

July 01, 2007

Native American mascots and violence

Northeastern University - Center for the Study of Sport in Society

Recommended Citation

Northeastern University - Center for the Study of Sport in Society, "Native American mascots and violence" (2007). *CSSS Research Articles and Reports*. Paper 5. <http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d10010099>

This work is available open access, hosted by Northeastern University.



NATIVE AMERICAN MASCOTS AND VIOLENCE

Within the last several decades, much media attention has been placed on the potentially offensive, derogatory and patronizing images of Native American men and women in the sports arena. In 1968, the National Congress of American Indians launched a campaign to address stereotypes found in print and other media.ⁱ In 2001, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights recommended that all non-Native American school should stop using Native American imagery because of inherent stereotyping that influences “false portrayals that have a negative effect on contemporary Indian people.”ⁱⁱ In 2005, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) banned racially or ethnically derogatory imagery from postseason events.ⁱⁱⁱ These markers have catalyzed the changing of 1200+ school mascots within the last 40 years. Yet despite these significant campaigns and policy changes, many mascots continue to use Native American image for sports team representation. In considering this issue, several important questions need to be considered:

- Given the implementation of policies protecting Native Americans, why do Native American mascots continue to exist?
- Does a connection exist between Native American mascots and violence targeting Native Americans?
- Is it fair for individuals who are not “ethnically Indian” to have strategically claim “Indianness” to argue in favor of Native American mascots?^{iv}
- Is the issue of changing Native American mascots on sports teams as matter of local tradition or pure finances?
- Is ethnic empowerment more or less important an athletic tradition?
- Are individuals who support the presence of Native American mascots in American sports teams informed of the impact these images have made on Native Americans in relation to other ethnic groups?

With exception of Notre Dame’s Fightin’ Irish, Native American mascots remain to be the only ethnic group depicted as sports team mascots. Despite the decisions of many universities to change their names, several universities continue to support Native American mascot imagery, including the University of Illinois, Florida State University, and University of North Dakota. These universities argue that,

“[A] Native mascot stands as a symbol of honor, respect, and dignity that represents those qualities for which a University strives...[they] claim authenticity in justifying the appropriation of American Indian culture as a truly admirable synecdoche for what remains “good” in society and on the playing field: strength, determination, obstinacy, and courage.”^v

Yet evidence within these universities suggests otherwise. These mascots create a hostile environment for Native American students on campus that often leads to threats and

violence. In fact, a report made by the National Center for Education Statistics and the Bureau of Justice Statistics have revealed that “American Indian students were more likely than Black, Hispanic, and White students to report being threatened or injured with a weapon on school property...[and] more likely to carry a weapon on school property.”^{vi} Although no formal correlation has been made between heightened violence and the presence of Native American mascots, it is indisputable that violence towards indigenous ethnic groups continues to increase.^{vii} The pressure of local traditions appears to overpower the safety of young Native Americans.

Indigenous groups and cultural studies scholars alike view the “Native mascots as hegemonic devices – commodification tools – that advance contemporary manifest destiny by marketing native culture as Euramerican identity.”^{viii} This history has perpetuated internalized oppression and self-hatred among Native Americans. The stereotypes that “mascots, symbols, images, and personalities portrayed in schools teams often miseducate American Indian and non-American Indians about American Indian culture, society, and spirituality”, and infringed upon the Native American people’s “pride and right to self determination.”^{ix} These mascots are believed to treat Native people as things rather than an ethnic group, and give the impression that they are less human and therefore less worthy of respect. This self-deprivation is exemplified in a 1996 report conducted by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, which found that during this period “overall homicide rates for Native Americans were about twice as high, and suicide rates were about 1.5 times higher, than those of the general U.S. population...Young Native American males were disproportionately at risk.”^x Self-inflicted violence continues to affect the Native American population.

Linguistically, the imagery and symbolism of Native Americans has become another source of disempowerment for Indigenous ethnic groups. The term “squaw”, used in the mainstream to derogatively refer to female Native Americans has been used towards several female sports teams. The word in fact comes from an Algonquin word referring to the female genital area.^{xi} Historically, white traders shortened this word and used it towards Native American women. The United Nations Commission on Human Rights states this usage of this word is “not only racism, it is sexual harassment.”^{xii} The term “Redskins” is similarly misused in American society. It is assumed that the term was derived from the Native American’s skin color, which in itself is offensive. However, in the 19th century, trappers would kill Indians for trade, exchanging animal skins and scalps. The UN Commission on Human Rights confirms that “some of the white women did not like this term scalp, so the trappers started calling the scalps “Redskins”, referring to the bloody mess that happened after the trappers cut off the scalps of the Indians.”^{xiii} These terms and others continue to inhibit the Native American people from obtaining the right to be respected and accepted as a people.

Movement towards the elimination of Native American mascots for sports teams has taken a slow but continuous course. The US Commission on Civil Rights, the National Congress of American Indians, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People have publicly discouraged such mascots. Several state education agencies, including New York, Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin and New Hampshire,

have done similarly.^{xiv} In February 2007, the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association discussed, for the first time, whether to urge schools to change potentially offensive nicknames. These small steps are hoped to further the Native American peoples' empowerment, and prevent the rapidly increasing violent crimes perpetrated on indigenous groups, of which American Indians are the victims of at more than twice the rate of all US residents.^{xv} To continue these efforts, it must be made clear this is not a uniquely Native American problem. Rather, it affects all members of society, as evidenced in a report by the US Department of Justice: "About 7 in 10 violent victimizations of American Indians involved an offender who was described by the victim as someone of a different race – a substantially higher rate of interracial violence than experienced by white or black victims."^{xvi} It is hoped that for the Native American people, whose history is not often portrayed accurately in public education systems, will continue to receive empowering support from the American community in general through the reduction of Native American mascots used in sports teams.

ⁱ Cada, Chrissy. "In Colo., Fightin' Whities play hardball." *The Boston Globe* 15 March 2002: A2.

ⁱⁱ Saraceno, Jon. "Some colleges have lot to learn about racism." *USA Today* 10 August 2005: C2.

ⁱⁱⁱ Saraceno, Jon. "Some colleges have lot to learn about racism." *USA Today* 10 August 2005: C2.

^{iv} <http://jss.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/28/1/56>

^v http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/american_indian_quarterly/v026/26.4black.html

^{vi} <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2005/2005002.pdf>

^{vii} <http://www.indianz.com/News/2004/005559.asp>

^{viii} http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/american_indian_quarterly/v026/26.4black.html

^{ix} http://www.apa.org/pi/oema/justification_amindian_mascots.pdf

^x <http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/pub-res/hombook.pdf>

^{xi} http://www.treatycouncil.org/section_21317117.htm

^{xii} http://www.treatycouncil.org/section_21317117.htm

^{xiii} http://www.treatycouncil.org/section_21317117.htm

^{xiv}

http://www.boston.com/news/education/k_12/articles/2007/02/07/schools_are_asked_whats_in_a_name/

^{xv} <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/press/aic.pr>

^{xvi} <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/press/aic.pr>