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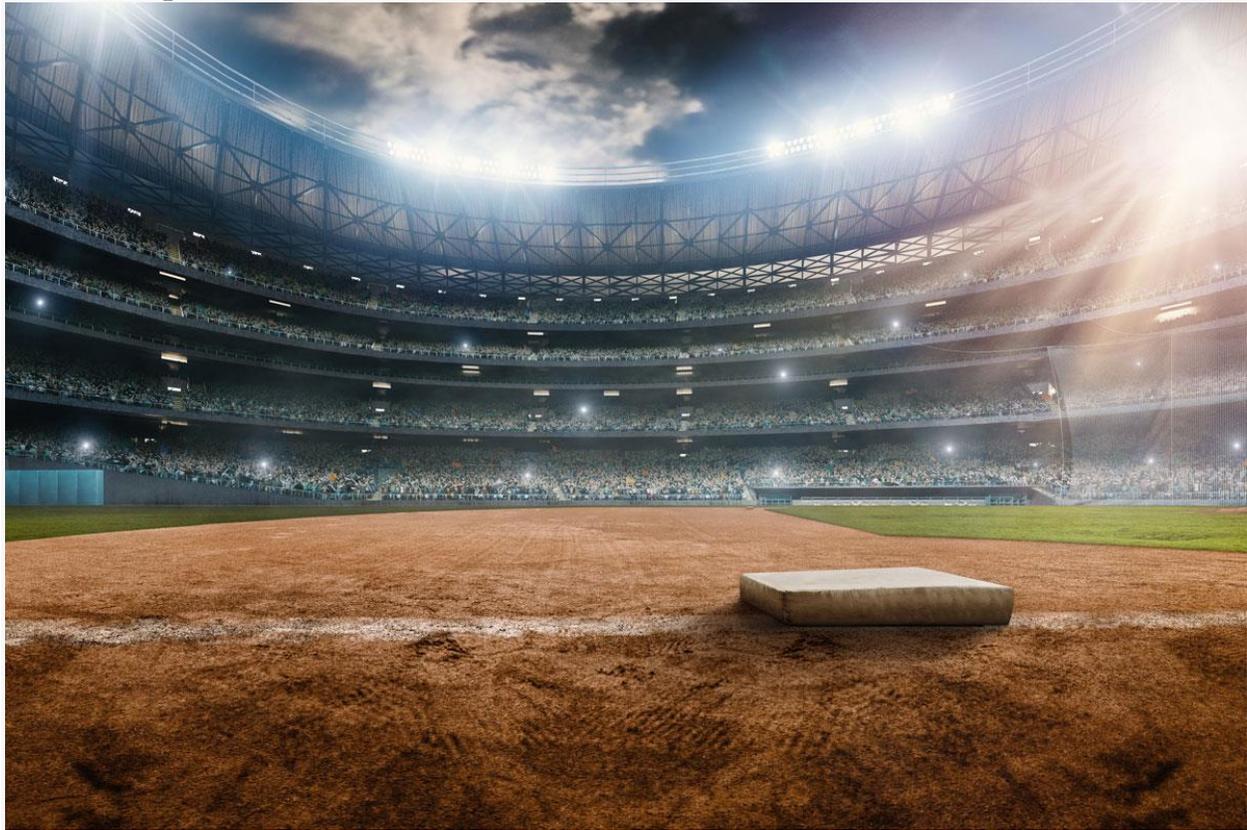
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Baseball's Name Changes Should Stop with the Cleveland Guardians

By David Head
UCF Forum columnist
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Yes, there have been some offensive team nicknames, but do we need to keep looking at the distant past to be offended



With the baseball season winding down, the Cleveland Indians' days are numbered—as the Indians, anyway. Starting next season, the ballclub will be known as the Cleveland Guardians, a reference to a set of nearly century-old iconic Guardians of Traffic statues along a bridge near the stadium that symbolize progress and transportation.

“Indians” is baseball’s most problematic name and the hardest to defend. But like so many school names, street names, statues, and monuments eyed for replacement, the question isn’t where to start. It’s where to stop.

Inevitably new targets will emerge, such as the Atlanta Braves, the only other team with a Native American nickname. Other candidates might include the Texas Rangers, because of the state police force’s history of violence against Blacks, Native Americans, and Mexicans; or, the San Diego Padres, named in honor of Franciscan missionaries such as St. Junípero Serra, whose statue protesters toppled in 2020 in California.

Are we fated to have our teams in baseball and other sports ensnared in a never-ending culture war pitting charges of racism against claims of cancel culture? I see three possible ways out.

First, we could accept that team names will change more often than we’ve been used to. In the early day, baseball teams changed names frequently. The Braves, for example, began life in Boston in 1871 as the Red Stockings, and then became the Beaneaters, Doves and Rustlers before becoming the Braves. They switched to the Bees for a few years, then went back to the Braves — and later moved to Milwaukee and then Atlanta.

Today’s multi-billion dollar sports merchandise industry argues against changing team names too often, however. When a cadre of marketing and design consultants pore over every detail of colors, jerseys, marks, logos and mascots, even the smallest shift costs a lot of money.

Second, teams could change — and stick with — innocuous names. Baseball already has plenty of animals, such as the Toronto Blue Jays, Baltimore Orioles and Florida Marlins. Other team names refer to uniform colors, such as the Boston Red Sox and Chicago White Sox. Still other team names embrace points of local pride, such as the Colorado Rockies, Seattle Mariners, Minnesota Twins, Philadelphia Phillies and, now, the Guardians.

The problem, however, is that inoffensive things don’t stay that way. Even colors can run afoul of politics. Between 1953 and 1959, McCarthyism drove the Cincinnati Reds to become the Redlegs. You can guess what would have happened to the Milwaukee Brewers if they’d played in the 1920s during Prohibition.

Third, and what I believe to be the best option: Fans can discern between names that are now offensive in themselves, such as Indians; names that are controversial because of a problematic origin story, such as the Rangers; and names that can be creatively repurposed, such as the Braves.

This approach recognizes that words change meaning over time, and what once seemed like an honor can become hurtful. There’s no reason to hold onto an offensive name just to preserve tradition or deny the forces of political correctness a win.

At the same time, it's vital to recognize that words change in the other direction: what used to be offensive can become harmless.

Pirates are a good example. Real pirates were violent thieves, rapists and murderers, and the Pittsburgh ballclub got its name when it was accused of stealing — “pirating” — a player from another team. Today, though, pirates are seen as rambunctious, freedom-loving rogues like Pirates of the Caribbean's Captain Jack Sparrow, not merciless cutthroats. The nickname is just for fun.

The Rangers could be seen similarly: unsavory historical figures rendered more acceptable by the passage of time. “While we may have originally taken our name from the law enforcement agency,” a Texas Rangers team statement read, “since 1971 the Texas Rangers Baseball Club has forged its own, independent identity.” We should take the team at its word, not insist that a name's meaning is locked in the past.

In this spirit, the Braves could stay the Braves, but with a different meaning attached to the name. After all, there are plenty of ways to be brave. There's already a movement afoot to dub the Braves the “Bravest” in honor of firefighters, complete with the tomahawk in the team's current logo becoming a fire axe. They could even keep “Braves” and just change the theming to be about firefighters.

If a team name is offensive in itself, it has to go, but that doesn't mean people should rummage through the past looking to be offended. Fans should remember that the real attachment to a team doesn't come from its name or logo. It's the players and the games that make being a fan meaningful.

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