

# “Standing Up For What She Believes In”: U.S. Women’s Soccer Fan Responses to the Interplay of Sport and Politics

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## Abstract

Scholars have identified a new wave of athlete political activism and/or advocacy, often led by the example of women. Yet despite the importance of fan responses to political expressions in sport to public conversations and sport and corporate organizational reactions, little empirical research has considered how fans make sense of women athletes’ political engagement. We draw from in-depth interview data collected with 53 U.S. adults who attended the 2019 Women’s World Cup and were highly-identified fans of women’s professional soccer. Specifically, we consider fan responses to Megan Rapinoe’s kneeling to protest racist police violence and declaration that she would not visit the Trump White House and Jaelene Hinkle’s declining a call up to the U.S. Women’s National Team to not wear an LGBT Pride jersey and comments in opposition to marriage equality. Fans’ responses to these two athletes reveal that women’s sports are perceived to be uniquely political, that athletes are understood to have rights to political engagement that should be exercised with an awareness of their risks, and that fans love a winner, with athletic talent strengthening political activism/advocacy work when an athlete’s ideology aligns with fans’, but generating internal conflict among fans when it does not.

**Keywords:** Sport, Politics, Soccer, Gender, Race, Sexuality

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## Introduction

Like all social institutions, sport is eminently political, equally characterized by existing political ideologies and divisions as a site where these are continually negotiated, resisted, and changed (Thorson and Serazio 2018; Washington and Karen 2001). Yet the idea of sport as a meritocratic form of entertainment outside of the political sphere is both strong and persistent, with many believing that sport is and should be apolitical (Agyemang, Singer, and Weems 2020; Allison, Knoester and Ridpath, 2021; Cavalier and Newhall 2018; Knoester, Ridpath and Allison 2021). This position is belied, of course, by the long history of elite athletes using sport as a

platform to call attention to and work to transform social inequalities (Edwards 2017). Recently, U.S. college and professional sport has witnessed a renewed wave of athlete activism, reflective of and contributing to awareness and discussions of racial and gender inequalities in U.S. society (Borders 2018; Cooky and Antunovic 2020; Frederick et al. 2017). Activist efforts within sport have made claims to apoliticism more tenuous and brought visibility to the ways in which politics are brought into and are already a part of sport.

As a lens into the relationship between sport and politics, we take up questions of sport fans’ perceptions of and responses to the politicization of sport. Specifically, we address U.S. women’s soccer

fans’ responses to two recent examples of the overt enmeshing of sport and political beliefs in U.S. women’s professional soccer. This focus is an important complement to existing knowledge, as limited empirical research has addressed fan reactions to the political engagement of women athletes despite the fact that women have been at forefront of the recent wave of athlete activism (Bagley and Liao 2021; Borders 2018; Cooky and Antunovic 2020).

Relying on 53 in-depth interviews with highly-identified U.S. women’s soccer fans, we compare responses to Megan Rapinoe’s kneeling protests during the national anthem and subsequent comments about not visiting the Trump White House and Jaelene Hinkle’s opting out of U.S. Women’s National Team play to avoid wearing an LGBT Pride jersey and comments in opposition to marriage equality. While Rapinoe’s words and actions received more national attention than Hinkle’s, in line with her more prominent public profile, both events were highly visible and frequently discussed among U.S. women’s soccer fans, notably through social media sites such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*. Importantly, however, these events varied in the specific political beliefs at play, offering a unique opportunity to compare responses to the assertion of both liberal (Rapinoe) and conservative (Hinkle) political beliefs in sport among what research has shown to be a largely politically progressive group of fans (Guest and Luitjen 2018; Henderson 2018). Thus, we extend prior research that has examined responses to athlete activism among more conservative groups of fans (McGannon and Butryn 2020; Sanderson, Frederick, and Stocz 2016; Smith and Tryce 2019). As we show, while fans personally espoused Rapinoe’s political views and largely rejected Hinkle’s, they maintained support for both athletes’ right to activism, perceiving women’s sport as inherently political.

## Theoretical & Empirical Framework

### *Sport, Politics, and Responses to the New Athlete Activism*

The conceptual framework for this study holds that sport and politics are interrelated; sport is and has always been political, and broader political ideologies have often been communicated, negotiated, and resisted in and through sport (Schmidt 2018; Thorson and Serazio 2018; Trimbur 2018; Washington and Karen 2001). Athletes, in particular, have long used their social standing to contest political arrangements that construct and reinforce social inequalities of race, gender, and sexuality (Edwards 2017). Despite these integral relationships, however, a view of sport as

inherently good, pure, and outside of politics (ideally, if not always in practice) retains strong cultural significance, periodically asserted in suggestions that athletes should “stick to sports” (Allison et al. 2021; Cavalier and Newhall 2018; Mudrick et al. 2019). As Coakley (2015) acknowledges, however, this view itself is not politically neutral. Instead, claims of sport’s neutrality are defenses of the status quo that reinforce existing racial and gendered hierarchies in both sport and society (Gill 2016).

Recent years have seen a number of high-profile moments of athlete activism in sport, part of new feminist and antiracists movements like #MeToo and Black Lives Matter. Efforts to counter complex social inequalities on the part of high school, college, and professional athletes have included national anthem kneeling protests, game boycotts, protest through apparel items, op-eds, and social media posts, among others (Bagley and Liao 2021; Mudrick et al. 2019; Schmidt et al. 2019; Trimbur 2018). Most activist efforts among athletes have called attention to or challenged inequality, supported the expansion of civil and human rights, and combatted prejudice and discrimination, actions that align with liberal political ideologies and, often, the priorities of the Democratic party. Responses to these activisms commonly include some support but also backlash from the more politically conservative owners and fans within many men’s and women’s team sports (Agyemang, Singer, and Weems 2020; Frederick et al. 2017). In contrast, little research has considered activist or advocacy efforts in sport that align with conservative or Republican party principles and ideas, perhaps because there are fewer such examples or because these moments receive less public and media attention.

The responses of fans to athletes’ political engagement is an important source of public opinion that affects the actions of sport organizations and related corporate and mass media entities. Moreover, social media have enabled fans to become active and engaged in not only the consumption but also the production of sports news, communicating with athletes, teams, leagues, and other fans to shape public narratives (Pegoraro 2010; Schmidt et al. 2019). Trimbur (2018) argues that the economic and cultural significance of sport in U.S. society enables the symbolic actions of athletes, coaches, and others to generate important discussions among diverse groups; “sport forces people who otherwise would not engage with each other into a dialogue. It creates new spaces for conversations whether participants are willing or not” (p. 11). While “there is a dearth of empirical data exploring the ways in which consumers engage with such displays [of activism], especially when the activism becomes political and thus, potentially divisive” (Mudrick et al. 2019: 179), there are some

previous studies of fans’ (or consumers’) perceptions of and responses to political activism among men athletes (Mudrick et al., 2019). American gridiron football, in particular, has received outsized attention (Cooky and Antunovic 2020).

One main finding in research on fan responses to athlete activism has been simultaneous support and opposition (Frederick et al. 2017; Gill 2016). Notable in these and similar studies (see also Sanderson et al. 2016), the principle of freedom of speech is often invoked, sometimes to argue for athletes’ right to political activity, yet sometimes to limit it. Also, fan reactions to Black athlete activism have been subtly racist, relying on and reinforcing controlling images of Black men as “dumb jocks” or “dangerous thugs” (Gill 2016). This has especially been true in reactions to Black women’s activism. The Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) has a long history of social activism, often paving the way for higher-profile activism by male athletes in the NBA and NFL. In 2016, WNBA led the way with shirts honoring victims of violence (Bagley and Liao 2021), postgame press conferences discussing victims of police violence, individual player activism (Borders 2018), and league-wide initiatives dedicated to social justice. What has been notable about WNBA activism is that it has generally taken the form of collective action rather than individual athlete acts of protest. Importantly, WNBA athletes who engage in political protest and action do not seem to face much backlash for their activism from fans. Lisa Borders, former WNBA President, noted, “while there was a backlash, a clear majority of WNBA fans responded by showing up at games and sharing support on social media. They may have respectfully disagreed with a position, but they respectfully recognized the right of the players to make their voices heard” (Borders 2018).

Another central finding in existing research is that fans’ existing political ideologies shape their responses such that they have more favorable reactions to activist positions that align with their own political commitments. For instance, Mudrick et al.’s (2019) quasi-experimental design found that attitudes towards a liked athlete became more negative with that athlete’s public statements opposing a U.S. President that the respondent supported. McGannon and Butryn (2020) conducted a critical discourse analysis of National Football League owners’ statements following President Trump’s labeling of protesting NFL players as “son[s] of bitches” who should be fired in 2017. Known to be politically conservative, on average, this group expressed belief in a post-racial meritocracy that defended the (unequal) status quo. And Knoester et al.’s 2021 study of U.S. adults’ opinions toward athlete kneeling protests found that

political conservatism was associated with lower levels of support (see also Smith and Tryce 2019).

#### *Resurgent Feminism in Women’s Sport*

Specifically, our study considers two recent moments of athlete political activism and/or advocacy within U.S. women’s professional soccer. Through about 2012, many who worked within women’s professional soccer shied away from an explicitly feminist label, concerned about alienating existing and potential corporate and media partners, and embracing only a politically vacuous language of girls’ and women’s empowerment (Allison 2018). These dynamics have shifted recently, however, in tandem with a changing public consciousness, the renewed popularity of feminism, the organization of Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements, and USWNT legal efforts to challenge pay, resource, and treatment inequalities within soccer.

Two recent studies demonstrate this shift. Cooky and Antunovic (2020) illustrated how the USWNT’s campaign for equal pay to their men counterparts gained media visibility through a neoliberal feminism that pushed for women’s inclusion within hypercommercialized mediasport. Media framed the team’s efforts in ways that supported their claims to sexist treatment, in contrast to earlier framings of women’s soccer as less valuable than men’s, with less interest in their “product.” And Cavalier and Newhall (2018) note that the U.S. Soccer Federation’s social media posts supportive of the 2015 Obergefell v. Hodges Supreme Court ruling in favor of marriage equality were a departure from this organization’s past silence on social issues. They analyzed Facebook and Instagram comments on these posts, finding that the primary topic of discussion was the relationship between politics and sport, with two thirds of users arguing for their incompatibility. Other comments discussed (and often criticized) the posts’ use of rainbow colors to represent the country, reflecting nationalist rhetoric about the salience of red, white, and blue, or argued that the number of publicly “out” gay, lesbian, and bisexual players, coaches, and fans in women’s soccer made it appropriate for U.S. Soccer to post in support of marriage equality. Importantly, however, and despite some mention of the women’s team and its fanbase, Cavalier and Newhall’s (2018) focus on the U.S. Soccer Federation’s social media accounts likely captured comments from soccer followers broadly, and not women’s soccer followers, specifically.

The women’s soccer fanbase has long been substantially, and perhaps even predominately, White and female, with a sizeable proportion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) fans

(Allison 2018). Eschewing earlier heteronormative marketing efforts that targeted “families” (Southall and Nagel 2007), women’s soccer now recognizes and celebrates its LGBTQ fans, for instance through team Pride nights. Women’s soccer supporters groups are diverse in gender and sexual identities and diversity and inclusion are shared values that draw and keep people in fan communities (Guest and Luitjen 2018; Henderson 2018). While it is certainly not the case that every self-defined U.S. women’s soccer fan would identify as politically liberal or as a Democrat, the fanbase is more liberal than conservative, on average, and embraces ideals of gender and sexual equality that are typically understood to characterize liberal politics.

### *The Events*

In September of 2016, U.S. Women’s National Team (USWNT) and Seattle Reign FC star Megan Rapinoe knelt during the playing of the national anthem prior to a National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) match against the Chicago Red Stars. Rapinoe knelt in support of NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick’s kneeling protest against police violence in communities of color. In explaining her action, Rapinoe connected her solidarity with Kaepernick to her experiences as a publicly “out” queer woman, noting that, “Being a gay American, I know what it means to look at the flag and not have it protect all of your liberties” (NBCSports 2016). Rapinoe’s national anthem protests continued intermittently after this point, limited by a U.S. Soccer Federation policy passed in 2017 that required players to stand during the playing of the anthem (Carlisle 2017), though this policy was overturned in 2020 (Carlisle 2021). During the 2019 Women’s World Cup, however, she remained silent with her hands at her side during the playing of the U.S. national anthem (Costley 2019).

In an interview with the magazine *Eight by Eight* just prior to the 2019 Women’s World Cup, Rapinoe was asked how she felt about a trip to the White House should the U.S. team win the tournament. “I’m not going to the f---ing White House,” Rapinoe replied, doubting that the team would be invited and expressing her rejection of the politics of then-President Donald Trump (Costley 2019). A video clip of her comments was released publicly via social media partway through the Women’s World Cup, generating substantial and heated discussion.

Two recent studies have examined these events. Schmidt et al. (2019) collected comments on both Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe’s public Facebook pages following their 2016 kneeling protests during the playing of the national anthem. They found that three themes characterized largely unsupportive

discussion of Rapinoe’s protest: “athlete’s role” asserted the idea that sport and politics should not mix, “representation” expressed a nationalistic view that representing one’s country precluded critiquing it, and “freedom” discussed Rapinoe’s right to speech, despite personal disagreement with her politics. Frederick et al. (2020) analyzed tweets that mentioned either Donald Trump or Megan Rapinoe the day after Rapinoe’s comments about not visiting the White House were posted online and following Trump’s response on Twitter calling her “disrespectful” and arguing, “Megan should WIN first before she TALKS!” Twitter commentary was highly divided, with some users supporting Rapinoe’s words and others opposing her actions via definitions of national pride as unquestioning loyalty to traditions that surround the American flag. Those who defended Rapinoe variously invoked her first amendment rights or criticized President Trump’s treatment of minority groups, including people of color and LGBTQ people. Megan Rapinoe’s girlfriend, WNBA superstar Sue Bird, also published an essay noting, among other things, that President Trump had never invited a WNBA champion to the White House, or an NCAA women’s basketball champion team that was coached by a Black woman (Bird 2019).

In 2017, the NWSL North Carolina Courage defender Jaelene Hinkle declined an invitation to play for the USWNT during two friendly matches. While the USWNT did not release a reason for Hinkle’s decision at the time, it was revealed in 2018 through Hinkle’s interview with the 700 Club that she had not wanted to wear a rainbow-themed team jersey celebrating LBGT Pride Month (ESPN 2018). Her political and religious beliefs led her to this decision, as she did not support marriage equality. Following the Supreme Court’s decision in favor of marriage equality in 2015, Hinkle had voiced her opposition, writing on Instagram, “I believe with every fiber in my body that what was written 2,000 years ago in the Bible is undoubtedly true. It’s not a fictional book. It’s not a pick and choose what you want to believe” (Bieler 2019).

Following the revelation of Hinkle’s interview with the 700 Club, she received boos from the stands at subsequent NWSL games, although at least one fellow Courage player and her coach publicly supported her right to her opinion and praised her as a player and teammate (ESPN 2018). Other USWNT players were less enthusiastic about Hinkle’s stance, however, and Hinkle was not on the 2019 Women’s World Cup roster. Team goalkeeper Ashlyn Harris responded to a Tweet suggesting that the UWSNT was not “friendly” to Christians by arguing: “Hinkle, our team is about inclusion. Your religion was never the problem. The problem is your intolerance and you are

homophobic. You don’t belong in a sport that aims to unite and bring people together. You would never fit into our pack or what this team stands for” (Bieler 2019).

We see these two sets of events as providing an opportunity for comparative analysis of fan perspectives on the relationship between sport and politics. Both are examples where athletes’ political beliefs influenced their decisions in their sport, took place within roughly the same period of time, and drew substantial attention, particularly within sport and women’s soccer communities. At the same time, these events are distinct in that Rapinoe’s actions reflected a politically liberal position, while Hinkle’s actions illustrated her conservative political and religious beliefs. These events took place in a context of growing public support for athlete kneeling protests against racism and police violence, though it is unclear whether this support extended to other political issues or activist efforts (Knoester et al. 2021). In contrast to research that has used social media posts to assess fan reactions (see Cavalier and Newhall 2018; Frederick et al. 2017; 2020; Gill 2016; Sanderson et al. 2016; Schmidt et al. 2019), we rely on in-depth interviews with fans that allowed for follow up and probing questions to ask about how and why reactions were developed and expressed. Specifically, the research questions that we address are:

- 1) How do U.S. women’s soccer fans respond to these two sets of events?
- 2) What do fan reactions to these events reveal about the relationship between sports and politics?

## Data and Methods

We draw from semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with 53 adults (18+) who lived in the United States and attended at least one match of the 2019 Women’s World Cup in France, part of a larger ethnographic study of women’s soccer fandom that also included observation at fan sites during the Women’s World Cup and interviews with fans living in other countries. We restrict our study to U.S. fans, as this group had the greatest knowledge of the events we are interested in and involvement with U.S. women’s soccer. Perhaps because participants were sampled on the basis of their attendance at the Women’s World Cup, which required substantial outlays of time and resources, this group is comprised of highly-identified women’s soccer fans who closely followed the USWNT and the NWSL, though the forms of their involvement varied somewhat based on geographic location relative to NWSL teams.

Participants were recruited through repeated Facebook and Twitter announcements of the study, emails disseminated by soccer journalists known to the second author, and snowball sampling.

Interviews took place between April and July 2019, beginning two months before the Women’s World Cup began and ending in the same month of the tournament’s conclusion. Those who were interviewed before the tournament were contacted afterwards for short follow ups about their experiences in France. All interviews took place over phone or video chat and lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. The interview guide developed for the study covered participants’ histories of sports participation and following, the development of their women’s soccer fandom, and their experiences as a fan in varied settings. However, early participants mentioned either Rapinoe or Hinkle in describing their women’s soccer fandom and so the interviewer began to ask explicitly about knowledge of and perceptions of these events in subsequent interviews. The majority (N= 45, or 85%) of the sample is female, 79% (N= 42) are White, 64% (N= 34) are heterosexual, and all but 4 participants had a least a 4-year college degree or were currently enrolled college students at the time of their interview. Nearly all (90%) of participants were between 20 and 49 years of age. While participants were not asked directly about their political party affiliation, political ideologies were commonly expressed in interviews, for instance through voiced opposition to the policies of the Trump administration, and showed that most participants embraced liberal political positions, on average.

Interviews were transcribed and de-identified and MAXQDA 2018 qualitative software was used for data analysis. Analysis followed Deterding and Waters’ (2018) “flexible” coding method for qualitative interviews. A first-round open index coding by the second author organized the transcripts by both planned and emergent topics using descriptive codes such as “sports participation: childhood.” For this analysis, a second-round coding addressed data within the code “controversies,” which included all discussions of both Rapinoe and Hinkle. At this stage, the authors jointly conducted a second round of focused coding, discussing the work frequently to reach consensus about the creation and naming of codes (Charmaz 2006; Saldaña 2013). Following the second-round coding of each participant’s transcript, we wrote an analytic memo that summarized the answer to our research questions and noted connections to or departures from other participants’ narratives. Second-round coding and participant memos formed the basis of a developing cross-case memo that consolidated analytic codes into broader themes that captured participants’ responses to these

events and their perspectives on the relationship between politics and sport. Below, we present the primary themes constructed from the data and elaborate how they answer our research questions. All names of participants are pseudonyms.

## Results

We first present themes that address our first research question on how fans responded to these two sets of events. We generated three themes that captured fan responses to Rapinoe’s kneeling protest during the playing of the national anthem and subsequent comments about not visiting the White House released during the 2019 Women’s World Cup: support, bravery, and winning as legitimacy. The theme support expresses fans’ support for both Rapinoe’s words (“not going to the White House”), actions (kneeling), and the reasons for these. The vast majority of fans expressed unqualified support for Rapinoe’s actions and their motivations, with words like “great,” “awesome,” and “proud” common among interview participants. Some fans used the word “support” directly, for instance when Viv said, “I support her in not going to the White House.” Rapinoe was a “role model,” “a leader,” or “someone to look up to” for her stands against police violence and the policies of the Trump administration, as well as for her fight with the USWNT for equal pay and treatment. Jana, for instance, called Rapinoe a “role model” and “great example” for ““bring[ing] causes to the public’s attention.” Yet Jana also listed Hinkle among “players who also aren’t role models,” suggesting that Jana’s own admittedly liberal political ideology shaped the types of “causes” that made only Rapinoe a positive example for others.

Other fans communicated support for Rapinoe by arguing against what they saw as the primary argument against her actions in mainstream and social media, including in the tweets of President Trump, that her kneeling was “disrespectful” to the country and its symbols, including the American flag and the U.S. military. Instead, fans positioned kneeling as respectful, the embodiment of patriotism and an extension of the “right” to free speech. For example, Tania argued, “She’s using her platform to voice her opinion which is her every right. I don’t think she’s trying to disrespect them [those in the military].” And while Phoebe acknowledged that others around her felt that “if you kneel it’s super disrespectful,” she rejected this argument, asking pointedly, “Why are we kneeling?”

Three fans expressed some degree of disapproval of Rapinoe’s actions, namely her kneeling in solidarity with Colin Kaepernick. Additionally, one fan (Linda)

noted, “I don’t know what I firmly believe or think about it.” Michaela was “disappointed” in Rapinoe kneeling as “a nationalist,” while Nikki argued that she was “conflicted” because the form of the protest meant that the “message” got “off course.” Deirdre, a Black woman, felt that Rapinoe’s kneeling took focus away from Kaepernick and the issue of racism, arguing that, “having a White woman do it sort of became a conversation more about Megan Rapinoe.”

Similar to Deirdre’s concern that Rapinoe’s kneeling de-centered racism, we found that expressions of support only sometimes mentioned racism, particularly among White women fans. Some White women seemed to see Rapinoe’s significance largely in terms of her contributions to fighting sexism and homophobia. Naomi, for example, a White woman, said that Rapinoe was “standing up for things that need to be stood up for,” mentioning the USWNT’s lawsuit and broader campaign for equal pay. And Diana, also White, felt that Rapinoe kneeling was “great” because “she is standing up for something that she believes in.” She then added in a tone of admiration, “To see that as an openly gay woman...And to do it as a woman in that kind of setting,” referring to the visibility of a professional soccer game. Both Naomi and Diana saw Rapinoe as an influential queer woman who fought for gender and sexual equality but who was not primarily an antiracist activist. Although our sample included relatively few fans of color, these fans were particularly likely to note Rapinoe’s antiracist protest. Madison, a Black woman fan, said that she “loved” Rapinoe’s kneeling as a “call to action” to address “racial and gender stuff” and she didn’t care if it “piss[ed] off all these patriotic douchebags.” And Gina, a biracial woman, put it simply: “What she was protesting was police brutality against Black people. Protest is one of the most American things you can do!”

The theme of bravery positioned Rapinoe as courageous in the face of both public and media scrutiny and risks to her career. Similar to comments about Rapinoe as role model, she was also presented as a heroic figure for persisting in political activism despite some dangers to her own reputation. Terms to describe Rapinoe that referenced her courage included “brave” (Jane and Jen), “courageous” (Jeff), “bad ass” (Abigail and Mandi), “ballsy” (Cristin and Francie), “baller” (Madison), “bold” (Francie), and “willing to be herself” and “not a cookie cutter identity” (Brandon). Some fans used negative terms to describe President Trump as a way of contrasting him with the brave Rapinoe, constructing an image of this athlete as locked in a battle with a morally bankrupt enemy. Rochelle, for instance, called President Trump a “bully” and “tyrant,” while George referred to him as a “dumb dumb” and “asshole.”

Fans made the case that Rapinoe’s activist positions were brave given the high and intense levels of attention these received in mainstream and social media. Jerica noted that the media coverage Rapinoe received during the 2019 Women’s World Cup was “ridiculous” in both quantity and quality, while Renee said that on Twitter, “half the country doesn’t see her as a hero.” Some fans had feared that Rapinoe’s career would suffer as a result of her kneeling and comments about not visiting the White House. As Jen opined, “I thought it was the end of her career.” And as Francie recollected, when she first saw Rapinoe kneel,

I remember just feeling like my stomach fell a little bit; just a feeling in the pit of my stomach. It was more of oh God. I hope this doesn’t kill all of her endorsement deals because I want her to be able to make a living playing the sport. I agreed with her a hundred percent, but I was like oh my God. That is so ballsy to be doing and I hope this doesn’t financially ruin her. It’s really bold to do it, what this is. It’ll be attention grabbing, but it’s also a huge risk for her.

To fans, Rapinoe’s bravery existed in accepting risk, handling the attention with composure, and, at times, by openly welcoming exposure. This reaction was likely a partial result of President Trump’s tweet taunting Rapinoe to “win” before speaking out. For instance, Callie said, “I love how she’s just like, “Bring it, bring it on,” and Sadie said that Rapinoe was “outrageously cool under pressure.” While Linda was not sure what she thought about Rapinoe’s kneeling, she “admired” her during the World Cup for being “unfazed” by the media scrutiny and having the “mental fortitude to do her job well.” Naomi, too, noted of the attention Rapinoe received from media, “I think she somewhat brought it on herself. But she meant to. I think she handled it very well.”

Finally, and as Linda’s mention of Rapinoe’s job performance hints at, winning as legitimacy captures an important element in fans’ responses, namely the perception that Rapinoe’s political positions were given weight and legitimacy by the USWNT’s victory in the 2019 Women’s World Cup and Rapinoe’s excellent play, which earned her Golden Boot and Golden Ball awards. Again likely a partial response to President Trump’s provocative Twitter response to Rapinoe saying that she would not visit the White House, fans argued that she had “backed up” her comments by excelling in the Women’s World Cup. Saria, for example, suggested that Rapinoe’s words invited scrutiny but that she had subsequently strengthened her positions through her play. Saria said, “She said what she said. If she played to the best of her ability, she kind of put that on herself. But she backed

up her claim which I think you don’t see a lot of now, like all talk no action. Well, she was all talk all action.” Anthony made a similar argument, noting, “She talked the talk and walked the walk. So it’s kind of hard to dispute when she’s saying I’m the best, like we’re not going.” And Brandon said, “I like that she backed it up and played great to back it up. It’s one of those things, if you’re supporting a lot of attention in the media and you’re not that good. But if you’re winning the awards...that’s awesome.” The counterpoint to this argument is, of course, that Rapinoe’s political activism would have been perceived as a weaker, less legitimate message had the team not lived up to expectations of victory.

The American public valued and listened to winners, who were given enormous attention through media. Like Saria and Brandon, Rochelle, too, used the phrase “back it up,” arguing that Rapinoe’s athletic dominance had given her a media spotlight she could use to advance conversations about racism, sexism, and sport. Rochelle argued:

She had an amazing tournament and we won. She was able to really back it up, right, and be able to say, “I really am one of the best footballers in the world. Let me show you.” And I also think that it helped drive the narrative around women’s soccer in a way that was outside of the team. And so, I think that even people that don’t really care about women’s soccer or weren’t really watching the World Cup, they read an article about Megan Rapinoe saying, “I’m not going to the White House,” and then Trump tweeting something about it, right? It also helps, I think, Megan Rapinoe have maybe a bigger platform for her to talk about bigger issues that she’s been talking about for years.

Turning to fan assessments of Hinkle’s declining to wear a Pride jersey with the USWNT and comments in opposition to marriage equality, we illustrate four themes: lack of support; actions have consequences, team dynamics, and it’s complicated. The first theme, lack of support, is a clear departure from the widespread fan support for Rapinoe. Instead, fans articulated their lack of support, and indeed opposition, to Hinkle’s views on LGBT rights. Some fans made direct statements that indicated a lack of support such as Elizabeth, who said, “I am not surprised that there are people with those views but I definitely was really disappointed to hear it and shocked that she had such strong views.” Others labelled either Hinkle or her ideas as “homophobic,” “ignorant,” “sad,” “unfortunate,” “frustrating,” or “discriminatory.” Some felt that Hinkle’s beliefs reflected poorly not only on her but also on the

southern United States given her NWSL team’s location in North Carolina; these beliefs indicted the “South” as uniquely homophobic and intolerant. As Rochelle argued, “I live in the South and I really wish that we were overall a more inclusive place to live for people. But unfortunately, that’s just not the reality right now... it is very harmful to a lot of people that love the game and love the team, to have someone that really believes some hateful things.” However, many fans acknowledged their disapproval of Hinkle’s position while also noting her “right” to hold and express her political and religious beliefs. Francie, for instance, argued, “I believe that everyone can have their own opinion. I don’t agree with it, but I think that’s her right.” Fans ubiquitously rejected Hinkle’s beliefs, but upheld free speech rights that gave her the ability to speak out against marriage equality.

The theme actions have consequences acknowledged Hinkle’s “right” to her beliefs and their expression while also supporting the resulting set of “consequences” that she faced, including others’ disapproval and losing the opportunity to play with the USWNT. Mallory captured a common fan perspective on Hinkle when she said, “I think she’s free to say whatever she wants. But I’m glad that that attitude has consequences.” One primary consequence was outrage and pushback from women’s soccer fans, as Nadine noted, saying, “There was a lot of disappointment, you know, and this is why you’re hurting fans and how dare you, was a lot of response that I saw.” Madison hoped that fans’ arguing against Hinkle’s words and actions would encourage the athlete to rethink her beliefs. As she explained, “Part of me’s glad that it happened so she could just see that there’s a lot of people that feel like that belief is unacceptable. We don’t live like that anymore so maybe you should think about why you believe that. You’re free to believe whatever you want, but we’re going to push you to question that, you know?”

Fans argued that another consequence was that she did not get an opportunity to play with the USWNT and may have jeopardized future call ups. For instance, Laura made the case that, “I think if you want to play professional soccer, you might as well just get over yourself and you don’t really turn down those offers like that so it seemed counter to an aspiration to play at the highest level...She made her decision, that’s her life and it’s her choice.” Some fans emphasized that playing for the USWNT was a job and the team a workplace to support the argument that Hinkle should not expect a second chance with the USWNT; workers were expected to conform to the expectations of their employers. As Isobel said,

I think my issue was the fact that everybody was like, ‘She deserves another call up.’ And I kind of forget the perspective of, say, me or you were at

our office and for whatever reason, you decided to turn down like a project or something. I don’t think me at work, my boss would never give me another opportunity. Like she said no to playing with her country.

While fans generally embraced consequences for Hinkle, some noted that they did not like or support the booing she received at NWSL games, instead preferring a strategy that they called “disengagement.” Andrea summarized this strategy: “I mean, I wouldn’t had booed her if I’d been in the crowd and watching her, but I wouldn’t have clapped when her name was announced either.” In fact, many fans applauded Hinkle’s apparent willingness to accept the consequences of her actions, despite their strong disagreement with her views. Andrea’s preference not to partake in booing Hinkle stemmed from her appreciation for Hinkle’s acknowledgment that her political and religious beliefs meant that she would not be able to play for the USWNT. “Great for her for standing up for what she believes in,” Andrea said, “Understanding that there are consequences. Your National Team coach is gay. You got to look your National Team coach in the eye and say, ‘I’m not going to wear a pride flag,’ and you expect to come back on the team?”

Team dynamics is a theme that communicates the difficult, even strained relationships between Hinkle and her gay, lesbian, or bisexual teammates and coaches that many fans imagined. Fans framed negative relationships as a result of Hinkle’s beliefs and as a detriment to team cohesion. Importantly, this was an assumed problem that resulted from Hinkle’s words and actions, as fans had no direct knowledge of her relationships with others on her NWSL team, and a few fans even noted the supportive tone of her coach when asked about Hinkle in media interviews. Nyla put it succinctly: “How are you supposed to get along with your team after you say something like this?” The phrase “I can’t imagine” commonly appeared as a way for fans to express the seeming challenge that Hinkle’s opposition to marriage equality posed for teammate relationships. As Diana said, “I can’t even imagine being the other players and being expected to treat her in the same way on the field.” And Jeff said in a tone of disbelief, “Especially, she’s had gay teammates in the past. She has them now, I think. It kind of bugs me that someone can think, ‘Oh, I’m just doing this because of religion’ and not see how much harm that can do to other people where you’re saying that they’re basically evil for living the life the way they were made. To have her there on the team is just kind of a frustrating reminder of that.”

Hinkle’s beliefs were also made a problem for team dynamics as a violation of the values of the NWSL,



which has many openly gay players, coaches, staff members, and fans, and which has embraced diversity and inclusion efforts, including events to celebrate LGBTQ+ fans. As Phoebe concluded, “At the end of the day the team does need to be about inclusivity for everyone to have an effective team. You have to be together as a team and so I think she’s not the right fit.” Elizabeth, too, praised the “inclusivity” of the NWSL and felt that Hinkle’s actions did not align with this value. She said, “The league is a super inclusive place and there’s a ton of very vocal players that are trying to move things forward and having Pride nights. I feel like that definitely outweighs those few people who have differing opinions. But it’s really unfortunate that even though she plays on a team and has gay teammates that she won’t wear a shirt that has a rainbow on it.”

Finally, the theme we named its complicated expresses fans’ sense of being torn in their feelings toward Hinkle: on the one hand, they did not agree with her politics, but on the other hand, she was a talented player who helped her team to win. Words like “tough,” “complex,” and “complicated” frequently communicated simultaneous appreciation for Hinkle’s athletic abilities and dislike for her political and religious positions. As Mandi mused,

I kind of was thinking about this the other day because the national team is having a hard time with our right back position. We have a need there...But then I was like, well, Jaelene Hinkle would be a great player in that position. Then I thought, okay, so we go to the World Cup and [defender] Kelley O’Hara gets injured and...who are we putting there right now? What if instead [USWNT Coach] Jill [Ellis] was like I’m going to take Jaelene Hinkle even if she’s homophobic but that way for sure we’ll be better off and winning. But she didn’t do that, so now we’re going to go and that’s a weak spot and what if we lose because we didn’t bring her?

Ana, too, noted similarly conflicted feelings, saying, “Sometimes it’s hard because she’s such a good player. I’m gay. I have a lot of gay friends. And I’ll take some of my friends to a game, they’re like, “Who’s that number? She’s great!” I’m like, “That’s Jaelene Hinkle. She’s evil. We don’t like to cheer for her”... It’s tough, and I’d just rather her not be on our team but then she’s so good. Do I want another team to have her? It’s a very conflicting part of the fandom.” A second form of internal conflict for some fans existed between their support for the “right” to free speech and the appropriateness of restricting or penalizing speech deemed harmful or discriminatory. While Gina said about Hinkle, “I think it’s her right to

decide that she doesn’t want to show up and wear those jerseys,” she also described what she called a “paradox of intolerance,” that “tolerating intolerance actually leads to a less tolerant world. Intolerance ends up winning. Policing people’s internal beliefs is hard.” And Andrew’s interview provided a clear example of this type of back-and-forth that some fans had with themselves. While Andrew did feel that Hinkle was free to hold and express her own political perspectives, he also was not sure that her views should be legitimized by her inclusion on the USWNT. As he argued,

I understand that there’s this argument, well part of diversity and inclusion is being tolerant of people who express things that you disagree with. But that isn’t always cut both ways. In my legal experience and my view of the world, when one form of discrimination goes against a certain class of people a certain way every time it becomes really toxic and problematic. And so, that isn’t really a value that I think to be represented or vindicated by the national team.

Based on a joint, simultaneous reading of the themes for Rapinoe and Hinkle that considered both similarities and differences in their implications for how fans perceived the relationship between sport and politics, we constructed three themes to answer our second research question. (Women’s) sport is political illustrates fans’ sense that sport is inherently political but that women’s sport, in particular, is uniquely so. Participants in this study argued that women in sport have always had to fight for their place and for resources, and also discussed the slow, but growing acceptance of openly gay, lesbian, and bisexual players, coaches, and fans. In their collective experience, the women’s soccer community (players, coaches, fans) were a generally liberal and progressive bunch who embrace values of diversity and inclusion. However, the racial or class politics of sport went far more unnoticed, despite Rapinoe’s kneeling to protest racial violence. The theme rights and risks emphasized athletes’ “right” to assert their beliefs and use their platforms regardless of fans’ personal reactions to the content of these beliefs. Fans’ disagreement with Hinkle, for instance, did not extend to taking away her ability to speak. However, fans simultaneously recognized that speaking out about political beliefs contains risks to reputation and career; athletes needed to accept these risks as the costs of political engagement. Finally, winning “trumps” all communicates the substantial value of winning through excellent play that runs throughout our findings. Fans held that Rapinoe “backed up” her activism through winning the World Cup and Golden

Ball and Boot, while fans’ dislike for Hinkle’s beliefs was made complicated by her talent and her contributions to both NWSL and (possibly) USWNT games. For some fans, the value attributed to winning “won out” over the community value of inclusivity.

## Discussion and Conclusions

This study examined fan responses to two recent moments of player political activism or advocacy in women’s professional soccer: Megan Rapinoe’s kneeling protest and later comments in opposition to a USWNT visit to the White House and Jaelene Hinkle’s comments against marriage equality and decision not to play for the USWNT because of the LGBT Pride jersey. We argue that these events present a novel opportunity to understand how a generally politically liberal group of fans makes sense of and responds to the explicit invocation of politics in sport across political ideology. This is a timely and important question given the recent “wave” of athletic activism and the power fans can exercise in shaping public debate (Pegoraro 2014; Trimbur 2018). In drawing from 53 in-depth interviews with fans, our study complements and extends existing research using social media data, most of which considers men’s sport (Cavalier and Newhall 2018; Frederick et al. 2018; 2020; Gill 2016; Sanderson et al. 2016; Schmidt et al. 2019).

To summarize, we find that fans were enthusiastically supportive of Rapinoe’s political positions but deeply unsupportive of Hinkle’s, clearly reflecting their own (liberal) political ideology, as well as the constructed values of professional women’s soccer. In fans’ view, Rapinoe advanced values of diversity and equality by bringing attention to gender and racial inequalities, while Hinkle undermined these values and presumably hurt her relationships with teammates by failing to support lesbian and gay rights. While arguments around “team cohesion” have previously been used to exclude or silence LGBT people in sport and in other social institutions, like the military, here the converse argument holds: team cohesion within women’s soccer was believed to exist only with the full acceptance of and support for LGBT players, coaches, and fans.

Despite fans’ different responses to the athletes’ politics, however, the phrase “standing up for what she believes in” in the title of this article was used to refer to both athletes, with some degree of admiration for both women’s willingness to assert their political beliefs in the face of perceived and substantial risks to their careers. Most fans expressed support for Rapinoe and Hinkle’s “right” to express their views through the “platforms” they enjoyed as professional athletes,

reflecting similar language around “rights” or “free speech” that social media commenters have voiced in previous studies. In the context of women’s soccer, however, arguments about athlete “rights” to political engagement were tied to the inevitably political nature of women’s sport, with fans referring to the long history of systemic sexism in sport to position women’s sport as continually embattled. By some necessity, then, women athletes were always political or activist, and so political expressions were to be expected, even desired. Fans rejected the argument that sport is, or could be, apolitical.

Interestingly, the negative career consequences that many fans imagined were minimal to nonexistent for both athletes. Hinkle was booed by some and did not receive a future call up to the USWNT, though ostensibly not due to her political views. Yet she remained a starting player on the North Carolina Courage through her retirement in 2020, earned two NWSL championships with the team, and was routinely labelled one of the best defensive players in the league (Birkedal 2020). And while Rapinoe did note backlash following her kneeling protest that included registration declines for her soccer camps and immediate dearth of play with the USWNT, she returned to help the team win the 2019 Women’s World Cup and has since become one of the best known U.S. women athlete-celebrities. In March of 2021, Rapinoe and teammate Midge Purce went to the (f\*\*\*ing) White House to mark Equal Pay Day with President Biden (Bieler and Boren 2021). In both cases, then, fan assumptions that political engagement would be risky did not fully hold true, regardless of the content of athletes’ political beliefs. This fact likely reflects shifting, more supportive public opinion amid the swell of athlete activism in recent years (Knoester et al., forthcoming).

Professional sport is competitive and commercial by definition. An emphasis placed on winning through athletic talent accompanied fans’ endorsement of diversity and equality as central values within women’s soccer. Both Rapinoe and Hinkle are very gifted players who made evident contributions to their NWSL team successes and their athletic prowess shaped the fans’ interpretations of their political engagements. Rapinoe’s was perceived to solidify the legitimacy of her political activism, while Hinkle’s generated substantial feelings of being “torn” among fans. This tension between feelings about on-field talent and off-field actions is no doubt similar to those that fans in many sports experience when talented or favored athletes transgress or otherwise fail to live up to fan expectations. Previous research has found that even in cases of serious transgression, as in criminal misdeeds, many fans maintain their fan allegiances and work to uphold an athlete’s reputation and career,

performing “image repair” work on behalf of the athlete (Allison, Pegoraro, Frederick and Thompson 2020). So, too, did some fans reject Hinkle’s politics but embrace her on-field performances, appreciating the team’s victories and refusing to join in booing her, but feeling acutely conflicted about their ongoing loyalty. The implication from this study is that athletic talent and a winning record may variously boost an athlete’s political message or mitigate the consequences of it in the eyes of fans. Of course, this proposition could usefully be explored through case studies of athletes in other sport contexts, or through incorporating research on athlete political activism with the substantial body of literature on athlete transgressions.

It is also an important part of our results that some fans focused somewhat more on gender and sexual (in)equalities than racial inequality, on average, despite the fact that Rapinoe kneeled to protest racism. Of course, to some extent, this reflects the salience of sexuality to events surrounding Hinkle. In addition, it may be that mainstream media coverage of women’s soccer or much social media commentary focused on issues of equal pay and gender inequality over racism, especially around the time that these interviews were conducted. Yet notably, fans praised Rapinoe as an openly lesbian woman who fought for equal pay and equal treatment of women to men in sport, often over her antiracist activism. Also entirely unacknowledged by fans was Hinkle’s position as one of the few women of color in a predominately White sport (Allison and Barranco 2020). We suggest that fan perspectives were developed and expressed through the lens of (unacknowledged) class and racial privilege (see also Allison 2020; Travers 2011), centering gender and sexuality as more relevant to the (White) women of professional soccer than race.

Though not the focus of this study, a fascinating counterpoint is the activism to counter racism and sexism of the predominately Black women of the WNBA. This work has received far less attention and public praise than that of Rapinoe and her USWNT teammates, despite its intersectional approach to feminism recognizing connections between racism, sexism, and homophobia (Borders 2018; Cooky and Antunovic 2020). In an essay for the *Player’s Tribune*, Rapinoe (2020) herself contrasted the media and public attention the USWNT received but that WNBA players did not, despite their significant activism, writing: “I think we need to be careful about calling the support that we got a “feminist” breakthrough, when it’s only part of the way there. Because when the support only extends to “white girls next door” sports? That’s not feminism — or at least it’s not the kind of feminism that I’m here for.”

There are notable limitations to our study. Perhaps foremost is that by relying on a volunteer sample of those who attended the Women’s World Cup, we capture only the perspectives of highly identified and affluent fans. The community of self-defined women’s soccer fans is certainly more diverse than this group, and perspectives on Rapinoe, Hinkle, or other players who have engaged in political activism are likely broader and more complex than those presented here. It is also likely the case that findings would be different among non-fans, and more expansive examinations of public opinion would reveal much about how athlete activism is received and responded to (see, for example, Knoester et al. 2021). However, this project would be complicated by non-fans’ lack of knowledge of teams, players, and their public and political stances. This may be particularly true for athletes like Hinkle, who are well known among existing and dedicated women’s soccer fans but lack the national, celebrity profiles of Women’s National Team players such as Rapinoe. While both are skilled players, the role of a player’s public visibility in how their activism is understood remains something of a question for further investigation.

We also limited our analyses to a single sport context, whereas comparative research across sport type or level of competition would add valuable nuance to existing research. Finally, like many of the participants in this study, our own commitments are to racial, gender, socioeconomic, and sexual equality, as is likely evident in our prior research (Allison 2018, Cavalier and Newhall 2018). As researchers, we continue to seek understandings of athlete political work and responses to it that contribute to inclusivity and equality. As athletes’ efforts to highlight inequality and fight for change continue and perhaps accelerate, these projects can be vital contributions.

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