

Sports, Mascots and Bias

Table Talk: Family Conversations About Current Events



Updated July 2020

The decades-old controversy over the Washington Redskins name is in the news again. In early July 2020, FedEx, Nike and other major sponsors of the N.F.L. football team asked the team to change its name, which is considered a racist slur against Native American people. In addition, several Native American leaders and organizations wrote to N.F.L. Commissioner Roger Goodell, demanding that the name be changed. As a result, in July 2020, the team announced: "In light of recent events around our country and feedback from our community, the Washington Redskins are announcing the team will undergo a thorough review of the team's name."

On July 13, 2020, the team released a press release officially announcing that they plan to change the team's name. In it, they said, "Today we are announcing we will be retiring the Redskins name and logo upon completion of this review." They are now working to develop a new name and design.

"Redskin" is an offensive epithet

For many years, the Washington Redskins' name has been criticized for using the term "redskins." Every major English dictionary describes the term "redskin" as derogatory and Native American people and others consider it an offensive slur. There is debate over whether the term "redskin" originates from the scalped head of a Native American, red body paint or the red color metaphor for race. Regardless of its origin, since the mid-19th century "redskin" has been a slang word white people used for Native American people.

As a result, terms such as "redskin" have almost disappeared from common usage except for sports teams. Even with sports teams, there used to be more than 3,000 teams with Native American names and mascots. That has been steadily in decline; currently there are fewer than 1,000 high school, college and professional teams that use Native American mascots. One other NFL team, the Kansas City Chiefs, has a Native American-themed name. Major League Baseball has two Native American named teams: the Atlanta Braves (known for their "Tomahawk Chop" at games) and the Cleveland Indians. There is also one National Hockey League team, the Chicago Blackhawks.

History of pressure to change the name

In 2014, fifty U.S. Senators signed a letter asking the N.F.L. to push for a name change of the Washington D.C. football team. Also in 2014, the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office revoked the trademark of the N.F.L.'s Washington Redskins for the second time. At the time, President Obama said, "If I were the owner of the team and I knew that there was a name of my team—even if it had a storied history—that was offending a sizable group of people, I'd think about changing it."

In 2015, California became the first state to ban public schools from using "Redskins" as a team name, nickname or mascot.

Age

10 and up

Questions to Start the Conversation

- What do you think about the Washington Redskins' name change controversy?
- What do you think are the different perspectives on this issue?
- Do you think the players and teams, who have a strong influence over the public, have a responsibility to send a strong message about names and mascots? Why or why not?
- Should the fans' and general public's opinions about sports teams' names and mascots be factored into the team's decision?
- Do you think the Washington football team should change their name? Why or why not?

Questions to Dig Deeper

- Are there any sports teams in our town/city or state that use Native American mascots or names? How can we find out more about that?
- How are mascots, slurs, names and epithets used in ways that are offensive and biased? How is this harmful?
- What more do you want to know about Native American history and the bias and discrimination directed at Native American and Indigenous people?

Ideas for Taking Action

Ask: What can we do to help? What actions might make a difference?

- Find out if your town, city or state has a sports team using a Native American mascot and write a letter expressing your point of view about it.
- Educate others about this controversy by sharing information on social media, having individual conversations or organizing an educational forum or debate in school.
- Watch the video [Proud to Be](#) together; discuss the message of the video, what impact it has on your thinking and how that can be conveyed to others.

Additional Resources

- [Should Washington's NFL Team Change their Name?](#) (ADL Lesson Plan)
- [Lewis and Clark: The Unheard Voices](#) (ADL Lesson Plan)
- [Children's and Young Adult Books About Native American and Indigenous People](#) (ADL's Books Matter)