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USA Today – Editorial

NCAA takes high road with ban of offensive mascots

By Myles Brand, NCAA president

Much has been written over the past week about the NCAA Executive Committee's decision not to conduct championships on the campuses of member institutions where the use of nicknames and mascots representing American Indians is considered hostile and abusive. Some of the articles have been supportive of the committee's decision; some thought it fell short and called for an outright ban of such mascots.

NCAA president Myles Brand.

By Donna McWilliam, AP

Others, the majority, saw the move as unnecessarily intrusive on local decision-making, bureaucratic kowtowing to political correctness, too impractical or ill-defined to make a real difference, or a decision that simply caught everyone off guard.

However, to ensure that the discussion springs from the same facts, here are some important points to keep in mind:

- While I agree with and support the Executive Committee's decision, neither I nor any member of the NCAA staff had a vote. The decision was made by a dozen chancellors and presidents from all three membership divisions appointed to represent their institutions, their conferences and the values of higher education. There were no dissenting votes, either.
- The decision does not mandate that institutions change their mascots. This is a membership-based association where institutional autonomy is valued; there is no league office that can dictate. The decision applies only to NCAA national championships.
- The decision does not go into effect until Feb. 1. The affected institutions (18 out of more than 1,000 schools) have six months to appeal their classification and the broader decision of the Executive Committee.
- Finally, this is a teachable moment. A major part of this effort is aimed at initiating discussion on a national basis about how Native American Indians have been characterized and, in some cases, caricatured. In that, the decision has already been successful.

To be fair, some American Indian tribes have expressed their approval of the manner in which their names and imagery are used by specific institutions. Florida State University is a well-documented case in point, and that will likely be the basis for any appeal. The Executive Committee must take such claims seriously.

At the same time, many individuals and tribes view such uses as disrespectful toward their customs and culture. They see a level of contempt in the same way African Americans saw black-face minstrel shows decades ago as contempt for their race. We would not think of allowing nicknames or mascots that disrespect African Americans. Surely, American Indians should be accorded the same treatment.

This is America, where individuals and groups have the right to express how they feel about the way they are presented to the public. Organizations such as the NCAA have the responsibility to pay attention to and respect such expressions. This is not about an effort to be politically correct. It is about doing the right thing.

Imitation, it is said, is the highest form of flattery. But when it is viewed in the eyes of those being portrayed as hostile and abusive — no matter how well-intended — imitation becomes the lowest form of disrespect and insult.

It is time to bring such practices to an end. The NCAA has no authority to force its member institutions to change their mascots or nicknames. Even so, the NCAA can and has determined that within the environment of NCAA national championships, behaviors that inappropriately characterize a group of people will not be welcomed.

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