Hank Aaron Steps Up to the Plate on the use of Native American Names and Mascots in Sport

by Richard E. Lapchick
Special for the Sports Business Journal

In one day, Hank Aaron did more for the campaign to stop using Native American names and mascots for sports teams than the 30 plus years that the campaign has been active.

As fans gathered for the All-Star Classic in Atlanta, Aaron stepped up to the platform that throwing out the first pitch gave him. He talked to the media about race and sport. This was not new for the man who had his own personal triumph of breaking Babe Ruth's career home run chilled by innumerable death threats and a barrage of hate mail. What was new was his statement that if the name "Braves" that he wore on his chest for decades was hurtful to many Native Americans, then it should be changed. He instantly became the most prominent athlete to take that position publicly.

I always found it incongruous that Ted Turner never really reacted when people confronted him about owning a team called the Braves that rallied around the Tomahawk Chop. Here was a man who brought the Soviets and Americans together for the Goodwill Games. He hired Hank Aaron, arguably baseball's most outspoken critic on racial issues, as a high-ranking executive for these same Braves. He donated $1 billion to the United Nations. Nothing in his personal or professional profile would conjure up a question about race other than the Braves.

I had been in that position myself. I played freshman basketball for the St. John's Redmen. My father coached those Redmen for 20 years, and was affectionately called "the Big Indian." He never had reason to question the nickname or the wooden Indian mascot.

That all changed late one evening in 1969 at Mama Leone's Restaurant, near the old Madison Square Garden. Whenever we were there to eat after a game, people would come up to my father to greet him or ask for an autograph. This night started no differently until an older man who appeared to be in his late 60s, like my father, asked if he could join us.

He told my father how much he admired him as a coach and as someone who helped to integrate basketball. (My father had signed Nat "Sweetwater" Clifton, the NBA's first black player, when he was the coach of the Knicks in 1950). We smiled until he added that these things made it particularly embarrassing that my father coached a team called the Redmen and was called "the Big Indian." The man was an Indian.

That was the first time that we had ever thought about what the "Redmen" meant. It began to conjure up memories of headlines: "Redmen on the Warpath;" and "Redmen Scalp Braves [Bradley]." The Braves even "hung the Redmen" once. Something was wrong with the picture.

Here was the man who helped integrate basketball being thought of as racially offensive. He died in 1970 and the issue persisted for another 20 years until St. John's, like other universities that came to understand, rid itself of the Indian symbols and name.

Too many haven't. More than40 colleges and universities and five professional teams, including the Braves, use Native American names and symbols. Would we think of calling teams names such the "Chicago Caucasians," the "Buffalo Blacks," or the "San Diego Jews?"

Could you imagine people mocking African Americans in black face at a game? Yet go to a game where there is a team with an Indian name and you will see fans with war paint on their faces. Is this not the equivalent to black face?

Although the thought of changing tradition is often painful, the sting of racism is always painful to its victims.

Supporters of maintaining the names and mascots generally claim that their use furthers our appreciation of Native American culture. They say that names are meant positively, that to be called a "Brave" is a compliment. There are even Native Americans who don't challenge that view.

Nonetheless, most Native Americans believe that campuses where Indian names and mascots are used can be hostile learning environments not only for Native American students, but all students of color and all students who care about racism. They have no doubt that this issue is about racism.

They insist that on most campuses where Native American symbols prevail, there are hardly any with a Native American studies department or serious attempts to recruit Native American students and faculty.

The fact that history has ignored the incredible pain we have inflicted on Native Americans does not now give us the right to ignore their largely muted call. Hank Aaron has given that call a new and powerful voice.

Like all people of color and women who fight for their rights, their voices must be raised to make people who look like me become uncomfortable like that Indian man did with my father and me in 1969. Like Hank Aaron did before the All-Star game.

In June I spoke at the Sovereignty Symposium in Tulsa, Oklahoma. It is an annual gathering of Native American leaders to discuss issues of their sovereignty- how to protect it where it is intact and how to reclaim it where it has been stolen. The use of Native American names and mascots for sports teams is one of the issues Native Americans believe is a breach of their sovereignty.

That is so ironic. To me, Native Americans are our most spiritual people. They believe that we all live within the one circle of humanity, no matter what the color of our skin.

We wait for our sports teams to honor that circle.

Northeastern University's
CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF SPORT IN SOCIETY
360 Huntington Avenue, Suite 161 CP
Boston, MA 02115-5000
Phone: (617) 373-4025
Fax: (617) 373-4566 / 2092

E-MAIL US at sportinsociety@neu.edu