

Indian Mascots Affect More than Sports

By Eugene Tapahe
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The ethical issue of Indian mascots in sports has more of an affect on society than we could possibly imagine. The disillusionment of Native American heritage and pride will continue into the future if we keep ignoring the real issue racism.

The segregation of Native American people is a major reason for the modern world's ignorance of Native American culture, traditions, and life.

For example, last year I remember my 5-year old daughter coming home very excited and saying she learned how to be "Indian" in school. At first I was shocked and upset because she's Navajo, I then decided to find out what she was talking about. I asked her, "What is it to be Indian?"

She replied, "We put paint on our faces, wore feathers in our hair and did Indian dances." I asked, "Who showed you the Indian dance?" She answered, "My teacher." I said, "Show me the dance." She started prancing around in circles - it was cute.

After seeing her excitement and enthusiasm I forgot all about my disappointment. I then sat down with her and explained she is and will always be Navajo, no matter what she wore or how she danced because most importantly it is what is in her heart and mind that counts the most.

We ended the discussion and I hoped it wouldn't come up again. But this past month, for my daughter's kindergarten graduation, we dressed her and my youngest daughter, 4-years old, in traditional Navajo attire for the special night and my youngest daughter said, "Daddy I'm a real Indian now."

Again I had to explain. Later that night a classmate of my oldest daughter said, "You're dressed up like an Indian." My daughter replied, "No I'm not. I'm dressed like a Navajo."

At that moment I felt that I had failed my fellow Native Americans. Why? Because I had an opportunity to educate my daughter's class about Native Americans and my Navajo culture, but I did not do it.

So, those impressionable 5-year old children in my daughter's class will go into the next grade believing they can be "Indian" too, if they paint their faces, wear feathers in their hair and do a silly little dance.

It's amazing that this cultural misconception is still being perpetuated today and in of all places, in our children's schools. I know the school and teachers didn't mean to offend or hurt anyone but they did.

The derogatory representation of Native Americans occurs in sports with Indian mascots, people with this same misconception think that it is trivial and harmless. But it is not.

Let us think about the future and our children - impressionable, naive, loving and trusting of our every word. Envision them looking at a "black man" dressed like a Washington "Redskin." Would they feel proud or confused? What if your child asked you if he or she were a real "Indian," what would you say?

Would you be proud if you were called a "Redskin?" Even after you learned the word was used to identify a dead Indians scalp.

When the "white man" came to the North American continent they practiced genocide on Native Americans. A cash bounty was given for every "Redskin" (scalp) as proof of killing an Indian. Could you explain this to your loving child and think that they would understand?

Last month I read an article about the Indian mascot issue in the "Denver Post" (Monday, May 20, 2002), "they beat their drums; they voiced their rhetoric?drums beating, chants rising." This was no city parade it was a group of Native Americans protesting the use of an Indian mascot by a local high school.

Why do Native Americans use the same "Indian stereotypical" tactics they disapprove of to protest this issue? Is it acceptable to beat drums, chant and storm into a town just because we are Native Americans?

The Indian mascot under protest was the Eaton High School Fightin' Reds in Eaton, Colorado. The school mascot is a defiant cartoon with a misshapen nose and bare buttocks. This issue has received international news because of the University of Northern Colorado Native American intramural basketball team's counter-defense to the mascot by satirically naming themselves the "Fighting Whities".

American Indian Movement activist, Russell Means, Oglala/Lakota, led the marching protest. This brings up another question, should a man who sold his "Indian-voice" to Disney be involved in this issue. Mr. Means is the voice of Wind River in the Disney animated movie, "Pocahontas", another misleading portrayal of early Native Americans for the entertainment of our vulnerable children.

I wonder what were Mr. Means' true intentions? The mascot issue or was he just trying to get international publicity. Depicting ourselves, as the Hollywood "savage" by beating drums and chanting isn't going to educate people. Suzan Shown Harjo, the president and executive director of The Morning Star Institute, is a great example of educating people who are ignorant of Native Americans. In fact, on November 18, 2001 on ESPN.com she answered questions on Indian mascots.

Through the scrutiny and racial rhetoric presented during the online chat Harjo stood strong and educated those who would listen. I commend her for the willingness to beat her drum in a professional and well-mannered way.

This is the drum we need to beat - a drum of education and knowledge, a chant of harmony and tradition. As Americans we can stand together to make a difference peacefully.

The use of Indian mascots in sports has to end because it has a negative affect on all Native and non-native children. I failed my daughters once and I won't let it happen again. We must educate those around us and be willing to listen and tell our children the truth about Native Americans and other cultures, too.

We must beat our drums in unity let us rid our land of all racial images together. Ask yourself, what you would be more proud of your child wearing a Washington Redskin's cap or their character.

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