

The difference between honor and excuses

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Nextions

Blackhawks find a way to show respect to Native Americans

If diversity of backgrounds and perspectives gives us the ability to get inspiration and ideas from cultures and traditions different from our own, what, if any, is our responsibility to recognize and honor the sources for our inspiration and ideas?

In the last several decades, the Washington Redskins have been under public and legal attack to change their name and logo, the University of Illinois has had to “retire” Chief Illiniwek as a mascot for the Fighting Illini and the Cleveland Indians are facing tremendous pressure to replace Chief Wahoo as a logo and mascot.

The tension is steadily mounting between Native American groups who argue that the above represent offensive and disrespectful impressions of their history and communities and the supporters of these athletic teams who claim that the social pressure to change them is misplaced and destructive because the names and logos are actually celebrating Native Americans.

As the political, social and cultural calls for these teams to change their names and logos increases, the dialogue of “can a sports team use Native American symbols and names” has become so polarized that people have divided into “yes, because it honors Native Americans” and “no, because it dishonors Native Americans” camps.

No one is asking if there is a way to use Native American symbols and names for team monikers and logos in an honorable way, and a Chicago example of doing it right often gets overlooked.

While many Native Americans rightfully oppose the use of any Native American people or symbols for recreational purposes, many are actually open to the idea if teams commit to honorably using Native American people or symbols as logos and names accurately and appropriately as opportunities for teaching people about Native American communities, history and culture.

Unfortunately, the examples of how to do it wrong are far more noticeable than any examples of how to do it better. For instance, the refusal of the Washington Redskins’ owner to acknowledge that Redskins is an offensive slur and the lack of acceptance among the Cleveland Indians’ management that Chief Wahoo is an offensive caricature are just a couple of in-your-face examples of athletic teams (ab)using Native American symbols and history for their logos



and mascots. Yet, in the midst of these offensive and disrespectful actions by many athletic teams, the Chicago Blackhawks quietly offer a lesson in how to borrow from traditions without usurping the voices and dignity of those to whom those traditions belong.

This lesson starts with recognizing how borrowing from a tradition requires that there be an actual connection to the tradition. The Blackhawks were named as such by one of the team's founders, Frederic McLaughlin, whose Army battalion in World War I called itself Black Hawks in honor of Chief Black Hawk, a fierce warrior from the Sauk tribe in Illinois for whom the Black Hawk War of 1832 was named. Although much more can be done to make people aware of Chief Black Hawk's story, he was a real chief whose bravery and heroism was noted by his allies and enemies alike.

In direct contrast, there never has been a Chief Illiniwek, Chief Wahoo or any group of Native Americans who referred to themselves as redskins, an offensive dehumanizing slur similar to how the n-word was and is used to deprecate African-Americans. Justifying roots in a tradition when there are actually no roots to speak of is an exercise in foolishness at best and offensive deceit at worst.

Moreover, unlike the Washington Redskins, Fighting Illini or the Cleveland Indians, the Chicago Blackhawks reached out to organizations like the American Indian Center of Chicago to better understand the ways in which they can honor Chief Black Hawk's memory.

More importantly, when they received recommendations, they listened. They created a mascot — a black bird in a Blackhawks jersey — that did not denigrate Native American people in any way.

They made the logo in the clubhouse a space of dignity by keeping it illuminated at all times and barring people from stepping on it. They also contributed generously to organizations in Chicago that work to better the lives of Native Americans in addition to contributing to the renovation of the statue of Chief Black Hawk in Oregon. When the Blackhawks won the Stanley Cup in June, the rally to celebrate the victory began with members of the Sauk tribe honoring Chief Black Hawk.

Although the Blackhawks have not gotten everything right by any means, they are demonstrating what it can look like to actually honor and respect the communities from which you borrow traditions instead of merely mouthing the words in order to not change practices that are hurtful to entire communities of people.

In the global village that we all call home in the modern age, we all borrow traditions from other groups to expand, enrich and enhance our lives, but how often do we ask ourselves if we are honoring the roots of those traditions?

Diversity gives us all the ability to get inspiration and ideas from sources that would have never been available to us a few decades ago; inclusion is the responsibility we have to honor the sources of the inspiration and ideas in a way that builds understanding instead of discord.