

Sports

NFL orders players to stand for anthem or stay in locker room

'Team will have its own rules and make their own decisions'

LOS ANGELES: National Football League owners agreed a new policy on Wednesday that players must stand during the national anthem or incur fines for their clubs, unless they stay in the locker room. The issue of how to handle player protests of kneeling during the pre-game playing of "The Star-Spangled Banner" has loomed over the NFL club owners meeting in Atlanta, with the sport anxious to avoid a repeat of the controversy that divided the league last season.

America's most popular sport found itself at the center of a political firestorm in 2017 after President Donald Trump described players who knelt during the anthem to draw attention to racial injustice as "sons of bit...." who were insulting the flag and the nation.

The remarks prompted a wave of kneeling protests across the league in September, angering some fans and placing several conservative, Trump-supporting team owners in an awkward position as NFL television ratings dropped.

Vice President Mike Pence, who walked out on an NFL game in Indianapolis after some players knelt for the anthem, tweeted a headline of the NFL announcement Wednesday under the hashtag "Winning" and an American flag. Trump

later retweeted the message.

With the NFL's leadership reluctant to issue a blanket decree ordering players to stand for the anthem, the deal approved Wednesday represents a compromise. Under current NFL regulations, all players are required to be on the field during the anthem. The new policy removes that requirement, allowing players who do not wish to stand to remain in the locker room.

NFL Players Association to challenge the policy

Players who do come onto the field for the anthems would be required to stand or teams would be fined. "This season, all league and team personnel shall stand and show respect for the flag and the anthem," NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell said in a statement. "Personnel who choose not to stand for the anthem may stay in the locker room until after the anthem has been performed."

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'FALSE PERCEPTION'

Goodell said the NFL would levy fines against teams if players came onto the field and did not stand for the anthem, with teams deciding what punishment if any to pass along to kneeling players.

"If anyone is on the field and is disrespectful to the anthem or the flag, there will be a fine from



SANTA CLARA: File photo taken on October 6, 2016 (L-R) Eli Harold #58, Colin Kaepernick #7, and Eric Reid #35 of the San Francisco 49ers kneel in protest during the national anthem prior to their NFL game against the Arizona Cardinals at Levi's Stadium in Santa Clara, California. National Football League owners reached agreement Wednesday on a policy which would require players to stand during the national anthem but give them the option of remaining in the locker room if they preferred. — AFP

the league against the team," Goodell told reporters. "The team will have its own rules and make their own decisions." Goodell took issue with criticism levied at protesting players being called "unpatriotic."

"It was unfortunate that on-field protests created a false perception among many that thousands of NFL players were unpatriotic," Goodell said. "This is not and was never the case."

Art Rooney II, the president of the Pittsburgh Steelers, said the policy was the result of extensive consultation. "We're not forcing anybody to stand who doesn't feel like it," Rooney said. "But those that are on the field are going to be asked to stand. "We've listened to a lot of different viewpoints including our fans over the past year and this policy is an attempt to get to a place where we have respected everybody's point of view as best as we could." — AFP

Barcelona icon Iniesta joins Vissel Kobe in historic deal

TOKYO: Barcelona legend Andres Iniesta joined Japan's Vissel Kobe yesterday, calling his J-League move an "important career challenge". "This is a very special day for me," the 34-year-old World Cup winner said after signing his contract at a glitzy unveiling in Tokyo.

"I had a lot of offers, other clubs showed an interest in me," added Iniesta, who is reported to have agreed a three-year deal with an annual salary of \$30 million, comfortably a J-League record. "But I chose Vissel Kobe because it was an interesting project. There was also a lot of trust and confidence in me as a person and also as a player—that was a big reason."

Iniesta, who lifted 32 major trophies and made 674 appearances for Catalan giants Barca, was handed his trademark number eight shirt by Vissel owner Hiroshi Mikitani. "I am confident that Iniesta's leadership philosophy and his DNA will be a terrific inspiration for not only

Vissel Kobe but Japanese football," said Mikitani.

"His arrival in Japan will raise the profile of Japanese football globally. Iniesta will inspire and empower us to reach new heights in football in Japan. We are very proud to see this day come." The Spain icon's decision to choose Kobe arguably represents Japanese football's biggest transfer coup, with many top players now moving to cash-rich Chinese clubs in the twilight of their careers.

It also comes as a timely boost to the J-League, which used to attract luminaries such as Brazilian great Zico and former England star Gary Lineker when it began in 1993 but has struggled to attract marquee players in recent years. Iniesta will join former Arsenal striker Lukas Podolski in the western port city of Kobe after he completed a move from Galatasaray last summer. Podolski was quick to send a "welcome" tweet to Iniesta on Thursday.

"I'd like to help take this club forward and help the J-League grow in Asia," said Iniesta, who is set to join his new team mates after the World Cup in Russia. "I'm looking forward to getting to know the Kobe players as quickly as possible to be able to help with that process."

Danish star Michael Laudrup, himself a former Barcelona fan favourite and one of Iniesta's boyhood heroes, also played for Vissel in 1996-97. Vissel currently sit sixth

in the J-League first division standings after 15 games played.

Iniesta, who famously scored Spain's winning goal against the Netherlands in the 2010 World Cup final, had been top of Mikitani's wishlist. The billionaire businessman is also the founder and CEO of Rakuten, Barcelona's main sponsor, and was heavily involved in the deal that brought Iniesta to Japan. Mikitani said Iniesta "plays the most beautiful soccer in the world", predicting his arrival in Japan could lead to an influx of top foreign players joining the J-League.

Iniesta played his final game for Barcelona in a 1-0 win over Real Sociedad last weekend in an emotional farewell to the club he joined as a schoolboy. The mercurial midfielder won nine La Liga and four Champions League titles among a massive haul of trophies at Barcelona.

Iniesta had also been linked to a move to Chinese Super League side Chongqing Lifan but they denied the rumours. As speculation of his next move reached fever pitch, Iniesta tweeted a photo of himself and Mikitani in a private jet overnight, along with emojis of the Japanese flag and a football. Many Japanese fans retweeted the photo of the pair shaking hands and welcomed Iniesta to the country, while one user posted a cartoon meme of Iniesta dressed in a wizard's cloak and waving a wand. — AFP

Istanbul to host 2020 Champions League final

KIEV: Istanbul's Ataturk Olympic Stadium will host the 2020 Champions League final, UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin confirmed in Kiev yesterday.

The 76,000-capacity ground played host to Liverpool's famous comeback from 3-0 down to win the Champions League on penalties over AC Milan in 2005.

UEFA have been under pressure to ensure future final host cities have the hotel and airport infrastructure to cope with the influx of fans, delegates and media for the biggest game in club football.

Liverpool have complained to UEFA after their fans have faced spiralling accommodation and travel costs for fans trying to attend Saturday's final against holders Real Madrid in Kiev, the city which played host to the Euro 2012 final.

"They just don't have the airport infrastructure and the hotel capacity to cope with an event of this size and there isn't another major city within real hitting distance of it," Liverpool chief executive Peter Moore told the Liverpool Echo newspaper.

"It's not only affected Liverpool fans but Real Madrid fans too. There will be lessons learned from this. Rest assured, I've raised this at the highest levels of UEFA."

Ceferin had already reintroduced a tender process for bidding for finals since taking over as UEFA president from Michel Platini. — AFP