

Last year Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, point guard for the Denver Nuggets of the National Basketball Association was suspended without pay for refusing to stand during the playing of the National Anthem. The NBA Rulebook contains a provision which clearly requires players and coaches to stand along the sidelines while the National Anthem is played. Abdul-Rauf's suspension was imposed sixty games into the season even though he had declined to stand since the season began. On the day immediately before the league took its action, news reporters had asked Abdul-Rauf his reasons for not standing, and he said, at that time, that "the [American] flag is a symbol of oppression and tyranny This country has a long history of that, ... You can't be for God and for oppression," Abdul-Rauf is a devout follower of Islam. There is no specific rule of Islamic law that forbids a person from standing at attention while the National Anthem of the United States is played. The suspension remained in effect for two days, after which Abdul-Rauf agreed to stand, but said he would offer a prayer while the National Anthem is played.

Was the suspension of Abdul-Rauf by the NBA morally justifiable? If so, why? If not, why not?

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: The NBA's suspension of Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf was morally unjustifiable. Granted, he clearly violated a provision in the NBA rule book. This provision: is itself morally unjustifiable, however, because it doesn't allow room for a 'case such as Abdul-Rauf's, in which a player refuses to stand at attention while the national anthem is played, as a matter of sincere and strongly held personal conviction. The rule making committee and the commissioner of the NBA have the authority to make and apply rules to promote the NA's best interests. In any situation where one party exercises authority over another, however, there is responsibility to do so in ways that avoid unduly imposing upon interests and concerns significant to the other party. In this case it appears that the NA failed to consider sufficiently the sincerity and strength of Abdul-Rauf's convictions. It is difficult to think of any considerations affecting the best interests of the NA with enough moral weight to justify making a player go against his strongly held convictions, at least in a circumstance like this where Abdul-Rauf had no specific intention to offend or cause distress to anyone.

Case from the March 6, 1997 Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl. Copyright Robert Ladenson, Center for the Study of Ethics at the Illinois Institute of Technology, 1997.