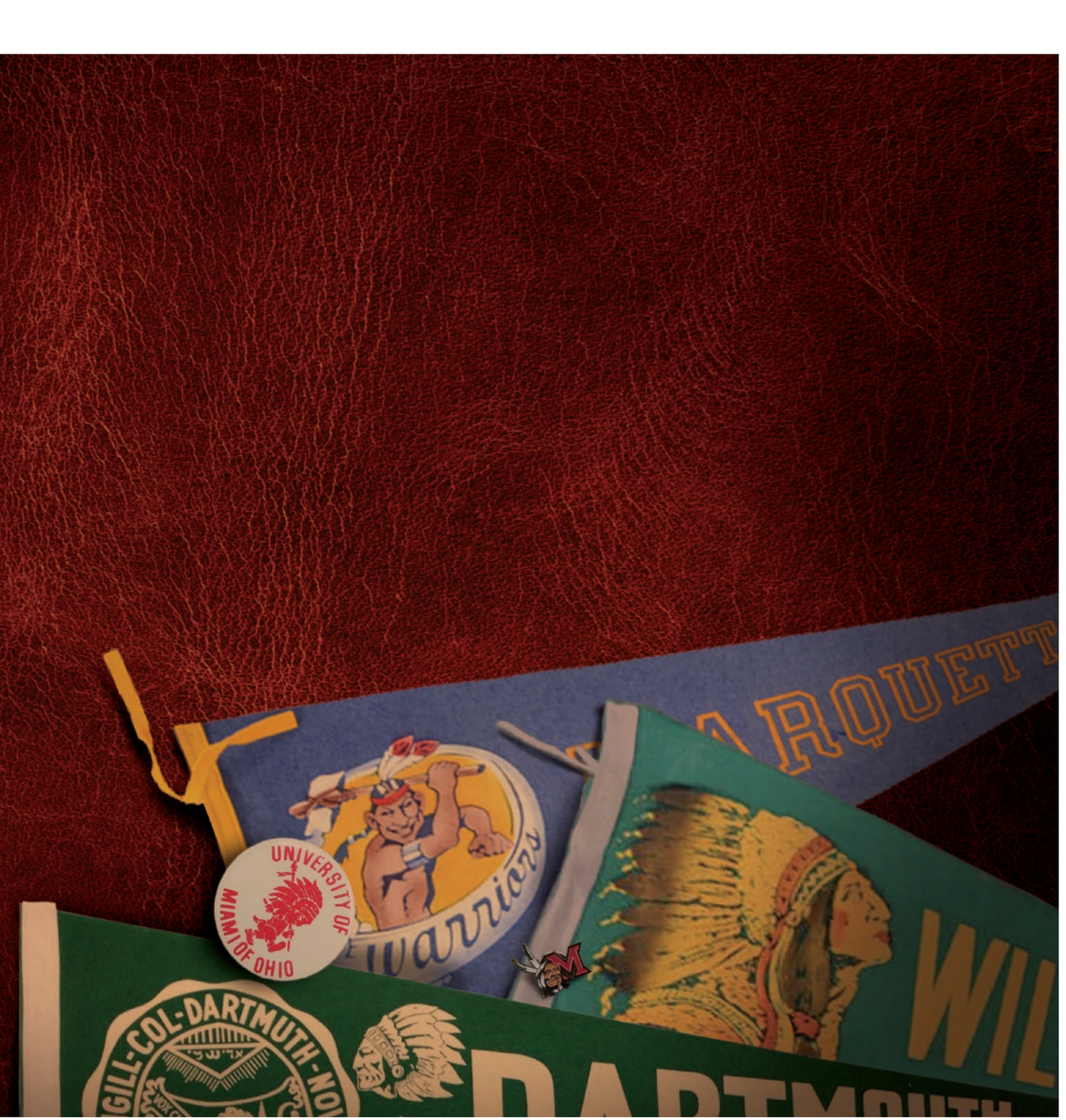
Where pride meets prejudice

Ten years have passed since the NCAA stepped into the question of whether Native Americans should be used to brand sports programs. How teams became entangled with indigenous culture and how they began to unravel themselves from it is a lesson in change, the intense loyalty of college fandom – and what happens when the two collide.

By Amy Wimmer Schwarb



TIME FOR CHANGE

Key events in the American Indian mascot debate. *Red boxes indicate changes in mascots or nicknames.*

1968

The National Congress of American Indians launches campaign to address stereotypes of Native Americans in the media.

1970

The University of Oklahoma retires its Little Red mascot.

In Cleveland, protests begin against the Major League Baseball team's use of Chief Wahoo.

1971

Marquette University removes its Willie Wampum mascot.

Mankato State College abandons its Indian caricature mascot.

1972

Stanford University abandons its Prince Lightfoot mascot and switches from the Indians to the Cardinals (later to become the Cardinal).

Dickinson State University drops Savages in favor of Blue Hawks.

The University of Utah, which had used both "Utes" and "Redskins" as dual team nicknames, drops its use of Redskins.

1973

At Eastern Washington University, the Savages become the Eagles.

1974

At Dartmouth College, the board of trustees urges discontinuation of Indians as a nickname.

1978

Syracuse University abandons its Saltine Warrior mascot.

1979

St. Bonaventure University turns away from its use of Brown Indians and Brown Squaws as mascots.

SOURCES: Jay Rosenstein, associate professor, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; Changethemascot.org; NCAA meeting minutes; The NCAA News; AISTM.org

On game days, the State Farm Center in Champaign, Illinois, radiates – from the gleaming hardwoods of center court, to the mango hue of the seats ringing the floor, to the electric climate of the Orange Krush student section. Everywhere, orange. Everywhere, energy. At expected moments – a stolen ball, a breakaway layup, a favorable call at just the right time – that energy turns feverish.

But at halftime, after the players have receded to their locker rooms, this arena in the heart of the heartland can feel as reverent as a Sunday morning. The congregation quiets when public address announcer Tim Sinclair introduces an Illini custom nearly 100 years old. "There is no more stirring and dignified tradition on any college campus than the Three-in-One," Sinclair proclaims, "which embodies the true tradition, excellence, pride and loyalty to this great university in the most exciting four minutes of college athletics."

The crowd joins the band in a familiar cadence: Clap. Clap. Clap-clap-clap. Soon, friends and strangers are draping their arms over shoulders, swaying as they sing:

Hail to the orange, hail to the blue.
Hail alma mater, ever so true.
We love no other, so let our motto be
Victory, Illinois, varsity.

The tempo picks up again, and a frenzy of rhythmic claps and rousing whoops replaces the solemnity. The fervor, the volume, the excitement – they all crescendo until the band, in one abrupt explosion of sound, stops.

Throughout this ritual, the court has been empty. But many fans' minds are full, with memories of a figure who once appeared on this floor in a turkey-feather headdress, dancing in what many believed to be a reverential portrayal of a Native American ceremony. And in this moment at the end of the song, suspended between the revelry of halftime and the resumption of the game, thousands among the sea of orange remember the dancing American Indian with one word, gruff and guttural:

"Chief!"

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign no longer has a chief. Its decades-old symbol, Chief Illiniwek, last performed at halftime nearly nine years ago. Neither does the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, where Chief Moccanooga was retired two decades ago, nor the University of Louisiana at Monroe, where Chief Brave Spirit once summoned fandom at a campus that called itself The Reservation. They've been banished to the annals of college sports, keeping company with other vanquished reminders of how several college sports programs once rallied their fans: the feathers on the College of William and Mary logo; the word "Scalping" in Alcorn State University's Scalping Braves nickname; the Runnin' Joe mascot at Arkansas State University.

Yet the chief and his comrades linger – not only at Illinois, in a single-word refrain revived each game night by a free-speaking crowd, but at schools throughout the country where the allegiance to a former nickname lives on in the hearts and minds of some alumni and fans. Dartmouth College, for instance, turned away from its Indians nickname more than 40 years ago, yet in 2015, the Dartmouth Indian resurfaced on an unofficial T-shirt denounced by the provost. The shirt was promoted on a flier that asked: "Hate political correctness? Love Dartmouth?"

February marks 10 years since the NCAA implemented its policy against "hostile and abusive" Native American mascots, nicknames or imagery at its championships – a decision decried at the time by critics as a political overcorrection. By the time the NCAA stepped into the matter, dozens of its members – inspired by a push from activists or the sensitivities of the schools' leadership – had already backed off from using images and names associated with Native Americans.

For the schools that hadn't, the NCAA decision ignited a uniquely American discussion, centered on three subjects that inspire intense feelings: ethnicity, personal identity and the allure of college sports.

"There comes a point in time where you've got to take a stand on what's right and what's not right,"

Bill Hug of Park Ridge, Illinois, portrays Chief Illiniwek at the Illinois-Michigan game in 1951. Chief Illiniwek was used by Illinois from 1926 to 2007. CHARLES KNOBLOCK / AP IMAGES

says Robert Vowels, now the athletics director at the University of Detroit Mercy, who chaired the NCAA Minority Opportunities and Interests Committee during the NCAA discussions about Native American mascots. "I think this issue had a kind of magnitude – a sense that this was important, and we were trying to resolve the challenges of that day."

How colleges and universities came to adopt Native American icons as their own is a complex tale that spans the 20th century, and the story of how those schools untangled themselves from that marriage is even messier. Change, after all, is hard. And in the case of Native American-inspired college sports teams, stripping the symbols of an alma mater means coming between fans and a piece of how they define themselves – even if those symbols were misappropriated from another culture.

Much of what Americans believe about the indigenous people who came before them comes from a 19th century entrepreneur who turned his brief experience as a U.S. Army scout in the American West into a career as a traveling showman – and created a myth upon which a country built its character.

Beginning in the 1880s, William "Buffalo Bill" Cody's Wild West Show – part fiction, part fact, all pageantry – was an elaborate presentation featuring a cast of 200, including American Indians and sharpshooters, plus hundreds of horses, bison and other animals. Cody brought to life stagecoach robberies and epic Indian battles, and his exhibitions drew millions of people who had been following news accounts of the American Indian Wars.

On the brink of the Industrial Revolution, Native American culture was admired in a bit of a pop-culture moment. "It was a short step from celebrating the heroic white pioneers who 'won the West,'" historian Brian Dippie, a former president of the Western History Association, wrote, "to mourning the losers who, once resistance was over, served as poignant symbols of the cost of progress."

Even though more than 500 societies and nations once populated the United States, this moment of popularity coalesced with a time when the Great Plains tribes were making headlines during the waning moments of the American Indian Wars. The symbols of some of those tribes – elaborate eagle-feather war bonnets, skilled horsemanship, tepees, powwows – came to define the American Indian.

From that fascination grew two disparate paths for interacting with native people. One was to open boarding schools for American Indian children – places where their culture could be dismantled, replaced by Christianity and lessons in being "civilized." The other was, ironically enough, almost the opposite: Native American culture was used to teach young white Americans how to forge their way in a country still searching for identity.

Progressive groups of the day – most notably, the Boy Scouts of America – used American Indian folklore to teach virtues. "That's one of the most prevalent, romantic ideas that gets expressed. … The Indian had his time and was passing on the baton, if you will, to American citizens to lead the country in a productive future," says Jennifer Guiliano, an assistant professor of history at Indiana University-Purdue University at

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1980

Southern Oregon State College (now Southern Oregon University) stops using Native American imagery to represent its nickname, the Red Raiders.

1987

St. John's University (New York) stops using a Native American caricature in its logo and mascot.

1988

Siena College changes from Indians to Saints.

Saint Mary's College (now Saint Mary's University of Minnesota) drops Red Men for Cardinals.

The Michigan State Civil Rights Commission decries the use of Native American nicknames, logos and mascots in Michigan schools.

In Minnesota, the state board of education adopts a resolution calling the use of Native American mascots and imagery "unacceptable."

1989

Montclair State College (now Montclair State University) drops Indians in favor of Red Hawks.

Bradley University's Braves drop their use of an Indian mascot and caricature logo.

1991

Eastern Michigan University drops Hurons for Eagles.

The Nebraska Commission on Indian Affairs asks 27 Nebraska public schools to abandon their use of Native American mascots and nicknames.

The National Education Association denounces the use of ethnicity-related nicknames for sports teams.

1992

Simpson College becomes the Storm, dropping Redmen.

Civil rights advocates protest Super Bowl XXVI, where the Buffalo Bills faced the Washington Redskins.

The Portland Oregonian becomes the first American newspaper to decline to use the word Redskins in print.

1993

Arkansas State University abandons Runnin' Joe mascot.

The National Congress of American Indians denounces in a resolution the use of American Indian names with sports teams.

The University of Wisconsin-Madison refuses to play nonconference games against teams with Indian nicknames.

1994

Hartwick College switches from Warriors to Hawks.

Marquette University retires its Warriors nickname and becomes the Golden Eagles.

Juniata College switches from the Indians to the Eagles.

St. John's (New York) abandons its Redmen nickname and becomes the Red Storm.

University of Iowa bans the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign's Chief Illiniwek from campus competition sites and announces it won't schedule nonconference games against teams with Indian mascots.

1995

The University of Southern Colorado (now Colorado State University-Pueblo) switches from the Indians to the ThunderWolves.

1996

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga stops using the Chief Moccanooga mascot.

Miami University (Ohio) drops the nickname Redskins.

The Adams State University Indians become the Grizzlies.

1997

Chattanooga drops its Moccasins name in favor of Mocs, a reference to the state bird, the mockingbird.

1998

Yakima Valley Community College drops its Indian nickname, logo and mascot at the request of Native American students.

Indianapolis and author of Indian Spectacle: College Mascots and the Anxiety of Modern America. "Much of the public consciousness about Indians was, 'They're disappearing. They're vanishing. We need to preserve what they were and celebrate them.'"

That was the "cultural storm that was existing at the moment when schools picked them up and turned them into icons and brands," Guiliano says. She points to Lester Leutwiler, the first person to appear as a Native American mascot on a college football field, who portrayed Chief Illiniwek at Illinois in 1926. Leutwiler had learned his dance and created his costume at Boy Scout gatherings.

Other schools joined the Indian nickname bandwagon. Chief Blackjack, based on a cigar-store Indian statue, began representing St. John's University (New York). Big Chief Bill Orange, the Saltine Warrior of Syracuse University, became that school's mascot. The University of North Dakota adopted the Sioux name in 1930, dropping its previous association with the Flickertail, a type of gopher.

The storylines from the Buffalo Bill days persisted, too. Through the middle of the 20th century, American Indians were represented as savage villains or stoic wise men in Western movies and Saturday morning cowboys-and-Indians programming.

Meanwhile, Native Americans had more to worry about than sports mascot caricatures that glowed red with toothy smiles. By 1970, the unemployment rate for Native Americans was 10 times the national average, and 40 percent lived in poverty. But also by then, they had started finding their voice.

Histories of the American Indian Movement, founded in 1968 in Minneapolis in response to police brutality, chart the pinnacle moments: In 1969, dozens of Native Americans occupied the abandoned federal prison on Alcatraz Island off San Francisco, declaring the island Indian land and demanding the United States create a cultural center and college there for Native Americans. In 1972, protesters seized the offices of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington, D.C., calling attention to their grievances with the government. In 1973, a group of armed American Indians occupied Wounded Knee, South Dakota – site of a U.S. Army cavalry massacre of Native Americans in 1890 – for more than two months.

In those years, colleges and universities were among the first to recognize the role they had played in perpetuating myths about Native American culture. Dartmouth stepped up, dropping its Indian mascot in 1969. Within the next five years, several mascots – Little Red of the University of Oklahoma, Willie Wampum of Marquette University, Prince Lightfoot of Stanford University – were gone.

But they were only a tiny percentage. By that point in American sports, the number of Native American-inspired nicknames for U.S. high school, college and professional teams had swelled to about 3,000.

"It's really hard for native communities to look past that a lot of this celebration is a celebration of the dying of their ancestors," Guiliano says. "Americans would be upset about a celebration of D-Day as our veterans fighting and dying. If these are celebrations, what exactly are they celebrating? It is celebrating extermination and colonization."

The words "Indians welcome," added to the prison wall at Alcatraz Island during Native American activists' 19-month occupation in 1969, are still visible today. AP IMAGES

The brilliant orange of the Fighting Illini shined even brighter in Champaign, Illinois, during the 1988-89 men's basketball season. The team won the first 16 games of the season, and before long, sportscaster Dick Vitale had anointed them the "Flyin' Illini." A deep run in the Division I men's basketball tournament seemed to loom in their future.

Among the locals excited about the team was a high school boy who had just moved to the area. His mother, Charlene Teters, a member of the Spokane tribe who had raised her family near a Washington reservation, was a graduate student in fine arts at Illinois.

Her son was so caught up in Illini basketball – particularly his favorite players, Kendall Gill and Marcus Liberty – that Teters took him and his sister to a home game. Colleagues in her department made Chief Illiniwek sound harmless. "We didn't know what we were going to see," she says. "I had not seen him before; I had only heard him described to me. People said, 'The mascot is honorable, respectful, dignified and noble.'"

At halftime, the announcer introduced the Three-in-One. The drum beats sounded. The crowd called for the chief with their familiar cadence: Clap. Clap. Clap-clap-clap. Then, Chief Illiniwek – head down, feet bare, face expressionless – ran onto the court.

Teters was struck by the chief's costume – "a beautiful buckskin," she calls it – and long, flowing headdress that nearly brushed the hardwoods. To her, the dance itself was less inspiring; the leaps, skips and hops seemed to represent a hodgepodge of Hollywood depictions and Illinois student imaginations.

Teters' daughter, she would describe years later, seemed to sink into her seat. Her son tried to follow the lead of the fans around him, and laugh along with them. But for Teters, the chief's dance and the hand-clapping ritual surrounding it were mocking her family, her religion, her culture. "It is very difficult," she says, "to get how the people I had talked to could arrive at the idea that this was dignified and noble."

That game – and her children's exposure to it – changed Teters' life. "I and my family are native people who know who we are and where we come from," Teters says. "That's what a tribe is – people connected by blood and connected by a land base. My children knew who they were."

As the Illini forged ahead with a season in which they advanced to the Final Four for the first time in 37 years, Teters stood outside their arena, holding homemade signs with messages such as: "American Indians are human beings, not mascots." Fans began calling her, leaving cruel or threatening messages. Counter-protesters showed up where Teters did, chanting "Pick another school" or "Chief haters have got to go."

Teters felt alone. She called her tribal chairman in Washington to prepare him for reporters or antagonists who might call him to ask whether the tribe supported her.

"He was a man with a very keen sense of humor," Teters says. "I'm describing what's happening to me – the hate calls, people threatening me, threatening my children. He's laughing through my entire story. Then, he gets quiet. And he says: 'Do you know where you are, Char? Do you know where you are?'"

She understood his concern. There she was, 2,000 miles away from home, trying to defend a culture her colleagues and neighbors understood mostly through "Lone Ranger" episodes. Still, the tribal chairman offered his support. "If someone does call, we'll know what to say," she recalls him telling her, "because we want to support you."

Teters was a leader at the forefront of a change in mindsets. Over the next decade, one pocket of America after another seemed to awaken to questions about how Native Americans were depicted in modern society.

In 1992, at Super Bowl XXVI in Minneapolis, Native Americans protested the Washington Redskins' appearance. In 1993, the National Congress of American Indians called upon "all reasonable individuals in decision-making positions to voluntarily change racist and dehumanizing mascots." The late 1990s saw more calls for change: In 1998, the Kansas Association for Native American Education called for all schools in the state, both public and private, to eliminate their association with Native American mascots, and in an American Jewish Committee statement on team names, it opposed "the use of racial or ethnic stereotypes … when the affected group has not chosen the name itself."

Activist Charlene Teters is now dean at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe. SUBMITTED BY CHARLENE TETERS

Meanwhile, colleges and universities throughout the country took notice. Even schools that did not use Native American nicknames or mascots struggled when opponents that did came to town. At the University of Iowa, fraternities once hanged Chief Illiniwek in effigy when the Hawkeyes were meeting the Illini. In 1993, the University of Wisconsin-Madison refused to play nonconference games against any team with a Native American mascot; a year later, the University of Iowa announced the same ban.

And in a sign that this momentum was beginning to reach every corner of society, in 1999, Crayola dropped the color "Indian Red."

Still, no one was suggesting this issue should be addressed at a level outside individual colleges and universities. Decades of practice had strengthened perceptions that these traditions belonged to the schools themselves.

And no one in the ranks of higher education leadership had yet risen up to tell them otherwise.

At St. Cloud State University, a Division II school that competes in Division I for men's ice hockey, demonstrations against Native American team nicknames greeted meetings of the St. Cloud State Huskies and the North Dakota Fighting Sioux. University President Roy Saigo feared violence would one day break out.

"Hockey fans are crazy, and the protesters would demonstrate in the arena," recalls Saigo, who was president of St. Cloud State from 2000 to 2007 and is now president at Southern Oregon University. "I thought, 'Holy cow, this is going to create a potential riot.' All you need is somebody to push or hit somebody."

Saigo was sympathetic to the protesters' cause. A Japanese-American, he and his family were removed from their California home in the early 1940s, and Saigo spent three years of his early childhood in a detainment camp in Arizona. "I have an extreme sensitivity," he says, "to those who have no voice."

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Southern Nazarene University replaces Redskins with Crimson Storm.

Chemeketa Community College abandons its Chiefs nickname and becomes the Storm.

Oklahoma City University switches from the Chiefs to the Stars.

Morningside College in Iowa, formerly the Maroon Chiefs, becomes the Mustangs.

The Kansas Association for Native American Education calls for eliminating Native American mascots at schools in the state.

In a statement on team names, the American Jewish Committee states that it "deplores and opposes the use of racial or ethnic stereotypes … when the affected group has not chosen the name itself."

About 200 activists attend the first national Conference on the Elimination of Racist Mascots on the Illinois campus.

1999

Indiana University of Pennsylvania decides to change its mascot to a black bear, though its nickname, the Indians, will remain.

A consortium of 12 Native American tribes known as the Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council issues a resolution that calls for ending "the use of depictions of and cultural references to American Indians as mascots, logos and team nicknames in Wisconsin public schools."

A panel in Utah cites "Redskins" as a derogatory term and forbids its appearance on license plates.

Pennsylvania-based Crayola announces plans to drop the name "Indian Red" from its crayon palette.

A three-judge panel of the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office rules that "Redskins" is disparaging to Native Americans.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People denounces Native American mascots in a resolution.

1999

The Society for the Study of the Indigenous Languages of the Americas urges Illinois to replace Chief Illiniwek with a symbol "that does not promote inaccurate, anachronistic and damaging stereotypes" of Native Americans.

The dress code at the main public library in the Cleveland area prohibits its 700 employees from wearing items depicting the Cleveland Indians mascot, Chief Wahoo, at work.

2000

Hendrix College keeps its nickname, the Warriors, but drops the Indian-head logo that went with it.

Seattle University becomes the Redhawks, dropping its Chieftains nickname and its Indian head logo.

2001

Southwestern College switches its name from Apaches to Jaguars.

The Quinnipiac University board of trustees votes to drop the school's Braves nickname.

Cumberland College will no longer be the Indians, but the Patriots.

Colgate University stops using "Red" as part of its Red Raiders nickname.

The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights issues a statement that calls for schools to stop using Native American images and nicknames for its teams, calling the practice "insensitive."

The New York State Education Department calls for retiring "Indian" team names from public schools.

The Minnesota Indian Education Association adopts a resolution against the University of North Dakota's use of "Fighting Sioux."

The Modern Language Association adopts a resolution in opposition to Native American mascots and symbols.

An American Counseling Association resolution encourages members to work toward elimination of stereotypical Native American images at their workplaces.

American Indians protest in 1992 outside the Metrodome in Minneapolis before the start of Super Bowl XXVI between the Washington Redskins and the Buffalo Bills. MARK DUNCAN / AP IMAGES

He brought that perspective with him when, in 2001, he reached out to his colleagues in the NCAA, hoping the Association might join other American institutions speaking out about misuse of Native American culture. By then, dozens of NCAA schools already had dropped offensive mascots or nicknames; Saigo hoped the others could be pushed to make the same choice.

He angled for a spot on an NCAA committee agenda, but met resistance. Stepping on member schools' business was an uncomfortable idea.

When he was offered a chance to speak, it was at a university presidents' luncheon, where his words would compete with the sounds of forks scraping against plates – not exactly the rapt audience he had hoped to find. "I remember throwing a file down on my table," Saigo says. "My assistant encouraged me to go anyway."

Many of the presidents in the room were colleagues he had known for years. He wasn't afraid to make this conversation uncomfortable; he had been known to ask Catholics how they would feel about a student dressed in a pope costume dancing with a Crucifix at halftime.

"I got up there, and I said, 'I'm going to talk today about Native American mascots.' They just sort of stared at me," he recalls. "I said, 'You guys don't think this is important?'"

He noticed the table near the front where he had been sitting. Three African-American men – all of them Division II presidents who were collegial acquaintances of Saigo's – seemed to be giving him polite but disinterested attention. If Saigo couldn't wake them up, he decided, the rest of the NCAA wouldn't respond either.

"Hey, listen up, everybody! Listen up!" he recalls saying. "I want you to hear me because I'm not going to say this twice. I'm going to tell you all a story about Little Black Sambo."

The brazen word pierced any lunchtime ambivalence, and his friends near the front straightened in their chairs. For 100 years, Americans had been usurping pieces of Native American culture, making them their own – and the comparison of that practice with racist depictions of African-Americans shot like electricity through the crowd. With their attention in his hands, Saigo assaulted their sensibilities.

In a PowerPoint, he showed how schools' use of these nicknames had opened the door to racist portrayals. One slide showed a drawing of a Native American, his eyes replaced with X's as if he were drunk. In another, distributed by students at an opposing school, a Native American was depicted performing a sexual act on the other school's animal mascot. "Is this a welcoming environment?" Saigo asked. "I'm not telling you what to do. I'm just asking a question."

His presentation complete, the St. Cloud State president retook his seat.

"Saigo," he recalls the three colleagues at his table telling him, "we get it."

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The same month Saigo made his appeal, the NCAA Executive Committee – the Association's highest-ranking body – issued a new policy banning schools in states that fly the Confederate flag from hosting championship events.

When it was announced, potential critics lined up with commendations. "Two thumbs-up to the NCAA," USA Today sports columnist Jon Saraceno wrote.

Meanwhile, the level of unease with Native American mascots was reaching new heights. In 2001 alone, colleges and universities swapped Apaches for Jaguars, traded Indians for Patriots and dropped "Red" from "Red Raiders." The most influential voice, however, came from the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, which called for an end to the use of Native Americans as school mascots, logos and nicknames, describing it in a statement as an "insensitive" practice that "should be avoided."

Days after that statement was released, the Executive Committee assigned the NCAA Minority Opportunities and Interests Committee to examine the issue. The committee worked quickly: Within two months, it concluded Native American mascots "must be a concern to the NCAA," according to a July 2001 committee report.

But NCAA work on the issue had only begun. Vowels, then chair of the Minority Opportunities and Interests Committee, began meeting with university presidents, chancellors and athletics directors at schools with Native American mascots. "We felt good about those hard discussions," he says. "You have the history – there's a love of the school and how it's been for so many years. You have to work through those issues and get to the point of consensus, but there was also a feeling that we need to move on."

Vowels' committee spent a year talking with affected schools and developing options for consideration. In its final report to the Executive Committee, the Minority Opportunities and Interests Committee noted: "A change in tradition is not an indication that institutions were 'wrong' in the past or that institutions harbor ill will toward American Indians. It is simply an acknowledgment of changing times and growing awareness and sensitivity."

The Executive Committee wasn't prepared to make a decision. It asked the top committees from each of the three NCAA divisions to consider the recommendations. It referred the issue to a subcommittee. By 2004, the Executive Committee had invited member schools with Native American nicknames to complete a self-study. The hope: that schools would recognize the nation's tolerance for using particular ethnic groups as mascots was waning, and take steps to make changes.

But early responses showed this was one issue that wouldn't resolve itself. One Executive Committee report noted that in the first few months of the self-study, only 12 schools had responded. Nine did support some type of NCAA-directed analysis, and the feedback suggested university leaders wanted to initiate change but didn't think their campus had an appetite for it unless it was forced. Two schools, on the other hand, were strongly opposed. The report said those two considered NCAA involvement "an unreasonable interference … in institutional issues."

By late 2004, the Minority Opportunities and Interests Committee was growing frustrated. Increasingly, members were unconvinced the Association's top committee would be willing to take a stand on Native American mascots. "We were concerned because we thought we had vetted it in a way that was thorough and was equal on everybody's side," Vowels says. "So when things did bog down a little bit, we were wondering whether folks were going to get cold feet. We said, 'Hey, time is moving. We've looked at this issue. We think it's the right thing to do.'"

While Vowels and his committee were waiting for action, other groups were taking it. State boards of education in Michigan and New Hampshire called for an end to Native Americans as mascots at public schools in their states. More colleges and universities, including Southeast Missouri State University, which switched from the Indians to the Redhawks, changed their nicknames. The issue, while drawing little attention in the public consciousness, was moving on with or without the NCAA.

Finally, in summer 2005, with the schools' self-studies complete, all that was left was for the NCAA's highest-ranking committee to make a decision.

At that point Walt Harrison, president of the University of Hartford, had been serving on the Executive Committee for two years. The Aug. 4, 2005, meeting was his first as chair, but the issue the college presidents on the committee were asked to consider that day was not new to Harrison.

Years earlier in the mid-1990s, when he was vice president for university relations at the University of Michigan, Native American students on campus had protested a secret society on campus known as Michigamua, based on a fictional tribe. As Harrison was working with the students and dissecting the complexities of issues surrounding ethnic identity, he was awakened to the sensitivity of the issue. "I'm Jewish, and I was asked to think about, 'What if they were the Michigan Rabbis, and they had a big Rabbi symbol on their hats?' That made a huge impression on me," Harrison recalls. "So when it came up in the context of the Executive Committee, to me, it seemed kind of obvious that we needed to take action."

The committee voted 17-0 to prohibit member schools from displaying "hostile and abusive racial/ethnic/national origin mascots, nicknames or imagery" at NCAA championships. A series of deadlines were put in place for the changes, but players, cheerleaders and band members' uniforms could not display Native American imagery, and such images had to be covered if the school was hosting an NCAA championship event. Eighteen schools were cited in the announcement for their use of questionable nicknames, mascots and imagery.

Bernard Franklin, then the NCAA senior vice president for governance and membership, had worked at the national office just a few months at that time; previously, he had been a college president who served on the Executive Committee in 2001, when it adopted the ban on schools in states that fly the Confederate flag hosting championships. To him, the Native American mascot announcement felt similar.

"It was the same process – decision on Thursday, announcement on Friday," Franklin says. "On the Confederate flag issue, on Saturday, there was hardly a whisper. I think in the back of the minds of folks, they thought, well, that was a controversial policy. And so I think we underestimated the reaction to this policy across the country."

The reaction was pointed – and angry. Some schools said they were blindsided by the decision. Others questioned how those three words – "hostile and abusive" – could apply to traditions they believed were carried out with decorum and respect.

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A resolution passed by the Seminole of Oklahoma, Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw and Muskogee nations calls for eliminating "the stereotypical use of American Indian names and images as mascots in sports."

The National Conference for Community and Justice opposes Native American mascots in a statement.

The Maryland Commission on Indian Affairs issues a resolution supporting the elimination of Native American mascots, logos and sports team nicknames in the state's public schools.

2002

Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts gets rid of the nickname Mohawks.

Southeastern Community College moves from the Blackhawks nickname to Black Hawks.

Martin Methodist College drops Indians for Redhawks.

The Iowa Civil Rights Commission opposes use of Native American team names and images in a resolution.

In Minnesota, 34 presidents on the State Colleges and Universities Board oppose discriminatory team names, logos and mascots in a resolution.

The New Hampshire Board of Education calls for local schools to stop using Native American mascots.

The North Carolina State Advisory Council on Indian Education opposes Native American mascots, logos and the like in public schools in the state.

2003

An Ohio newspaper, the Telegraph-Forum, decides to stop using "Chief Wahoo" in print.

The Michigan State Board of Education urges schools in Michigan to stop using Native American "mascots, nicknames, logos, fight songs, insignias, antics and team descriptors."

2004

Southeast Missouri State University changes from Indians to Redhawks.

2005

The University of West Georgia drops its Braves mascot for the Wolves.

Carthage College becomes the Red Men, abandoning Redmen.

Midwestern State University leaves behind its Indians mascot.

The NCAA announces new policy to discourage member schools from using "hostile and abusive racial/ethnic/national origin mascots, nicknames or imagery."

The American Psychological Association issues a statement calling for retiring Native American team mascots in the United States, citing research that shows the portrayals can be damaging to the self-esteem and social identity development of Native Americans.

2006

Southeastern Oklahoma State University drops Savages for Savage Storm.

Chowan College (now Chowan University) abandons its Braves nickname and the corresponding mascot.

Muscatine Community College drops its Indians nickname and mascot.

The University of Louisiana at Monroe becomes the Warhawks, dropping Indians.

The College of William and Mary, knows as the Tribe, removes from its logo two feathers – the last vestiges of the Native American connotation of its nickname.

Newberry College stops using Indians as a nickname.

"Is this the PC police here," columnist Peter Kerasotis wrote in the News-Press of Fort Myers, Florida, "or the KGB?"

Jeb Bush, then the governor of Florida – whose Statehouse office was located in the same city as the Florida State University Seminoles – told reporters: "How politically correct can we get? To me, the folks that make these decisions need to get out more often."

"Note to the NCAA Executive Committee," wrote columnist David Climer of The Tennesseean, "Once you open a can of worms, it's hard to get that sucker closed."

Even more visceral comments came from fans via voice mail and email. Shortly after the announcement, a series of voice mails arrived at 2 or 3 a.m. at Harrison's office at the University of Hartford. Harrison asked his assistant to listen, just in case someone had left contact information and wanted a returned call. But all she heard, over a combined half-hour of messages, was vocal intonations of the "tomahawk chop," a chant used by Florida State.

"Aaah-ah-ah-uh-ah … aaah-ah-ah-uh-ah."

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On the first day of September 2006, a Saturday morning when the air hung thick in the Black Bayou region of Louisiana, Chief Brave Spirit mounted his horse. Wearing moccasins, war paint and a two-piece garment designed to look like buckskin, he cantered toward the 50-yard line of the University of Louisiana at Monroe's Malone Stadium.

Waiting for him at midfield were some university dignitaries, including the university president. The chief dismounted. He removed his headdress and handed it over to the administrators. And then he stood aside and watched, resolute, as a bird named Ace led the football team onto the field for its home opener. With that, the Louisiana-Monroe Indians became the Warhawks.

The transition wasn't that simple for every school.

Altogether, 18 schools were on an NCAA list of schools where mascots, nicknames or imagery were deemed "hostile and abusive." Of those, 10 changed their nicknames and dropped Native American references in how they present themselves. Three more schools – the Bradley University Braves, the Alcorn State Braves and the Illinois Fighting Illini – kept their nicknames by agreeing they would not use them to represent Native Americans.

Many of those 18 schools appealed the decision to the NCAA and lost those appeals before moving on. Among those, some, in Franklin's words, "leveraged the policy to make change." The NCAA provided an impetus to put in place new nicknames or mascots, while diverting finger-pointing away from university leaders. "Confidentially, they would call me and say, 'Bernard, I'm going to submit this appeal,'" Franklin recalls, "'but I hope it gets denied.'"

For five others – the Catawba College Indians, Central Michigan University Chippewas, Florida State Seminoles, Mississippi College Choctaws and University of Utah Utes – the story ended differently. They demonstrated to the NCAA approval from the tribes that inspired their names, and embarked on formal agreements with the tribes.

"Although the Executive Committee continues to believe that stereotyping Native Americans through nicknames and imagery is wrong," Franklin wrote in a letter to Florida State, "it recognizes that a Native American tribe is a distinct political community and, therefore, respects the authority of the tribe to permit universities and colleges to use its name and imagery."

Illinois graduate student Dan Maloney portrays Chief Illiniwek at halftime of the Illinois-Northwestern men's basketball game Feb. 18, 2007, one of the chief's last official appearances. JOHN DIXON / AP IMAGES

Other schools, too, tried to engage with a distinct political community that could sign off on their depictions. In Illinois, the definition for "Illini" was elusive; the state was named by French explorers, and "Illini" was used to describe a loose confederation of tribes that made up the region. Today, their closest relatives are the Peoria, who are based in Oklahoma. Back in 2001, the year Saigo first approached the NCAA about Native American mascots, the Peoria had asked Illinois to drop Chief Illiniwek.

Six years later, faced with NCAA sanctions, some Illinois alumni reached out to the Peoria, hoping to reach an agreement that assured the school could keep its traditions. But the Illinois board of trustees went a different direction and retired the chief, who danced at halftime for the last time in February 2007.

Activist Philip Yenyo (left) talks with a Cleveland Indians fan before a game in 2015. MARK DUNCAN / AP IMAGES

Nowhere was the transition away from Native American imagery more difficult than at the University of North Dakota. The NCAA push to drop its use of "Fighting Sioux" sparked lawsuits, tribal resolutions and a state law connecting the nickname to the school. (That law, too, prompted a lawsuit, filed by a group of Native American students.)

The question was at last settled by public referendum in 2012. And once voters had a chance to speak, they left little room for debate: By a ratio of 2-to-1, they were in favor of abandoning the fight to remain the Fighting Sioux.

Just this fall, the university announced that a nickname had been chosen. Two days later, the North Dakota men's ice hockey team was scheduled to play again in St. Cloud, Minnesota, a matchup that years earlier had inspired the St. Cloud State president to speak up for change. But this time, North Dakota took the ice as the Fighting Hawks.

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These days, Bernard Franklin is the chief inclusion officer of the NCAA. Every year, he is invited to speak to a University of Central Florida sports management class that dissects the NCAA's implementation of its Native American mascot policy. Students are assigned various roles to play as they work together to weigh the facts of each case and come to a fair conclusion. Each year, one student portrays Franklin.

One slide in his presentation notes the most popular American sports team mascots: Eagles. Tigers. Bulldogs. Panthers. Cougars. Lions. Bears. Wildcats. Indians. One of these things, he tells the students, is not like the other – and using Native Americans as mascots equates them with animals.

Franklin sometimes wonders whether the words "hostile and abusive" in the NCAA policy helped set the stage for the firestorm that erupted. "Perhaps using different language might have created more opportunity for dialogue," he notes. "When a person gets defensive, they're not listening. And in so many of the situations I encountered, people were defensive because of those three words in the policy."

The national trends that precipitated the NCAA policy have only gained steam in the decade that followed. Shortly after it was announced, the American Psychological Association called for retiring Native American team mascots, pointing to research that demonstrates how the portrayals can damage self-esteem and social identity development of young Native Americans. A U.S. president spoke out against Native American team names for the first time in 2013. The following year, the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office canceled six Washington Redskins trademarks.

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At Illinois, Chief Illiniwek, though long gone, lives on – if only as the focal point of a debate over identity. On one side, the Council of Chiefs, an unsanctioned body of alumni, supports an unofficial Chief Illiniwek each year. On the other, a faculty emeritus has proposed banning the songs that once accompanied the chief's halftime dance, even though the music predates the chief.

Meanwhile, a student senator has proposed starting a search for a new mascot. The school, he says, needs to rally around something new.

The university retains the rights to its chief imagery but makes minimal use of it – a move that keeps control of the controversial symbol in the hands of the school. In the 2014-15 fiscal year, Illinois sold $1.4 million worth of sanctioned merchandise; the chief represented $1,300 of it, or 0.09 percent.

"Our policy is, our trademarks, our school name cannot be used with Native American imagery," says Marty Kaufmann, assistant director of athletics for business development at Illinois. "Do we police the logo? Yes, we police all trademarks. But if someone makes something with Native American imagery on an orange T-shirt, unless it has clear references to Illinois, we can't do anything about it."

A block from the Illinois campus, fans can buy an official orange T-shirt, with three feathers that float toward the shirttail like fallen leaves. "Gone," it reads, "but not forgotten."

Schools can drop a mascot. They can replace a nickname. They can redesign a logo. Changing hearts and minds, though, is more complicated.

2007

Indiana University of Pennsylvania becomes the Crimson Hawks, abandoning its Indians nickname.

At Illinois, the board of trustees removes Chief Illiniwek from performing at athletics events and retires the chief logo and regalia.

2013

Ten members of the U.S. Congress write a letter to NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell and Washington owner Dan Snyder, asking them to remove Redskins as a team name.

For the first time, a sitting U.S. president speaks out against Native American team names: "If I were the owner of the team and I knew that there was a name of my team – even if it has a storied history – that was offending a sizable group of people, I'd thinking about changing it," President Barack Obama told The Associated Press.

2014

Both houses of the New York State Assembly condemn the Washington Redskins for their team nickname.

The National Congress of the American Indian and the Oneida Indian Nation send letters to all NFL players, urging them to take a stand against the Redskins team name.

The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office cancels six Washington Redskins trademarks, ruling the name is "disparaging to Native Americans."

2015

California bans public schools from using Redskins as a mascot.