

Story published: Tuesday, Feb. 12, 2008

# THE OLATHE NEWS

## Indian mascot time has come

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I saw the pre-game "Indian" ceremony at the Shawnee Mission North gymnasium for the first time before last week's basketball games between SM North and Olathe North.

The minute I walked into the gym I wondered if I had stepped into some sort of time-warp and gone back to an era when such displays were socially acceptable. In a way, I had. According to SM North athletic director George Sallas, the ceremony has been part of the pre-game since the 1970s, when his wife was a cheerleader at the school.

Basically, there's a student standing out at mid-court, wearing "Indian" garb while a percussionist from the school band belts out an "Indian" rhythm on the bass drum. Sallas said the mascot's outfit — a feathered headdress and beaded leather tunic and chaps — are made by an authentic Indian tribe.

Still, seeing a white kid standing out there wearing it with his arms crossed and a stern expression on his face seemed to reinforce every age-old stereotype of the Indian as a "noble savage."

He looked like a cigar store Indian, the kind lampooned on the TV show "Seinfeld" as kitschy and outdated — and that was almost 15 years ago.

The school has written permission from the Eastern Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma to use that imagery, signed in 1992 by George J. Captain, the chief of the tribe at that time. Students who want to wear the mascot costume must write an essay that shows they understand that they will be representing an entire race of people.

Regardless of what that tribe thinks, some local American Indians have objected to SM North's pre-game ceremony.

Sallas said the school has received complaints in the past, particularly from people affiliated with the Haskell Indian Nations University in Lawrence. In response to those complaints, SM North has removed elements that used to be in the ceremony, like a "tomahawk chop" and the stereotypical "war whoop" in which the students put their hands to their mouths repeatedly.

"We do everything in our power not to be disrespectful to the Native Americans," Sallas said. "We do everything in our power to keep it as respectful as we can and honor that image, not degrade it."

It's worth asking, though, if removing overtly offensive elements like the war whoop and the tomahawk chop is enough. Should a school with a tiny American Indian population be allowed to claim Indian symbols and imagery as its own?

The old Shawnee Indian Mission that the school district is named after is not something that most

people with native blood want to celebrate. It was a tool of assimilation, where young Indians were forced to adopt the religion, dress and language of the white man at the expense of their own culture.

Now that culture is being relegated to a pre-game ceremony done before basketball games by people who have little concept of the spiritual significance behind it.

There are people of native blood within the Shawnee Mission district who are offended by the display at SM North. I talked to one of them last weekend. But many of them would rather go about their daily business and just avoid the school gym than raise a fuss about it.

They're tired of fighting battles like that. Battles against the old Cleveland Indians' mascot, "Chief Wahoo," and against the most galling insult in professional sports, the Washington Redskins.

They shouldn't have to fight those battles anymore. After all, this is the 21st century, at least outside of the SM North gym.

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