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Insult or Honor?

More than 2,000 schools have given up Indian mascots in response to protests from Native Americans. But one tribe wants to keep its place on college jerseys.

By *Monica Davey* in *Grand Forks, N.D.*

Amber Annis, a Sioux Indian and a senior at the University of North Dakota, finds the school's "Fighting Sioux" nickname and logo offensive, and she wants to get rid of it.

"That image is everywhere in this town—on T-shirts, hats, trucks, license plates, water bottles—and it's nothing positive for me," says Annis, a member of Cheyenne River Tribe in South Dakota. "It's very upsetting."

While Annis has lots of company in her beliefs on campus, members of one Sioux tribe called Spirit Lake take pride in the name, saying it's an honor and that abandoning it would send the tribe one step closer to obscurity.

"When you hear them announce the name at the start of a hockey game, it gives you goose bumps," says Frank Black Cloud, a member of the tribe. "They are putting us up on a pinnacle."

And so, in a legal standoff that has turned some preconceptions upside down, members of the Spirit Lake Tribe sued to preserve the Fighting Sioux name and logo, an image of an Indian in profile with feathers on his head.

In 2005, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (N.C.A.A.), which governs college sports, banned what it called "hostile and abusive" Indian mascots, logos, and nicknames during postseason play. The ban came after years of complaints from Native American groups. The prohibition includes logos, signs in stadiums, cheerleader and band uniforms, and mascots.

Deep Rifts On Campus

"The use of Native references in sports amounts to name-calling," says Suzan Shown Harjo of the Morning Star Foundation, a Native American rights group. "It reduces the entire race to caricatures. It's racism, and it insults our children and grandchildren."

At the high school level, there is no equivalent to the N.C.A.A., so it's up to local school boards or state legislatures to decide which mascots are appropriate. In recent years, many high schools have replaced Indian mascots and nicknames with less controversial ones.

In 1970, there were more than 3,000 schools in the U.S., both high schools and colleges, using Indian names and symbols for their sports teams; today there are about 900, most of which are high schools, says Harjo. At the University of North Dakota, the controversy over the Fighting Sioux name and logo has created deep rifts on the campus of 13,000 students, among its alumni, and especially among American Indians here.

'Tears and Heartbreak'

"We're talking tears and heartbreak here for our students," says Linda Neuerburg, assistant director of American Indian Student Services at the university.

Student leaders at the American Indian Center have a collection of T-shirts showing images of Indians and bison (the nickname of rival North Dakota State University teams) in vulgar poses. They describe the insult they feel when they see people walking on a large logo of the Indian face on the floor of the school's hockey stadium.

Harjo, whose group has been working for decades to encourage schools to drop Indian mascots and nicknames, says the issue is about much more than just pride: "It's a very short leap from having a mascot that demeans Native people to doing actual physical harm to Native people," she says. "That's what we're trying to short-circuit."



But in North Dakota, the Spirit Lake Tribe members who sued the university to keep the "Fighting Sioux" say they're proud of the nickname.

"I am full-blood, and I grew up on this reservation," says Eunice Davidson, 57. "I have to tell you, I am very, very honored that they would use the name."

In December, a judge dismissed the lawsuit, which could clear the way for the logo to be changed. The state education board, which now has the authority to decide the logo's fate, was expected to meet in early 2010 to discuss the issue.

Frank Black Cloud, another Spirit Lake member, takes a broader view of the controversy: If the University of North Dakota retires the Fighting Sioux nickname, that will not soothe relations between white North Dakotans and American Indians; quite the opposite, he maintains.

"If you think there are some tensions at the university before, just think what repercussions there will be for Indians then," he says. "You are going to kick us back a century."

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