

IN WHOSE HONOR?

OVERVIEW

Native American mascots are common in both professional and collegiate sports in the U.S. There are the Florida State “Seminoles,” the Washington “R—skins,” the Atlanta “Braves,” “Chief Illiniwek” at the University of Illinois, and the University of Utah “Utes,” to name just a few. The presence of Native American mascots is not without controversy, however. Many sports fans tend to support Native American mascots, arguing that they are honorific and traditional. In contrast, the National Coalition on Racism in Sports and Media (American Indian Movement) opposes such mascots as racist and dehumanizing. Native Americans do not share a monolithic position: some support the use of Native American mascots while others oppose it. Some argue that the use of Native American mascots can be educational and spread awareness while others argue that these mascots entrench stereotypes and commodify Native American experiences for the benefit of others.

The University of Utah has been using the “Utes” nickname since 1978 and has historically used various Native American mascots at sporting events. Before colonization, Nunt’z (Ute) peoples lived in roughly eleven autonomous bands in most of the present day state of Utah. There are now three federally registered Ute nations, each with Reservation land: the Southern Ute Indian Tribe/Reservation in Southwest Colorado, the Northern Ute or the Ute Indian Tribe of the Uinta-Ourey Reservation in Northeast Utah, and the Ute Mountain Tribe/Reservation (including the White Mesa Ute Tribe) in the four corners region (specifically Utah, New Mexico, and Colorado). Since 1978, the University of Utah has used the “Utes” nickname with the permission of the Northern Ute government. The Northern Ute are a living, breathing, and changing people who, like most Native Americans, live what may appear to be a standard everyday life in line with the dominant culture. Currently, the University of Utah officially uses the licensed nicknames Utes™, Utah Utes™, Runnin’ Utes™; has a Circle and Feather® logo (colloquially referred to as the drum and feather logo); and uses the mascot “Swoop,” a red-tailed hawk native to Utah. The University has permission from the Northern Ute tribe to use these symbols under a Memorandum of Understanding first signed in 2003 and renewed in 2014. In 2014 the University and Utes Nation also initiated the “Ute Proud Campaign” including a website with information about the relationship between the University and the Utes, and suggestions for appropriate fan behavior, a Ute Proud T-Shirt, and a scholarship for Ute students. Yet controversy persists about whether the University ought to keep the “Utes” nickname.

In 1997, the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) aired *In Whose Honor?*, a documentary by Jay Rosenstein about Charlene Teters, a Spokane Indian who led a campaign against the University of Illinois’s mascot, “Chief Illiniwek.” *In Whose Honor?* brought light to some of the issues surrounding the use of Native American mascots and exhibits several argumentative strategies invoked by both advocates and opponents of Native American mascots in professional and collegiate sports.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this lesson is to *foster a critical comparison and contrast between the “Utes” nickname and Chief Illiniwek and other mascots.*

STUDENT READINGS

1. Rosier, Paul C. 2003. “Sports Mascots, Names, and Images.” In *Native American Issues*. Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1-29.
2. Endres, Danielle. 2015. “American Indian Permission for Mascots: Resistance or Complicity within Rhetorical Colonialism,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 18, no. 4, 649-689.

WATCH

Jay Rosenstein. 1997. *In Whose Honor?* Public Broadcasting Service.
<http://www.pbs.org/pov/inwhosehonor/>

MATERIALS

For this lesson, the classroom will ideally be equipped with a computer and projector screen. Since students will be breaking up into groups, the room should be arranged in a way that allows for easy mobility. Students will need pens and paper.

PROCEDURE

At the beginning of the class session, the instructor should give a mini-lecture on Native American mascots in the U.S. and the history of Native American symbols and mascots at the University of Utah. Materials for this lecture can be gleaned from the essay by Danielle Endres noted above as well as from the PowerPoint presentation linked to this lesson plan. After the lecture, show Rosenstein’s film, *In Whose Honor?* Alternatively, if time is limited, you could have students watch the film before class. Then have students break up into small groups and discuss the possible differences between the “Utes” and “Chief Illiniwek” and between the “Utes” and the “R—skins.” Ask them to discuss: the role that permission plays in whether they support or oppose the use of the symbols; the difference between using a nickname (“Utes”) and a mascot (“Chief Illiniwek”); how using the name of a specific Native American nation might be different from using a general moniker; whether there is a difference between when a university or a professional athletic association uses Native American mascots and symbols; and how some uses of Native American symbols might be respectful and others not. At the end of class, close with a group discussion centered on the following questions: First: Did the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) do the right thing letting the University of Utah keep the “Utes” nickname and banning “Chief Illiniwek”? And, second: What should happen to the “Utes” nickname in the future?