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When Sports & Politics Don't Mix

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One of the cardinal rules of sports organizations is that it always boils down to the fans. That's why mixing politics and sports, like the Phoenix Suns organization did Wednesday, is tricky.

The Suns decided to wear their "Los Suns" jerseys—which they've done before—on Cinco de Mayo for their playoff game against the San Antonio Spurs. In a statement Tuesday, the Suns' owner Robert Sarver explained the decision was to honor "our Latino community, and the diversity of our league, the state of Arizona, and our nation." But then he said, "The frustration with the federal government's failure to deal with the issue of illegal immigration resulted in passage of a flawed state law. However intended, the result of passing this law is that our basic principles of equal rights and protection under the law are being called into question," referring to the new Arizona immigration law.

The Suns' marquee player, Steve Nash, talked about the law, the decision, and how important the fans are to the team: "I think the law is very misguided... I think it's very important for us to stand up for things we believe in. As a team and as an organization, we have a lot of love and support for all of our fans. The league is very multicultural. We have players from all over the world, and our Latino community here is very strong and important to us." In another interview, Nash said, "I think that it opens up the potential for racial profiling and racism...I think it represents our state poorly in the eyes of the nation and the world."

The team's decision even prompted a rally near the arena where the Rev. Al Sharpton joined a group of protesters against the new immigration law wearing the Los Suns jerseys.



The Suns' comments and decision are fairly bold as you look at these facts:

1. The law isn't targeted at the Latino community. It's targeted at illegal aliens—people who are breaking our country's laws. So the only people this law should really be offending are those breaking it anyway. We're pretty sure those aren't the type of fan base any team wants to be defending.
2. A majority of Arizonans—presumably the bulk of Phoenix's fan base—support the Arizona law, according to the latest polling. Basically, the team was making a statement that arguably over half their fans disagree with. It makes it look like the wishes of a law-abiding fan base were overlooked by the team and the owner so that a political statement could be made. Were those fans considered?
3. Nash is Canadian. The law doesn't affect him any more than it affects the next person, because he's not an illegal alien. Yet how offended would Canadians be if an American skated in Game 2 of the NHL playoffs for the Montreal Canadiens wearing a jersey that spelled the team's name the American way (Canadians), and this after he criticized a Canadian law that didn't affect him? You'd have World War III on your hands.
4. The misinformation out there about the law is astounding, and you don't do a service to your fans by spreading it. For example, Nash talked about the law

possibly leading to racial profiling, but racial profiling is expressly prohibited in the law itself. In fact, in a move that will make her forever cool, Arizona Gov. Jan Brewer wrote an op-ed that was an exclusive on ESPN.com countering some of the most outrageous claims. When ESPN is publishing legislative op-eds by governors, you know sports and politics have passed the courtship stage.

Maybe the Suns addressed these issues privately. The organization said the statement put out Tuesday and wearing the jerseys speak for themselves, and they will have no further discussion on the issue. But it seems there are still questions that sports fans don't have answers to.

Or maybe the Suns have learned the wisdom in Los Angeles Lakers' Coach Phil Jackson's response to the ordeal as ESPN reported: "I don't think teams should get involved in the political stuff. And I think this one's still kind of coming out to balance as to how it's going to be favorably looked upon by our public. If I heard it right, the American people are really for stronger immigration laws, if I'm not mistaken. Where we stand as basketball teams, we should let that kind of play out and let the political end of that go where it's going to go."

Cartoon courtesy of Brett Noel

Miss Meinecke was a member of Hillsdale College's Dow Journalism Program, sports editor and beat reporter for the campus newspaper, and also contributed to Life Times, the newsletter for Southern Indiana Right to Life. She interned at Comcast SportsNet in Washington, D.C. through the National Journalism Center before joining Human Events in August 2008. E-mail her at emeinecke@eaglepub.com. You can also request to follow her on [Twitter](#).

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