

# THE FALL OF REDMEN COUNTRY: THE EVOLUTION OF A SPORTS LOGO ISSUE

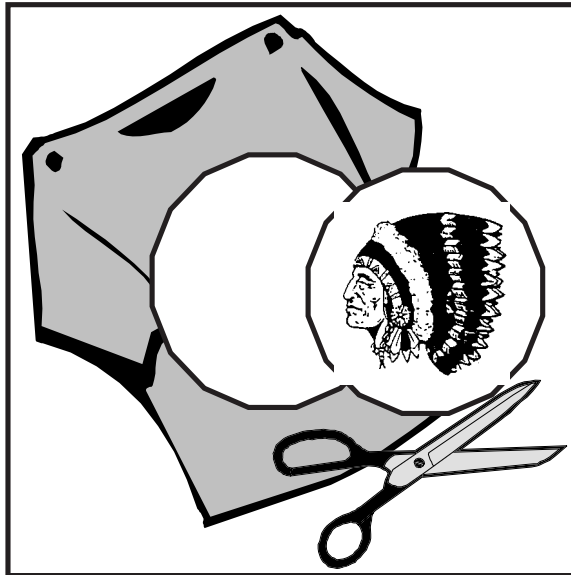
DOUG WELCH

**M**ilton's Mike Johnson has always been one to wear his political leanings on his sleeve.

"The last thing that I ever want to do is admit that I agree with liberal Democrats or teachers for that matter," Johnson told the largest crowd to attend a local school board meeting in many years on July 19. "But we look bad on this one."

"Johnson has been spending the better half of the last decade traveling the Midwest with his wife, Cherie, as an AIDS activist, lecturing school students on the physical and social aspects of the disease. On this evening, however, Johnson wasn't in front of a crowd of about 150 to talk about the disease that has changed his life. Johnson was in the jam-packed high school library to talk about the school's "Redmen" nickname and logo. He was there to tell the crowd that the name is a racist stereotype.

Although Johnson's opening remark received a chuckle from the audience, he wasn't kidding about liberal Democrats. Back in the early 1990s, prior to Mark Neumann coming onto the political scene, Johnson briefly considered making a run at the



Republican nomination for Wisconsin's 1st Congressional District seat. But here Johnson was in July, talking about an issue that many write off as mere politically-correct pap. In many ways Johnson's ruminations are an example of the evolution of the thinking process about the use of Native Americans as sports mascots, including by those who live in small towns where such

symbols have become woven into the fabric of the community.

In 1990, the community of Milton rallied in full force when its high school's nickname and mascot symbol came under fire from a Native American resident. The show of community support was fervent and near unanimous for the school's Redmen nickname and accompanying mascot - a comical, some say drunken, caricature of a tomahawk-wielding cartoon Indian. During a heated public hearing on the challenge of the appropriateness of the Milton High School's mascot and logo, Milton's seven-member school board decided to keep the Redmen nickname but to not endorse the logo

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— affectionately referred to by some locals as "Smokin' Joe." For sporting events, the board adopted a new logo of a common stoic profile of a Native American wearing a feathered headdress, a symbol some believed at the time to be a more honorable depiction of Native Americans.

Nine years later, at the July 19 meeting at which Johnson spoke, members of Milton's school board voted to retire the Redmen nickname by a 5-2 margin. Along with the name, the board eliminated the newer logo, the very symbol it deemed more appropriate and honorable just nine years earlier.

What happened in those nine years? In 1990, letters to editor of the Milton Courier, the community's weekly newspaper, filled page after page in support of the Redmen name. While the issue was being taken up by the school board this year, the newspaper received only a handful of Redmen-related letters and the majority of those favored a change. At the July meeting, the crowd was split evenly in its opinion about whether the school board should retire the name.

Certainly the community's view of the issue changed from the beginning of the decade to its end. It did so, it would appear, without noticeable outside pressure from Native American activist groups. The issue came back to the attention of the school board in May after a petition asking that the name be retired was signed by 69 of the school's 76 teachers. The petition was brought to a board meeting by high school drama teacher Jeff Churchwell, who told the board the name is racist, sexist, and promotes stereotypes that should not be held up by public education institutions. At the same meeting, members of the Milton Clergy Council, an organization with representatives of each of the community's churches, told the board its group was unanimous in its support for change. Other professionals from the community, including school and domestic violence counselors, spoke of the trappings a school faces when it holds up stereotypical images of existing ethnic groups.

By no means had the pendulum of the public's view on the issue swung entirely the direction opposite of 1990. There were also many people at the May meeting, as well as the one in July, who supported the Redmen name, citing tradition and claiming that the practice of using Native Americans as sports mascots is a way of honoring them. As evidenced by a petition signed by more than 900 Redmen supporters, many people in the community continue to believe the school should retain its nickname. But the school board, as well as the overwhelming majority of high school staff, were persuaded by compelling arguments made through the years concerning the image of a public education institution that uses such symbols.

Anyone who has heard Johnson speak knows that he does not subscribe to doctrines of political correctness and is outspoken with his conservative Republican views. It's when the Mike Johnsons of the world view the issue of Native Americans as sports mascots in similar light as say, Democratic Representative Frank Boyle, that it makes one wonder if this is an issue of more substance than some traditionalist would like to admit.

### **What's In a Name?**

Redmen, Blackhawks, Warriors, Braves, Indians and Chiefs. These are names used by 40 school districts in the state as sports mascots with accompanying logo symbols that depict Native Americans. They are names and images that schools and entire communities have embraced for decades. They are names that become a community's identity.

But more than 1,000 high schools and universities nationwide have gone away from the practice of using ethnic groups, particularly Native Americans, as sports mascots. In the past 20 years, 19 state schools that once used Native Americans as sports mascots changed their nicknames and logos. Colleges in Wisconsin, including Marquette University, the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, UW-LaCrosse and Ripon College, have made the transformation with varying reactions. At

Whitewater the change was barely noticeable. At Marquette, however, a move from the Warriors to the Golden Eagles upset many an alumnus.

Attempts to change Native American-related nicknames in some communities have been contentious and near-disastrous, in some cases tearing communities apart. Over the past few years, attempts to remove names in Mosinee (Indians) and Mukwonago (Chiefs) have been long, drawn-out affairs with the names remaining and communities divided on the issue. In Medford, the school board changed its Red Raiders name only to have a movement take root to change it back again nearly two years later. After more bickering, the Native American logo has been retired but the Medford Red Raiders name remains. In Menomonie, three school board members lost their seats in a recall election after the board voted to retire the school's Indians name. At the first meeting following the recall election, the new Menomonie school board reinstated the Indians name. The decision came on the same day as when a Menomonie student was awarded \$100 for his design of what was to be the school's new Mustangs logo.

Sports names become important fixtures in schools and communities. It is a common belief that the names, as well as the general practice of using Native Americans as sports mascots, is a way of honoring Indian peoples and traditions. But in the late 1960s, Native American advocacy groups began raising concerns about the practice. In the early 1970s, Stanford University became the first major university in the nation to change its name. Stanford went from the Indians to the Cardinal — as in the color.

If the practice is as accepted nationwide as it once was, there would now be more sports teams with Native American references instead of fewer. In recent years there have been an influx of new sports teams and many existing franchises that have changed names for various marketing reasons. The vast majority of minor league baseball teams, for example, have adopted new names and logos in the last few years. Teams like the Beloit Brewers changed to the Beloit Snappers. Scores of minor league teams nationwide changed their identities in the name of selling new hats but none changed to Indian symbols. Professional soccer, hockey and arena football leagues have

been introduced throughout the nation this decade. Yet none of the new teams that fill those leagues use Indian monikers.

What was once a common practice now is near taboo. It could very well be because people are beginning to listen to Native American voices like that of George Newago, tribal chair for the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa.

"Over the past 25 or so years, we have been telling people that these sports mascots are demeaning, derogatory creatures who affect our children," Newago said. "Children should be going to school to unlearn stereotypes that have been placed upon the Native Americans. These images distort attitudes toward Native Americans. Non-Native Americans are not in the position to tell our Band what is not derogatory or offensive."

Newago's comments came in response to a survey conducted by the *Milton Courier* newspaper of Wisconsin tribal leaders. The leaders were asked their thoughts on Milton's Redmen

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name and logo as well as how they view the practice of Native Americans being used as sports mascots. To the later question, Clarice Werle, research supervisor for the Forest County Potawatomi Community, echoed Newago's concerns.

"There are several issues to be considered regarding the use of Native Americans for mascots and logos. I believe this would apply to any other ethnic group as well. However, American Indians are the only ethnic group so 'honored' and without their permission. Would another ethnic group such as the Latino feel 'honored' in the same way? I don't think so and neither would it likely occur. The majority of Native American Indians feel the use of these mascots and logos are offensive and derogatory to them and to their ancestors. If we honor someone then we consider their feelings. If an entire population or ethnic community keeps saying that they don't wish to be a mascot symbol, the ultimate honor is to listen to and respond to that request."

To Werle, Newago and other members of the Native American community, the central issue is that of an unwilling ethnic group being portrayed and used as mascots and logos. But what happens in communities like Milton and other places that have used the images for decades is that a different perception comes into focus. The thinking goes that the Native American community should be pleased and proud that community's like Milton have chosen to honor Indian heritage. And even though some people may come to view names like "Redmen" and "Redskin" as being harmful they have no problem with terms like "Indians," "Chiefs" and the ever-popular "Warriors." That view is countered by the contention that Indian men are not limited to the role of warrior or chief. Those images, some Native Americans contend, are nothing more than curios of the past for an entire culture that is only now beginning to make headway in society after having its North American population deflated from some five million prior to the arrival of Europeans to around 250,000 in the late 1800s. Some Native Americans also see this symbolism as a mockery of their cultures.

They see objects that are held sacred — such as the drum, eagle feathers, painted faces and traditional dress — being used not in sacred ceremony, or in any cultural setting, but in another culture's games.

In an editorial published June 22, the *Omaha World-Herald* pondered whether the issue would have even arisen if more care were taken by those trying to honor Indian cultures through sports mascots.

"One wonders if the problem would have appeared if it weren't for the behavior sometimes associated with spirit symbols. Native Americans sometimes seem the most upset with the idiot Hollywood war-whoops, tomahawk chants, aped dances and drugstore costumes that are set out by cheerleaders and fans as representing the Indian culture. Attend any Atlanta Braves baseball game and it should be clear why mascots have become an issue. Likewise, the Cleveland Indians could go a long way toward restoring sensitivity if they got rid of the ridiculous caricature that serves as their spirit symbol."

### **What Happened In Milton?**

At one time, Milton High School presented what Native Americans considered to be among the worst of names and most insulting of caricatures. Prior to 1990, the school coupled its Redmen name with its "Smokin' Joe" logo. "Smokin' Joe" was the unofficial name of a hooked nose, tomahawk wielding, dancing caricature that could have been lifted right out of a 1950s Porky Pig cartoon. A large, color reproduction of "Smokin' Joe" hung from the Milton gymnasium wall and whooped over packed houses during basketball games as the crowd chanted "This is Redmen Country." "Joe's" image graced all kinds of official school items from stationary to the cover of the student handbook.

On September 28, 1990, Carol Hand, a 10-year resident of the school district and a member of the Sokaogon Band of Lake Superior Chippewas, wrote a letter to the School District of Milton stating that she had concerns about the name and logos used by the school during sporting events and on school notices. Hand's

daughter graduated from Milton High School in the spring of 1990. Hand stated that the logo portrays "American Indian people as screaming savages, or as foolish, war-like, caricatures." At the October 11, 1990 school board meeting, Hand spoke to a crowd of about 60 people and outlined her concerns. Several people from the audience spoke in support of the Redmen name and the board agreed to appoint a committee to study the issue. The committee met once and decided to recommend to the board that the name remain and that the board adopt two different logos. One was a stoic profile of a Native American with a headdress designated to be used for athletic purposes. The other was a chief in a headdress behind a shield to be used on documents such as diplomas and graduation announcements.

Letters of support of the Redmen name poured into the local newspaper. During a highly-charged school board meeting on November 27, 1990, about 100 people showed up to demonstrate their near-unanimous support for the Redmen name. Many spoke passionately about their attachment to the name and image. The board adopted the committee's recommendation, a move that disappointed some in the crowd because "Smokin' Joe" would no longer be a part of Milton High School.

Hand, too, was not pleased. The board's decision did not cut to the Native Americans as sports mascot issue. On January 25, 1991, Hand filed a discrimination complaint against the school district. In her letter of complaint, Hand stated, "Racial and cultural discrimination are perpetuated throughout the Milton school system through the use of demeaning names for sports teams and the use of stereotypical and demeaning portrayals of American Indians."

Some Redmen supporters began funneling their anger toward Hand. Sweatshirts were sold around town that had the old "Smokin' Joe" image with the phrase "Hands off our Redmen" embroidered across the front. Hand left town, claiming she received a death threat on her telephone answering machine.

But Hand's discrimination complaint lingered. The school district denied Hand's complaint on grounds that she had no standing, because she did not have a child in school. An appeal was filed with the Department of Public Instruction. The district contended the issue was a matter of local control. The suit ended in January, 1992, when Rock County

Judge John Lussow issued a writ of prohibition preventing the DPI from hearing the discrimination appeal filed by Hand against the Milton school district.

The ruling ended the school district's need to defend the Redmen name in court. To many, Hand was viewed as the villain in the whole matter. She had dared to question one of the community's most long-standing traditions. Although most people in the community didn't

agree with Hand's methods, many began to slowly put the Redmen issue under close and not-so-impassioned scrutiny. The *Milton Courier* began taking a hard editorial stance against the Redmen name and on several occasions called for its retirement. The paper also refused to use the name in sports articles because of its offensive nature. Counselors and staff members at the high school periodically voiced concerns about the name and the paradox it presents when trying to counsel students on harassment issues. The school's Equity Committee discussed the issue on several occasions during the mid-1990s.

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The new logo was never embraced by the school. It appeared on very few sports uniforms and was virtually invisible. It was clear to many that the name and logo were non-functional. Almost every year the school board was faced with some aspect of the issue. In 1991 the Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council forwarded a resolution to the DPI opposing Indian logos. In 1992, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Herbert Grover wrote all school districts which have Native Americans as sports mascots and asked that the names and logos be reviewed. The board was constantly dealing with little flare-ups of the issue, the most recent in 1997 during homecoming festivities when the senior class resurrected the "Smokin' Joe" image on t-shirts. The matter came to the school board which told students they would not be allowed to wear the shirts at school-sponsored functions because the image was not the school's official logo. At that meeting, students voiced a desire to have some sort of mascot or logo to rally around.

From the meeting came the idea to survey students about their thoughts on the Redmen name and the school logo. Of the 828 students polled, 54 percent said the name should be retained. Thirty-five percent wanted the name changed and nine percent said they didn't care. The survey left people on both sides of the issue claiming victory. Supporters of the Redmen said a majority voted in favor of keeping the name — end of discussion. People on the other side of the issue noted that 46 percent of students in the school either want the name changed or didn't care — not a ringing endorsement for a name and image whose function is the unite and rally the community.

In April, the *Courier* and *Janesville Gazette* printed portions of responses to the *Courier* survey of the state's tribal leaders about the Redmen nickname and logo. Julie Barton, of the Oneida Nation, compared the term Redmen to other derogatory slang terms.

"It's no different than 'nigger' or 'Chinaman,'" Barton wrote.

Thomas Maulson, president of the Lac du Flambeau speculated on the origin of the term.

"It's a derogatory reference that comes from the 'redskin' bounty previously used by the U.S. government agencies to inflict genocide activities upon the native inhabitants in North America," Maulson said.

Newago wrote this about the Redmen term:

"Redmen is a pejorative term that did not originate from the Native Americans themselves. This in itself should indicate how we feel about this term. The use of the term was wrong then and it is still wrong now. Referring to Native Americans as Redmen is the same as referring to the Afro Americans as 'darkies.' Wrong is wrong. Referring to an ethnic group by skin color or shade is discrimination. It's also a racial slur that should never be allowed."

That same month, Churchwell circulated a petition throughout the professional staff at the high school asking that the name be dropped. Sixty-nine of 76 teachers at the school signed the petition. It seemed as though the people who were forced to deal with the name on a day-to-day basis were the ones who had the most concerns. Also, those who were forced to give the issue deep thought sometimes found themselves re-evaluating their own personal stance.

Dale Beaty had yet to run for school board when he wrote a letter to the *Courier* in support of the Redmen name at the time of the 1997 homecoming incident.

"It's truly sad to see that some adults in the community seem more than willing to trash our roots simply to please a bunch of uptight whiners and the apologists who want to appease them," Beaty wrote in 1997. He was elected to the school board in 1998 and gave the issue great thought prior to a May 24 meeting when he introduced a motion to change the school's name to the Wildcats.

"I could not vote to extend the use of the name 'Redmen' anymore than I could vote to extend the use of the term 'Nigger' or to keep someone at the back of a bus," Beaty said during an impassioned speech.

The board took up the issue at its May 24 meeting in response to Churchwell's teacher petition. Three motions, including Beaty's, were made during the meeting to retire the Redmen name. But each motion was tied to a formula for replacement. Consequently, none received more than three votes when four were needed for passage. Board member Wilson Leong brought the issue back to the board at its July 19 meeting. Just like the previous meeting, the board heard about 90 minutes of testimony from the public before deliberating. Leong made a simple motion to respectfully retire the Redmen name. The motion was approved by a 5-2 vote.

To many observers, including former Superintendent Jon Platts, the vote culminated an evolutionary process that began with Hand's letter of complaint. The July meeting was the district's first in 30 years without Platts, who retired June 30.

"The issue has tempered considerably," Platts said. "We went to court based on the question of whose decision is this? It's a community issue and the community needs to deal with it. It's been an evolutionary process. There's been on-going publicity and discussion not only locally but nation-wide when you look at what's going on in Atlanta and Cleveland. And there's been an on-going understanding. Just look at our culture today. No longer are we a White society."

And no longer does Milton High School have the term Redmen in its official vocabulary. Now the community enters its life-after-logo phase which begins this school year with the selection process for a new name and mascot. In some communities, as demonstrated in Menomonie and Medford, that phase can be just as contentious as process was to eliminate the name in the first place.

We may or may not have heard the last word from "Redmen Country."