Cleveland Indians Will Abandon Chief Wahoo Logo Next Year

The Cleveland Indians will stop using the Chief Wahoo logo on their uniforms beginning in 2019, according to Major League Baseball, which said the popular symbol was no longer appropriate for use on the field.

The logo has long been the source of anguish and frustration for those who consider it offensive, outdated and racist, but for many of the team's fans it is a cherished insignia — a divide that has played out at all levels of sports in recent years with teams featuring such nicknames and insignias. Most universities have stopped using Native American nicknames, while other teams, like the Washington Redskins in the N.F.L., have resisted growing pressure to do so.

Chief Wahoo, a cartoonish caricature of a Native American that has assumed several forms over the years, first appeared on the Indians' uniforms in 1948. In recent decades various groups across North America have appealed to the team to renounce the logo, to no avail. But over the past year the commissioner of baseball, Rob Manfred, has pressured Paul Dolan, Cleveland's chairman and chief executive, to make a change.

Citing a goal of diversity and inclusion, Manfred said in a statement provided to The New York Times that the Indians organization "ultimately agreed with my position that the logo is no longer appropriate for on-field use in Major League Baseball, and I appreciate Mr. Dolan's acknowledgment that removing it from the on-field uniform by the start of the 2019 season is the right course."

Phillip Yenyo, the executive director of the American Indian Movement of Ohio, cheered the decision as "another step in the right direction" but lamented that the move was being put off for a year.

"Why wait?" he said. "If you are going to go this far and get rid of it, why not do it now? All they are doing is testing it out, because the name has to go, too. The nickname absolutely has to go. It's not just the logo."

Photo

The Washington Redskins and the N.F.L. have shown little, if any, desire to stop using the team's logo and nickname. Credit Nick Wass/Associated Press

Yenyo also called on the Atlanta Braves to change their name.

Cleveland has been edging away from the logo in recent years and has used it less frequently, but beginning in 2019 it will not be seen at all on the team's uniforms, or on banners and signs at Progressive Field, the team's stadium. Consumers will still be able to purchase items with the logo on them at the team's souvenir shops in the stadium and at retail outlets in the northern Ohio market, but those items will not be available for sale on M.L.B.'s website.

"We have consistently maintained that we are cognizant and sensitive to both sides of the discussion," Dolan said in a statement issued by M.L.B. "While we recognize many of our fans have a longstanding attachment to Chief Wahoo, I'm ultimately in agreement with Commissioner Manfred's desire to remove the logo from our uniforms in 2019."

Discussions about ending the use of the logo did not include deliberations over changing the name of the franchise, though opponents have also sought that over the years. Many schools and universities have changed their nicknames away from representations of American Indians. The St. John's University Redmen, for example, became the Red Storm in 1994, and teams at the University of North Dakota, once known as the Fighting Sioux, have been the Fighting Hawks since 2015. But many teams still cling to the old names and likenesses despite pressure to eliminate them.

While getting rid of Chief Wahoo will be applauded by opponents, some may see it as only the first step toward the ultimate goal of changing the team name.

Protests against the team names, logos and mascots have flared occasionally over the past few decades. The Redskins are seen by many as having one of the most egregiously insensitive nicknames, though the team and the N.F.L. have expressed little interest in changing it. The Braves, of Major League Baseball, have also drawn criticism, especially for the so-called tomahawk chant performed by fans at games.

In 2014, under Mark Shapiro, the team president at the time, the Indians reduced the use of the Chief Wahoo logo and introduced a block C as their primary insignia. Shapiro, who is now the Toronto Blue Jays' president, said the grinning caricature made him uncomfortable. But Chief Wahoo was still used by Cleveland, including during high-profile games in the postseason (the team reached the World Series in 2016).

Small groups of protesters regularly gather outside Progressive Field before important games, such as home openers and playoff games. While the protesters frequently incur the wrath of fans passing by on the way to the stadium, they have been on amicable terms with the team itself, which often coordinated with the police and the protesters to ensure their safety and right to assemble peacefully.

Some have sought action from the courts to outlaw the logo and the team name. During the 2016 postseason, Douglas Cardinal, an indigenous Canadian activist, sought an injunction from a Canadian court to prevent Cleveland from using uniforms depicting Chief Wahoo or the team name while playing in Toronto.

The petition was denied, and Manfred said at the time that the courts were not the venue to resolve the dispute. He did, however, promise to engage the Cleveland ownership about significant changes regarding the use of the logo. Last April, during the Indians' home opener against the Chicago White Sox, Manfred for the first time made clear his desire to get rid of the logo altogether and outlined his intention to push Dolan on the issue.

Although the Indians will stop using the logo on their uniforms, they will not relinquish the trademark and still will be able to profit off sales of merchandise bearing the logo at the stadium and in the Cleveland area. But by maintaining the trademark, the team, with the supervision of M.L.B., retains control of the proliferation of the logo. If it relinquished the trademark, or announced an intention never to claim its protections, another party could legally assume control of it and use the logo in other ways.

Before the Indians officially adopted the logo, it was seen in local newspapers to accompany results and news about the team. In 1947, the then-owner Bill Veeck, known generally for his progressive views in other areas (he signed Larry Doby as the first African-American player in the American League), hired a cartoonist to come up with an official team logo.

That version is regarded as more offensive than the current red, white and blue model, which depicts a person with an exaggerated toothy smile, huge eyes and a feather. Some proponents of the logo say that it and the team name actually honor American Indians. But others say the use of ethnic groups as mascots and nicknames for teams is demeaning.

The Indians team name itself is supposedly derived from Louis Sockalexis, a member of the Penobscot nation in Maine, who played for a different Cleveland team in the National League from 1897 to 1899.