

'Chief Illiniwek' to miss Final Four trip

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Top-seeded Illinois is preparing to take on Louisville in the Final Four, but the Illini will take the court in St. Louis Saturday without their mascot.

"Chief Illiniwek," a student in buckskins, feathery headdress and makeup has been less visible at the school's athletic events during the past five years.

Why?

Well, trouble seems to find the Chief, as Illinois has been the target of protests, demonstrations and lawsuits, which claim the figure perpetuates a racial stereotype and demeans Native Americans.

The other three finalists' mascots are expected to attend, according to the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.

Illinois has come under more fire recently when, in a lawsuit earlier this month, the Illinois Native American Bar Association and two individuals filed suit seeking to force the school to stop using the Chief as its sports mascot.

Yet Chief Illiniwek, who doesn't usually attend road games during the regular season, remains Illinois' official school symbol, and the university wishes that he not be referred to as a mascot.

In January, the NCAA minority issues committee asked schools that use the American Indian as a nickname to conduct a six-month self-evaluation of its use. The findings are due May 1.

The school's board of trustees, meanwhile, has grappled with the controversy for years. In 1990, it supported the Chief. But that endorsement could be fading.

In the fall, the board unanimously adopted a resolution that whatever consensus conclusion it reached would include recognition of American Indian cultures and traditions.

In a vote nearly a year ago, almost 70 percent of Illinois students who participated supported the Chief.

During games, Chief Illiniwek usually doesn't do much except present a four-to-six-minute halftime dance designed to bring fans to their feet.

And even if he did make the Final Four trip, the NCAA has a carefully-planned halftime show, and it probably would not make time for the Chief's routine.

"All aspects of the Chief and its dance should be eliminated," said Jen Tayabji, a former Illinois student who is a member of the Progressive Resource/Action Cooperative, a group involved in trying to do away with the Chief and the "Fighting Illini" moniker.

And so the debate rages on, but as the Chief (who is Illinois student Kyle Cline) sits home this weekend, there will be plenty of T-shirts and signs bearing his likeness in the Edward Jones Dome in St. Louis.