

# What's in a Name?

**H**ave you ever wondered how some sports teams got their names? Take the Los Angeles **Dodgers**, for example. What is a "Dodger," anyway?

The name "Dodgers" goes back to the late 1890s, when the team was located in Brooklyn, N.Y. In those days, horse-drawn trolleys carried people up and down the streets of Brooklyn. To get to the stadium, people would have to dodge past the trolley cars. The team became known as the "Dodgers," and the name stuck.

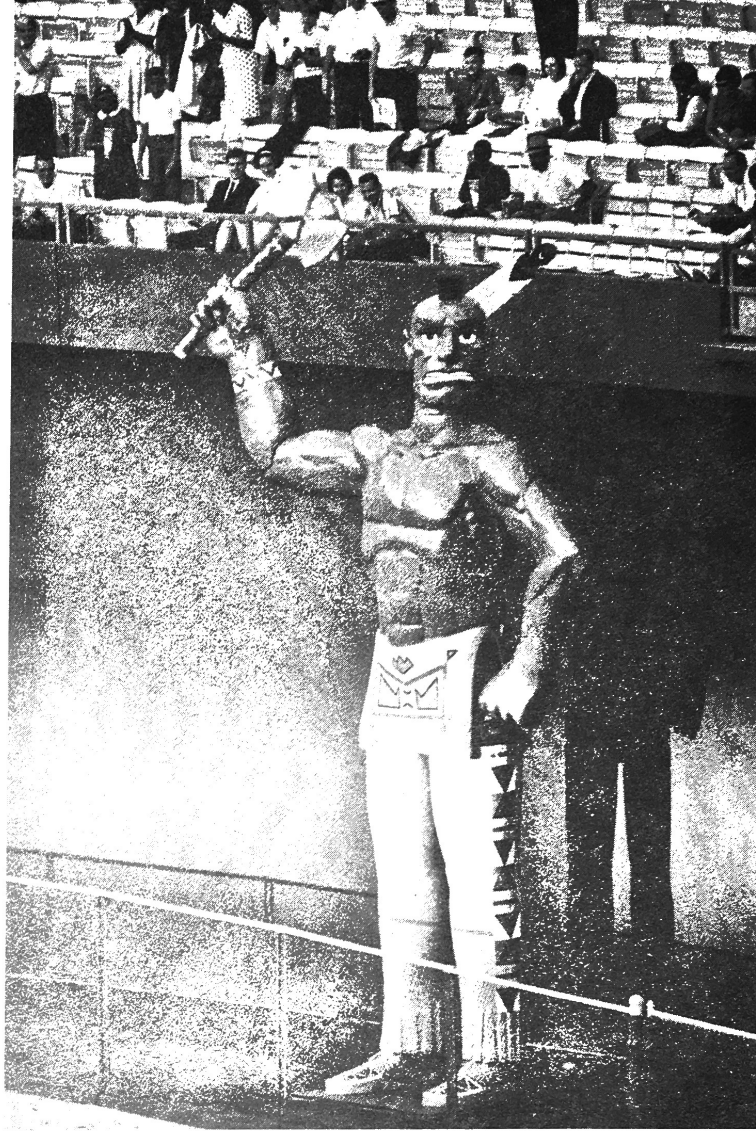
What about the Los Angeles "Lakers"? Why are they called the Lakers when there are no lakes nearby? The answer is fairly simple. Before moving to Los Angeles in 1960, the Lakers were located in Minneapolis, Minn. Minnesota's nickname is the "Land of 10,000 Lakes."

Some new team names cause dilemmas. The names of the Orlando Magic, Miami Heat, and Utah Jazz sound clever. But what do you call an individual player on these teams? A Magic? A Heat? A Jazz?

While some team names pose minor problems, others spark major controversy, specifically those named after Native Americans. At the 1992 Super Bowl, Native American groups protested outside the stadium. They demanded that the Washington Redskins, one of professional football's most successful teams, change its name. Many Native Americans believe the team's name insults their race. "Redskins," they say, is a racial slur. Most people would agree. Webster's Third New International Dictionary defines *redskin* as "a North American Indian, usually taken to be offensive."

Native American activists say "redskin" is definitely offensive. They ask the Washington team and its fans to recognize the offensiveness of "Redskins" and change the team name.

"Redskins" is not the only team name Native Americans criticize. They object to all teams using Native Americans as their name and mascot, such as the Atlanta Braves, Cleveland Indians (especially the use of their stereotypical cartoon-Indian mascot, "Chief Wahoo"), Florida State Seminoles, and so on. Although these names are not racial slurs, many Native Americans still object to them.



*This 22-foot tall "brave" cheers for the Atlanta Braves. After each home run, his tomahawk shakes, his head turns from side to side, and his eyes flash red and green. (UPI/Bettmann)*

They point out that no member of any other racial group is used as a mascot and has its image placed on everything from posters and T-shirts to bedsheets and garbage cans. They believe teams choose Native American names for the same reason teams choose names like Pirates, Raiders, and Buccaneers: They associate them with savagery and fierceness. The Washington Redskins fight song, for example, tells the "braves on the warpath" to "scalp 'em!"

According to many Native Americans, besides reducing their image to that of mindless savages, these teams mock their culture. Some fans dress up in war paints and feathers. They carry tomahawks (small hand-held axes) and beat drums. They whoop and yell and dance around as if they were doing some kind of war dance. In last year's World Series with the Minnesota Twins, many Atlanta Braves fans went wild over an arm motion called the "tomahawk chop." At each game, over 50,000 people would move their

forearms back and forth, as if they were hacking away at something with a tomahawk.

Many Native Americans feel that their proud heritage has been turned into a source of entertainment for others. They believe people think it is all right to make fun of their traditional dress, language, and rituals. They do not think teams would treat other groups this way. They ask: Would the New Orleans Saints dare to dress someone up as the pope and have their fans go through the motions of a fake Catholic mass? No, say Native Americans, because this would be disrespectful to Catholics. If no other racial, religious, or ethnic group would tolerate such disrespect, why should Native Americans?

Native Americans ask for the same respect given other groups. Their dances, dress, and rituals are all important parts of their history and their heritage. They help make their culture unique. Native Americans have had much taken from them in their tragic history—their land, their homes, and their traditional ways of life. For them, mocking their culture takes away their dignity.

### The Reaction

Many people have listened to what Native Americans have to say and agree with them. Several years ago, Stanford University, responding to requests from Native Americans, changed its team name from the Indians to the Cardinal. Because of the recent protests, District of Columbia (D.C.) Mayor Sharon Pratt Kelly has advocated changing the Redskins team name. The Washington Post, the major newspaper in D.C., also supports the change. One city radio station has a new policy against using the name “Redskins” on the air. Instead, it refers to the football team simply as “Washington.”

A newspaper in Oregon, the Oregonian, has recently taken a similar step. It will no longer print names such as Braves, Chiefs, Indians, or Redskins in its newspaper articles. In a recent article, the newspaper referred to the Atlanta Braves as “the baseball team in Atlanta.” The Sporting News, a well-known national sports newspaper, is considering adopting a similar policy.

Not everyone has supported the Native Americans’ arguments, however. Many fans oppose the name changes, especially the fans in Washington, D.C., home of the Redskins. The team has won the Super Bowl three times in the last 10 years. Fans love the team. Many know the team fight song, “Hail to the Redskins,” by heart. They display the team logo and colors, burgundy and gold, almost everywhere, from clothing to office windows. They even paint them on cars, buildings, and construction cranes.

Many Redskins fans do not want to change the team’s name. They identify with its proud tradition and have collected team clothing and

paraphernalia for years. Many feel that the name is part of the city’s identity and cannot be replaced. They say its name has nothing to do with making fun of Native Americans. It’s the name of their football team, which they are proud of. They believe that the complaining groups are overreacting and being too sensitive.

Many fans in Cleveland also support their team’s name. They do not consider the use of the name “Indians” as an insult, especially since the name was chosen to honor Lou Sockalexis, the first

Native American major-league baseball player. Other teams with Native American names agree that their teams’ names are meant as an honor, not an insult. They explain that they would not choose a name for their team that would not be respected by others. The names they choose have to represent something special, not something to be insulted. They think that Native Americans should feel flattered, because no other race is honored in this way.

### What Do You Think?

1. Is the name “Redskins” insulting? Does it make fun of Native Americans? Should the Washington Redskins change their name?

*Continued on next page.*

## DID YOU KNOW...

...that the “tradition” of team names is not as consistent as some people might think?

- The **Atlanta Braves** used to be the **Boston Beaneaters**
- The **Kansas City Chiefs** used to be the **Dallas Texans**
- The **Washington Redskins** used to be the **Washington Senators**
- The **Cleveland Indians** used to be the **Cleveland Spiders, Blues, Broncos, and Naps**

2. Would it make a difference if a Native American school or team used the name "Redskins"? Why or why not?
3. Notre Dame University's name is "the Fighting Irish," but Irish-American groups do not complain about it. Why do you think that this name does not cause controversy? (You may want to quickly look up the origin of Notre Dame University as a reference for this question.)
4. Can you think of any other team names or mascots that may be controversial? If so, why would the names be controversial? Who would they offend?
5. Do you think Lou Sockalexis would have felt honored to have Cleveland name its team the "Indians" after him? (Read the article "The Lou Sockalexis Story.") Why or why not?
6. Do you agree with the policy that some newspapers have taken in refusing to publish the controversial team names? Why or why not?

### ACTIVITY

Imagine that you attend Western High School, home of the "Cherokees." The name "Cherokees" has been with the school since it opened, 20 years ago. A large statue of a Cherokee warrior stands in front of the school, and many pictures and paintings of Cherokee Indians are displayed throughout the school.

All team uniforms, school posters, banners, etc., show a Native American warrior shooting a bow and arrow. One of the school cheers goes: "Cherokee people, Cherokee tribe. We're going to get you, and skin you alive. And when we're finished, they'll be nothing left. 'Cause Cherokee people are the best!"

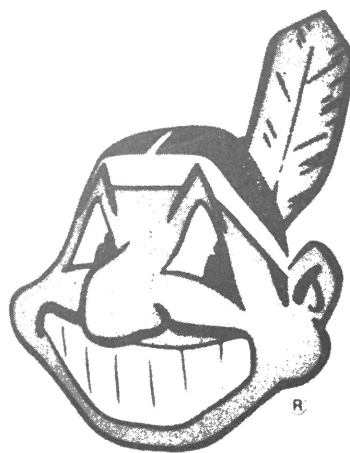
There's also someone who dresses up like an Indian warrior, with feather headdress, bow and arrow, and war paints. He stands on the sidelines at all football and basketball games. This mascot, Chief Scalp'Em, leads a special cheer and war dance during halftime in which the chief and the fans taunt the other team by shouting "war cries" and pretending to shoot arrows. Then, the chief takes a replica of the other team's mascot to the center of the field or court, and with a fake tomahawk, scalps it and holds the scalp high in the air while all the fans cheer and whoop.

Recently, a group of students and parents of Native American descent have filed a complaint with the school board. They have requested that the school stop using the Cherokee as its mascot. They cite the same reasons as other Native

American protestors (described in the article, "What's In A Name?"). They are especially opposed to the cheers used by the cheerleaders and fans and Chief Scalp'Em's halftime show.

The school board understands the concern of the Native Americans. But it also realizes that changing the school's mascot would be controversial and replacing all the uniforms and artwork would be expensive. The board has decided to schedule a special meeting to hear from various people before it votes on what changes, if any, should be made. The board hopes that some kind of compromise can be reached.

Arrange the class into groups of four or five members. Choose one group to be the school board. Divide the remaining groups into those role-playing either (1) Native American students and parents or (2) the cheerleaders and Chief Scalp'Em. All groups, except the school board, should prepare arguments presenting their particular point of view, as well as proposals for any changes they feel are appropriate and why. The school board should select a president to run the meeting. Each group should have one member present its arguments before the board. After each group has presented its case, the board should discuss in front of the class what action to take: Should it (a) leave the mascot as it is; (b) change the mascot completely; or (c) modify the more controversial aspects of the mascot. After no more than 10 minutes, the board should vote.



CLEVELAND INDIANS

*Many Native Americans find the Cleveland Indians' mascot, Chief Wahoo, particularly offensive. (AP/Wide World Photos)*