

Imagining the Indian: The Fight Against Native American Mascoting

“Imagining the Indian” is an advocacy documentary examining the movement to eradicate the words, images, and gestures that many Native Americans and their allies find demeaning and offensive. The film opens with a telling historical introduction to the stereotyping of Indian lives and mores present in American life since—as one observer notes—“the Original Sin occurred the minute Europe touched Native shores in North America.”

It then catalogs the decades-long fight Indian lobbying and protest groups have made to change that state of affairs, which the film calls “mascoting,” especially in the world of sports and media. The film uses examples that have become notorious, like baseballs Atlanta Braves’ cringe-worthy tomahawk “chop” (shown in a clip featuring Jane Fonda and Ted Turner)

The film highlights the accelerating pace of addressing mascoting, with emphasis on the recent successful cases regarding changes made by Washington's National Football League (NFL) team adopting the name of the Commanders, and Cleveland's Major League Baseball (MLB) team becoming the Guardians.

Other professional teams--Kansas City's NFL team, Chicago's NHL team, and Atlanta's MLB team—are discussed, too, but their owners remain adamant that they will *never* change their team names or practices (just as the Redskins did). The movie indicates that there are harmful Indian mascots all over the country, and myriad secondary schools still have harmful Native-American themed mascots. “Imagining the Indian” seeks to shine a light on these ongoing harms.

Interviewees include several spokes persons from the DC area such as Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland (Laguna Pueblo), Founding Director of the National Museum of the American Indian, W. Richard West Jr. (Southern Cheyenne), Under Secretary for Museums and Culture at the Smithsonian, Kevin Gover (Pawnee), among many others.

“Changing the names for the Washington Football team and Cleveland's baseball team was long overdue,” said the film’s Co-Director Aviva Kempner, “but the victory is only piecemeal until names are also changed in Atlanta for baseball, in Chicago for hockey, and in Kansas City, and don’t ignore the almost 2,000 other teams with problematic names.” Kempner is a DC-based filmmaker who has directed documentaries on baseball star Hank Greenberg and on the Molly Goldberg TV show.

Her co-Director Ben West (Cheyenne tribe) added that “Imagining the Indian” addresses the misrepresentation of Native peoples in sports, television, movies, pop-culture, and beyond, familiar examples of which are liberally

depicted throughout the movie, such as the subservient Tonto in the Lone Ranger TV shows and the “savage” identity of Indians in innumerable standard Western movies. West noted that the filmmakers are proud that the film is a product of Indian Country.

“Eradicating mascotting of native people will rid us of its perniciousness, which is that exposure to it is at the root of negative stereotyping and treatment of all people of color,” said the film’s Co-Producer Kevin Blackstone, an ESPN panelist and professor at the University of Maryland who also writes sports commentary for *The Washington Post*.

One major Indian group challenging mascotting is called *Not in Our Honor*, which aims to stop cultural appropriation of Indians by the Kansas City football team. They argue that there is much to be done to address the issue. (*The film opens in the DC area on April 4, 2023.*)

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