

## Native American Mascots in Sports

History

Lecturer

Date

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In 2001, the United States Commission on Civil Rights commenced a study that informed Americans of deliberate offensive misuses of Native American mascots and cultural symbols. Both public and private enterprises had been committing these offenses. Congress was petitioned in 1968 by the National Congress of American Indians to put a stop to non-Native American sports teams, towns, and media misusing Native American mascots and cultural symbols in ways that belittled or stereotyped American Indian culture.<sup>1</sup> As a result, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights proposed a ban on using mascots and cultural symbols of Native American origin by non-Native Americans schools and teams. The use and misuse of Native American mascots and symbols is relatively common in many states, particularly by professional sports teams and schools. Some non-Native American schools intentionally choose stereotypical or discriminative imagery for their mascots, and this is offensive to the Native American community. Many violent conflicts have occurred regarding the misuse of Native American symbols and mascots of which few people can even explain their origins<sup>2</sup>. However, non-Native Americans do not want to stop using Native American mascots and symbols, even though they know little to nothing about the indigenous cultural meanings ascribed to these mascots and symbols. Additionally, people do not want to give up using Native American mascots and symbols because they have formed a multi-billion industry for social events, sports, and marketing. Giving up using the symbols and mascots would result in an astronomical expense of changing brands, brand names, and trademarks associated with the use of these images. This notion would likely to lead detrimental financial situations for many entities<sup>3</sup>. Sports teams such as the Washington

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<sup>1</sup>Paul Rosier, *Native American Issues*. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2003), 165.

<sup>2</sup>John Bloom and Willard Michael. *Sports Matters*. (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 67.

<sup>3</sup>John Wolburg, The demise of Native American mascots: It's time to do the right thing. *The Journal of Consumer Marketing*. Vol. 23, Iss. 1, (2006), 4.

Redskins, the Cleveland Indians, and the Kansas City Chiefs, among other sports teams, are accused of negatively portraying American Indian symbols and mascots, since their brands tend to paint Native Americans as raging, warlike, red people who are always in conflict.

Consequently, the use of stereotypical and racist brand names and mascots may be stopped to bridge the divide between Native and non-Native American cultures. The Bureau of Justice Statistics and the National Center for Education Statistics released a study that shows American Indian students are more likely to be threatened and, even injured, at school, more than other ethnic groups, such as African American or Hispanic students. Therefore, they are also more likely to carry weapons on school property for self-defense<sup>4</sup>. The Department for Disease Control and Prevention postulate that Native American population had double the homicides in 1996, compared to other races. Unfortunately, using Native American symbols and mascots in a discriminatory fashion may be causing Indian Americans to have high rates of self-inflicted violence. This is especially evident in young Native American men who feel rejected.

Consequently, suicide cases among Native Americans are reported to be 1.5 times higher than in other races<sup>5</sup>. It is noted that for every 10 violent confrontations and victimizations that young Native Americans face, the U.S. Department of Justice reports that seven of those are caused by the presence of a non-Native offender<sup>6</sup>. Subsequently, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the National Congress of American Indians have come together to discourage using symbols and mascots that offend Native American culture. Many organizations such as Interscholastic Athletic Association, which is based in Massachusetts, have discouraged schools from referring to Native Americans with

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<sup>4</sup> Stanley Eitzen, D. *Sport in Contemporary Society*. (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2004), 205.

<sup>5</sup> Janice Welsch, *Multicultural Films*. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2005), 18.

<sup>6</sup> Roger Chapman. *Culture Wars*. (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2009), 75–80.

offensive nicknames while competing<sup>7</sup>. Other states such as Minnesota, Wisconsin, New York, Michigan, and New Hampshire have discouraged the use of stereotypical symbols and mascots of Native American origin, as a way to reach out show Native American culture more respect.

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<sup>7</sup> Tim Delaney and Madigan Tim, *The Sociology of Sports*. (Jefferson: McFarland & Co, 2009), 205.

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