

## **"Illiniwek" will sit out Final Four**

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Michigan State's "Sparty the Spartan" and the University of Louisville's "Cardinal Bird the Cardinal" will be here for the NCAA Final Four this weekend in all their costume finery. So will "Rameses the Ram," mascot of the University of North Carolina Tar Heels.

But the team symbol with the shortest drive to St. Louis won't make the trip. "Chief Illiniwek" will stay home at the University of Illinois.

The chief - a student in buckskins, feathery headdress and makeup - has become less visible at athletic events over the past five years or so. Except for the occasional road game, like the Braggin' Rights showdown here between Missouri and Illinois, he seldom leaves Urbana-Champaign. There, his appearances are mainly at football, volleyball and men's and women's basketball games, said Kent Brown, the university sports information director.

Often, where there's the chief, there's trouble. Sometimes it's one person in the stands, bellowing charges that the character demeans American Indians. Sometimes it's an organized demonstration, with harsh signs and angry words.

Detractors have achieved attention, but not the ultimate goal of packing up the costume for good. The chief remains Illinois' official symbol - the university prefers he not be called a mascot - but one that causes discomfort for the athletic program and university as a whole.

Brown said it would not be fair to say the chief's role has been reduced just to quell the controversy. "But it takes that out of play," he added.

Chief Illiniwek does not parade along the sidelines, hang out with the band or pick a pseudo fight with another team's mascot. He is a performer who presents an Indian dance, four to six minutes long, that draws rapt fans to their feet.

Even if the chief came to the Final Four, as he did the last time Illinois made it, the NCAA's carefully planned halftime show probably would not make an opening for his routine, said Tom Hardy, spokesman for the university.

Many high schools and smaller colleges have shed nicknames and symbols based on American Indians, but fans of Chief Illiniwek insist he is not comparable. They argue that he is a respectful, proud character who emphasizes the state's heritage and educates

people about American Indians.

"The chief embodies all the qualities that we try to strive for," said Nick Klitzing, president of Students for Chief Illiniwek and a student member of the university's Board of Trustees. "It embodies courage, strength and unity and tradition. He is the token of the University of Illinois and has been for 78 years."

Critics complain that an Indian mascot, particularly at a largely Caucasian campus, is racist and insensitive, and that 78 years of it is about 78 years too many.

"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" team name.

A symbol should be unifying, not divisive, Tayabji said. If it dissuades American Indian students and professors from coming to Illinois, it isn't worth it, she said.

Most important, Tayabji said, the fact that many American Indians find it offensive "is good enough reason to get rid of it."

Kyle Cline, the current Chief Illiniwek, could not be reached for comment.

The Board of Trustees has grappled with the controversy for years. In 1990, it endorsed the chief. But that support may be waning.

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

There are plenty of opinions from which to draw. There are whole organizations pro and con. The latter includes a Web site - [www.retirethechief.org](http://www.retirethechief.org) - started by Brian Jewett, a professor.

About a year ago, nearly 70 percent of Illinois students who voted in a referendum backed the chief.

Meanwhile, a report last fall by the North Central Association, a school accreditation organization, said the university would face damage if the issue isn't resolved.

And earlier this month, opponents of the chief, including the Illinois Native American Bar Association, sued to get the trustees to end the chief's reign. They said he perpetuated a racial stereotype, violated Indians' rights and violated the board's own anti-discrimination policies.

The university has publicly said that it is not violating any laws or policies.

Illinois was one of 31 schools asked by the NCAA in November to explain why they feel it necessary to use American Indian imagery, said Gail Dent, an NCAA spokeswoman. Illinois' self-evaluation is due May 1.

While the chief himself will be absent from the Final Four, there are sure to be plenty of his likenesses on Illinois fans' T-shirts and other gear, and perhaps the occasional fan made up in the chief's image.

Charlene Teters, an Illinois graduate and a member of the Spokane Nation Indian tribe, said she decided about the last time Illinois made the Final Four that it was time for the chief to go. Teters, of Santa Fe, N.M., said she was upset to see her teenage children react to his performance with embarrassment and humiliation.

She eventually helped found the National Coalition on Racism and the Media, and became a familiar figure in the University of Illinois debate.

"This is not just me. It is a movement," Teters said. "But the quality of the debate really hasn't changed much."

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