



# DEMEANED AND VICTIMIZED

INDIANS SAY SPORTS  
MASCOTS, ADS  
CREATE SUBHUMAN  
IMAGE

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*ABC News*  
March 20, 2005

Would you buy Martin Luther King Malt Liquor or wear Jesus Christ Jeans? If any of these make you uncomfortable, you might have an inkling of how Lakota Sioux, and American Indians in general, respond to the use of the name Crazy Horse to market everything from jeans to dancing clubs.

American Indian activists see a connection between the use of the name of a man considered a spiritual leader and the acceptance of Indian-related nicknames and mascots for sports teams, which they say range from the simply demeaning to the sacrilegious and together keep American Indians from being considered on a level with other ethnic groups.

"[The use of such images] reinforces all of the stereotypical conceptions of native people so prevalent in the American consciousness, effectively



reducing the fullness of our humanity to a unidimensional farce," Joe Gone, a psychologist and member of the Gros Ventre tribe said in an interview with the American Psychological Association Monitor.

The fact that these mascots and advertising images exist, according to Gary Brouse of the Interfaith Council on Corporate Responsibility, is evidence that American Indians have been left out of the mix as America has become more conscious of the rights of minorities.

### **Problems of Perception**

A figure of a black, a Jew or Latino comparable to the Cleveland Indians' Chief Wahoo mascot would not be tolerated by society, just as the use of the name of a person of another race who was as revered as Crazy Horse is by American Indians to advertise an alcoholic beverage or dance club would be met by outrage, Brouse said.

"Crazy Horse was a very sacred leader," he said. "He is mostly known in non-Indian Country as a military leader. In Indian Country, he is a religious leader."

Though associating the name with a clothing line, as Liz Claiborne Inc. does with its Crazy Horse brand, would seem less offensive to Indians than some of the other ways it has been used, the company's ads featuring skinny models casting languid looks at the camera are hardly harmonious with what Crazy Horse represents to Indians.

"He's a cultural hero," said Wilmer Mesteth, a Lakota tribal leader. "He was something like Martin Luther King or [Nelson] Mandela. Fighting for the rights of his people, and he gave the ultimate sacrifice of his life."

The company issued a statement last week in response to a request for an interview that said: "We oppose products that reinforce negative stereotypes about Native Americans or any other ethnic, racial or cultural group. Moreover, we have never used Native American imagery or iconography, and we never will."

Liz Claiborne "intends no disrespect to any member of the Native American community," the statement said. "Although the issue has yet to be resolved, we understand the views that are being expressed and we remain hopeful that we will eventually reach a mutually acceptable agreement."

### **Taking the Sacred, Making It Silly**

The Lakota's long running battle to get companies to stop using the name Crazy Horse to market products is just one aspect of American Indians' struggle to redefine themselves in the eyes of non-Indians.

"I think that part of it is that America needs to be educated," Mesteth said. "We're alive and well and still struggling. We're struggling against great odds to maintain our lives."

That effort includes the annual appeals to professional sports teams like the Cleveland Indians, Atlanta Braves and football Washington Redskins and Kansas City Chiefs to rethink their nicknames and mascots. The insults presented by these names and figures goes beyond the caricature. Just the name Redskin is considered by many American Indians to be a term as insulting as words referring to other ethnic groups that are unprintable.

Many of the objects commonly waved around by team mascots, such as staffs decorated with eagle feathers or "peace pipes," and the long trailing feathered headdresses they often wear are sacred objects to various tribes. It's as though they were waving crucifixes or Torah scrolls to spur on their fans.

"It says, 'Your religion is not as important as mine,'" Brouse said. "Why can't we carry our understanding of what is offensive and prejudicial over to other groups? Why can't we understand what is offensive to others?"

"I know [New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani] has been very upset and very vocal about museum displays using the Virgin Mary. This is even worse," he added, referring to two Brooklyn Museum of Art shows that featured work that Giuliani considered insulting to Catholics.

Numerous universities, colleges and schools have responded to Indians' requests to get rid of their Indian-related nicknames and mascots. Some schools — such as the universities of Wisconsin and Iowa — have gone so far as to schedule no games against teams bearing Indian-related nicknames.

Professional teams have been less responsive. Spokesmen for the Braves and Indians did not return calls for comment on this issue.

### **A Culture Erased?**

Some even go so far as to say that it creates an attitude towards Indians in which they are looked at as fair game for any kind of abuse. A recent federal study found that 70 percent of the violent crime committed against Indians is committed by members of other races, and nearly 50 percent of the time the perpetrator is drunk.

"I hadn't thought about it before, but it makes sense," said Kate Stetson of Legi/x, a firm that lobbies on American Indian issues, when asked about the issue. "What mascots do is trivialize and demean individuals and erase a culture. The less you think people are like you, the more you feel that you can be violent with them with impunity."

Only Asians come close to Indians in suffering crime at the hands of other races, but overall, they are victimized at a rate less than one-fourth of the rate at which American Indians are victimized. Indians suffer violent crime at a rate of 124 for every 1,000 people, while the national average is 50 per 1,000. African-Americans suffer violent crime at a rate of 60 per 1,000, about 20 percent of which is committed by other races.

The study does not examine what percentage of these crimes could be considered bias or hate crimes, though, which leaves the meaning of the figures open to interpretation.