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Pride or Prejudice?

Some colleges back away from using American Indian names and mascots for athletics teams, while others defend them

By ERIC WILLS

The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights declared in 2001 that American Indian nicknames and mascots at colleges were "inappropriate" and "disrespectful" and should be eliminated.

Inspired in part by the commission's recommendation, the National Collegiate Athletic Association decided to investigate the issue on its own. Now, four years later, the work of the NCAA's Minority Opportunities and Interests Committee is coming to a close.

The association identified 31 member colleges with American Indian mascots, nicknames, or logos and asked them to file reports by the beginning of May, evaluating how they use such imagery.

In August the panel will submit a report to the NCAA's Executive Committee suggesting a course of action, which may include measures as severe as a ban on such nicknames.

"I think the NCAA's involvement has tremendous significance, regardless of what the outcome is," says Ellen Staurowsky, a professor and chair of the department of sport management and media at Ithaca College. "A starting point in these types of discussions has to be raising awareness."

The issue is by no means new. Stanford University and Dartmouth College retired their "Indians" team nicknames more than 30 years ago, after bitter fights with alumni. In the past two years, at least six colleges have retired American Indian mascots or nicknames. In February the State University of West Georgia eliminated its "Braves" nickname and soon will announce a replacement. The NCAA's increasing interest in the issue played a role, says Beheruz N. Sethna, the university's president. Stonehill College decided in early May that its athletics teams would be known as Skyhawks rather than the Chieftains. Respect for American Indian culture, as well as the NCAA's interest, influenced the decision, says a college spokesman.

Southeast Missouri State University, without a mascot since the 1980s, chose "Redhawks" in October to replace both "Indians" for its men's teams and "Otahkians," after a Cherokee princess, for its women's teams. The new nickname enables the university to market its athletics programs without an "arm tied behind its back," says Charles R. Wiles, marketing-and-promotions director. "It was just a matter of time," he says, "before the NCAA got tougher."

Always a Seminole

Some other colleges, however, are not budging from loyalty to their American Indian-related mascots. For more than 25 years, a succession of Florida State University students have portrayed Chief Osceola, planting a flaming spear at midfield before every Seminoles home football game. In its report to the NCAA, Florida State uses a common defense of such imagery, saying that it is not only respectful but a celebration of the culture.

"Our use of the symbols and images of the Seminole demonstrate the highest honor and respect for a Nation of People whose uncompromising fortitude and strength of character we want our athletes to emulate in all arenas of sport," wrote Lee F. Hinkle, vice president for university relations, in the university's report.

Detractors respond that such imagery fosters stereotypical views of American Indians. Ms. Staurowsky sometimes asks students in her sports-management classes at Ithaca who Chief Osceola is. Without hesitation most of them

respond that he is Florida State's mascot. But, she says, they do not know who the real Osceola was, nor can they describe his fate -- beheading -- at the hands of U.S. soldiers.

"I think that says that there is a certain level of naïveté or disingenuousness, that you can take a sports mascot and have that be a meaningful vehicle for education of the American populace," she says.

Florida State officials note that the university portrays Chief Osceola with the knowledge of the Seminoles in Florida and Oklahoma. Florida members of the tribe participate in the university's homecoming parade and help design the regalia worn by Chief Osceola, and Florida State offers scholarships to tribe members.

A number of institutions argue that local tribes support their nicknames and mascots. They include Mississippi College and the University of Louisiana at Monroe.

Even among American Indians, though, there is disagreement over the issue. The chief of the Seminole Tribe of Florida, Mitchell Cyprus, did not return *The Chronicle's* telephone calls but has affirmed his support of Florida State's nickname in previous interviews. Nevertheless, in 2001 the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma signed a statement, along with other tribes, condemning the use of American Indian mascots and nicknames by colleges. Florida State's report does not mention the statement.

David W. Narcomey, a member of the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma, says he is helping to draft a tribal resolution that if passed would speak against Florida State's use of its mascot. Referring to the Seminoles of Florida, Mr. Narcomey says, "I believe they have not seriously looked at the mascot issue and fully explored its impact."

Corey Jackson, the NCAA's staff liaison to the minority-interests committee, draws a pointed comparison: "In the 1960s, certain people in the South felt that the situation was okay with Jim Crow." Sometimes, he says, "the issue is much bigger than one local community."

Even in Florida there are dissenting voices, such as Susan Anderson. A working mother and a Cherokee, she enrolled in Florida State in the late 1970s and completed her degree in the mid-1990s. As someone who participates in traditional Cherokee ceremonies, she says the use of regalia by the student who plays Osceola trivializes items that she finds sacred.

Since the early 1990s, she has participated in protests outside Florida State's home football games. "At first, as a young person, it simply depressed me," she says. "As I matured, it made me more angry."

In its report, Florida State says that there is no evidence that the Seminole nickname is racist, creates a hostile environment, or is sacrilegious.

Tribal Tensions

The voices of local American Indians have been raised on some campuses. At the University of North Dakota, Leigh D. Jeanotte, director of American Indian services and a member of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa Tribe, says his input and that of others was omitted from the university's report about its "Fighting Sioux" nickname. "The NCAA was asking for some active involvement of the campus community regarding this issue," he says. "None of that took place here at UND."

In its report, the university emphasizes its American Indian programs and says it "is recognized as a national leader in providing access and opportunity for American Indians and other minority populations."

"Arguably," the report says, "the university does more than any other institution of higher education in the United States to celebrate the American Indian culture."

Mr. Jeanotte helped file a minority report with the NCAA, questioning whether such cultural programs can be used to justify the nickname. It argues that most American Indian programs at the university are financed by federal grants, and that the directors of the programs have established "outstanding reputations despite the controversy" surrounding the nickname.

Charles E. Kupchella, the university's president, says he has not seen the minority report and cannot comment on it. He notes that North Dakota's strategic plan includes support for American Indian programs, and that such institutional support "can't be explained away."

Moreover, North Dakota says it is bound by a 2001 ruling by the state's Board of Education that says the

university's athletics teams must be known as the "Fighting Sioux." That ruling came a few days after an alumnus, Ralph Engelstad, said that if the nickname was changed, he would halt construction of a $100-million hockey arena he was donating to the university.

The NCAA's Mr. Jackson says that although he has not yet read North Dakota's report, the argument that a university is bound by what its state board dictates is circular. The association, he says, will look into "institutions that don't want to face up to the issues."

Faculty members at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign say they have been shut out of a report on the university's nickname and its use of Chief Illiniwek, portrayed by a student who dons buckskins, paints his face blue and orange, and dances during the halftimes of football and basketball games. In June 2004 the Board of Trustees called for a "consensus conclusion" on the use of the mascot that would be acceptable to a majority of alumni, students, and faculty members.

In its report, Illinois did not explore the issues in any depth, says Stephen J. Kaufman, a professor of cell biology who is an outspoken critic of the mascot's continued use. "The report dodges and dances around many of the NCAA's questions" and shows that university administrators lack the courage to take a stand, he says in an interview. He points to the recent decision of the president of Marquette University to turn down an offer of $2-million from two trustees -- and resist subsequent pressure from like-minded alumni -- to restore a retired American Indian nickname (*The Chronicle,* June 18, 2004). Perhaps the NCAA will have similar conviction, Mr. Kaufman says.

Supporters of the use of Chief Illiniwek think doing away with the symbol would have a negative impact on their university. Howard Wakeland is an associate dean emeritus of engineering and president of the Honor the Chief Society, a nonprofit group with more than 1,000 members, whose goal is to keep Chief Illiniwek a part of university life. He says, "It really does something for the esprit de corps."

'True' Braves

Amid such controversies, the University of North Carolina at Pembroke stands out as an unusual case. Founded in part by Lumbee Tribe members in 1887, the institution enrolled only American Indians until the 1950s. The student body remains more than one-fifth American Indian.

In its report, Pembroke cites widespread local support on the campus and among the local tribes for its "Braves" nickname. Jimmy Goings, chief of the Lumbees and a Pembroke graduate, calls the founding of the university "one of the greatest accomplishments of our people."

Zoe W. Locklear, a Lumbee who is interim dean of the School of Education, heard that message. "To borrow a popular line from a television show," she says "the tribe has spoken."

There are a few dissenters, as illustrated by a survey the college conducted for its official report. Around 7 percent of more than 1,300 respondents, including those on campus, alumni, and local residents said they were not in favor of continuing to use the nickname and logo. In 1991 Pembroke did respond to criticism from American Indian tribes and replaced its "Braves" mascot, a student who dressed up in an American Indian outfit, with a red-tailed hawk.

Vernon Bellecourt, director of the National Coalition on Racism in Sports and the Media, which opposes the use of American Indian mascots, says he respects Pembroke's right as an American Indian institution to choose its own name. Nevertheless, he hopes that it will replace the nickname to set an example for other colleges and "provide leadership on this issue."

Then there is the case of the University of Hawaii-Manoa, which found its "Warriors" nickname specified for inclusion by the NCAA. As a spokeswoman explained, the nickname refers to indigenous people from Hawaii, not American Indians. The university will file a report, although it missed the May 1 deadline.

Limited Options

The NCAA has often been skittish about wading into intracampus debates, including this one. The association's Committee on Sportsmanship and Ethical Conduct urged all colleges to stop using American Indian nicknames in 2002 but said it recognizes that controversies over nicknames "may be addressed most effectively by the individual institution, its community, and conference, rather than at the national level."

Both Florida State and North Dakota quote that passage in their reports. Philip A. Harmeson, senior associate to the president of North Dakota, who wrote the university's report, was less subtle in the local *Grand Forks Herald* on May 1: "The NCAA does not have the authority to order a school to use, or not use, a particular name, or mascot," he said. He did not elaborate in an interview with *The Chronicle.*

In the interim report it filed in 2002, the NCAA's minority-interests committee, which comprises 15 college presidents, athletics directors, and other officials, and is chaired by Robert C. Vowels Jr., commissioner of the Southwestern Athletic Conference, says there are a number of penalties that it can recommend to the Executive Committee.

In 2002 the NCAA forbade championship events from taking place in South Carolina and Mississippi because of those states' continuing use of the Confederate battle flag. Those bans remain in effect.

Apart from attempting an outright ban on American Indian nicknames and mascots, the NCAA could suggest that colleges that decline to give up such imagery be barred from postseason tournaments, or be prevented from bringing their mascots to such games, or be fined.

"It's tough to tell" what will happen, says Mr. Jackson.

If the NCAA does nothing, many colleges will be left to respond to the opinions of deep-pocketed alumni who treasure the tradition of Indian nicknames at their alma maters. Southeastern Oklahoma State University emphasizes that point in its report.

"The complete elimination of Savages as a nickname ... is judged to be a highly value-laden process that would be emotionally charged and would immediately create a severance or disconnect with many alumni," it says. "The immediate consequences would be very costly to the university in terms of fund-raising activities with sports-minded alumni."

But Richard D. Little, senior director of communications at Miami University, offers some surprising empirical evidence. In 1996 the Ohio institution retired its "Redskins" nickname in favor of "Red Hawks." Before the decision was made, many alumni raised protests and threatened to permanently withhold donations.

The year after the name change, the university had the largest fund-raising response in its history.

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