



**Colin Kaepernick**

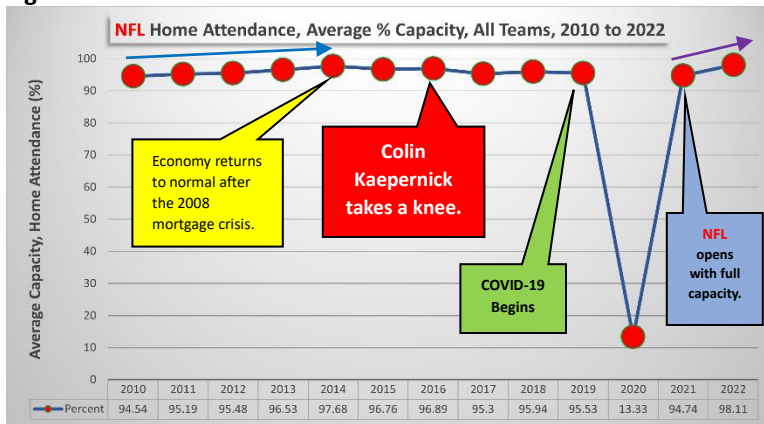
Source: <https://time.com>

# How one man changed public discourse by protesting the National Anthem. What were the consequences?

By: Erik Thompson

In the modern age, seemingly simple actions can have lasting consequences. Courage from one individual on any given afternoon can change the world by dinner time. Technology, social media, and smart devices have affected our world in dramatic ways. What are the metrics and tools available to make sense of a rapidly evolving world? On September 1, 2016, the San Francisco 49ers were playing their final preseason game when Colin Kaepernick took a knee during a televised national anthem. Was this single inflammatory act enough to influence the attendance of future NFL games? This is a question best answered by attendance data that is available at [ESPN.com](https://www.espn.com/nfl/attendance). Will analyzing the data be insightful?

**Fig. 1.1**

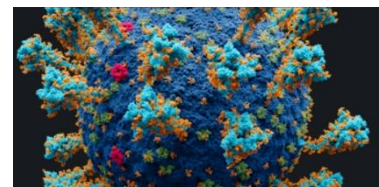


**NFL Home Attendance, Average % Capacity, All Teams, 2010 to 2022**

Data Source: <https://www.espn.com/nfl/attendance>

In 2020 the world was in a total state of lockdown. Siding with an overabundance of caution, the COVID-19 pandemic caused panicked NFL owners to make tough decisions. Many of the NFL owners implemented mask mandates, social distancing protocols, and even closed facilities entirely. **Fig. 1.1** matches the [Wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org) information and correlates well with the data. The difference in average (%) attendance is far less noticeable with Colin Kaepernick's protest, however. The two years before Colin Kaepernick took a knee shows an average of 97.68% and 96.76%, with the year of his protest increasing up to 96.89%.

A large downward spike for the year 2020 is distinctly visible in the graph, **Fig. 1.1**. It is important to note that the average percentage capacity is used here, because there is variability in venue size that must be accounted for. Total attendance values would have less meaning. What happened to cause a feature like the 13.33% average attendance in 2020? Is this an outlier in the data or is the sample size too small? The COVID-19 pandemic and the 2008 mortgage crisis top the list of suspects.



Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on  
en.wikipedia.org

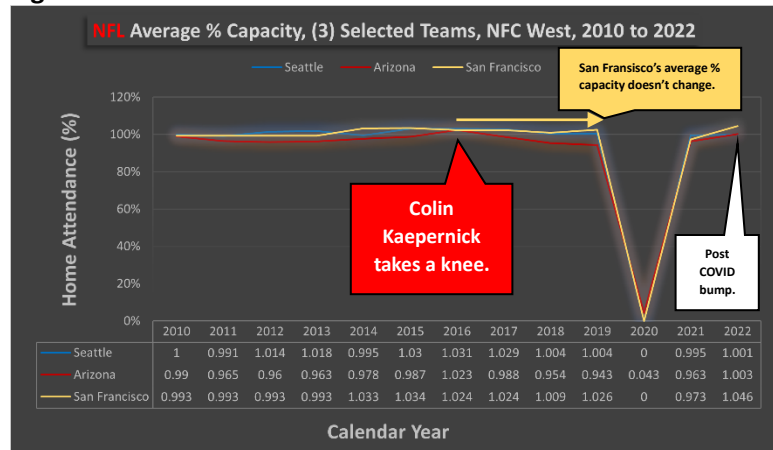
**Impact of the COVID-19 on NFL Football**

Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org>

There is an ascending feature marked with a blue arrow in **Fig. 1.1** that shows a 0.5% to 1% increase in attendance from 2010 to 2014. Attendance levels off by 2014 when Colin Kaepernick's protest takes place. There is a drop to 95.3% in the following year (2015), which may indicate a connection to Kaepernick's actions. There is a noteworthy global crisis to consider that may add some context to the ascending feature leading up to the 2016 season. In 2008 the world's economy was rocked by a near collapse of the global banking system, due to mortgage-backed securities defaulting at many of the largest banks. Although the recession officially lasted until June of 2009, the unemployment rate did not normalize until 2014-2016 [Forbes.com](https://www.forbes.com). There is also a bump in average (%) capacity in the 2022 season shown as a purple arrow in **Fig 1.1**. The bump in average (%) capacity is also visible in **Fig 1.2**.

A bump in 2022 does correlate with the re-opening of venues after the pandemic restrictions started to ease. **Fig 1.2** takes a closer look at the NFC West during the same 2010 to 2022 timeframe. Interestingly, Seattle and San Francisco had a small amount of fluctuation, while Arizona dropped a whole percent over the following two years. The expectation that San Francisco would have been directly impacted by Kaepernick's actions does not show up in the data. It is possible that Colin Kaepernick's actions did not hurt the NFL.

**Fig 1.2**



**NFL Average % Capacity, (3) selected Teams, NFC West, 2010 to 2022**  
**Data Source:** <https://www.espn.com/nfl/attendance>



**Colin Kaepernick**  
**The Kaepernick Effect: a story of the other athletes who kneeled in protest**

In his new book, Dave Zirin explores the ripple effect of the NFL quarterback's protests, and how he inspired activists at all levels of American sports

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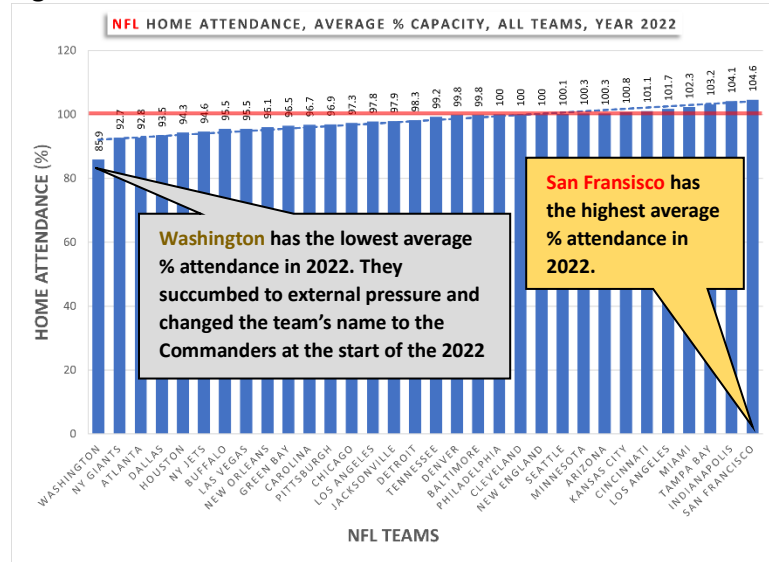
**The Kaepernick Effect**  
 Source: <https://www.theguardian.com>

The immediate effects of Colin Kaepernick's actions appear to have had a marginal impact at best on the NFL's average (%) attendance according to the data, but it is fair to say that he initiated a massive cultural movement. As reported by The Guardian, Kaepernick's clarion call inspired the US Women's Soccer team to take a knee and demonstrate that these social issues do need more public attention. The consequences of Kaepernick's actions were dramatic enough to transcend the expectation that players and fans should show respect by standing at attention with right hand over their heart during the national anthem.

At the risk of becoming a pariah in the league, Kaepernick did what he believe was necessary to bring attention to criminal justice reform. What followed was a public debate about the questions, "Did Colin Kaepernick go too far to get his point across?", "Is it okay to be disrespectful to draw attention to social issues?". According to [Wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org), Kaepernick started out sitting instead of kneeling to show respect and bring attention to his cause, but it didn't work. Kaepernick needed to raise the stakes. Colin Kaepernick's actions forced the discussion into the mainstream media, changed public discourse, and inevitably cost him his starting quarterback position.

The changes in the NFL's average (%) attendance because of Colin Kaepernick's actions were a drop in the bucket, when compared to extreme world changing events like the pandemic. However, after taking a closer look at the bump in the 2022 NFL season, **Fig. 1.3** shows that business is booming again after being completely locked down for a season. Only 9 teams were below the 96% mark, and 10 teams were above the 100% mark. A team can exceed 100% capacity when they sell auxiliary seats, add capacity to luxury suites, and other temporary options like seats on the sideline. Something to note is that Washington is at 85.9% in 2022, what could cause a 10% difference from the average of 94.93%?

**Fig 1.3**



**NFL Home Attendance, Average % Capacity, All Teams, Year 2022**  
**Data Source:** <https://www.espn.com/nfl/attendance>

A drop in average (%) attendance for Washington is likely a result of the team's recent name change. According to [Wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Washington_Redskins) The Washington Redskins change to the "Washington Football Team", and eventually to the "Washington Commanders". Brand volatility could account for lowered attendance. Perhaps one of the unforeseen consequences of Colin Kaepernick's social justice reform spilled over to racial injustice in general and created a higher degree of scrutiny from NFL fans. An interesting detail is the fact that San Fransisco has the highest average (%) capacity for home attendance in 2022. Did the fans forget or forgive Colin Kaepernick?

Colin Kaepernick's actions did not dramatically change the NFL's average (%) attendance. The pandemic was the clear winner for a single year drop of 82.2% from 2019 to 2020. Kaepernick's protest is comparable to the upward adjustment period after the 2008 mortgage crisis before unemployment rebounded, with a variability of around 1% over their respective timespans. Inspiring a change in public discourse and giving other athletes courage to stand up for what they believe in is a win for Kaepernick, however. When the next courageous athlete does something radical to get attention for their cause, fans will remember that non-conformity is sometimes necessary to instigate the changes that make our society a better place to live.

Washington's football team has a brand that is more socially acceptable at the short-term cost of a drop in the average home (%) attendance. Although Kaepernick did not directly cause Washington to change their football team's name, he started the conversation about social justice reform, thus getting fans and owners in the NFL to think about what matters most. What matters is that the NFL and all sports should be fair and inclusive. It is not a question of if, but when will the next courageous athlete take the initiative to stand up for what they believe in? The data shows with an average (%) attendance for home games at 98.11% in 2022, the fans are tired of the lockdowns, and they are ready for some football. Sometimes a courageous act is all that is needed to make the world a better place.