



Station 3: Sports - The Washington Redskins Logo



Ending the Legacy of Racism in Sports and the Era of Harmful “Indian” Sports Mascots, National Congress of American Indians, October 2013

“Indian” sports brands used by professional teams were born in an era when racism and bigotry were accepted by the dominant culture. These brands which have grown to become multi-million dollar franchises were established at a time when the practice of using racial epithets and slurs as marketing slogans were a common practice among white owners seeking to capitalize on cultural superiority and racial tensions.

Among the professional ranks, the effort by the NFL and the Washington football team to retain the violent and racially derived term “Redsk*ns” has been a focus of national and international media. The legacy of racism which was established by the team’s owner, George Preston Marshall, is an important component to the story of the Washington football team name, in addition to its violent origins in American popular culture.

The term originates from a time when Native people were actively hunted and killed for bounties, and their skins were used as proof of Indian kill. 16 Bounties were issued by European companies, colonies, and some states, most notably California. By the turn of the 20th century it had evolved to become a term meant to disparage and denote inferiority and savagery in American culture. By 1932, the word had been a term of commodification and a commentary on the color of a body part. It was not then and is not now an honorific.

“Are You Ready For Some Controversy? The History Of ‘Redskin’” (excerpt), Lakshmi Ghandi, Code Switch, npr.org, September 9, 2013.

Throughout the 1800s, the word [Redskin] was frequently used by Native Americans as they negotiated with the French and later the Americans. The phrase gained widespread usage among whites when James Fenimore Cooper used it in his 1823 novel The Pioneers. In the book, Cooper has a dying Indian character lament, “There will soon be no red-skin in the country.”

Decades later, the word “redskin” began to take on a negative, increasingly violent connotation. Author L. Frank



Baum, best known for his classic *The Wizard of Oz*, celebrated the death of Sitting Bull and the massacre at Wounded Knee with a pair of editorials calling for the extermination of all remaining Native Americans. In one of the December 1890 pieces, Baum wrote, “With his fall the nobility of the Redskin is extinguished, and what few are left are a pack of whining curs who lick the hand that smites them.”

From Sportslogohistory.com

The Redskins primary logo used today was first designed in 1971 in close consultation with Native American leaders. Among those who unanimously approved and voiced praise for the logo was Walter “Blackie” Wetzel, a former President of the National Congress of American Indians and Chairman of the Blackfeet Nation. Years earlier, Mr. Wetzel had been deeply involved with U.S. President John F. Kennedy in the movement for civil liberties, civil rights, and economic freedom for all. In 2014, Mr. Wetzel’s son Don commented, “It needs to be said that an Indian from the State of Montana created the Redskins logo, and did it the right way. It represents the Red Nation, and it’s something to be proud of.”

Washington Redskins win trademark fight over the team’s name, June 29, 2017, Washington Post

One of the earliest points of contention came on March 29, 1972, when a delegation of Native American leaders met with then-Redskins president Edward Bennett Williams, lobbying him to change the name. Though he didn’t do so, the team scrapped “Scalp ’em” from its fight song, replacing it with “Beat ’em.” The team also got rid of the cheerleaders’ black braided wigs.

It would be another 20 years until Native American activists took their first legal action against the team. On Sept. 10, 1992, seven Native American activists led by Suzan Shown Harjo filed a petition with the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, asking that the team’s six registrations be revoked.

Seven years later, the patent and trademark office’s appeals board ruled in Harjo’s favor. But the team never quit fighting to defend itself, arguing that most Native Americans were not offended by the name, and that the activists hadn’t proved that the name was widely considered a slur.

As the Redskins and Harjo battled in court, a 2004 poll by the Annenberg Public Policy Center seemed to back up the team’s argument: 9 in 10 Indians did not find the name offensive.

Washington’s NFL team to retire Redskins name, following sponsor pressure and calls for change, July 13, 2020, New York Times

For more than two decades, Washington Redskins owner Daniel Snyder has fiercely resisted calls to change the name of his team, despite protests that the name is offensive to Native Americans. But Monday morning, with pressure for a change immense and an internal review of the name ongoing, the team announced that it will “retire” the name at the conclusion of the review.

The team did not say when a new name will be chosen, and “Redskins” will not be removed immediately. The club’s website remains Redskins.com, and Monday’s news release was sent on Redskins letterhead. A person with knowledge of the situation said the team plans to use Redskins until a new name is chosen, though it is contemplating other options, including the possibility of a generic temporary name such as “Washington Football Club.”