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 Schwarz
On game days, the State Farm Center in Champaign, Illinois, radiates—from the glistening hardwood floors of center court, to the mango hue of the seats surrounding the floor, to the electric climate of the Orange Krush student section. Everywhere, orange. Everywhere, energy. At a basketball game, spirit—a ball, a breakdown layup, a favorable call at just the right time—the energy turns feverish.

But at halftime, after the players have receded to their locker rooms, this arena in the heart of 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 Moccasina was retired two decades ago, or the University of Louisiana at Monroe, where Chief Brave Spirit once modeled legendary drums at a campus that called itself “The Reservation.” They’ve been banished to the annals of college sports, keeping company with other vanished reminders of how several college sports programs once rallied their fans: the feathers on the College of William and Mary logo; the word “Savages” in Alcorn State University’s Scupling Brave 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 crew, but at schools throughout the country where the allegiance to a former mascot lives on in the hearts and minds of some alumni and fans. Dartmouth College, for instance, turned away from its Indian nickname more than 40 years ago, yet in 2015, the Dartmouth Indian rezoned on an unofficial T-shirt denounced by the proctor. The stunt was promoted on a flier that asked: “Hate political correctness? Love Dartmouth?”

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 these 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 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 around which a country built its character. Beginning in the 1880s, William “Buffalo Bill” Cody’s Wild West Show—part fiction, part fact, part 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 robbers and epic Indian battles, and his exhibitions drew millions of people who had followed news accounts of 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 Brun Dirie—to a former president of the Western History Association, writing, ‘to mourning the losers who, once resistance was overcome, was poised to become insignificant symbols of progress.’”

The NCAA decision ignited a uniquely American discussion, centered on three subjects that require understanding: the power of ethnicity and names associated with Native Americans; the role of colleges and universities; and the cost of progress. The Native American mascots and nicknames embodied the true tradition, excellence, pride and loyalty to this great university in the most exciting four minutes of college athletics.”

The tempo picks up again, and a fervor of rhythmic clapping and源自一个文化的游行队伍重新聚集在一起。然而，他们再也无法回到中心，一旦爆炸的声音在人群中消退。这种恐怖，这种法庭上的仇恨一直。但是，许多外国军人愿意，带着武器的时。在那个论坛上，这面旗帜上的勇气，它也从上一次流血的战场。拼贴画是一场免费的演讲，包括美国原住民的故事，使他们能够建立一个国家。
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 1990, recognizing the Indian as a living being. Wyoming–Laramie announced – Little Red of the University of Oklahoma, Willie Wampum of Marquette University, Prince Lightfoot of St. John’s University – were gone. But they were only a tiny percentage. By that point in time, others had already bowed to pressure and dropped their inspired nicknames for U.S. high school, college and professional teams had shoved to about 3,000. It was really hard for native communities to look past that a lot of this celebration is a celebration of the dying of their ancestors,” Giuliano says. Americans would be upset about a celebration of D-Day or the veterans fighting. And those are celebrations, which is wrong and colonization.” It is colonizing and celebration.

The brilliant orange of the Fighting Illini shined as the U.S. national team, a year later, the University of Iowa announced with a Native American mascot; a year after that, the University of Wisconsin announced in a resolution. It's really hard for native communities to look past the fact that this momentum was beginning to reach every corner of society, in 1989, Coyote dropped the color “Indian.” Still, no one was suggesting this issue should be addressed at a level outside individual college and university. Decades of practice had strengthened perceptions that these traditions belonged to schools.

And one in the ranks of higher education leadership had yet run up to tell them otherwise.

At St. Cloud University, a Division II school that competes in Division I for men’s ice hockey, demonstra- tions against Native American team nicknames greeted the first NAACP president Roy Saigo said. “I thought, ‘The stickers would be taken off the boxes and not used for any other reason.’” In fact, they were one of the first to recognize the role they had played in perpetuating myths about Native American culture.

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1999
The Society for the Study of the Indigenous Languages of the Americas elected its first Chief Liwakwa with a symbol “that does not promote stereotypes or dehumanizing caricatures of Native Americans.”

2000
The American Indian College Fund and American Indian College Schools Consortium took the unprecedented step of drafting a resolution encouraging members not to use Native American mascots or nicknames at their institutions.

2001
The Quinnipiac University board of trustees decided to drop the school’s nickname, the Indians.

2002
Southeastern Conference president Craig Thompson announced that the SEC would push schools to stop using Native American mascots.

2003
A resolution passed by the Seminole Tribe of Oklahoma, Cheyenne, Cheyenne, Chippewa, and Mohawk chiefs called for eliminating “the stereotypical use of American Indian names and images as mascots in sports.”

The National Conference for Community and Justice opposes all forms of racism.

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

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

An Oregon newspaper, The Telegraph, decides to stop using “Chief” in their headline.

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

The Michigan Civil Rights Commission adopts a similar resolution.
“Is this the PC police here,” columnist Peter Kerasotis wrote in the News-Press of Fort Myers, Florida, “or the KGB?”

Jab 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 put out more often.”

*Note to the NCAA Executive Committee,* wrote columnist David Climer of The Tennessean. “Once you open a can of worms, it’s hard to get that sucker closed.”

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

“Aah-ab-ah-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ab-ac-