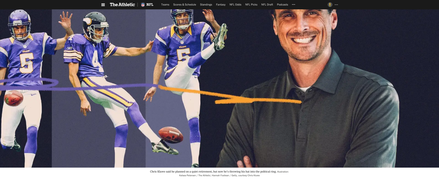

Chris Kluwe said he planned on a quiet retirement, but now he's throwing his hat into the political ring. Illustration: Dylan Hernandez / The Athletic / Around Twitter / Getty / Leonard Ortiz / AP

Former NFL punter Chris Kluwe is ready to turn his activism into a political career

By Michael Silver
April 9, 2026

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HUNTINGTON BEACH, Calif. — For eight years, Chris Kluwe piled his trade by trotting onto the field on fourth downs and booting a football back to the opposing team.

Yet when Kluwe saw an opportunity last year to help his community — and fight for what he believes is — the former Minnesota Vikings punter couldn't resist the compulsion to go for it.

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Kluwe, a Democrat, is now running for California's Assembly District 73 seat, a campaign he launched in the wake of his high-profile arrest at a Huntington Beach City Council meeting in February 2025. Handcuffed while protesting the council's decision to place a "MAGA" activist plaque outside the city's central library, Kluwe was released after receiving a misdemeanor citation for disturbing an assembly.

In the weeks and months that followed, he became a popular speaker at Orange County political functions, eventually embracing a potential career path he'd never previously entertained.

"I originally had no plans of ever holding political office," Kluwe said, laughing, during an interview last month at his home about a mile from the Pacific Ocean. "That was not something I aspired to growing up. But after I got arrested, I got invited to speak at a bunch of different Dem clubs in the area. And after every time I spoke, people would come up to me and say, 'Have you ever thought about running?' We want to run for you. We want to donate. We want to run with."

"After the sixth or seventh one, I was like, I should probably run for something. Cause clearly it seems I'm (tapped into) something that people want to see."

Kluwe, 54, has, in some ways, been preparing for this moment for nearly a decade. In 2012, he became the most prominent NFL player in a group called Minnesotans for Marriage Equality. Kluwe began speaking out against a proposed amendment to the state's constitution that would have banned same-sex marriage. His vocal support for LGBTQ rights during that season, he believes, cost him his job and ultimately his career.

The Vikings released Kluwe in May of 2013, and following that season, he wrote an article for Deadspin accusing then-Minnesota special teams coordinator Mike Priefer of having made repeated homophobic comments in response to the punter's activism. After a subsequent investigation, the Vikings suspended Priefer for the first three games of the 2014 campaign.

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Once discarded by the Vikings, Kluwe never received another NFL contract offer, essentially making him the Colin Kaepernick of punters.

Aside from Priefer's antagonism, Kluwe recalled, "I never saw any blowback in the locker room. I actually got along really well with everyone. Even the guys that didn't agree with me, they were like, 'Yeah, that's your view, but you're not in here yelling and preaching at us. You're not making it our business if we don't want it to be our business.'"

"There was that mutual respect of, 'Yes, we can disagree, but at the same time we can still work together to accomplish a common goal.' And I think that is something that we're currently missing in America. This idea that at the end of the day, we're supposed to be on the same team. And I played with guys that I didn't agree with politically with each other in practice, and then game Sunday, you stuck by your teammates to achieve the goal. We have to get back to that as a country."

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At times, Kluwe expresses his views with the subtlety of a Brett Favre-to-Randy Moss deep ball. Before his arrest, Kluwe stood up at the city council meeting and characterized the MAGA ideology popularized by President Donald Trump as "profoundly corrupt, unmistakably anti-democracy and most importantly ... explicitly a Nazi movement."

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One reason Kluwe said he decided to run for the State Assembly seat is to try to defeat Gregory Van Der Burgh, a Huntington Beach City Council member running to replace Kleber Republican Diane Dixon, who isn't seeking reelection. Van Der Burgh came up with the idea for the MAGA plaque. The other candidates include Republican Matthew Harper, a former state assembly member, and independent Frank Wagner.

A Democrat hasn't won the seat in more than 30 years, but the district has occasionally tilted blue in statewide elections. If there is a blue wave in the midterms, it could help down-ballot candidates like Kluwe, if he makes it past the primary.

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Yet for all his ideological principles, Kluwe comes across as a wonky pragmatist when discussing his platform, stressing affordability, mixed-use development and walkable neighborhoods. If elected, he said, he'll strive to streamline the process that allows developers to build houses in California, push for investment into public transportation and work toward a "holistic solution, so people can afford to live near where they work ... a thriving place that is a community."

When Kluwe talks about potential modifications to the California Environmental Quality Act (a 1970 statute often cited by local officials as an impediment to creating housing) and incentivizing developers on a statewide level by reducing the amount of time it takes to get their dwellings approved and built, his pitch hardly sounds revolutionary.

"I'm not calling for, like, full-here-guy-space communism — as much as I love science fiction novels," Kluwe said, smiling. "We can work together to lift each other up and to make sure that everyone has the same opportunities I had as a kid. I don't think that's too much to ask for."

One of Kluwe's most conspicuous supporters has been Rep. Robert Garcia, the ranking member of the House Oversight Committee, whose district is just north of Huntington Beach.

"He's learning a ton about policymaking and the way politics works, but he's approaching it so differently," Garcia said of Kluwe. "We just want to help people. When I've heard him speak to groups, he talks a lot about economic issues and affordability. He's really speaking to the issues people want to make the community better ... and in this moment really wants to stand up for folks and push back on what he sees as abuses by the government."

Whether Kluwe will get that chance remains to be seen. District 73 has more registered Republicans than Democrats, but Kluwe, while decidedly the underdog, believes he has a punter's chance to win come November. Before that, he'll have to do well enough in California's June 2 primary, a "jungle" format that elevates the top two vote-getters to a general-election runoff, regardless of party affiliation.

As the sole Democrat in the four-candidate field, Kluwe thinks he has a good shot of advancing.

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"I think he'll translate incredibly well as he campaigns, and as he governs," Garcia said. "This is a very young type of seat, it's one (that requires a candidate) to appeal to all types of folks — regardless of whether someone is a Democrat or an Independent or a Republican. He can (have) mass appeal, because he is really authentic."

Not everyone, of course, is receptive to Kluwe's message. As perhaps the second-most renowned punter of his era — Kluwe said he received encouragement from future ESPN personality Pat McAfee, then a Colts punter, when he spoke up for same-sex marriage in 2012 — he is used to getting blowback, whether it's related to directional kicking or civil disobedience.

Chris Kluwe joins a small group of protesters outside the Pelican Hill Country Club in 2017. Kevin Sanders / AP via Orange County Register

Kluwe's once quiet existence in "Surf City USA" has become far chaotier. After losing his job as a freshman football coach at Huntington Beach's Edison High School following his arrest and subsequent social media posts, Kluwe filed a federal lawsuit against the school district. It has yet to be resolved. He has been showing up at weekly protests outside city hall, mostly assisting with security, and will likely start attending and going door-to-door to speak to voters sometime this month. He plays in a pair of bands, including one with his father, a retired Air Force lieutenant who sells, made from a buoy and fulfilling life.

"I would like to go back to being happily retired, because I would really hard to get there," Kluwe said as the family's 8-year-old rescue dog, Jenny, barked in the background. "I'm enjoying my life and my family and my friends. "But I'm also not going to watch my country go down the drain and not try to do something about it."

Thus, referencing Franklin Delano Roosevelt's 32-plus-year stint as president, Kluwe laid out an idyllic vision that bridged his humor and his concern with what he hopes will be his next one.

"Democratic Socialism has worked in Australia," he said. "When we look out for each other, when we bring each other up, then everyone succeeds and thrives.

"You hear in the football locker room all the time: A rising tide lifts all boats. When people are doing well, when people are taken care of, they're not getting enough catches, and they're asking them to do blocking routes. I'm not opposed to some people making more than others. It's just, make sure you're lifting everyone else up while you're doing it. So that way, we all have a chance to thrive and prosper."

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