



## Insult or Honor?

[Are American Indian names, mascots and logos insulting or honorable? Veronica Majerol outlines the debate, citing evidence from local high school students, the N.C.A.A., and a founder of the National Coalition on Racism in Sports and the Media.]

Indian-themed mascots are a tradition for thousands of school and pro sports teams in the U.S. But many Native Americans find the imagery offensive.

Branden Lloyd and the rest of the football team at Mukwonago High School in Wisconsin have a ritual they perform before each home game: For strength and luck, players touch the painting of a Plains Indian Warrior, their mascot, that hangs in their stadium as they head out to take the field.

“I always felt like the mascot just resembles the pride, honor, and courage we have,” says Lloyd, an 18-year-old senior.

But however much students cherish their more than 80-year-old mascot, the school may have to give it up, along with their nickname, the Indians. In 2010, Wisconsin passed a law giving residents the right to contest race-based nicknames, logos, or mascots, and a senior at Mukwonago filed a complaint that year.

The school was ordered to choose a new name and mascot, but some residents sued to keep them, and the case has been in the courts ever since.

American Indian-derived names mascots, and logos have a long history in the U.S. They’re used by pro teams like the Cleveland Indians, Atlanta Braves, Washington Redskins, and Kansas City Chiefs, as well as by college teams like the Florida State Seminoles and the Mississippi College Choctaws.

An estimated 6,500 elementary, middle, and high schools across the U.S. also use them, according to an analysis done by Ezra Zeitler of the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire.

Many schools say the names and logos are vital parts of their identity that honor, rather than disrespect, Native Americans. Some have also resisted making changes for financial reasons: Rebranding equipment, clothing, and facilities could end up costing schools hundreds of thousands of dollars.

But many American Indian advocacy groups see the logos and mascots as an insult and have fought for decades, with some success, to put an end to what they call stereotypical representations of their culture.

Some schools changed their team names long ago: Stanford University in California, for example, switched its mascot from the Indian to the Cardinal in 1972.

### **Fighting Over ‘Fighting Sioux’**

*Other schools waited until their hand was forced. In 2005, the N.C.A.A. (National Collegiate Athletic Association) identified 19 universities with names it considered “hostile or abusive” to Native Americans. The governing body in college sports said teams could keep their names if they got permission from tribal leaders; otherwise, they’d have to find a new name or be excluded from hosting championship games.*

Since then, Arkansas State University's team switched from the Indians to the Red Wolves; Indiana University's Indians became Crimson Hawks; and the Indians at Newberry College in South Carolina became known as the Wolves. Other teams sought and won permission from tribal leaders, so Florida State University's Seminoles and the University of Utah's Utes are still taking the field.

Most recently, the University of North Dakota changed its nickname, the Fighting Sioux, despite having the approval of most members of the Spirit Lake Tribe, one of the two groups of Sioux in the state. In 2009, a group of Spirit Lake members sued the N.C.A.A. to let the U.N.D. keep the name.

"The name is an enormous source of pride," Frank Black Cloud, a Fighting Sioux advocate and member of Spirit Lake, recently told Time magazine. But in November, after years of legal battles, a new state law forced the university to retire its 81-year-old moniker.

Today, all the schools on the N.C.A.A.'s list have resolved their mascot issue, except for Alcorn State University in Mississippi, whose teams still go by the Braves even though that has meant being excluded from hosting N.C.A.A. championships for the past six years.

Wisconsin, with one of the largest Native American populations in the country, is the only state to pass a law allowing challenges to mascots at the high school level. Since it took effect two years ago, four complaints have been filed, which led two school districts in the state to drop their nicknames or logos. Two others, including Mukwonago, are in the process of appealing orders to change their team names.

### **Memorabilia Sales**

*"It's a start," says Charlene Teters, a professor at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and a founder of the National Coalition on Racism in Sports and the Media. "It's a recognition that it causes a hostile environment for Native people who happen to go to school there or who are in the community."*

Change has come more slowly in pro sports, where team logos and mascots help draw fans—like the thousands of Atlanta fans who do the "tomahawk chop" at Braves games and fuel profitable memorabilia sales.

"Every time the Cleveland Indians play, there's a group of Native people outside who protest," says Teters. "It's really difficult to be heard and to fight a multimillion dollar industry."

But it's also many of the fans who continue to resist changing what they view as an essential part of their teams' traditions.

At Mukwonago, students like Lloyd, the senior who plays football, will be keeping their fingers crossed as the case over their mascot plays out in the courts.

"I hope we get to keep it," says Lloyd.

*"I'm glad I'm going to be able to graduate as an Indian."*

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