

## **My power is my culture: Athletes of colour in American Football**

**Dion Enari**

Auckland University Technology

**Sierra Keung**

Auckland University of Technology

### **Abstract**

The over representation of people of color in the NFL (National Football League) has resulted in their increased visibility. Many of these athletes are portrayed by their coaches, fans and the media as ‘gifted’ or ‘natural warriors’. Sadly, much of the public discourse surrounding these athletes ignores the positive affect their cultures have on their professional sporting career. This article shows how professional athletes from a migrant group have positively used their cultural values and pride in the sporting arena. It is our aim to increase awareness of the important role their cultures play in their professional success. As members of this community, who actively work in these spaces, we privilege their stories.

**Keywords:** football, Pacific athletes, athlete wellbeing, cultural pride, indigenous athlete, people of colour

## Introduction

Polynesian athletes in the NFL are constantly portrayed throughout the media and public discourse as natural, gifted, individual athletes. Reports show that this group are 28% more likely than any other ethnic cohort to play in the NFL (Vainuku, 2015), and football players with Samoan heritage are fifty-six times more likely to be NFL players than any other ethnic group (Uperesa, 2010). When viewing the Polynesian athlete it is important to understand the cultural capital they bring into the industry, beyond their assumed physical prowess (Hapeta et al., 2019; Keung, 2018). Sadly, the current discourse on Polynesian athletes among the media, sporting staff and the general public dismisses other factors which contribute to their success, such as discipline, spiritual and cultural factors. This article will explore the intersection between Polynesian NFL athletes and their cultures.

Polynesia spans fifteen nation states in the South Pacific. Many Polynesians were able to migrate in large numbers to countries such as Australia, New Zealand and America because of their historical colonial ties (Enari & Haua, 2021; Faleolo, 2020). For example, those from the Cook Islands, Tokelau and Niue are able to freely reside in New Zealand due to their status as New Zealand realm countries, while those from American Samoa are able to migrate freely to the United States, as American Nationals. Polynesian migration away from their island homes to foreign countries was pursued in search of educational and financial opportunities outside of subsistent village life (Enari & Taula, 2022; Faleolo, 2020). As Polynesians sustained their families and communities in America, they continued to foster their cultures and traditions through speaking their languages, attending their Polynesian diaspora churches and performing their dances and songs (Fa'aleava, 2020).

Today, Polynesian peoples and their tattoos; arts and clothing can be seen throughout Western popular culture. For example, Samoan superstar Seiuili "The Rock" Dwayne Johnson and Hawaiian hula girls are internationally visible (Lemusufeauaali'i & Enari, 2021). Polynesian themed food such as shaved island ice and flower lei's can be seen throughout mainland America. Although Polynesian people are seen, their voices are silenced by stereotypes imposed by public discourse labelling them 'exotic' or 'brown criminals' (Enari & Taula, 2022). Unfortunately, imposed negative portrayals of Polynesian people by government entities and the media have continued through to professional sports (Ng Shiu, 2011; Ravulo, 2015; Stewart-Withers & O'Brien, 2006), with the overly sensualised narrative of the hyper masculine warrior beast (Uperesa, 2010). Other narratives include shallow one dimensional representations of Polynesian athletes being native primitive savages who possess native male strength. This is further exacerbated by the fact that Polynesian football players typically play lineman, which are viewed as more physical positions (Maikis, 2019). These narratives neglect the active role our cultures contribute to an athlete's development.

## Our culture(s) - our power

While there are cultural and linguistic differences between Polynesian peoples, they are connected through geographical and familial ties with underlying fundamental similarities (Ryan et al., 2019;

Tukuitonga, 2013). All cultures throughout Polynesia are premised on collective support, and respect is afforded to those who are perceived as elders and authoritative figures (Enari, 2020, 2021; Manuela & Sibley, 2019). As Polynesian researchers, we believe these principles are contributing factors to their success (Enari & Keung, 2022; Keung & Enari, 2022).

The large team environment that exists in American Football is resonant to the large family setting in which Polynesians are typically raised. Their home and family environments teach them values that govern their ways of being and doing. Faith in God is principal. It is their divine faith that inspires, protects and supports their journey through life (Allen & Heppner, 2011; Marsters & Tiatia-Seath, 2019; Suaalii Sauni & Fulu-Aiolupotea, 2014).

Love for family is also important, as it is all encompassing of love for those present, past and yet to be born (Enari & Keung, 2022; Keung & Enari, 2022). For Polynesians, the concept of family extends beyond the nuclear mother, father and siblings. Polynesian families encompass anyone who can trace a genealogical connection; some as far as ten generations back (Enari & Haua, 2021). As collectivist people, much pride is felt in the shared familial connection Polynesian players have with their relatives. It is important to note that many of these Polynesian players are descended from historical High Chiefs and nobles from the islands. Therefore, it is a privilege to bear a name that is rooted in a shared legacy of pride and respect, as our ancestors traversed great bodies of water in search of greater opportunities for the next generation (Keung & Enari, 2022; Keung, 2018). As descendants of Chiefly lineage and esteemed ancestral legacies, it is imperative that Polynesian athletes both maintain the prestige of their last name, while also adding glory to their last name through doing great work. Samoan NFL player Tua Tagovailoa affectionately articulated this sentiment:

“My name is...I play for more than myself, I play for the name on the back of my jersey, I play for my Samoan culture, but most importantly, I play for my family’s legacy.” (Tua Tagovailoa, cited in Hooper, 2020).

American Football and other professional sports are but a contemporary vessel that allows Polynesians to continue building upon the foundation set by their ancestors. The collective responsibility these athletes have to honouring their family names and cultural legacy is extended to their fellow teammates and clubs. It is common to see these athletes use their Polynesian ways of being among their people, and use them within the NFL context. For example, many Polynesian athletes refer to their teammates as brothers, their coaches as Father/Uncle and their team as a family. Polynesian people are known to refer to those they have built a genuine connection with as family members, and they afford them the same respect and dignity they would for their biological relatives (Enari & Haua, 2021).

In the Polynesian culture, everybody who is close to a family or everybody who is a significant, older elder that is very close to my parents, they’re ‘auntie’ or ‘uncle.’ In Hawaii, it’s how we address people in the Polynesian way. It’s out of respect. It’s out

of love. It's really just as tight-knit culture because we're all we have ... everything revolves around family in our culture (Breiden Fehoko, cited in Elwood, 2020).

The athlete's Polynesian ways of being and knowing are further extended as the songs and dances they perform among their Samoan and Tongan families are also taught and performed together with their non-Polynesian teammates. As such, the aforementioned characteristics and values of these athletes combined with their physical traits are a dream combination for football recruiters and coaches.

These athletes are God-fearing, and in this context, a key motivator for the Polynesian athlete to succeed is to repay the sacrifices of their ancestors and parents and wider family network (Keung & Enari, 2022; Uperesa, 2014). They are socialised to obey and respect extended relatives, elders and church leaders. Throughout their journeys as professional athletes, many of them further extend this respect to their coaching staff and sport managers.

It is important to acknowledge that Polynesian athletes do not play for mere individual benefit. Instead, they work for the betterment and pride of their extended family, church and community.

"Family is the No. 1 thing for us...it's our family, it's our last names, it's who we represent and we understand when we go out in public" (Manti Te'o, cited in Teope, 2017).







As they journey throughout the NFL sphere, they further extend this respect to their sporting teams and fans. In turn, these collective networks assist in supporting their long-term success (Keung, 2018). Research has shown that for Polynesians, family support and religion can act as a buffer and mediate distress (Allen & Heppner, 2011). Furthermore, a strong cultural identity has also been associated with positive wellbeing and helps desist from delinquent behaviour among Polynesian youth (Enari & Keung, 2022; Paterson et al., 2016).

We acknowledge the challenges that may arise from not being able to secure a professional contract, and how it extends beyond the lost opportunity for an individual to become financially stable and successful. For Polynesian athletes, this can translate into a lost opportunity for their family, community or church to become financially stable and successful as well (Ng Shiu & Vagana, 2016; Panapa & Phillips, 2014). Luckily, Polynesian athletes, their families and communities are now navigating ways to address these issues as they arise. Polynesian athletes have been able to draw upon the support from their families and cultural pride in achieving their personal and athletic goals. Such initiatives include in-depth discussions with their relatives on realistic pay expectations, and how best their church and extended family can help them during their pre-season preparation.

With the increase in accessibility to media outlets and social media platforms, today's Polynesian athletes are positioned to help elevate our people, culture and community beyond the stereotypical narratives that some sections of the media portray. As Polynesian people in a Eurocentric society, it

is empowering to see more of our athletes publicly identify their cultural heritage and love for God on their social media platforms. As seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Athlete profiles on social media

<p>Tua Tagavailoa <i>Miami Dolphins</i></p>  <p>The image shows the Facebook profile of Tua Tagavailoa. The profile picture is a photo of him in a Miami Dolphins jersey. The cover photo features the name 'TAGAVAILOA' in large, stylized letters. The bio includes his name, location (Faa Beach, HI), and contact information.</p>	<p>Leki Fotu <i>Arizona Cardinals</i></p>  <p>The image is a tweet from user Leki99 (@LekiFotu) dated Mar 9, 2016. The tweet text says '100% Tongan'. The image shows two photos of Leki Fotu in a white and red uniform, standing on a field.</p>
<p>Juju Smith-Shuster <i>Pittsburgh Steelers</i></p>  <p>The image is an Instagram post showing Juju Smith-Shuster. He is wearing a white short-sleeved shirt, white shorts, and a red lei. He is walking on a red carpet at an event.</p>	<p>Danny Shelton <i>New York Giants</i></p>  <p>The image is a tweet from Polynesian Football (@PolynesianFB) dated Mar 10, 2016. The tweet text says 'Danny Shelton did his pro day drills...in a lava lava. #polypride'. The image shows Danny Shelton in a purple tank top and a brown and black patterned lava lava skirt, running on a field.</p>
<p>AJ Epenesa <i>Buffalo Bills</i></p>  <p>The image is a tweet from AJ Epenesa (@AJEpenesa) dated Sep 13, 2020. The tweet text says '1000 % Samoan loving this RELS Mafia thing! I love my son @ajepenesa24 for the rest of my life! 🙌🏻 Great game @buffalobills'. The image shows a video of AJ Epenesa in a red and blue uniform, performing a dance move on a field.</p>	<p>Austin Faoliu <i>Dallas Cowboys</i></p>  <p>The image is a tweet from Austin Faoliu (@Faoliu_35) dated May 23, 2020. The tweet text says 'For The Culture 🇵🇸'. The image shows a graphic of Austin Faoliu in a green and white uniform, with the name 'AUSTIN FAOLIU' and the number '9' overlaid. The background features a green and white pattern.</p>


**DeForest Buckner**  
*Indianapolis Colts*



**DeForest Buckner** @DeForestBuckner · Apr 29, 2016  
@TideNFL, Can't wait to get to work in the Red & Gold! Lets do this, #49ers fans! #OurColors #ad

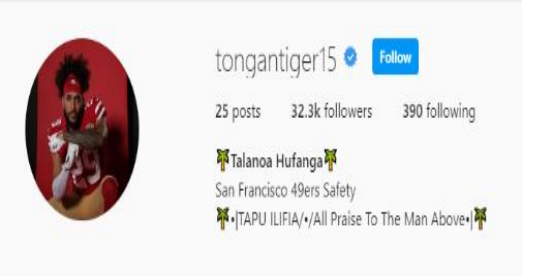
32 188 662

**Jay Tufele**  
*Jacksonville Jaguars*



**Jay Tufele** @tufele123  
// USC '21 // Jacksonville // #801 //  
Joined September 2014  
327 Following 4,626 Followers

**Talanoa Hufanga**  
*San Francisco 49ers*



**tongantiger15** Follow  
25 posts 32.3k followers 390 following  
Talanoa Hufanga  
San Francisco 49ers Safety  
TAPU ILIFIA / All Praise To The Man Above

**Netane Muti**  
*Denver Broncos*



**Netane Muti** @netanemuti  
Warrior of God Denver Broncos  
Tonga Joined October 2016  
643 Following 4,713 Followers

**Breiden Fehoko**  
*Los Angeles Chargers*



**Breiden Fehoko** @breidenfehokod · Aug 29  
Thankful for every opportunity. Thank God for keeping me healthy. Thankful for every day I get to play this game.

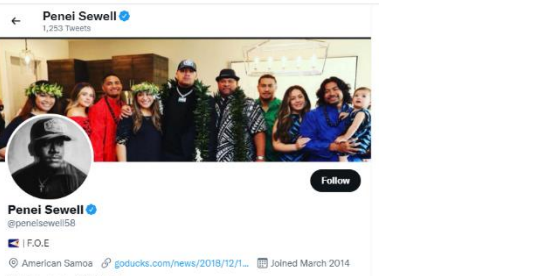
11 24 502

**Kendrick Bourne**  
*New England Patriots*



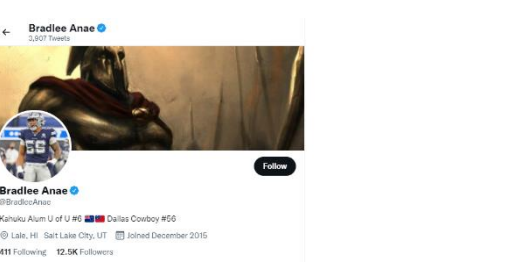
**Kendrick Bourne Poly** @bournepoly11  
SAVANNAH BLACK Current NFL WR #84 Former LWU WR #11 HC Bournepoly11 snapchat Bournepoly11 Youtube Kendrick bourne Twitch Bournepoly11  
Shelburne, VT @bournepoly11 Joined July 2012  
109 Following 53.6K Followers

**Penei Sewell**  
*Detroit Lions*



**Penei Sewell** @peneisewell58  
F.O.E.  
American Samoa goducks.com/news/2018/12/1...  
Joined March 2014  
361 Following 33.8K Followers

**Bradlee Anae**  
*Dallas Cowboys*



**Bradlee Anae** @BradleeAnae  
Kahuaku Alum U of U #6 Dallas Cowboy #66  
Lala, HI Salt Lake City, UT  
Joined December 2015  
411 Following 12.5K Followers

This signifies the importance of who they are as Samoans, Tongans and Polynesians, as well as the respect and love they have for what they represent. The use of national flags of their heritage nations (i.e. Tonga, American Samoa, Samoa) and the wearing of cultural attire and adornment (i.e. ie faitaga/tupenu, ie lavalava, lei as seen in Figures 1 and 2) in public does more than elevate the profile of the heterogeneous and diverse Polynesian community.

For those young Polynesians who are now generations removed from being born and raised in their heritage Polynesian nations, they now have role-models that look like them and show them how to exert pride and confidence with their 'Polynesianess' in an American context. We believe the next step for our role-models is to promote the other opportunities (i.e. education, career and professional development that football has afforded them off the field).

The benefits of being a professional athlete can also include access to wellbeing, education and financial resources. For example, the National Rugby League (NRL: professional rugby league competition in Australia and New Zealand) has implemented a policy that any contracted player aged twenty or younger needs to complete at least eight hours a week of education or work in order to maintain their eligibility to play during the NRL season (Keoghan, 2019). As there is no college sports system in Australia or New Zealand, the NRL also implemented a policy in 2008 for players who participate in their under-20s competition, stating that they should also be engaged in part-time education or work (equates to twenty-four hours a week) to be eligible to play. Additionally, all NRL clubs are mandated to ensure that club commitments do not interfere with the twenty-four hours of work or study that players must complete (Keung, 2018). Such a mandate is not common at a professional sports level, however, more needs to be done to ensure that while the intention of such policy was implemented to support athletes in their development and future career transition, Polynesian athletes were less likely to maximise such opportunities when compared with other ethnic groups (Ng Shiu & Vagana, 2016).

### **Moving forward**

The NFL, like many professional sports organisations, is embedded within a Western designed system. However, these athletes have been able to draw upon their Polynesian pride and support, via their families, cultures, and faith. They have also been able to bring their Polynesian ways of being and knowing into the professional sport arena. Through analysing the intersections between Polynesian athletes and their culture(s) we are able to better understand how this cohort navigates being in the NFL. An enhanced understanding of the interplay between Polynesian athletes and their culture will inform a more culturally responsive athlete pipeline into, and beyond, the sphere of professional sports. We believe there is a genuine opportunity for all stakeholders to foster the cultural wellbeing of their Polynesian athletes by embracing their cultural values, practices and knowledge(s). Doing so may help innovate new ways of building team culture, which could in turn, enhance individual and team performance. An acknowledgement of cultural values, practices and knowledge(s) would be a signal to the industry to accept the whole being of the Polynesian athlete, and not just their athletic

ability. The bottom line for Polynesians is not profit, it is people. If that is satisfied, then everyone benefits. We envision that this article may be used by sporting organisations and administrators, to consider inclusive ways of supporting the cultural capital of athletes of color and empowering them to develop it. The power that fuels the success of Polynesian athletes is rooted in their ancestral knowledge, cultural values and practices. A relational bottom line precedes an economic bottom line. Ia manuia (many blessings).

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### **Authors' biographies**

**Dion Enari** is a lecturer at the School of Sport and Recreation, Faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences at Auckland University of Technology. He has a PhD in Samoan culture from Bond University with a Master of International Relations and Lefaoali'i (high talking Chief) title from Lepa, Samoa. His research interests include Sport Management, Sport Leadership, mental health, Pacific language, indigenous studies, and trans-nationalism.

**Sierra Keung** is in the game of building capability and growing capacity within our Māori and Pacific community through sport. An advocate for creating space for indigenous thought leadership to support Māori and Pacific athletes, their families and community need to thrive, regardless of the "field" they play on.

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