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NCAA nickname proscription

Richard C. Crepeau
University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
NCAA nickname proscription
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The NCAA, in whatever wisdom it may have remaining, has ruled that NCAA institutions who have "offensive and abusive" mascots and logos will not be allowed to host any post-season event nor participate in any post-season event while displaying such a logo or mascot. Eighteen universities have been named in this group. This is a ruling that has been a long time coming and one that represents many of the problems with organizations like the NCAA.

Let me first acknowledge that one of my degrees is from Florida State University, an institution that is directly affected by the NCAA ruling on the use of Native American mascots and symbols. I would be less than truthful if I said this has no impact on my views on this subject. Another of my degrees is from Marquette University, which chose to drop the name "Warriors" several years ago in deference to the sensitivities of Native Americans.

It seems to me that there are several problems with the NCAA ruling, which raise a number of questions. First, is this the sort of thing that the NCAA should be ruling on at all, or should it be left to the individual institutions? Second, is a one size fits all ruling, a wise approach to the issue? Third, is the NCAA decision the result of a wide-spread point of view in the Native American community, or rather a reaction to pressures applied by a small group of activists? Fourth, by what authority does the NCAA wield this power?

It certainly is true that there has been a considerable protest over this issue for several decades. Under that pressure a large number of institutions decided to change. Others for a variety of reasons chose not to change. Those who made the latter choice did so for a variety of reasons and did so after considerable consideration. Some of these choices were economic; some were in response to alumni and student wishes, and some perhaps from inertia. Whatever the case, choices were made, and if the choices were wrong then these institutions must live with whatever fallout might result.

Florida State University has over the years consulted with the Seminole Tribe of Florida on the issue of the name and on the

character of "Chief Osceola." However, the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma has objected to the characterization of Chief Osceola for years. So which group has priority here. Apparently, the NCAA sees Oklahoma's claim as more significant than Florida's claim. Tribal Council member Max Osceola of Florida objects to the NCAA decision pointing out that "you have non-natives making decisions about native names."

The NCAA ruled that eighteen institutions have "prima facie hostile and abusive" symbols and that these eighteen will be affected by this ruling. Certainly, you could understand such a characterization being applied to the use of "Savages" by Southeastern Oklahoma State. The use of "Redman," "Indian" or "Brave" might deserve such a characterization, but to categorize the name of a people such as "Seminole," "Choctaw" or "Sioux" in such language is itself "prima facie hostile and abusive." Some may also wonder why the NCAA accepts the use of "Braves" in some cases and not others, or why "Aztecs" is not offensive while "Seminoles" is.

Why do universities and others use the Native American and aspects of Native American culture as symbols? What do these symbols mean? What do they signify?

From the beginning of European settlement in North America, there has been a great deal of ambivalence in the European community toward Native Americans. There has been conflict, there has been friendship, and there has been arrogance. Europeans clearly took the position that they came from a superior culture and had much to teach the natives, whom they regarded as savage and primitive. At the same time Europeans were attracted to the Native American culture, to their harmony with nature, to the ability of native peoples to live happily on the land. Many early settlers left the European community and joined tribal communities, attracted by a superior way of life. The Europeans came to admire and fear the tenacity and the bravery of the native peoples, and they borrowed heavily from them for survival. But in the end, the European saw the Native American as a part of the American Wilderness, an obstacle to be transformed or overcome.

But always, despite the slaughter and the conflict, the genocidal tendencies, there was an admiration that would not, and indeed could not, die. Unlike the African, whom the European degraded and pushed to the edge of the human family, the Native American was admired as a member of an ancient civilization. Thomas Jefferson and others spent much time and effort in the

study of native cultures. Jefferson, being most interested in languages, did his best to catalogue and preserve native languages. Although willing to admit the inferiority of Africans, Jefferson tenaciously defended the Native American against any such assessment. They were part of America, and to degrade them would be to degrade America. The Native American is a symbol, and an important one, of the meaning of America itself.

It is no accident that the Native American is to be found on American coinage. They are part of and a product of the American environment. They are a symbol of strength and courage. There are no comparable images and attitudes that the Europeans held toward the Africans.

Symbols are important, and that is why people feel they have a stake in them. And some symbols are powerful and that is why they are borrowed. The NCAA and others should not confuse admiration and emulation with denigration.

It seems to me that in this controversy each institution must make its own decisions based on its own analysis of what they stand for and what they believe about themselves, as well as their relationship to native peoples and cultures. In that process they are obligated to listen intently to the Native American community. The NCAA and its political agenda should have no role in this process.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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