

Trump vs. the NFL: Who Won?

Over the past six months, President Donald Trump has developed a reputation for picking fights with anybody and anything, from foreign dignitaries like Kim Jong Un, to luxury department stores like Nordstrom. Last week, he added another big name to the list: the National Football League.



Trump during a rally speech: "Wouldn't you love for these NFL owners, when someone disrespects our flag to say, "Get that son of a b off the field right now!" (USA Today)*

That's right: America's most controversial president went to war with America's most televised past-time. Last Friday, Donald Trump criticized football players who protest during the national anthem, calling for NFL owners to "get that son of a b* off the field".

All fans (whether they agreed with the President or not), anxiously awaited Sunday Night Football to see who would still be standing as "The Star-Spangled Banner" rang out across the stadium. Meanwhile, with less than 48 hours to go before kick-off, NFL teams scrambled to come up with a winning 1st-and-Goal PR play that would top Trump's Challenge. Let's take a look at the highlights of this key matchup: Donald Trump vs. the NFL.



More than half of the Broncos players chose to take a knee in protest during the National Anthem (Mashable)

Denver Broncos: divided, they'll stand

The pressure was on for the Denver Broncos. Not only were they trying to stay undefeated against a feisty Buffalo Bills team, their game was also one of the first to be played following Pres. Trump's outburst. But if the Denver coaching staff was worried about how their players would react to the extra political attention, they didn't show it. Their priority was on going 3-0.

The coaches decided to leave it up to the players to decide what they would do during the National Anthem. As the anthem began playing, it was clear to everyone where most Broncos players stood. Of the [53 players on the roster, 32 of them decided to take a knee](#) (Kizla, Denver Post).

Three days later, Broncos Pres. John Elway surprised everyone by going against his players.

"I'm one that believes in standing for the National Anthem and I've always believed that," he said in an [interview with Broncos TV](#).

The next day, the Broncos announced that all players would stand together for the National Anthem. But the question remains: after more than half of the team *chose* to protest, just how "*together*" will they really be?

Winner: Donald Trump

*If you're trying to maintain a strong, unified PR image, the last thing you want to do is turn your back on half of your organization. While the Broncos owners may not have called anyone a "son of a b**", they pretty much did what Pres. Trump asked. They showed the world that it doesn't matter how many players protest on the field; the men in the VIP box will always have the last word.*



Army Veteran and Steelers OL Alejandro Villanueva stands alone during the National Anthem (Business Insider).

Pittsburgh Steelers: the tale of the lone ranger

Unlike the Broncos, the Pittsburgh coaching staff carefully planned how their team would respond to Pres. Trump's comments. They decided that the Steelers players would stand united ... in the locker room. The coaches hoped that by not taking the field, they could avoid any political controversy. It was a clever trick-play that failed miserably.

At the last minute, the team decided to stay in the tunnel instead of the locker room during the National Anthem. In the confusion, Offensive Lineman Alejandro Villanueva, an Army Ranger who did three tours in Afghanistan, found himself standing alone outside the tunnel.

The image of the lone ranger saluting the flag sparked outrage among many Steelers fans. Some [burned Terrible Towels](#) and posted it on social media, while others called for a boycott of the team. When asked whether or not the Steeler's would keep protesting, [Steelers President Art Rooney](#) simply said "It's over, as far as I'm concerned."

Winner: Donald Trump

Believe it or not, the "locker room protest" was a smart PR response that actually worked for [several NFL teams](#) that Sunday. In the public eye, teams that stayed in their locker rooms were "united"; fans would never know how many players knelt or stood for the National Anthem. However, the Steelers decision to ditch that plan at the last minute created just enough confusion to leave Villanueva standing by himself. The Steelers learned that when it comes to PR strategy, improvising or calling an audible doesn't always work.



Cowboys owner Jerry Jones kneels with his team, before standing for the National Anthem (The Washington Post)

Dallas Cowboys: NFL's grande finale

Thanks to Monday Night Football, the Cowboys got to watch and learn from the mishaps of those teams who played on Sunday. When it came time to take the field in Glendale, AZ, the Cowboys were ready. Just before the game, Cowboys owner Jerry Jones locked arms with his players and the entire team took a knee before standing for the national anthem.

"Trump really put these NFL owners in a tough situation," explained Clark Callahan, associate director of the School of Communications at BYU. "On the one hand they rely on players to win games, but on the other hand they rely on fans to watch the games. Jerry Jones found the best way to keep everybody happy."

After the game [Cowboys Coach Jason Garrett shared](#) "Our purpose was to show support and to demonstrate, but to do it in a way that didn't involve the national anthem."

NFL fans certainly seemed to approve; ESPN reported that TV ratings for the game [increased by nearly 63%](#). The new numbers took Pres. Trump by surprise; he had just spent the past 24 hours [attacking the NFL's abysmal ratings](#). Two days later, Pres. Trump gave the closest thing to an apology that he'll probably ever give. [Trump personally called Jones](#) to compliment him on the Cowboys behavior during the anthem.

Winner: Dallas Cowboys

The Cowboys called Trump's bluff. "[America's Team](#)" found a way to protest Trump's remarks without offending its conservative fan base. Meanwhile, Pres. Trump realized that there are cons to attacking NFL owners. In addition to being wrong about NFL ratings; Trump also lost some credibility as a leader. Prior to the Cowboys protest, [Trump called Jones four times](#) imploring him not to protest. Not only did Jones ignore Trump, but Trump then called Jones a fifth time after the

game to congratulate him. Jones isn't just an ordinary NFL owner either – he's also a well-known Trump supporter. Earlier this year, Jones donated [\\$1 million to Trump's inaugural committee](#). So Trump did the right thing by making that fifth phone call. Maybe next time he'll think about his self-interests of his key publics (NFL Owners) so he doesn't have to make so many phone calls.