Should Sports Teams Use Native American Names and Mascots?

Against the Use of Mascots...

Team mascots are racist

In response to previous letters about American Indians being mascots for sports teams, the writer of “Mascots don’t belittle Indians” (letter, Jan. 9) stated that the fans [don’t think lowly of American Indians because of] an American Indian mascot.

By definition, racism is discriminatory or abusive behavior toward members of another race. While the fans of these sports teams feel it is fine to have an Atlanta Brave or a Washington Redskin, it is abusive behavior toward members of American Indian tribes.

“The Washington (blank)s” — in the blank space insert any race, and you will come up with a team mascot that would not be tolerated in today’s society.

These team mascots need to be retired and we as Americans need to see that if we are to have freedom from oppression, then we need to start with our own homeland.

Dante Halleck  Kuwait

**Above clips found at: http://www.stripes.com/article.asp?section=125&article=59841&archive=true**
In Favor of Mascots...

Names prideful, not racist

In response to the letter “Team mascots are racist” (letter, Jan. 17): Team mascot names are not racist. The writer correctly gave the definition of racism, and no team mascot comes remotely close to meeting that definition.

Teams, whether they be high school, college or professional, choose mascot names that demonstrate strength and power. Cleveland Indians, Florida State Seminoles, Atlanta Braves, Washington Redskins ... none of these display discriminatory or abusive behavior toward members of another race, or more specifically, toward American Indian tribes. In fact, when humans actually flesh out the part of those mascots, they are done with what most would agree is dignity and pride.

Perhaps we should rename them, though, in order to appease the letter writer. I wonder how he would feel about Cleveland Daisies, Florida State Kittens, Atlanta Peaches or Washington Pussy Willows? Those names would certainly strike fear in their opponents’ hearts and minds, wouldn’t they?

Jim McDonald  Camp Virginia, Kuwait
NCAA Takes Aim At Indian Mascots
INDIANAPOLIS, August 5, 2005

(CBS/AP) Fed up with what it considers "hostile" and "abusive" American Indian nicknames, the NCAA announced Friday it would shut those words and images out of postseason tournaments, a move that left some school officials angry and threatening legal action.

Starting in February, any school with a nickname or logo considered racially or ethnically "hostile" or "abusive" by the NCAA would be prohibited from using them in postseason events. Mascots will not be allowed to perform at tournament games, and band members and cheerleaders will also be barred from using American Indians on their uniforms beginning in 2008.

Major college football teams are not subject to the ban because there is no official NCAA tournament.

Affected schools were quick to complain, and Florida State — home of the Seminoles — threatened legal action.

"That the NCAA would now label our close bond with the Seminole people as culturally 'hostile and abusive' is both outrageous and insulting," Florida State president T.K. Wetherell said in a statement.

"I intend to pursue all legal avenues to ensure that this unacceptable decision is overturned, and that this university will forever be associated with the 'unconquered' spirit of the Seminole Tribe of Florida," he added.

The committee also recommended that schools follow the examples of Wisconsin and Iowa by refusing to schedule contests against schools that use American Indian nicknames.

While NCAA officials admit they still can't force schools to change nicknames or logos, they are making a statement they believe is long overdue. Eighteen mascots, including Florida State's Seminole and Illinois' Illini, were on the list of offenders.

Those schools will not be permitted to host future NCAA tournament games, and if events have already been awarded to those sites, the school must cover any logos or nicknames that appear.

"Certainly some things remain to be answered from today, and one of those things is the definition of what is 'hostile or abusive,'" said Tom Hardy, a spokesman at Illinois.

The NCAA did not give a clear answer on that.

President Myles Brand noted that some schools using the Warrior nickname will not face sanctions because they do not use Indian symbols. One school, North Carolina-Pembroke — which uses the nickname Braves — will also be exempted because Brand said the school has historically had a high percentage of students, more than 20 percent, who are American Indians.

"We believe hostile or abusive nicknames are troubling to us and it can't continue," committee
chairman Walter Harrison said. "We're trying to send a message, very strongly, saying that these mascots are not appropriate for NCAA championships."

The decision, however, quickly evoked passions and complaints from both sides.

At Florida State, Wetherell said the NCAA was trying to embarrass the school for using its nickname, even though the Seminole Tribe of Florida has given the university permission to continue using it.

"Other Seminole tribes are not supportive," said Charlotte Westerhaus, the NCAA vice president for diversity and inclusion.

Supporters also were unhappy.

Vernon Bellecourt, president of the National Coalition on Racism in Sports and Media and a member of the Anishinabe-Ojibwe Nation in Minnesota, approved of the ban but had hoped the NCAA would take even stronger action.

"We're not so happy about the fact that they didn't make the decision to ban the use of Indian team names and mascots," he said.

Harrison, president at the University of Hartford, said the executive committee does not have the authority to do that, and schools can still appeal their inclusion on the list.

Brand and Harrison said they hoped school officials would pursue policy changes through the NCAA first, before going to court.

"I suspect that some of those would like to having a ruling on that," Brand said. "But unless there is a change before Feb. 1, they will have to abide by it."

Two years ago, the NCAA recommended schools determine for themselves whether Indian depictions were offensive.

**CBS News Correspondent Tom Foty** reports that the NCAA had investigated 33 schools nicknames and that about half have changed their names since then, leaving the 18 schools now subject to the new mascot and nickname restriction.

Among the schools to change nicknames in recent years were St. John's (from Redmen to Red Storm) and Marquette (from Warriors to Golden Eagles).

But that hasn't changed opinions on either side.

"They're not willing to give up this money," Bellecourt said, referring to merchandising revenue. "We would hope that it (the decision) was the handwriting on the wall that would urge them to drop these team names and mascots."
Sorry for not being a stereotype

Chicago Sun-Times
April 24, 2004
By Rita Pyrillis

How many of you would know an American Indian if you saw one? My guess is not many. Certainly not the bank teller who called security when an Indian woman — a visiting scholar — tried to cash a check with a tribal identification card. When asked what the problem was, the teller replied: "It must be a scam. Everyone knows real Indians are extinct."

And not the woman who cut in front of me at the grocery checkout a few months ago. When I confronted her, she gave me the once over and said: "Why don't you people just go back to your own country."

OK, lady, after you, I said, when I thought of it the next morning.

Even though I was born and raised in Chicago, strangers sometimes assume I'm a foreigner. For the record, I'm Native American, or Indian — take your pick. I prefer Lakota.

Sometimes strangers think I'm from another time. They wonder if I live in a teepee or make my own buckskin clothes or have ever hunted buffalo. They are surprised when I tell them that most Indians live in cities, in houses, and some of us shop at the Gap. I've never hunted a buffalo, although I almost hit a cow once while driving through South Dakota.

Sometimes, people simply don't believe I'm Indian. "You don't look Indian," a woman told me once. She seemed disappointed. I asked her what an Indian is supposed to look like. "You know. Long black hair, braids, feathers, beads."

Apparently, as Indians go, I'm a flop, an embarrassment to my racial stereotype. My hair is shoulder-length, and I don't feather it, unless you count my unfortunate Farrah Fawcett period in junior high.

When you say you're Indian, you better look the part or be prepared to defend yourself. Those are fighting words. When my husband tells people he's German, do they expect him to wear lederhosen and a Tyrolean hat? Of course not. But such are the risks when you dare to be Indian. You don't tug on Superman's cape, and you don't mess around with a man's stereotype.

Native American scholar Vine Deloria wrote that of all the problems facing Indian people, the most pressing one is our transparency. Never mind the staggering suicide rate among Native youth, or the fact that Indians are the victims of violent crimes at more than twice the rate of all
U.S. residents — our very existence seems to be in question.

"Because people can see right through us, it becomes impossible to tell truth from fiction or fact from mythology," he wrote. "The American public feels most comfortable with the mythical Indians of stereotype-land who were always THERE."

Sure. Stereotypes don't have feelings, or children who deserve to grow up with images that reflect who they are — not perfect images, but realistic ones. While Little Black Sambo and the Frito Bandito have gone the way of minstrel shows, Indians are still battling a red-faced, big-nosed Chief Wahoo and other stereotypes. No wonder people are confused about who Indians really are. When we're not hawking sticks of butter, or beer or chewing tobacco, we're scalping settlers. When we're not passed out drunk, we're living large off casinos. When we're not gyrating in Pocahoochie outfits at the Grammy Awards, we're leaping through the air at football games, represented by a white man in red face. One era's minstrel show is another's halftime entertainment. It's enough to make Tonto speak in multiple syllables.

And it's enough to make hard-working, decent Indian folks faced with more urgent problems take to the streets in protest. Personally, I'd rather take in my son's Little League game, but as long as other people insist on telling me when to be honored or offended, or how I should look or talk or dance, I will keep telling them otherwise. To do nothing would be less than honorable.

*Rita Pyrillis is a free-lance journalist and a member of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe.*