

## Solomon Jones: Becoming 'clean-cut' will never be enough to earn black men acceptance

By *Solomon Jones*  
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**(TNS)**

Michael Vick, who knows well the sting of being an NFL outcast, believes Colin Kaepernick must do little more than cut off his Afro in order to return to the ranks of active NFL quarterbacks.

Vick said as much during a Monday appearance on Fox Sports 1's "Speak for Yourself," surmising that the former San Francisco 49ers quarterback would get a job if he abandoned his Afro or cornrows in favor of a "clean-cut look."

Not only are Vick's comments insulting because they imply that black hair, when worn in its natural state, is not clean-cut – his comments are also hypocritical.

If hair were the issue, Vick, who proudly sported cornrows while playing for the Atlanta Falcons, would never have risen to NFL fame and fortune. If hair were the issue, Richard Sherman, and other elite NFL players who wear dreadlocks would be bounced from the league. If hair were the issue, even a middle-aged black man like myself would be eligible for millions in NFL money, because I shaved myself bald 20 years ago.

But hair is not the issue. The NFL's failure to offer a contract to former All Pro and starting Super Bowl quarterback Kaepernick is driven by racism, and by Kaepernick's bold decision to speak out against it.

Last year, in the wake of several high-profile killings of unarmed blacks by police, Kaepernick decided to sit, and later to kneel during the National Anthem.

When he was asked why he did so, the quarterback told NFL media: "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color. To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder."

Kaepernick's makeshift protest spread like wildfire in the NFL and in other leagues. Right-wing critics took umbrage at his decision to protest during a song they believe should unite us as Americans.

But I doubt Kaepernick's critics understood that the famous star-spangled banner which flew over Fort McHenry when it was attacked by the British in the War of 1812 was made by a slaveholder named Mary Young Pickersgill. Kaepernick's critics probably didn't know that a portion of the anthem's third verse is a virtual ode to slavery written by slaveholder Francis Scott Key. I doubt, quite frankly, that his critics understood that the very racism Kaepernick protested is sewn into the flag and written into the song they so badly wanted him to sing.

I doubt that Vick understood those things either. But Vick understands racism. He experienced it firsthand when he returned from a two-year prison term for running a dogfighting ring in which dogs were killed. Constantly harassed by protesters who demanded his removal from the NFL, Vick was targeted in ways that his white counterparts never were.

Protests didn't follow Pittsburgh quarterback Ben Roethlisberger after he was suspended from the NFL following two sexual assault allegations, neither of which resulted in charges, though one led to a civil suit. There was little public reaction when Phillies pitcher Brett Myers was arrested for beating his wife in public (the charges were ultimately dropped) and rejoined the team within weeks.

Vick? He was routinely referred to as a thug after the dogfighting conviction. So when Eagles coach Andy Reid gave Vick the chance to join the Philadelphia Eagles after Vick's prison term, Vick did what he's now advising Kaepernick to do. He became clean-cut.

The signature cornrows Vick wore early in his career? Gone. The swagger from the streets of Newport News, Va.? Vanished.

Vick cut his hair, spoke against animal abuse, and stood up for a white teammate who called a black security guard the N-word in a viral video. That white teammate – backup wide receiver Riley Cooper – got a raise and a contract extension. Vick was cut from the team.

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(continued)*

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Vick should know, better than most, that black men who excel in sports are not supposed to think and feel. They are not supposed to exercise their constitutional right to peacefully protest. They are simply supposed to play.

But if the third stanza of Francis Scott Key's "Star-Spangled Banner" is to be believed, "No refuge could save the hireling and slave from the terror of flight or the gloom of the grave."

That's why, in a country founded on slavery, playing well and cutting one's hair will never be enough to earn acceptance for a black man.

I'm sure Michael Vick knows that. I pray that Colin Kaepernick knows it, too.

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