

Racial profiling still affects NFL players

The Associated Press

A son who saw a police officer hold a gun to his father's head. A husband whose wife was pulled over driving a Bentley.

These unsettling scenes are among the stories from some of the NFL's marquee players, multimillionaires sharing tales of racial profiling by law enforcement. It is a troubling concern for people of color that has been at the center of the protests begun in August 2016 by former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick.

The protests have waned, but the ongoing issue for players — and the black communities they come from — has not.

The Associated Press surveyed 56 of the 59 black players at last weekend's Pro Bowl game as part of its look at how African-American athletes have long used their sports platforms to effect social and political change. The AP asked the players whether they or someone they knew have ever experienced racial profiling.

All said yes.

"You can probably ask any black man out here and the answer is yes," said Jacksonville Jaguars defensive tackle Malik Jackson. "It's not like this is just starting today or a new thing. It's gone on for a long time. I think African-American men have been (victims) of racial profiling for a long time, by either the things they wear or just by the color of their skin."

In protesting, Kaepernick and others attempted to highlight the killings of unarmed black men by police, an issue brought into the national spotlight by Black Lives Matter activists after the shooting death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014. But the message was quickly overtaken by fans offended by the players' decision to kneel during the anthem.

"That was the main thing with the protests, to bring awareness so people know what's going on," said Jaguars cornerback Jalen Ramsey. "That's the first step to trying to fix the situation."

NFL players who have protested this season have been in the minority, and protests waned as the season went on. Some players are focusing on ways of addressing injustice off the field.

"If it affects that many people by taking a knee, just

stand up, it's that simple," said Pittsburgh Steelers center Maurkice Pouncey. "Taking a knee during the anthem, in my opinion, changes nothing. Giving back to the community, being around the kids and people in poverty, I respect that."

For many players, the issue is not one of patriotism, but rather it is personal.

"At the end of the day, we're not trying to disrespect nobody," said Jaguars cornerback A.J. Bouye. "No matter what happens, I feel like somebody is not going to be happy, but we have a lot of respect for our country and respect for the game."

Bouye was among the players who recounted firsthand experience with racial profiling.

"My dad, when I was growing up ... gun to his head and everything," Bouye said. "That's why it hits close to me. We know that there are issues going on, and maybe some people don't want to bring awareness to them, but we'll find a way."

Tampa Bay Buccaneers defensive tackle Gerald McCoy said he, his father and his wife have all been victims of racial profiling — even after he became a successful athlete.

"It happened to my wife in the past couple of years," said McCoy, who was drafted in 2010. "She got pulled over. She was driving a Bentley. Nice neighborhood, and they pulled her over. All her stuff was right and they just didn't have any reason. It just wasn't right."

Black athletes have been finding a way to fight for social change for more than 100 years, from Jack Johnson to Muhammad Ali to Kaepernick.

Their fights have come at great personal expense, from alienation by fellow Americans to incarceration to the loss of their careers.

NFL players faced backlash of their own in 2017.

During the season, President Donald Trump referred to the players as "sons of bitches" and suggested they be fired. And Trump again condemned the protests in his State of the Union address on Tuesday night, juxtaposing the campaign against the patriotic efforts of a white child who has planted thousands of American flags on the graves of veterans.

A recent AP-NORC poll



Pittsburgh Steelers center Maurkice Pouncey runs out of the tunnel as he is introduced before the start of a Dec. 17 game against the New England Patriots in Pittsburgh. Pouncey is focusing on ways of addressing injustice off the field. "Taking a knee during the anthem, in my opinion, changes nothing. Giving back to the community, being around the kids and people in poverty, I respect that," Pouncey said.



Tampa Bay Buccaneers defensive tackle Gerald McCoy during a game in Tampa, Florida. McCoy said he, his father and his wife have all been victims of racial profiling, even after he became a successful athlete.



Jacksonville Jaguars defensive tackle Malik Jackson addresses reporters after a practice. "It's not like this is just starting today or a new thing," Jackson said on profiling. "It's gone on for a long time."

showed most Americans think refusing to stand for the national anthem is disrespectful to the country, the military and the American flag. Most African-Americans polled were more likely to approve of the players' protests. Only 4 in 10 Americans polled saw refusing to stand for the flag as an act of patriotism.

Players have pointed out

that the protests are allowed under free speech, one of the cornerstones of American democracy. Martin Luther King Jr. framed civil disobedience as a commitment to conscience tied to founding revolts of our country like the Boston Tea Party.

The issue has loomed over the entire NFL season, which culminates with Sunday's Super Bowl. And a year into

his presidency, Trump's Department of Justice has abandoned talk of police reform in favor of support for law enforcement and criticism of activists.

Of the players surveyed at the Pro Bowl, 42 said they would support the idea of the NFL going back to keeping teams in the locker room until after the anthem is played, a practice that was

changed in 2009 — not that they believe they have much say in what decision league owners will make.

"The league does what the league does," said Jackson. "I don't have any say in it, so I don't care."

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AROUND THE NFL

Gronk 'ready to roll' for Super Bowl 52

The Associated Press

Patriots' tight end Rob Gronkowski has been cleared from the concussion protocol and will play in Sunday's Super Bowl against the Philadelphia Eagles.

Gronkowski participated fully in practice on Thursday. Defensive lineman Deatrich Wise also practiced after being cleared from the concussion protocol. Malcolm Butler (illness) and Brandon King (knee) also participated in the workout.

Gronk said he is "ready to roll" and has no limitations. He had been sidelined since taking a helmet-to-helmet hit from Jacksonville's Barry Church in the first half of New England's AFC championship game win.

The All-Pro tight end missed last year's Super Bowl win over Atlanta after undergoing back surgery.

Gronkowski said he believes that the team doctors were just using the bye week to be as cautious with the injury as possible.

"We knew the whole time I was gonna be good to go," he said. "I was progressing really good throughout the week. We just knew I'd be ready and we've been practicing like we always do."

Gronkowski led the team in receiving during the regular season with 69 catches for 1,084 yards and eight touchdowns.

His return gives quarterback Tom Brady another key option against an Eagles



Patriots' tight end Rob Gronkowski, center, warms up during Thursday's practice.

defense that finished the regular season ranked fourth in the NFL in defense.

Philadelphia is giving up 229 yards per game through the air in the playoffs. New England comes in averaging 318 yards passing during the postseason.

"He's a dynamic player. He means a ton to our offense. He really has since he got to our team. It's always great when he's out there," Brady said.

"I've played with him a long time, I've thrown him a lot of footballs. He knows exactly what to do, he knows where to expect the ball, when to expect it. He's just a tremendous player for our team."

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AROUND THE NBA

Griffin mauls Memphis in Pistons debut

The Associated Press

Blake Griffin had 24 points and 10 rebounds in his debut for Detroit, and the Pistons edged the Memphis Grizzlies 104-102 on Thursday night.

Griffin was impressive throughout his first game for the Pistons since they traded for him earlier this week. His teammates looked uncertain at times, but Detroit was able to outlast a Memphis team without Tyreke Evans and Mike Conley.

Anthony Tolliver's 3-pointer with under two minutes remaining gave Detroit a 101-100 lead, and the score stayed that way until the final seconds. Marc Gasol attempted to drive on Griffin but missed his shot, and a wild scramble led to a jump ball between Tolliver and Dillon Brooks with 10.4 seconds left.

The Pistons controlled that tip, with Reggie Bullock running the ball down in the corner. Tolliver gave Detroit a three-point lead with a pair of free throws, and then purposely fouled Wayne Selden with 2.6 seconds remaining. Selden made the first free throw and the second went in even though he was trying to miss and give his team a chance at an offensive rebound. A free throw by Bullock closed out the scoring.

Griffin was the first Detroit starter announced before the game and received a big hand from the crowd. The arena still didn't appear full — the



Detroit Pistons forward Blake Griffin (23) collides with Memphis Grizzlies forward JaMychal Green (0) while going to the basket as Detroit center Andre Drummond, left, and Memphis center Marc Gasol (33) watch during the first half of an NBA game Thursday in Detroit.

Pistons have struggled with attendance for several years — but the atmosphere was lively, especially during the tight finish.

Griffin's first points came

when he powered to the basket and made a shot off the glass. Drummond had 14 points and 15 rebounds but sat out some of the crucial possessions late.

James Harden leads Rockets past Spurs

James Harden had 28 points and 11 assists, and the Houston Rockets dominated the San Antonio Spurs for the second time this season with a 102-91 victory Thursday night. Clint Capela added 14 points and 13 rebounds in Houston's third straight win.

Pelicans acquire Mirotic from Bulls

The New Orleans Pelicans acquired forward Nikola Mirotic and a second-round draft pick from the Chicago Bulls for center Omer Asik, guards Jameer Nelson and Tony Allen, and a first-round pick.

The trade, announced by both teams late Thursday afternoon, comes less than a week after New Orleans lost All-Star DeMarcus Cousins for the season because of a left Achilles tear — and with the Pelicans still in the playoff picture. Mirotic has averaged 16.8 points and 6.4 rebounds since missing the first 23 games this season because of two broken bones in his face stemming from a fight in practice with Bobby Portis. The altercation soured Mirotic on playing for Chicago, and the Bulls were looking to accommodate his request to be traded.

"Niko's representatives were consistent over the last several months that they wanted him moved," said John Paxson, the Bulls' executive vice president of basketball operations. "They never backed off of that stance one bit."