

The CASE for CHIEF ILLINIWEK

The demand by certain University of Oregon activists that the school cancel next season's men's basketball game against the University of Illinois because of Chief Illiniwek, its respectful and honorable symbol of over seventy-five years, is misguided, as evidenced by the following indisputable facts.

The vast majority of Native Americans support the use of Indian symbols, mascots, and nicknames in athletics (Peter Harris Research Group Poll and Annenberg Election Survey).

This fact was proven beyond a statistical doubt in two statistically valid national polls conducted by impeccable polling organizations. A March 2002 poll conducted by the highly respected Peter Harris Research Group, and published in Sports Illustrated, found that 81% of Native Americans support the use of Indian nicknames by high schools and colleges, and 83% of Native Americans support the use of Indian symbols and mascots by professional teams (margin of error plus or minus 4%). The 83% figure can be safely applied to colleges, as well, for no one would logically disagree that collegiate symbols and mascots are at least as respectful as those in professional sports. (Note: In a presidential election, an 83% majority would be considered an overwhelming mandate.)

Moreover, in September 2004, the renowned National Annenberg Election Survey asked the following question of Native Americans in a national survey: "The professional football team in Washington calls itself the Washington Redskins. As a Native American, do you find that name offensive or doesn't it bother you?" Approximately 90 percent (margin of error plus or minus 2%) responded that the name does not bother them, while just nine percent said that they took offense.

Clearly, then, a small but vocal percentage of Native Americans - led by activists - are in opposition to such nicknames, mascots and symbols. Sports Illustrated concluded: "There's a near total disconnect between Indian activists and the Native American population on this issue."

Sadly, some of those activists, both Native American and non-Native American, refuse to acknowledge the legitimacy of those polls, some even suggesting that Native Americans might be afraid to honestly answer such questions. But one must ask: In the United States of America, what conceivable consequence might befall a Native American who answers a pollster's question by replying simply, "Yes, I am offended by the name Redskins"?

(Note: Though some colleges and universities replaced their Indian symbol, mascot and/or nickname in the past, it is believed that none has done so since the Harris and Annenberg surveys jointly demonstrated the truth concerning Native American feelings about this issue. Similarly, since those two surveys, it is believed that no college or university has imposed an Indian symbol, mascot and/or nickname litmus test in scheduling, for to do so would place any such institution in the curious position of discounting the collective intellect and will of the Native American people.)

Chief Illiniwek is honorable - not racist.

Some activists regrettably and incorrectly brand Chief Illiniwek a "racist" symbol. Webster's Collegiate Dictionary teaches the following: Racism exists when one believes one's race to be superior to another, or practices hatred or intolerance of another race. The millions who understand Chief Illiniwek do the direct opposite: we love, respect and revere Chief Illiniwek - the antithesis of racism. He is the proud, dignified and irreplaceable leader of our Illini family.

The University of Illinois student body overwhelmingly supports Chief Illiniwek.

The University of Illinois student body demonstrated overwhelming support for Chief Illiniwek in a March 2004 referendum. Nearly 70% of those voting on an informed and distinctly progressive campus voted that Chief Illiniwek should continue as the official symbol of the university. (Note: 35% of students are either minority or foreign.) The student body understands that the Chief Illiniwek tradition is a respectful and honorable one, and that clearly no offense is intended or should logically be taken. Similarly, alumni and the citizens of Illinois overwhelmingly support Chief Illiniwek.

Chief Illiniwek is not a mascot.

Activists are wrong when they refer to Chief Illiniwek as a mascot rather than a symbol. Chief Illiniwek is an esteemed symbol of our state's Native American heritage. Mascots patrol the sidelines, lead cheers, taunt opponents. Chief Illiniwek does none of those. In fact, he is never present during the playing of an athletic event. He appears for just four minutes at intermission of certain men's and women's athletic events in authentic regalia presented to the U of I in 1983 by Sioux Chief Frank Fools Crow, considered by many to be the most important Native American spiritual leader of the past century. Some of his appearance involves a modern Native American dance form called fancy dancing, the rest to leading the reverential singing to our alma mater. Then he proudly disappears - no cheerleading, no taunting, nor anything else to detract from his respectful appearance. Chief Illiniwek is not about athletics, but instead represents over seventy-five years of adoration for our alma mater.

Sports should not be a pawn for social agendas.

The facts surrounding this issue do not support a scheduling ban by the University of Oregon. Similarly, the University of Illinois and other schools should not refuse to schedule athletic events with the University of Oregon because of Oregon's legalization of euthanasia (the only state to do so), even though that practice is widely viewed quite negatively. Rather, the University of Illinois should respect the collective intellect of the people of Oregon.

The tragic boycotts of the 1980 and 1984 Olympics taught an undeniable lesson: No one wins when sports are used to promote political agendas. Hopefully, this country will never see the day when collegiate contests are scheduled based upon social issues such as euthanasia, state legalization of same-sex marriage (i.e. Massachusetts), or strict immigration laws (i.e. Arizona's Proposition 200). (One can only imagine the potential for scheduling chaos in intercollegiate athletics if Roe v. Wade someday is overturned, with states once again allowed to enact their own laws on this most contentious of issues.) But an adverse decision by the University of Oregon concerning Chief Illiniwek et al. would help set the stage for eventual litmus-testing in scheduling, to the eternal detriment of intercollegiate sports.

Chief Illiniwek does not stand alone.

If the University of Oregon were to take a position against scheduling schools with indigenous and/or cultural symbols, mascots and/or nicknames, then what would it say to Florida State University, which enjoys the wholehearted and public endorsement of the Seminole Tribe of Florida for its use of Chief Osceola and the Seminole nickname? And to the University of Hawaii, which enjoys overwhelming in-state Pacific Islander support for its Warrior mascot and nickname? And to the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, a Native American institution nicknamed the Braves? And to the University of Notre Dame, whose leprechaun mascot and Fighting Irish nickname are enthusiastically supported by most, but not all, Irish-Americans? Clearly, the University of Oregon should not embark upon this slippery slope.

All should be respected.

Everyone's opinion on this subject should be respected. However, the small minority opposed to Chief Illiniwek et al. needs to accept that their view departs significantly from that of most others, and refrain from asking the University of Oregon to fight its fight for them, a fight clearly unsupported by the vast majority of Native Americans.

At the University of Illinois, we deeply respect our Native American brothers and sisters, just as we deeply respect Chief Illiniwek - an enduring symbol of courage, dignity, and diversity.

So, Ducks, let's play ball!!!

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