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Culturally Insensitive Athletic Mascots

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Culturally Insensitive Athletic Mascots: Do Future Leaders in Sport Care?

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Abstract

Since the passage of the 1964 US Civil Rights Act, insensitive cultural imagery has received ever-increasing scrutiny and opposition, thus many US universities have reconsidered their usage of culturally insensitive athletic mascots (CIAM). A primary goal of this article was to present information on the adoption, evolution, opposition, and, in most cases, transition away from CIAM. Regarding the historic usage and evolution of specific CIAM's, this article will provide a detailed examination of Chief Illiniwek (University of Illinois), Colonel Reb (University of Mississippi), and The Fighting Souix (University of North Dakota).

Another goal was to explore the opinions of traditional-age college students in academic majors related to sport leadership. In order to explore this topic, a survey (N = 142) was conducted regarding sport science student reactions to graphic images of CIAM. This survey was conducted to examine the potential effect of Color Blind Racial Ideology (CBRI) regarding CIAM. These findings provide support to the theory that future sport leaders also tend to exhibit CBRI related to school-based athletic mascots where dominant ethnic group perspectives have been the traditional viewpoint.

Introduction:

Over the past thirty years, US universities have faced ever-increasing pressure to drop what many perceive as culturally insensitive athletic mascots (CIAM). The most frequently targeted mascots have been associated with American Indian imagery, but other mascots, such as the use of “lady” for women’s teams, have also been identified as being insensitive and/or inappropriate imagery. Pressure to address culturally insensitive imagery was initially fueled by the passage of Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act which established federal regulations providing that “no recipient (of federal funding) can cause or allow a racially hostile environment (Bacca, 2004, p. 73).” The Office of Civil Rights subsequently established the standard for a violation of this act as “any environment that is severe enough to adversely affect the enjoyment (for at least one individual) of some aspect of an educational program (Bacca, 2004, p. 74).” With over 1,400 US educational institutions using CIAM based upon American Indian symbols, major public universities have been the primary targets of complaints due to their high degree of regional, national, or international visibility (King, 2004, p. 3). Figure 1 (below) provides information on some of the notable changes in CIAM’s since 1990:

Figure 1. Notable Changes in Culturally Insensitive University Athletic Mascots since 1990

University	Year	Former Mascot	New Mascot
Saint Mary’s University	1990	Redmen	Cardinals
Eastern Michigan university	1991	Hurons	Eagles
Marquette University	1994	Warriors	Golden Eagles
St. John’s University	1995	Redmen	Red Storm
University of Kentucky	1995	Lady Kats	Wildcats (for all teams)
Miami University	1997	Redskins	Red Hawks
New Mexico State University	2000	Road Runners (women only)	Aggies (for all teams)
Colgate University	2001	Red Raiders	Raiders
Quinnipiac University	2002	Braves	Bobcats
University of the Cumberlands	2005	Patriots	Indians
Indiana University of Pennsylvania	2006	Indians	Crimson Hawks
Southeastern Oklahoma State U.	2006	Savages	Savage Storm
University of Louisiana-Monroe	2006	Indians	Red Hawks
Arkansas State University	2008	Indians	Red Wolves
University of Rio Grande	2008	Redmen/Redwomen	Red Storm
Washburn University	2013	Lady Braves	Ichabods (for all teams)

NOTE: 19 universities were (are) involved in an appeal process with the NCAA to keep their current mascot.

Source: Staurowsky, E. (2007)

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Sport sociologists and racial theorists have presented theories to explain the impact of CIAM on both dominant ethnic groups and ethnic minority populations. Farnell (2004) proposed that the use of CIAM creates “White Public Space”, founded upon ethnification and racialization, within which Whites are “invisibly normal” and racialized populations are “visibly marginal”. King (2004, p. 5) further stated that the specific use of American Indian mascots “claims the right to assess the propriety, acceptability, and authenticity (of American Indian populations) in White terms (and) in White-centered, White-identified, and White-dominated contexts.” This White Public Space is a somewhat abstract concept, but it was clearly described by Grant Teaff (former football coach at McMurry University) when he stated (Staurowsky, 2007, p. 64) that “You know, we are all Indian. At least those of us from McMurry anyway. We are all McMurry Indians, and we always will be.”

The Impact of Culturally Insensitive Imagery

This section will address the impact of CIAM usage on both ethnic minority and ethnic majority populations. The impact of culturally insensitive imagery is most often gradual and subliminal in nature. Neville, et al (2011, p. 238) found that constant exposure to stereotyped American Indian images (such as the Cleveland Indians usage of Chief Wahoo and The University of Illinois usage of Chief Illiniwek) were related to “negative psychosocial outcomes including lower self-esteem and community worth” among American Indian students. Staurowsky (2007) added that with 40% of American Indian students dropping out of High School, there may be serious side-effects of institutionalized, negative cultural imagery of American Indian populations. Neville et al (2011, p. 238) reported that usage of negative cultural imagery also “creates a hostile learning environment for those attending schools with racialized mascots.”

Usage of CIAM can also affect the mindset of youth within dominant ethnic populations as well. Bacca (2004, p. 72) proposed that members of dominant ethnic populations should “imagine a t-shirt or jacket with a pejorative against any other race or ethnic group – nigger, wop, kike, slope, spic – being allowed at a workplace or school” and added “yet some public schools use the term redskin as an official mascot and display it proudly on uniforms.” One primary outcome of CIAM usage is what Neville, et al (2011, p. 236) have described as Color Blind Racial Ideology (CBRI). They described CBRI as “the belief that race and racism are now irrelevant for the contemporary movement.”

CIAM’s are not necessarily limited to graphic images alone. The ritualistic behaviors of “human mascots” also can portray stereotypical characteristics of minority populations. To further investigate this phenomenon, they surveyed 389 University of Illinois students about the use of the Chief Illiniwek symbol and his pre-game dance. This pre-game dance ritual was described by Farnell (2004, p. 32) as a “White, male, student dressed and painted as an Indian who choreographs colonialism in every step of his cavorting fancy dance.” Of the students surveyed, 53% were strongly in support of

keeping “The Chief”; 25% were opposed to his usage; and 22% didn’t appear to care one way or the other. Regarding the usage of Colonel Reb (at the University of Mississippi), a campus poll taken during the fall of 2003 indicated that 94% of students wanted to keep “The Colonel” as the school’s athletic mascot despite what he may represent to any ethnic minority population. It may be that the current generation of traditional-aged college students views civil rights as a battle that has already been won and thus have adopted CBRI as a “path of least resistance”.

The counter-argument to replacing CIAM’s is most commonly based upon the ethnic majority’s stereotypical views of ethnic minority populations. Steinfeldt and Wong (2010, p. 110) describe this phenomenon as a “consumer blind spot within the dominant White culture” which “inhibits the ability of many Americans to identify the potential for these images to be perceived as racist and offensive.” Neville et al (2011, p. 237) described the current situation (in the US) as one in which the prevalent ideology does not necessarily align with reality. They proposed that many young people feel that they exist in an “ideal world (where) it would be desirable if race did not matter and that all were treated equally as human beings” when (in reality) “the US is a racially stratified society in which racism exists on many levels including individual and institutional”.

History and Evolution of Typical Culturally Insensitive Athletic Mascots

This section provides information related to the history and evolution of three highly visible and traditional CIAM’s. To fully appreciate the significance of CIAM it is necessary to explore examples of their history and evolution. During the 1920s and 1930s, many US colleges and universities playfully adopted what we view now as CIAM (King, 2004; Newman, 2007; Steinfeldt, et al, 2010). Some, such as the University of Illinois, with Chief Illiniwek, claimed to honor the American Indian Tribe that once thrived within their geographic region, while others, such as the University of Mississippi with Colonel Reb, harkened back to what they (ethnic majority populations) viewed to be regional heritage and tradition. These symbols of the power of the White majority were largely unchallenged during pre & post World War II eras, and many more specific “layers” of tradition were added as years went by. For instance, Colonel Reb began to wear a Confederate Army uniform most often accompanied by the Dixie anthem and the Confederate flag (Newman, 2007). The University of Illinois created an elaborate, traditional pre-game dance during which Chief Illiniwek was supposedly honoring “Illini tribal heritage and traditions” (Farnell, 2004). Figure 2 (below) provides detailed information on the creation, symbolism, opposition to, and current status of three typical university CIAM’s:

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Figure 2. History and Evolution of Three Culturally Insensitive Athletic Mascots

Phase Time Period/Evolutionary Process

Creation:	1926	Chief Illiniwek	Mascot chosen and developed by a former Boy Scout attending University of Illinois
	1936	Colonel Reb	University of Mississippi students drop “The Flood” and select “Colonel Reb”
	1930	Fighting Souix	University of North Dakota students drop “Flickertails” and select “Fighting Souix”
Symbolism:			
Chief Illiniwek:	Primarily focused upon ceremonial headdress logo and pre-game “Chief Dance” ritual		
Colonel Reb:	Associated with Confederate flag, Dixie anthem, Southern plantations, and terms such as “Old South”, “Rebels”, “Old Massas”, “General Nat”, “Johnny Reb”, and “Ole Miss”		
Fighting Souix:	Mascot popularized for being “warlike” and known for exterminating bison (mascot for rival University of North Dakota)		
Opposition:			
Chief Illiniwek:	Mascot and dance reported to be inauthentic in honoring Illini tribal traditions (1990), opposed by NCAA in 2005, dance last performed on campus in 2007		
Colonel Reb:	Barred from wearing Confederate uniform in 1979, use of Confederate flags in stadium/arena prohibited in 1997, plan to replace Colonel Reb announced by University officials in 2003		
Fighting Souix:	Usage opposed by tribal leaders, American Indian UND student groups, and the NCAA (1969 to 2005)		
Current Status:			
Chief Illiniwek:	Mascot, logo, and dance dropped by the University of Illinois; nickname “Illini” still utilized		
Colonel Reb:	Mascot dropped and replaced by “Rebel the Black Bear”; nickname “Rebels” still utilized		
Fighting Souix:	Still appealing the NCAA mandate to discontinue usage of mascot and nickname		

Sources: Farnell, B. (2004); King, C.R. (2004); Newmann, J.I. (2007); Steinfeldt, J.A, Kaladow, J.K., Pagano, L.A., & Steinfeldt, M.C. (2010)

As the US Civil Rights movement of the 1960s progressed, the collective voice of ethnic minority populations, and the scrutiny of cultural imagery, increased. Subsequently, institutions such as Stanford University (Indians to Cardinals then Cardinal) and Eastern Michigan University (Hurons to Eagles) chose to drop mascots based upon ethnification and/or racialization. However, most institutions have resisted external and internal pressure for change.

A typical resistance movement (to the usage of a CIAM) occurred on the University of North Dakota campus during 1969. The relatively small population of American Indian students (3% of enrolled students) formed the UND Indian Association to voice their opposition to the institutional representation of their tribes/nations (Steinfeldt, et al, 2010). Since that time over 21 additional organizations have submitted resolutions asking UND to discontinue their use of their Fighting Souix nickname and mascot (Steinfeldt, et al, 2010). Finally, in 2005, the NCAA mandated that nineteen colleges and universities must discontinue their use of their Native American themed mascots or face future sanctions (Staurowsky, 2007).

Transitioning away from Culturally Insensitive Imagery

This section will provide information related to the recent pressure to move away from CIAM's. Prior to the 2005 NCAA mandate, many universities were already beginning a gradual transition process away from CIAM. Newman (2007) reported that in 1979 Colonel Reb discontinued wearing the Confederate Army uniform, and in 1997 the University of Mississippi administration barred Confederate flags from intercollegiate athletic venues. Farnell (2004) reported that in 1990 the University of Illinois eventually disclosed that Chief Illiniwek and his pre-game dance were inauthentic regarding the history and traditions of the Illini Tribe. Many of these changes reflected changing societal norms related to insensitive cultural imagery. Former University of Mississippi football coach Steve Sloan commented (Newman, 2007, p. 324) that the institutional usage of racialized imagery and traditions increasingly made recruiting a more difficult process, and that he had to spend "significant time explaining why the racial symbols aren't important or were innocent."

Resistance to change is most often based upon the perception of being forced to discontinue what most view to be the history and traditions of their university. However, such changes are also a significant economic issue. For instance, Old Miss-Colonel Reb themed merchandise (in 2005) generated nearly \$4 million annually for the University of Mississippi (Newman, 2007). Most often, universities wanting to transition away from CIAM will hire consulting and/or graphic design firms to assist with this controversial and complex process.

The Transition Process Away from CIAM's

This section describes the transition process (from a specific consultant/graphic designer's perspective) often utilized when a university decides to replace a CIAM. With few exceptions, colleges and universities seek to avoid any situation which upsets stakeholders, who typically are strongly opposed to change. If primary stakeholders (alumni, students, faculty, community, or fans) are fond of the current athletic brand, it will require a very compelling outside force to urge schools to undergo a rebranding process. Examples of three external forces strong enough to prompt a branding change include pressure from ethnic minority rights advocacy groups, governing bodies (such as

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the NCAA, NAIA, state or federal government), or the implications of negative media coverage.

The majority of recent rebranding examples have involved the collegiate usage of Native American nicknames and the ongoing pressure for change originating from certain Native American tribes. Initial tribal pressure encouraged the ACLU and other minority rights advocacy groups to champion the Native American cause to the NCAA. Subsequently, the NCAA responded by limiting (in 1995) the rights of any member college or university utilizing a Native American athletic mascot. Ultimately outside pressure usually becomes a stronger force than the school's fear of upsetting their stakeholders and thus many recent branding processes have been implemented. There are additional marketing forces to be considered that can also encourage (or discourage) the athletic rebranding process. These forces include a reduction in sales of logo retail merchandise, an "out-of-date" logo, inconsistent usage of logos, improper brand messaging, or "incomplete" branding families (for example, the lack of a mascot version for children's clothing).

The process of assisting collegiate client transference from "culturally insensitive" athletic brands to updated and less controversial brands can be quite challenging. Stakeholders usually have developed a very strong historic and emotional bond with collegiate athletic logos, thus asking them to leave behind a beloved and cherished tradition can be very difficult. The process normally involves transitioning an angry, volatile environment into a more supportive environment where stakeholders can develop and embrace the new brand. For this reason, the initial phase typically includes preliminary focus groups which offer the school's stakeholders an opportunity to vent their feelings regarding disappointment and unhappiness and to discuss the need for change. Once focus group participants feel that they have been heard and appreciated, they are most often able to channel their emotions towards a more positive direction, discussing options for possible new nicknames and logos, and focusing on creating a new image that they are comfortable with. Based upon focus group input, numerous options can be developed for the look of the new brand and ultimately brand "finalists" are refined until they are completely satisfactory. The finalists are then shared with primary stakeholders to obtain their input, and the final brand is selected and refined for unveiling to the campus community.

Not all sub-groups of stakeholders react similarly to the re-branding process. In general, current students are much more open to change than alumni since they have not lived as long with their traditional collegiate identity. Alumni (as well as members of the local or regional community) often view themselves as being partially defined by athletic logos and traditions, and thus are much more resistant to change. However, despite their openness to change, students can be less sensitive to the need for change. Many students are very sensitive to the needs and feelings of others, often becoming the strongest of advocates for the disenfranchised, but few have enough life experiences to truly understand what it is like to be a member of a discriminated ethnic minority group. Thus,

color-blind racial ideology is a common barrier to change within this group (Neville et al, 2011; Steinfeldt & Wong, 2010).

The three most important aspects of managing the transition process are the "Three E"s: "emotion", "education" and "evolution". As you would expect, managing the emotional response to the loss of a beloved symbol is crucial. People who feel an attachment to a culturally insensitive symbol are not necessarily racist or insensitive. They see the logo as symbolizing their love for their school and that love overshadows any negative symbolism involved. During the transition process, they have a right to "grieve" the loss of their memories, traditions, and customs as well as the right to be heard. Once they have had a chance to vent their emotional response they can begin to move forward, focusing upon their rational response to the situation at hand.

The next transition step involves educating stakeholders about the reasons for the change. Once the emotional response has been "released", it is much easier for stakeholders to comprehend the cultural issues involved and to accept that change as inevitable. They also can embrace the marketing advantages that are available with a new nickname and logo. At this point they can often begin to generate excitement, focusing on creating the best new brand possible.

Evolution to the new brand is the final key transition component. It is vital that the new branding image is a genuine reflection of the school's history, traditions, character, and personality. The new brand should not be a slick marketing tool focused upon current trends without regard for the history and traditions of the college community. In fact, the best way to ensure that stakeholders will embrace a new brand is to base it upon adored traditions of the school community.

Exploring the Attitudes of Future Sport Leaders

This section provides insight into the views of students and then, more specifically, future sport leaders regarding the usage of CIAM. Along with alumni that have lived with the imagery and traditions of the past, most current students are also very resistant to the process of changing CIAM. A 1997 University of Mississippi campus poll reported that 94% of students surveyed wanted to keep Colonel Reb (Newman, 2007). In a similar study, 389 students were surveyed about their reactions to dropping the Chief Illiniwek imagery and pre-game ritual (Neville, et al, 2011). Of the students surveyed, 53% were supportive of "The Chief" while only 25% felt that his usage should be discontinued. In an online poll of 1,699 respondents, Steinfeldt, Kaladow, Pagano, and Steinfeldt (2010, p. 365) identified the primary objections to dropping Native American-themed mascots. The most frequently reported reason (32%) was that "these people just want attention, (this is) not a legitimate complaint." Other common objections included "we are victims of reverse racism and political correctness" (22%), "this issue is too trivial to get this amount of attention" (14%), and "this costs too much and should not be a priority (8%)."

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Survey of Selected Future Sport Leaders

In order to further examine the reactions of current traditional-age students about CIAM, we developed a “logo-based” mascot survey and administered it to 142 sport science undergraduate students (Exercise Science, HPE, and Sport Management majors) at a small, Midwestern, liberal arts college. This subject sample of sport science students (as opposed to the university “at large”) was selected in order to assess the perspective of students who are required to take courses addressing specific academic areas such as sport history, sport sociology, sport psychology, and sport ethics. It can be assumed that cultural sensitivity and diversity are core concepts to be addressed and that these “future sport leaders” should have become aware of, and sensitive to, issues related to CIAM.

The survey contained the graphic images of seven common athletic mascot images. Three logos were American Indian-themed and one each was associated with nationality/religion, gender, and violence. Students were asked to “rate how culturally insensitive these athletic mascots could seem to any group of people within our (national) society.” A one-to-ten Likert scale was utilized and was labeled as follows: 1 = “not insensitive”, 5 = “moderately insensitive”, 10 = “extremely insensitive”. Results of the survey are presented in Figure 3 (below):

Figure 3.
Athletic Mascot Survey Results (N = 142)

NOTE: Cells
contain mean
± standard
deviation

Gender, Age	"Warriors"	"Bullets"	"Lady Vols "	"Chief Wahoo"	"Colonel Reb"	"Fighting Irish"	"Redskins"	All "1" Ratings
Male, 20.0 ± 1.6	3.58 ± 2.3	2.88 ± 2.3	2.27 ± 1.9	4.69 ± 2.6	3.75 ± 2.7	3.53 ± 2.6	5.56 ± 2.8	n = 6 (6.3%)
Female, 20.6 ± 3.0	3.43 ± 1.9	2.26 ± 2.0	2.48 ± 1.8	4.10 ± 2.3	3.62 ± 2.1	3.79 ± 2.4	4.57 ± 2.8	n = 6 (13.0%)
Rating greater than "5"; n (%)	33 (23.2%)	15 (10.6%)	14 (9.9%)	41 (29.0%)	31 (22.0%)	35 (24.6%)	61 (43.0%)	

Group-mean scores on the logo survey revealed that most students did not react strongly to any of the athletic logos. Additionally, mean scores were very similar between male and female students, even for the single, gender-related logo. Students reacted most strongly to the American Indian-themed logos utilizing Chief Wahoo and the “Redskin” image. It is also interesting to note that twelve students (8.4%) rated each

logo as a 1.0 indicating that they were completely unconcerned with any movement to revise (or eliminate) CIAM.

Conclusion

The findings of our survey agree with those presented by Steinfeldt & Wong (2010) and Neville, et al. (2011) indicating that many traditional-age college students display a high degree of Color Blind Racial Ideology (CBRI) when confronted with culturally insensitive imagery. It may be that issues confronted during the US Civil Rights movement are no longer perceived as “contemporary” by traditional-age college students. Additionally, young people may view these historic confrontations as having already been won and no longer societal priorities. However, Neville et al. (2011, p. 237) reported that greater levels of CBRI are associated with “less tolerant racial and social beliefs among students.” The CBRI impact on the ethnic majority population, combined with the negative influences on ethnic minority youth being portrayed by mascots, needs to be recognized and discussed within our educational systems. In the academic setting of undergraduate sport science programs, we propose four basic steps to address these issues:

1) First-year undergraduates need to understand the significance of cultural imagery in US sport (and society in general) as well as the processes of ethnification and racialization. Our society is full of compelling case studies within which we could teach about the history, evolution, and impact of culturally insensitive athletic mascots. These outcomes would fit well within introductory-level history, philosophy, and principles courses.

2) Upper-level undergraduate students should understand and appreciate the concepts of White Space and Color Blind Racial Ideology. These social theories would serve as excellent debate topics within any course that addresses the areas of sport sociology, sport history, sport psychology, or sport ethics.

3) Students in organization and administration courses, or sport law courses, should explore legislation related to the use of culturally insensitive imagery. Researching the background of these policies would provide students with a more comprehensive perspective that takes into account the impact of cultural imagery on ethnic minority populations.

4) Finally, when students are placed in off-campus settings for field-experiences or internships, they should discuss this topic with professionals that have dealt with it in the “real-world”. These open discussions could produce valuable insights that would be transferable to working with any target population differing from those related to one’s individual background and experiences.

In summary, ongoing efforts are needed to reduce the usage of culturally insensitive imagery in the area of sport. However, these changes should not only occur solely as a result of governmental, or institutional, mandates, they should also be supported through learning activities that allow undergraduate students to gain a more open and comprehensive appreciation of the overall issue.

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