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On their feet, knees, and benches, NFL players sent messages. Here's a hint at what they meant

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By [Matt Rocheleau](#)

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On Sunday, an unprecedented number of professional football players were recalled not for their plays during the game, but what they did before it even started — namely for their stance during the national anthem.

Some knelt or sat. Others locked arms or raised a fist. A few National Football League teams even stayed in the locker room for “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

Each position was a mark of a protest, or solidarity. But what exactly do the different demonstrations mean? There’s no universal sign that any one position means and often the answer differs depending who you ask.

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But here’s a rundown of some of the explanations that members of the NFL gave for the stance they chose:

Kneeling or sitting

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Players who either sat or knelt during the anthem cited one or more of the following reasons: They said they were protesting racial or social injustice, expressing their displeasure with President

Trump's [comments on such protests](#), supporting free speech, or offering a show of unity.

Buffalo Bills linebacker Lorenzo Alexander [explained it this way](#): “there are some social injustices in this country, and today I wanted to take a knee in support of my brothers who have been doing it.”

Denver Broncos linebacker Von Miller [said](#), “Me and my teammates, we felt like President Trump’s speech was an assault on our most cherished right, freedom of speech. . . . At this moment in time, we felt like, as a team, we had to do something.”

And for New England Patriots safety Devin McCourty [kneeling was more about standing up](#). “We just wanted to send the message of unity and being together, not standing for the disrespect and different way guys felt.”



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The Oakland Raiders before their game against the Redskins in Landover, Maryland, on Sunday.

Standing with arms locked

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Many players said the meaning of this gesture was to show unity.

Chicago Bears defensive end Akiem Hicks, who played for the Patriots two seasons ago, [offered this](#): “We have great respect for our country, great respect for the flag, great respect for the anthem. We also want to show that we’re unified.

Atlanta Falcons wide receiver Julio Jones [said](#), “It’s all about unity. . . . Everybody here, including our owner, our whole organization, if we are going to do something, we are going to do it together.”

One arm linked, other hand over the heart (think, Tom Brady)

Patriots quarterback Tom Brady added a unique twist with the symbolic gesture he made during the anthem. He linked his left arm with another teammate’s, while he helped his right hand over his heart.

Brady [said](#) the demonstration was to show how much he [respects](#), supports, and cares about the other players on the team.

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“I just think there’s just a great love for my teammates,” he said.

Staying in the locker room

The meaning of this action varied among players, including teammates.

They cited one or more of the following reasons for choosing to stay in the locker room until the anthem was over: to show unity, to support freedom of speech, to fight hatred and injustice, and to try to remove themselves from the controversial issue.

Seattle Seahawks defensive end Michael Bennett [said](#), “At the end of the day it’s about coming together and collaborating and figuring out how to unite people together. I think as a team, we did that today.”

His teammate, linebacker K.J. Wright, [added](#), “We have our rights, and we are going to exercise those rights, no one is going to take that away from us. . . . We are going to be the next Jim Brown, the next Kareem, those athletes that stood up for injustice.”

Pittsburgh Steelers coach Mike Tomlin, meanwhile [had this explanation](#): “We’re not going to play politics. . . . We’re not participating in the anthem today. Not to be disrespectful to the anthem, but to remove ourselves from this circumstance.”



NAM Y. HUH/ASSOCIATED PRESS

The Pittsburgh Steelers stood in the tunnel during the national anthem before their game against the Bears in Chicago.

Raising a fist

This gesture has long been described as a way to protest injustices and as a symbol of black power. Sunday's athletes were hardly the first to make such a gesture. During the medal ceremony in the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, two American athletes famously offered up a raised fist as "The Star-Spangled Banner" played.

More recently, Patriots players Devin McCourty and Martellus Bennett (who now plays for the Green Bay Packers) did this during a pregame anthem last season.

McCourty [said](#) at the time, "It's all for the same cause: different social injustices."

Bennett [said](#) it was meant as a “sign of unity.” “All we’re trying to do is invite attention into the conversation, because it takes everybody. . . . It takes every single person in society to do their part, and no role is too small.”

Stretch

Buffalo Bills running back LeSean McCoy continued his pregame stretching during the national anthem on Sunday.

His [rationale](#): “I was very bothered the comments of our president of this country. As a president you’re supposed to lead us, you’re supposed to bring us together. You know, you’re supposed to lead this country.”

Standing without making any visible gesture

And then there were the players who stood, but without making any visible gesture. Interpreting the meaning, if any, behind that choice is difficult, especially because players weren’t asked much about that.

But at least one player, New Orleans Saints quarterback Drew Brees [spoke](#) to this stance on Sunday:

“I disagree with what the President said and how he said it. . . . Do I think that there’s inequality in this country? Yes, I do. Do I think that there’s racism? Yes, I do . . . If the protest becomes we’re going to sit down or kneel or not show respect to the flag of the United States of America and everything it symbolizes and everything it stands for, everything our country has stood for to get to this point, I do not agree with that.”



AP

Los Angeles Rams defensive end Robert Quinn on Sunday.



BOB LEVERONE/ASSOCIATED PRESS

New Orleans Saints quarterback Chase Daniel.

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