

A perspective on the name change of the Washington Redskins

Written by By Shawn Spruce
Friday, 31 July 2020 03:27

For more than 30 years I've watched from the sidelines as the controversy over Native American team names has evolved. Not decidedly in favor or opposed, I haven't felt hugely impacted by names, logos, mascots, and other Native American imagery in professional and college sports. As a Pueblo person from New Mexico, I've prioritized social and political concerns that in my view more directly impact contemporary Native people. However, I also have Midwestern roots.

I was raised in Ann Arbor, Michigan and there first acknowledged a different perspective when my older sister helped organize a protest in the neighboring city of Ypsilanti; challenging Eastern Michigan University's 60-year-old moniker the Hurons, a tribe indigenous to southeastern Michigan, as demeaning to Native people.

The small loosely knit group of students and community members were given a campus hearing in the fall of 1989. A young, charismatic athletic director named Gene Smith moderated. While professionally neutral, he was empathetic to their grievances. A member of Notre Dame's 1973 national championship football team, Smith has gone on to a high profile career. Today he is director of athletics at the Ohio State University, one of the highest revenue athletic departments in all of college sports.

A hot debate was ignited that October evening and those opposing the name were outgunned. My sister criticized the name Hurons as a racial slur invoked by 17th century French explorers while others condemned game day antics of fans mimicking war cries and waving fake eagle feathers. She also shared memories of a middle class upbringing. The only Native American student from kindergarten through high school, she recalled being asked by classmates at six-years-old if she lived in a teepee or if her father rode a horse to work each morning.

As the children of two accomplished health professionals we were spared the level of racist hostility suffered by many of our peers who grew up on reservations and less privileged surroundings. That would come later. However, being on the receiving end of ludicrous questions made either in jest or earnest and stemming from ignorance and stereotypes was frustrating and demoralizing. Our struggle felt different from those of other minorities and even other Natives.

It was the struggle to be acknowledged as a person, not a stereotype. The struggle to be taken

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seriously.

Those in favor of keeping the name represented a less cohesive but equally vocal mix of allies. A faculty member claiming Native ancestry, Lakota as I recall, went on record stating she wasn't insulted by the name and opposed changing it. An EMU football fan, citing a newspaper, challenged the origin of the word Hurons as disparaging. A student athlete also claiming Native lineage argued that the name instilled him with pride as a member of the wrestling team.

But the testimonial most damaging to the protest was from a man with actual Huron ancestry, and unlike the others, he was identifiably Native American. While once a powerful Iroquoian Nation the Huron, as a tribal entity, haven't had a presence in Michigan since the 1800s when they were relocated to Kansas and then to present day Oklahoma. Not part of the local community and lacking a connection to the university, the speaker's presence seemed odd, perhaps calculated.

Nonetheless his contention, that the name Hurons celebrated his tribal heritage, was hard to refute.

Another highlight of the evening was delivered by my sister's boyfriend, also a former college football player. A good natured jock who usually dodged a touchy topic like a pass block, I was surprised when the six foot three 220 pound ex-linebacker approached the microphone. He revealed that during four years at the University of Illinois his alma mater's Native American moniker, the Fighting Illini, was just a trite nickname to which he felt no allegiance.

He claimed the name didn't invoke pride or empower him to be a better football player. In short he could have made just as many tackles without Chief Illiniwek waving the Sweet Sioux Tomahawk.

I didn't speak that night and wasn't strongly swayed one way or the other, questioning how this really affected me. A few months later I moved home to New Mexico where team names weren't a concern of most Native American people. In a state with a large Native population and a deep cultural presence the vast majority of Natives didn't seem threatened by the issue. It was a topic relegated to academics and activists and easily overlooked.

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In some cases supporting it publicly was a sure way to be called a “wannabe.” Along with being called an “apple” (a Native person thought to embrace a white lifestyle) wannabe is possibly the most humiliating slight one Native person can bestow on another. Ironical that behavior most likely to evoke criticism amongst my people is trying too hard to be one of us or not hard enough. Stay in the middle and you’ll be fine.

Meanwhile back in Michigan the controversy simmered, but 1989 was a little too soon. Finally as more parties joined the debate and aided by a recommendation by the Michigan Civil Rights Commission that schools discontinue the use of Native American stereotypes, EMU ditched the name Hurons and its logo in 1991. By this time my sister was also living in New Mexico and no longer had a dog in the fight.

Although a lasting memory this event wasn’t the first time someone in my family felt threatened by a Native American team name. My father, born in 1934, was raised in Santa Fe, New Mexico where my grandfather was a teacher at the Santa Fe Indian School. Uncommon for a Pueblo of his generation, my grandfather placed enormous value on formal education. He sent his children to Catholic school and fostered studiousness and a strong work ethic at home.

An outstanding student, my father graduated high school in 1952 and was accepted to Stanford University.

After Stanford he graduated from the University of Southern California School of Medicine and following a residency, earned a master in public health at the University of Michigan; hence our connection to Ann Arbor. I’m extremely proud of my father’s accomplishments. However, in the summer of 1952 he was 18-years-old with limited knowledge of the world outside northern New Mexico, where he’d taken knocks growing up in a town with few Native Americans. When he encountered racism it wasn’t usually from whites, but rather Hispanic kids who made up the majority of the population.

Fights were common, often started after hearing the most egregious insult “You dirty Indian.”

But violent conflict wasn’t exclusive. When a cousin, whose parents also worked at the Indian

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school, returned to the pueblo, she was bullied by other Native girls at the tribal day school for being bathed and well groomed. A child from a stable, loving home, she was fiercely resented. Hair pulled and blouses ripped, she learned not to assume fair treatment from one's own kind and shared race, no guarantee of unity.

A few weeks before my father was set to arrive at Stanford he received a letter with his dormitory assignment. When his excited parents urged him to read the letter aloud, he began with the words "Dear Indian" before stopping abruptly. The room briefly fell silent and my grandparents shifted uneasily before my father bemoaned "I haven't even gotten to school and they're already calling me Indian."

The nature of the coincidence eluded the family. Stanford Indians was a name that dated back to the 1930s, an era of gridiron greatness led by the legendary Pop Warner. A coach who had earlier found success at the helm of another elite college team that went by the same moniker as Stanford and boasted one of the greatest athletes the world has ever known, the Carlisle Indians and Jim Thorpe. The only difference was that Thorpe and his teammates at the federally run industrial school were in fact Indians.

In 1972, twenty years before Eastern Michigan would retire the Hurons, Stanford's president was confronted with a petition from its Native American students to drop the name Indians. To this day the school applauds its sagacity as one of the first universities to remove an objectionable name and mascot.

The story of my father's letter is a longstanding family joke, a precocious yet naïve scholar, innocently unaware of his easily pardonable misunderstanding; an ambitious student who valued Stanford's renowned academic reputation over its football team. But it's also a troubling anecdote about which I've questioned whether to laugh or feel sorrow. I choose the former.

Occasionally I've had people ask me what I like best about being Native American; a loaded question perhaps, arguably inappropriate, but certainly interesting to consider. I tell them that for me it's not so much about the culture and history. Instead it's like being a member of a highly exclusive club. There are approximately 3 million Native Americans who are enrolled members of federally recognized tribes in the United States.

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In a country of over 330 million people we make up less than one percent. Extend that to a planet with almost eight billion people and the chances of being born Native American are astronomically slim. With over 560 federally recognized tribes, we don't always get along, but there's no denying our connectedness. It never ceases to amaze me how much I share in common and the kinship I feel with Native people from other tribes in other states representing vastly different, yet somehow similar cultures and histories.

Or when first meeting a random Native person from a tribal community thousands of miles from my own, we quickly discover a shared acquaintance. Indian Country has three degrees of separation instead of six.

Now the worst part of being Native American. For me it's being beholden to a portrait of what a Native American person is supposed to represent. History books have pictures of Sitting Bull, Geronimo, and Chief Joseph. A century and a half after their deaths and these men are still our most famous Native Americans.

I might argue that a Native person hasn't achieved household name status in this country since Jim Thorpe crushed opposing defenses running the wishbone and cruised to decathlon gold at the 1912 Stockholm Olympics.

That's not to say we haven't had any more great athletes and high profile sports stars; Billy Mills, Jacoby Ellsbury, and Shoni Schimmel to name a few. But none of them have managed to eclipse the magnitude of Thorpe. Today too many high profile Native Americans, athletes and others, are considered noteworthy primarily because they are Native American, as opposed to exceptional talents, skills, and accomplishments that stand alone regardless of race. The meritocracy of pro sports is one reason they are so beloved by Americans.

Being famous is not the embodiment of success. But when so few Native Americans are visible to mainstream America, it's a logical, though flawed conclusion that team names, mascots, and old Hollywood movies become their understanding of who we are; however, by doing so we as Native people become a caricature of who we once were. When tourists visit tribal lands, pow wows, or Pueblo feast days they don't come to see us.

They come to see the descendants of our ancestors. When fans celebrate the Washington

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Redskins name they don't celebrate us, they celebrate a romantic ideal of the past. That is the frustration my sister voiced thirty-one years ago and it's a frustration still felt today. It's on us as Native people to change our narrative.

It's on everyone else not to stifle it.

Minorities are often criticized for dealing the race card and I'm the first to admit it's overplayed. Take me as I am and I won't hold anyone personally accountable for the actions of their ancestors. Words like "offensive" can be nuanced and easily manipulated. At fifty-two, I feel I finally have enough life experience to recognize when we are victims and when we are not.

With the exception of my sister's passionate yet brief foray, no one else in my family has ever taken a stand on the issue of Native American stereotypes in sports. But with Washington Redskins owner, Dan Snyder, finally agreeing to retire the name after emphatically and repeatedly saying he never would, I must ask myself where I stand.

For years I felt an affinity for teams like the Washington Redskins, Florida State Seminoles, Chicago Blackhawks, and the North Dakota Fighting Sioux. I've admired logos of regal warriors paired with bold color schemes. I've proudly worn Native themed sports apparel as a way to express my cultural identity with a collection of Redskins team gear hanging in my closet. I still have a t-shirt.

While the word redskin is certainly a racial slur, it's antiquated and one I've personally never been called. As a young adult I grew my hair and, against the advice of family, ventured to remote reservations in South Dakota and back water towns in Oklahoma. Places, unlike Ann Arbor, where people weren't curious to know if I'd been raised in a teepee. I've been tormented by derogatory remarks about my heritage, but "redskin" was never one of those invectives.

And if I ever was called a redskin I'd probably be inclined to snicker "Really, that's the best you can do?"

I've also been compelled by the usual arguments. Native Americans have more important

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issues to worry about than team names. The controversy is too fragmented. Most Native people don't care about it.

Political correctness is killing our country. What about all the Native American high schools and colleges that have Native names and logos like my own alma mater, Haskell Indian Nations University?

The controversy has been a long one and its intensity fluctuates, for many years unpopular to support even in Indian Country. This is a battle that frankly could have lasted another 20 years. No one predicted how an unprecedented tsunami of illness, protest, and impatience would be the match to light the spark. Change is here and there is no turning back.

Although not all will agree, this is a huge win for Native people. Will it make all of our problems disappear overnight? Erase the fact that indigenous women are murdered at a rate ten times higher than the national average? Wipe out generations of health and economic disparities such as substance abuse and poverty?

Of course not, but a win is a win like any coach will say.

A good friend and colleague of the Oneida Nation, Susan White, served as the director of its trust and enrollment department. A vocal leader, she encouraged tribes to influence corporate America and exercise sovereignty through shareholder activism. She bought stocks in some companies only to submit shareholder resolutions challenging practices such as excavation of Native burial sites by superstores and stereotyping of Native Americans in professional sports.

One company she pressed was Fedex Corporation, a major Redskins sponsor which along with Nike wielded enough influence to finally tip the boat. Sadly, Susan lost her battle with cancer two years ago, but I know she is watching and she is happy.

I know others are not ready to say goodbye to the Washington Redskins and to be truthful I'm not sure I am. But that's ok, I'm here to hold your hand. Of course controversies are polarizing, that's the point. Why do some movements fail while others succeed?

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Why are some arguments examined through a strict lens while others never challenged? Timing, circumstance, and luck all factor huge in life. My thought is that someday, maybe not in my lifetime, people will look back at names like Redskins, Hurons, and Fighting Illini and simply shake their heads.

Until then some gratitude is due people like Susan White who spent a career pushing hard against the name. As well as those with only a fleeting role, like my sister. And of course those that stood in the trenches, holding signs outside stadiums on cold and unwelcoming Sunday afternoons. These people were all brave enough to do what myself and many other Native people were neither brave enough or interested enough to do.

And Indian Country owes you, big time.

Even people like my young father deserve some props. When nearly seven decades ago he sensed something wasn't right but didn't know quite how to respond. Or my aunt, at eighty-seven-years-old, she still remembers her torn blouse. And many, many more Native people who have stories to tell.

I even feel a need to give a shout out to Dan Snyder. I really do. I'm sure many will say too little too late. He's only doing this because it's finally costing him money.

I don't care. It's not too late to do the right thing. I'm late to the party too, what's my excuse?

Now about that old shirt in my closet, I threw it out today. It was time. But not to worry, I'll buy a new one when they come up with a new name and logo.

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