Athlete’s Just Shut up and Play

Sporting News

David Steele, Sporting News

They’ve decided they won’t — they can’t — just “shut up and play.”

NFL players, and their athletic peers in other sports, have challenged the notion that public statements about social and political controversies don’t belong at the games, that the field is sacred ground not to be tainted by words or deeds that break down the wall between the sports world and the real world.

Never mind, of course, that the wall is broken nearly every week, not long after players warm up and shortly before they’re introduced — when the national anthem is accompanied by a military flyover and an American flag the length and width of the field.

Never mind that telling athletes to check their feelings at the entrance gate and leaving their rights as citizens at home, rejects the very principles and concepts represented by the anthem, the flyover and the giant flag.

Reggie Bush, Johnson Bademosi and Davin Joseph tuned out the avalanche of criticism from multiple directions aimed at the five Rams players who took the field last week with their arms raised in the “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” gesture. The Lions’ Bush and the Browns’ Bademosi warmed up for their games Sunday with “I Can’t Breathe” scrawled on their shirts. The Rams’ Joseph played with the phrase written on his cleats.

Earlier in the week, the Jets’ Sheldon Richardson pulled no punches when tweeting and speaking about the same issues.

With full knowledge that a police association in St. Louis had taken aim at those Rams’ players rights, if not their jobs, for protesting the grand jury decision in Ferguson, Mo., no fewer than four more players invited the wrath of both the public and the New York City police by protesting last week’s grand jury decision in the chokehold death of Eric Garner.

What these NFL players are doing, though, is continuing a time-honored history, one that goes back to the Alis, the Smiths and Carloses, the Jim Browns and Bill Russells of a past era. All were athletes who the public believes belong in the tiniest of boxes. You’re there to play ball, they’re told, and you’re there to entertain us, and most important, when it’s time for you to disappear for a week, you do it immediately, until we’re ready to see you again.

Speaking of leaving one’s rights at the gate, by the way, a “die-in” protest against the Garner decision was planned for the parking lot at Lincoln Financial Field in Philadelphia, after the Eagles-Seahawks game.

The real world is that close.

The old adage about children is applied to the adults who play the game, often to the detriment of their own physical and mental health, to amuse the masses: They should be seen and not heard.

In other words, they’re told, shut up and play.

Bush, Bademosi, Joseph and Richardson, plus the five Rams players — and, in another sport, the Bulls’ [Derrick Rose, who also wore an “I Can’t Breathe” shirt](http://www.sportingnews.com/nba/story/2014-12-06/derrick-rose-chicago-bulls-i-cant-breathe-shirt-eric-garner-photo) in warmups Saturday night — decided they were not only capable, not only entitled, but obligated to play and not stay silent.

Expect them to get the same reaction as the one the Rams players got, including demands that their teams or the NFL punish them, and threats of boycotts by fans and businesses. But the outrage directed toward the Rams players didn’t scare everybody into silence. The threats didn’t work.

The words and actions of the players did work. They didn’t shut up. They were heard. And then they played anyway.