

ESSAY 10

"It's Just a Mascot!"

The Dark Side of Sports Symbols¹

D. Stanley Eitzen
Colorado State University

Maxine Baca Zinn
Michigan State University

D. Stanley Eitzen, professor emeritus of sociology at Colorado State University, earned his PhD at the University of Kansas. Although he is well known for his scholarship on homelessness, poverty, social inequality, power, family, and criminology, he is best known for his contributions to the sociology of sport. In 1996, he was selected a Sports Ethics Fellow at the Institute for International Sport. His books on sport include: *Fair and Foul* (5th ed.; Rowman and Littlefield, 2012); *Sociology of North American Sport* (9th ed., co-authored with George H. Sage; Oxford University Press, 2013); and *Sport in Contemporary Society* (10th ed.; Oxford University Press, 2014).

Maxine Baca Zinn is professor emerita in the Department of Sociology at Michigan State University. She received her PhD in sociology from the University of Oregon. Her books include *Women of Color in U.S. Society* (with Bonnie Thornton Dill) and *Gender Through the Prism of Difference* (with Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Michael Messner). She is coauthor (with D. Stanley Eitzen) of *Social Problems and Diversity in Families*, both of which won McGuffey Awards for excellence over multiple editions from the Text and Academic Authors Association, and *Globalization: The Transformation of Social Worlds*.

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The teams that played in the 1995 World Series were the Atlanta Braves and Cleveland Indians. Inside Atlanta Fulton County Stadium and Jacobs Field, the Braves' fans did the "tomahawk chop" and enthusiastically shouted "Indian" chants. Similarly, the fans of the Indians, united behind their symbol, Chief Wahoo, waved fake tomahawks and wore "war paint" and other pseudo-Native American symbols. Outside these stadiums, Native American activists carried signs in protest of the inappropriate use of their symbols by Anglos. (In less politically correct times, there was no such uproar when these same teams met in the 1948 World Series.)

A group's symbols serve two fundamental purposes—they bind together the individual members and separate one group from another. Each of the thousands of street gangs in the United States, for example, has a group identity that is displayed in its names, code words, gestures, distinctive clothing, and colors. The symbols of these gangs promote solidarity and set them apart from rivals.

Using symbols to achieve solidarity and community is common in American schools. Students, former students, faculty members, and others who identify with the institution adopt nicknames for its athletic teams, display the school colors, wave the school banner, wear special clothing and jewelry, and engage in ritual chants and songs.

A school's nickname is much more than a tag or a label. It conveys, symbolically, the characteristics and attributes that define the institution. In an important way, the symbols represent the institution's self-concept. Schools may have names that signify their ethnic heritage (e.g., the Bethany College Swedes), state history (University of Oklahoma Sooners), religion (Oklahoma Baptist College Prophets), or founder (Whittier College Poets). Most, though, utilize symbols of aggression and ferocity for their athletic teams—birds such as hawks, animals such as bulldogs, human categories such as pirates, and even the otherworldly such as devils (Franks, 1982; Fuller & Manning, 1987).

Although school names and other symbols evoke strong emotions of solidarity among followers, there is also a potential dark side to their use. The names, mascots, logos, and flags chosen may be derogatory to some group. The symbols may dismiss, differentiate, demean, and trivialize marginalized groups such as African Americans, Native Americans, and women. Thus, they serve to maintain the dominant status of powerful groups and subordinate those categorized as *others*. That may not have been the intent of those who decided on the names and mascots for a particular school, but their use diminishes these others, retaining the racial and gender inequities found in society. School symbols as used in sports, then, have power not only to maintain in-group solidarity, but to separate the in-group from the out-group and perpetuate the hierarchy between them.

Symbols of the Confederacy

At Nathan Bedford Forrest High School in Jacksonville, Florida, young African American athletes wear the Confederate Army's colors on their uniforms and call themselves the Rebels. The school they play for is named after the slave-trading Confederate general who became the original grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan.

Within the neo-Confederate culture found in parts of the South, certain symbols such as the Rebel battle flag and the singing of "Dixie" are zealously promoted

the Atlanta Braves and Jacobson Field, the school actually shouted "Indian" as its symbol, Chief Wahoo, a pseudo-Native American mascot, carried signs in protest during politically correct times, like the 1948 World Series.) They bind together the school's identity. Each of the thousands of students wears a school identity that is distinctive, and colors. The symbols from rivals are common in American sports who identify with the school colors, wave the school colors, and sing the school chants and songs. In many ways, symbolically, the school is an important way, the symbols that signify their identity (University of Oklahoma and Whittier College) and identity for their athletic categories such as pirates, and Manning, 1987). The emotions of solidarity are used. The names, mascots, and symbols may be used by groups such as African American students to maintain the dominance of the school. That names and mascots for sports, then, have the in-group from

(Britt, 1996). These symbols have two distinct meanings—one that promotes the South's heritage and another that symbolizes slavery, racial separation, and hate.

In 1948, the so-called Dixiecrats, rebelling against a strong civil rights plank in the Democratic platform, walked out of the party's convention. That year, the University of Mississippi adopted the Rebel flag, designated "Dixie" as the school's fight song, and introduced a mascot named Colonel Reb, a caricature of an Old South plantation owner. In 1962, James Meredith, despite the strong opposition of Governor Ross Barnett and other White leaders in the state, became the first Black student at the school. There were demonstrations at that time in support of segregation. Infused in these demonstrations was the showing of the Rebel flag and the singing of "Dixie" as symbols of defiance by the supporters of segregation (Edelson, 1991; Lederman, 1996; Nack, 1997).

Over the ensuing years, the use of these symbols at the University of Mississippi has caused considerable debate. On the one hand, they represented the state's heritage and as such were a source of pride, inspiration, and unity among its citizens. The opposing position was that these symbols represented a history of oppression against African Americans, noting that the Rebel flag was also a prominent symbol of the Ku Klux Klan. Opponents argued further that, since almost one third of Mississippians are African Americans, the flagship university of that state should not use symbols that recall the degradation and demeaning of their ancestors. Is it proper, they ask, to use the key symbol of the Confederacy and African American enslavement as a rallying symbol for the University of Mississippi's sports teams—teams composed of Whites and Blacks?

As a compromise, in 1983, 21 years after the University of Mississippi integrated, its chancellor ruled that the Rebel flag was no longer the official banner for the school. Chancellor Porter L. Fortune Jr. made it clear, however, that students would have the right to wave the flag at football games, and that they have done. Sports teams' names such as the Rebels as well as mascots like Colonel Reb and songs such as "Dixie" have continued as official school symbols.

The debate still rages. Charles W. Eagles, a University of Mississippi history professor, sums up the ongoing controversy:

For some of us—those who believe in the University of Mississippi—the symbols prevent the university from being everything it can be. Others—those that are faithful to Ole Miss [the traditionalists]—think that if you took the symbols away, there wouldn't be anything there. The symbols are seen as a real burden for the university. But they're the backbone of Ole Miss. (Lederman, 1996, p. 132)

This debate demonstrates vividly the power of symbols, not only to unite or divide, but the hold they have on people, as seen in their resistance to change and in the organized efforts to remove those symbols interpreted as negative.

Native American Symbols

The use of Native American names such as *Redmen*, *Fighting Sioux*, *Utes*, and even *Savages* is common in high schools, community colleges, colleges, and universities.

Florida, young African American students wear their uniforms and call them "Redmen" after the slave-trading company of the Ku Klux Klan. In the South, certain symbols are zealously promoted

Many professional teams have also adopted Native American names—in baseball, the Atlanta Braves and Cleveland Indians; in football, the Washington Redskins and the Kansas City Chiefs; in basketball, the Golden State Warriors; and in hockey, the Chicago Blackhawks.

Defenders of Native American names, logos, and mascots argue that their use is a tribute to the indigenous peoples. Native Americans, the argument goes, are portrayed as brave, resourceful, and strong. Native American names were chosen for sports teams precisely because they represent these positive traits.

Other defenders claim that their use is no different from those names and mascots that represent other ethnic groups such as the *Irish*, *Vikings*, or *Norse*. Because members of these ethnic groups accept the use of their names, Native Americans should also be proud of this recognition of their heritage, they maintain.

However, many Native Americans do object to their symbols being used by athletic teams. Since the early 1970s, individuals and organizations—such as the American Indian Movement (AIM)—have sought to eliminate the use of Native American names, mascots, and logos by sports teams. They use several key arguments, foremost among them being racial stereotyping. Names such as *Indian*, *Brave*, and *Chiefs* are not inherently offensive, but some names, logos, and mascots project a violent caricature of Native Americans (“scalpers,” “savages”). Teams that use American Indian names commonly employ the tomahawk chop, war paint, and mascots dressed as Native Americans. This depiction of Native Americans as bloodthirsty warriors distorts history, since Whites invaded Indian lands, oppressed native peoples, and even employed and justified a policy of genocide toward them.

Some mascots are especially demeaning to Native Americans. Chief Wahoo of the Cleveland Indians is described by sportswriter Rick Telander as “the red-faced, big-nosed, grinning, drywall-toothed moron who graces the peak of every Cleveland Indians cap.” Is such a caricature appropriate? Clyde Bellecourt, national director of AIM, summarizes the complaints:

If you look up the word “redskin” in both the Webster’s and Random House dictionaries, you’ll find the word is defined as being offensive. Can you imagine if they called them the Washington Jews and the team mascot was a rabbi leading them in [the song] “Hava Nagila,” fans in the stands wearing yarmulkes and waving little sponge torahs? The word “Indian” isn’t offensive “Brave” isn’t offensive, but it’s the behavior that accompanies all of this that’s offensive. The rubber tomahawks. The chicken-feather headdresses. People wearing war paint and making these ridiculous war whoops with a tomahawk in one hand and a beer in the other. All of these things have significant meaning for us. And the psychological impact it has, especially on our youth, is devastating. (Kravitz, 1992, p. 39)

Another problem is the imitation or misuse of symbols that have religious significance to some Native American peoples. Utilizing dances, chants, drummings, and other rituals at sporting events clearly tends to trivialize their meaning.

Also problematic is the homogenization of American Indian cultures. Native Americans are portrayed uniformly, disregarding the sometimes enormous differences among the tribes. Thus, through the use of Indian names and mascots,

society defines who Native Americans are instead of allowing them to determine how society thinks of them.

A few colleges and universities—such as Stanford, Siena, Miami of Ohio, Dartmouth, and St. John's—have taken these objections seriously and changed their names and mascots. Most high schools and colleges, though, resist such a change. Ironically, they insist on retaining the Native American symbols even though those schools do not have an American Indian heritage or significant Native American student representation. The members of these schools and their constituencies insist on retaining their Native American names because they are part of their collective identities. This allegiance to their school symbols seems to have higher priority than insensitivity to the negative consequences produced by inappropriate depictions of Native Americans.

Sexist Names

Many studies have shown the varied ways in which language acts in the defining, deprecation, and exclusion of women (Eitzen & Baca Zinn, 1989, 1993; Henley, 1987; Thorne, Kramarae, & Henley, 1985). Names do this, too. Naming a women's and men's athletic team is not a neutral process. The names chosen often are badges of femininity and masculinity, hence of inferiority and superiority. To the degree that this occurs, the names of women's and men's athletic teams reinforce a basic element of social structure: gender division and hierarchy. Team names reflect this division as well as the asymmetry that is associated with it. Despite advances made by women in sports since the implementation of Title IX in 1971, widespread naming practices continue to mark female athletes as unusual, aberrant, or invisible.

We examined the names and accompanying logos and mascots of sports teams for females and males at 1,185 coeducational four-year colleges and universities. We identified eight gender-linked practices associated with names and/or logos that diminished and trivialized women:

- *Physical markers.* One common naming practice emphasizes the physical appearance of women, such as the Angelo State Rambelles. As Casey Miller and Kate Swift argue in *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing*, this practice is sexist because the "emphasis on the physical characteristics of women is offensive in contexts where men are described in terms of achievement" (Miller & Swift, 1980, p. 87).
- *The use of girl or gal* stresses the presumed immaturity and irresponsibility of women, such as the Elon College Golden Girls. As Miller and Swift note, "Just as 'boy' can be blatantly offensive to minority men, so 'girl' can have comparable patronizing and demeaning implications for women" (Miller & Swift, 1980, p. 71).
- *Feminine suffixes.* This is a popular form of sexual differentiation found in the names of athletic, social, and women's groups. The practice not only

marks women, it denotes a feminine derivative by establishing a female negative trivial category. The devaluation is accomplished by tagging words with feminine suffixes like "ette." At Dillard University, for example, the men's team is the Blue Devils; the women's team, the Devilettes.

- *Lady.* This label has several meanings that demean women as athletes. "Lady," according to Miller and Swift, is used to "evoke a standard of propriety, correct behavior, and elegance" (Miller & Swift, 1980, p. 72), characteristics that are decidedly unathletic. Similarly, *lady* carries overtones recalling the age of chivalry. As Robin Lakoff (1975) maintains in *Language and Women's Place*, "This makes the term seem polite at first, but we must also remember that these implications are perilous: they suggest that a 'lady' is helpless, and cannot do things for herself" (Miller & Swift, 1980, p. 87). The use of *lady* for women's teams is common (e.g., the University of Florida Lady Gators). At Washington and Jefferson College, the men are Presidents and the women are First Ladies, which clearly marks the status of women's teams as inferior to that of the men.
- *Male as a false generic.* This practice assumes that the masculine in the language, word, or name choice is the norm, while ignoring the feminine altogether. Miller and Swift define this procedure as "terms used of a class or group that are not applicable to all members" (Miller & Swift, 1980, p. 9). The use of "mankind" to encompass both sexes has its parallel among men's and women's athletic teams that have the same name, for example, the Rams (Colorado State University) or the Hokies at Virginia Tech (a "hokie" is a castrated turkey). In *Man Made Language*, Dale Spender has called the practice of treating the masculine as the norm as "one of the most pervasive and pernicious rules that has been encoded" (Spender, 1980, p. 3). Its consequence is to make women invisible as well as secondary to men, since they are robbed of a separate identity.
- *Male name with a female modifier.* This practice applies the feminine to a name that usually denotes a male, giving females lower status. Examples among sports teams are the Lady Friars of Providence College and the Lady Gamecocks of the University of South Carolina (a "gamecock" is a fighting rooster). As we note in *Fair and Foul: Beyond the Myths and Paradoxes of Sport*, using such oxymorons "reflects role conflict and contributes to the lack of acceptance of women's sport" (Fuller & Manning, 1987, p. 64).
- *Double gender marking.* This occurs when the name for the women's team is a diminutive of the men's team name combined with *belle*, *lady*, or other feminine modifier. For example, at the University of Kentucky, the men's teams are the Wildcats and the women's teams are the Lady Kats. Compounding the feminine intensifies women's secondary status. In his 1986 book, *Grammar and Gender*, Dennis Baron argues that double gender marking occurs "perhaps to underline the inappropriateness or rarity of the feminine noun or to emphasize its negativity" (p. 115).
- *Male/female, paired polarity.* Women's and men's teams can be assigned names that represent a female/male opposition. When this occurs, the names of the men's teams embody competitiveness and other positive traits

usually associated with sport, whereas the names for women's teams are lighthearted or cute. Successful athletes are believed to embody such traits as courage, bravura, boldness, self-confidence, and aggression. When the names given men's teams imply these traits, but those for women's teams suggest that females are playful and cuddly, women are trivialized and de-athleticized. For instance, the Mercer University men's teams are the Bears and the women are the Teddy Bears; at Fort Valley State College, the men's teams are the Wildcats and the women's teams are the Wildkittens.

Another grouping occurs when names that could be included in one of the above categories also incorporate race. This especially occurs with teams that adopt Native American symbols. The men's teams at Southeastern Oklahoma State University are the Savages and the women's teams are the Savagettes, utilizing the diminutive feminine suffix combined with a negative stereotype for the racial category. Similarly, at Montclair State College, the men are the Indians and the women are the Squaws. The word *squaw* also refers to a woman's pelvic area and means prostitute in some native languages. Vernon Bellecourt of the American Indian Movement says, "The issue itself is clear . . . The word 'squaw' has got to go in all its forms. It's demeaning and degrading to Indian women and all women" (Tomas, 1997, p. 11).

Our survey found that slightly over half of U.S. colleges and universities have sexist names, logos, or both for their athletic teams. Thus, the identity symbols for athletic teams at those schools contribute to the maintenance of male dominance within college sports. Since the traditional masculine gender role matches most athletic qualities better than the traditional feminine gender role, the images and symbols are male. Women do not fit into this scheme. They are "others," even when they do participate. Their team names and logos tend to perpetuate and strengthen the image of female inferiority by making them secondary, invisible, trivial, or unathletic.

Resistance to Change

It is important to note that many schools do not have team names, mascots, and logos that are racist or sexist. They use race- and gender-neutral names such as Bears, Eagles, Seagulls, Saints, or Blue Streaks. Schools that currently employ racist or sexist names could change to neutral ones that embody the traits desired in athletic teams such as courage, strength, and aggressiveness. For some, such a change would be relatively easy—dropping the use of *lady* or *ette* as modifiers, for example. Teams with Native American or male names (stags, rams, hokies, centaurs) must adopt a new name or eliminate the racism or sexism that is inherent in their present names. A few schools have done so over the past 15 years or so. Most schools, however, resist changing names with passion because a name change negates the school's traditions.

Tradition, above all, is always a barrier to change. Students, alumni, faculty, and athletes become accustomed to a particular name for their university and its athletic

teams, and it seems "natural." This is the argument made on behalf of the many teams that continue to use American Indian names and symbols for their teams despite the objections of Native Americans. So, too, with names that are sexist. Even if a school team name has the force of tradition, is it justified to continue using that name if it is racist or sexist? If a sexist team name reinforces and socializes sexist thinking, however subtly, it should be changed. If not, the institution is publicly sexist.

Many see the naming issue as trivial. It is not trivial, though, to the group being demeaned, degraded, and trivialized. Some progressives argue that there are more important issues to address than changing racist or sexist names of athletic teams. This illustrates the contradiction that the naming of teams is at once trivial and important. For African Americans, whether the University of Mississippi fans sing "Dixie" and wave the Confederate flag is not as important as ending discrimination and obtaining good jobs. Similarly, for Native Americans, the derogatory use of their heritage surrounding athletic contests is relatively unimportant compared to raising their standard of living. For women, the sexist naming of athletic teams is not as significant as pay equity, breaking the glass ceiling, or achieving equity with men in athletic departments in resources, scholarships, and media attention.

Faced with a choice among these options, the naming issue would be secondary, but this sets up a false choice. We can work to remove all manifestations of racism and sexism on college campuses. Referring to language and relevant to the women's team names issue as well, the Association for Women in Psychology Ad Hoc Committee on Sexist Language has addressed and refuted the "trivial concern" argument:

The major objection, often even to discussing changing sexist language, is that it is a superficial matter compared with the real physical and economic oppression of women. And indeed, women's total oppression must end; we are not suggesting any diversion of energies from that struggle. We are, however, suggesting that this is an important part of it. (1975, p. 16)

Symbols are extremely compelling in the messages they convey. Their importance is understood when rebellious groups demean or defame symbols of the powerful such as the flag. Names and other symbols have the power to elevate or put down a group. If racist or sexist, they reinforce and, therefore, maintain the secondary status of African Americans, Native Americans, or women through stereotyping, caricature, derogation, trivialization, diminution, or making them invisible. Most of us, however, fail to see the problem with symbols that demean or defame the powerless because these symbols support the existing power arrangements in society. Despite their apparent triviality, the symbols surrounding sports teams are important because they can—and often do—contribute to patterns of social dominance.

Colleges and universities, for the most part, are making major efforts to diversify their student bodies, faculties, and administrations by race, ethnicity, and sex. This laudable goal is clearly at odds with the existence of racist and sexist names and practices of their athletic teams. The leadership in these schools (boards of regents, chancellors, presidents, and faculty senates) must take a stand against racism and sexism in all its forms and take appropriate action. Removing all racist and sexist symbols such as names, mascots, flags, logos, and songs is an important beginning to this crucial project.

Suggested Additional Resources

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Websites

Change the Mascot.org: <http://www.changethemascot.org>

Campaign led by the Oneida Indian Nation to end the use of the racial slur "redskins" as the mascot and name of the National Football League (NFL) team, the "Washington Redskins." Campaign calls upon the NFL and its commissioner to "do the right thing and bring an end [to] the use of the racial epithet." Relatedly, see the September 8, 2013 *ABC News* article, "Change the mascot' campaign hits Washington Redskins" (<http://abcnews.go.com/US/sports-mascots-stir-controversy/story?id=20194389>).

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National Coalition on Sports & Racism in Media: <http://www.aimovement.org/ncrsm/index.html>. The coalition is part of the American Indian Movement (AIM).

Audio/Visual

Rosenstein, J. (Producer). (1997). In whose honor? [Television series episode]. *POV*. Brooklyn, NY: American Documentary. Further information can be found at Public Broadcasting Service (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/inwhosehonor>).

Questions for Further Discussion

1. Before reading this article, how did you feel about Native American mascots or sexist mascots? Upon reading it, has your opinion changed? Why or why not? Does your race or gender inform your opinion on this issue?

2. Do you believe that teams with Native American names and mascots would lose fan support and funding if they changed their team name or mascot? How much should this be taken into consideration when considering changing team names or mascots?
3. Can you think of any other racist or ethnocentric traditions that we continue to uphold or celebrate? For instance, some argue that Thanksgiving is one such tradition. How should we think about these kinds of traditions? Should they be abolished altogether or can they be modified in some way?

Reaching Beyond the Color Line

1. Do an Internet search to find Native American tribal nations in your area. Research their histories and struggles. How does this knowledge shape your opinion of Native American mascots? Did any of the schools in your area use Native American team names or mascots? If so, what does this tell us about how we think about Native American people?
2. In small groups, research Native American team mascots in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and professional sports teams (e.g., Florida State Seminoles, Cleveland Indians, Atlanta Braves, Chicago Blackhawks, etc.). What information can you find about the origins of their mascot or team name? What do those origins tell us about how Native Americans exist in the public imagination? In your search, also look at how these teams have responded to the controversy over their mascots. What do their responses tell us about how Native Americans continue to exist in the public imagination? Has there been any change since the time that the mascot or team name was created?

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