

The Illini should put away their 'chief'

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Where's Chief Illiniwek?

He's missing in action, and that's a good thing.

Chief Illiniwek is the feathered, prancing, moccasin-wearing mascot of University of Illinois athletic teams.

He is also among the most demeaning of the sports mascots, symbols and nicknames whose existence is an affront to all Native Americans. Others of Illiniwek's ilk include the Washington Redskins, Chief Wahoo of the Cleveland Indians and the Tomahawk-chopping fans of the Florida State Seminoles and Atlanta Braves.

Chief Illiniwek has been a revered presence at Illinois sports events for nearly 80 years. In 1989, when the "Fighting Illini" team advanced to the Final Four of the NCAA men's basketball tournament, the chief danced with them every step of the way.

He was the living, breathing, feathered embodiment of school pride for Illinois students, alumni, faculty, trustees and fans.

This year, the Illinois men's basketball team, ranked No. 1 in the land, has advanced to the "Sweet 16" of the 2005 NCAA tournament - aka "The Big Dance."

But this time there is a big difference for Fighting Illini fans.

Chief Illiniwek isn't dancing with them.

His feathers and faux costume are packed away back in Champaign-Urbana waiting for football season.

Why has the chief stopped dancing?

I tried to call Chief Illiniwek to ask him personally. Cathy Arner, an Illinois athletic department spokeswoman, wouldn't put me through to the chief because, "he never speaks. It's a tradition." Besides, Arner added, "The chief is not a mascot, he is a symbol. He only appears at halftime of home games."

No matter. It is as obvious as the chief's bogus bona fides that American culture and the times they are a-changing. The irresistible force of diversity has swept across the land.

The chief obviously chickened out because he and his handlers were afraid of the controversy, the jeers and the protests his presence might create outside the cozy confines of home.

You know what? It makes sense for the chief to stay home.

His act means nothing to the people whose performance matters most, the Illinois players. They probably turn their heads in embarrassment when he performs. If they don't, they should.

And the fact that the chief is staying home is tacit acknowledgement that the end of his era is at hand.

It makes sense for another reason, too.

A Native-American elder - me - is invoking the Curse of Illiniwek on the Illinois basketball team. This means that Illinois will not win the championship this year - or any year - as long as Chief Illiniwek exists.

My apology if your bracket gets busted by the Curse of Illiniwek.

Blame the chief.

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