis. He clearly had more fervor for this than for that. It's one thing to take a knee or raise a fist. It's your right and there's a point made. But I hope others follow Kaepernick's lead, not in some of the naive political statements he's occasionally made, but in getting involved in the community and actually doing things which many NFL players already do but it's just not spotlighted. It's not just the NFL, NBA Major League Baseball, whatever it may be.

I think the reason why Kaepernick is an imperfect messenger is that you think about Muhammad Ali - a different time and of course he was a transcendent figure and he was so entertaining even when he was polarizing, people couldn't take their eyes off him he was so charismatic and magnetic - but you need people out there articulating as a few did this weekend - out there articulating. We love our country, we support the military, we know that most policemen not only are not guilty of misbehavior but many of them are heroic and dedicated, many of them are themselves African American Mexican or Hispanic and they're dedicated to protecting and serving people of all backgrounds. We get that. but there is still a problem and it and that problem - of police brutality specifically - is real, it's true, it's urgent, and because it's connected historically to the mistreatment of African Americans by government, by the justice system, and by the police, because it's connected it resonates all the more. If people can make those distinctions and voice those distinctions rather than just kneeling or rather than just raising a fist, then then the conversations really on and I hope it goes there.

BERMAN: It's hard to say all of what you just said on Twitter, which is I think one of the problems right now.

COSTAS: A world that plays its discussions out on social media is not a world of texture and nuance.

CAMEROTA: Bob Costas thank you for being part of the conversation with us.

COSTAS: Thank you all