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COMMENTARY

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Point / Counterpoint

Utes, Seminoles, Redskins, Braves...

Mascots are meant to honor

Oh, how I love my San Francisco 49ers. Yes, I did say *my* 49ers, because I consider them my team. I grew up with chilly nights at Candlestick Park, and my favorite number is 16 because Joe Montana wore it on his back.

But this isn't a Niners column.

What you might not know is that a 49er is a person, a person who dug for gold in the California gold rush. The Niners' mascot is a big, goofy white guy — named Sourdough Sam — with a tremendous beard and a ridiculous cowboy hat.

What's also ridiculous is the notion that I would ever be offended by Sourdough Sam. In fact, I always thought the idea of a fun, historical figure that inspired me to learn about my heritage was somehow a good thing.

Silly me.

So how's this for ridiculous: A group of Oregon law students is circulating a petition to

get the Athletic Department to stop scheduling games against schools with American Indian mascots. Today the petition will be presented to University President Dave Frohnmayer.

The plan is flawed logically because, in order to work, it allows for postseason tournaments and schools that have agreements with the tribes they depict, including the Utah Utes and the Florida State Seminoles. That the plan makes these allowances begs the question of how hard-line its proponents actually are.

But the plan is also ridiculous theoretically, because mascots should not be offensive.

My Webster's Dictionary defines "mascot" as "something regarded as a cherished emblem or symbol (as of a group or institution)." The key word in there is "cherished," because that's what an athletic mascot is. I cherish my Sourdough Sam just as fans across the country cherish their Utes and Seminoles.

So rather than exploiting American Indians, sports teams are glorifying them. Rather than abusing American Indian culture, sports teams celebrate it.

Certainly this does not apply to every team, and some teams such as the Washington Redskins of the National Football League have blatantly offensive team names. I would be offended if my favorite football squad was named the San Francisco "Whiteskins." But Division I collegiate programs don't cross into the crass like that professional squad does.

That's why it's silly to ask the Athletic Department to boycott schools with American Indian mascots. The mascots are not representative of anything more than a football or basketball team. An intramural basketball team at the University of Northern Colorado changed their name to the Fighting Whites to "deliver a simple, sincere message about ethnic stereotyping," according to the team's Web site. I was not offended by their team mascot, just as others shouldn't be offended by any kind of sports mascot.

The Athletic Department shouldn't be forced by anyone to make a political statement, especially when the statement is so, well ... ridiculous.

E-mail sports reporter Peter Hockaday at peterhockaday@dailyemerald.com. His opinions do not necessarily reflect those of the Emerald.



Peter

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Sports reporter

Resolution affirms courtesy

The anger and outrage in reaction to the law school's resolution that protests using American Indian names or images as team mascots is surprising. After all, in open-minded Eugene, one might think a movement against bigotry would be applauded. So why are so many people up-arms about the University resolving to uphold its obligations to promote tolerance?

My guess is the negative retorts to the University School of Law resolution are just that — thoughtless reactions.

Most of the letters to the editor have been mocking the resolution because it appears to be impractical for the University not to play teams with questionable mascots in the post season. Had some of the opponents to this resolution done their homework, they would find it only prohibits University teams from scheduling athletic events in the regular season with

schools touting American Indian mascots. Post-season games are not "scheduled" because, technically, no one could estimate which team would participate in playoffs.

Also, the resolution does not prohibit the University from playing teams that already have licensing agreements from American Indian tribes to use their image. The Florida State Seminoles and the Utah Utes are among the teams with such agreements.

The resolution won't tangibly impact University students. Rabid sports fans who assume the University may forfeit a chance

to play in an NCAA Final Four game because the Illinois Fighting Illini are in the same bracket, can breathe a sigh of relief. By supporting the resolution, the University would merely be taking a symbolic stand against marginalizing American Indians.

A lot of indignant feedback I've read questions how far society will take this "cause" and wonders where it will end. It's unlikely we're going to see the demise of the Washington Redskins or the Atlanta Braves anytime soon; authors of the resolution aren't trying to bite off more than they can chew. Incremental steps to end the promotion of racism must start at the local level and I'm surprised this effort hasn't garnered more support from open and educated minds.

Naysayers who mockingly claim the Seattle Seahawks promote stereotypes of birds and Boston Red Sox discriminate against people wearing blue socks are missing the point. Sure, the University's resolution is a small step, but it's a small step in the right direction.

I can't speak for American Indians on this topic, and I'm not trying to. For what it's worth, I tried to solicit a commentary from American Indian voices on campus to no avail. But as a University student with a vested interest in ending bigotry of all brands, I can't find fault in a resolution that holds our school to some basic standards of human respect.

The law school resolution isn't a "silly little cause" created by hyper-liberal tree huggers: It's common sense. Implementing the resolution won't hurt anyone and I encourage President Dave Frohnmayer to approve it when the resolution crosses his desk today.

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