

Yet another side of the ‘Redskin’ debate...

In his Indian Country Today perspective piece, “Free Speech: Another side of the ‘Redskin’ debate,” Ron Toya showed much courage in an era and arena where opinions not in line with current cultural- or political-correctness are considered heresy, wherein the heretic is often condemned to having his status as an Indian stripped from him and is forced to wear, ala Hester Prine, the letter A (for “apple,” of course). He becomes a colonized Indian; no longer a ‘real’ Indian.

Toya’s statement brings the battle over cultural-sensitivity into the arena where it should have been a long time ago: Indian Country. And he is right that it is probably acceptable among the vast majority of people in Indian communities for a high school, college or professional team to use an Indian-theme in its name and emblem.

A friend of mine in the 1980s, when he would come to Washington on tribal business, always included in his itinerary a certain sporting goods store downtown. There he would buy several maroon baseball caps adorned with the Redskins logo – the profile of a warrior on a shield bedecked with eagle feathers. The caps were for people on the Standing Rock Sioux reservation who gave him money to buy them.

But a growing number of people consider Native American-themed emblems and mascots demeaning, and insist that they be deemed against official regulations in sports, and perhaps even against the law. To illustrate the cultural offensiveness of such mascots, one national Indian columnist recently wrote about a little Lakota boy whose mother found him weeping in front of the TV set. When asked why he was crying, he responded that he was hurt by the use of “Indians” by the Cleveland baseball team. The message the writer sent was that the child would be scarred for life because of the insensitivity of professional sports. (No mention was made if the mother told the boy to change channels or, better yet, turn the damn thing off.)

Perhaps we of the older generation are inured by colonization and opiated by Christianity, for we tend not to be bothered by those things.

I agree with Mr. Toya that the issue should not be as big or as time consuming as it is, and perhaps we should just try to understand the weird customs of the colonizers. First of all, we’ve got to recognize the importance of the name to a team’s image, and the psychological effect it is supposed to have on opponents.

For instance, if the name of that famous university were in English instead of French, their famous victory march wouldn’t “shake down the thunder” for “Our Lady,” which is how Notre Dame translates into English. So they chose their mascot name, “Fighting Irish.” It was an obvious choice over such possibilities as, let’s say, the “Fighting Ladies,” or the oxymoronic “Fighting French.” But they made the most of it, adopting the Irish nickname and charging on in the name of Our Lady, in French, and leaving a bloody trail of vanquished foes in stadiums across America.

If it indeed offends people of various racial or ethnic groups, however, perhaps the teams should be convinced to change the name, emblem and mascot.

But having to change a nickname should not cause the uproar that it does. It should be an opportunity to have some fun. For example, instead of “the Fighting Sioux,” North Dakota University could adopt “the Bouncing Czechs,” or the “Mad Russians,” both of which would fit the demographics of the state better than the name Sioux, which is incorrect in the first place. Their old fight song could certainly be salvaged without much change to the melody.

Several decades ago, responding to demands of campus militants, Stanford University decided to shuck the name “Indians.” Then they held a campus-wide plebiscite to decide on a new name. The name “Fighting Clams” won out by a good margin, but the college big wigs, presumably with much pressure from the athletic department and rich alumni, ignored the will of the student body, and decided on “the Cardinal.” It must be pointed out that, even back then, Stanford was very culturally- and politically-sensitive and presumably didn’t want to offend Catholics with a silly mascot in red robes and pointy hat running around the field, nor did they want to chance riling the bird lovers. Therefore, their name isn’t “the Cardinals,” but “the Cardinal”... i.e. the color. (How utterly beige, how “safe.”)

One small college in the South, having to change its mascot name, chose “the Fighting Okra.” Presumably they changed their school colors to olive drab.

Why all the fuss about having to get new names? College sports need new ideas, new approaches anyway. The NCAA ban on Indian-themed mascots will do little to affect the BCS playoff at the end of the football season, or the March Madness in round ball. With the exception of the Florida State Seminoles – who have a dispensation from the tribe, the other teams with offensive names are on the doormat level of the various conferences anyway. On the other hand, wouldn’t it be great to see the Fighting Clams going head to head with the Bouncing Czechs for the national championship?

But, enough of this inane speculation. What might be the answer to this problem without treading on the free-speech rights of high school, college, professional and independent sports teams?

Several years ago, I was asked by a reporter of a small-town western Nebraska newspaper what I thought of their team keeping its nickname, which was actually a very fitting name for the town of Ogallala. I told him that he was asking the wrong source. I suggested that the town send a delegation of students, faculty and parents to Pine Ridge and ask to meet with the tribal council. They could offer an agreement between the town and the Tribal Council on conditions for use of the name. The agreement could call for such measures on their part as honoring the tribe by an annual week-long observance of Native American and tribal history, perhaps even student exchanges. And they could promise to have no demeaning gestures like the tomahawk chop, and their mascot would have to be agreed to by the tribe.

They would, of course, agree up front that they would honor the tribe’s decision, even if it meant dropping the name altogether.

Although this arrangement might not satisfy those who would have Indian or Native American names and emblems removed from all academic, independent, and professional sports, it would challenge those who say that they mean only to honor the Native Americans by appropriating the name of their tribes and symbols.

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