# “Redskins Pride”: How Some USD Natives View the NFL Controversy

By Jackie Hendry

“To gain psychological advantage over another team, you might want to put something fierce on the side of your football helmet: a lion, a tiger or a bear,” said Dr. Gary Cheeseman from his office in the Delzell School of Education building.

“Well, when you run out of lions and tigers and bears you generally will turn to things that you think, via stereotypes, are fierce fighters and warriors. That’s what American Indian people have been stereotyped as.”

 Over half-way through the 2013 NFL season, discussion over the name of the Washington Redskins continues to make national headlines. Everyone from Redskins owner Dan Snyder to President Barack Obama has weighed in. Protests have been staged. Debates have raged online whether the name is offensive or serves to honor the history of our country’s indigenous tribes.

 Dr. Cheeseman—a man with Ojibwe, Abenaki, Mic Mac and Irish heritage—knows where he stands on the issue. He finds the name “disgraceful.”

As the Washington Redskins controversy has remained on the national stage, one criticism of the discussion has been the lack of prominent Native voices.

A study done by the National Annenberg Election Survey a few years ago found that 90% of self-identifying Native Americans were not bothered by the team name. A link to an article about this study is featured on a section of the Washington Redskins’ website. The section, labeled Redskins Pride, seems dedicated to fighting back against those who believe the name should be changed.

The tagline: “Our past isn’t just where we came from—it’s who we are.”

That past seems to be a large part of the problem according to other Native members of the USD community.

“Growing up, I always remembered the story behind the saying ‘redskin,’” recalled Alexis Oskolkoff, a Sichangu Lakota tribal member.

“When [settlers] were killing Native Americans, they would get the scalp of the Native Americans to prove they had killed one. They would actually get a bounty for it. I still believe it’s a very demeaning association for Native Americans.”

“I think the fact that it’s been around for so long--it’s kind of part of American history or Americana, so people think it’s alright,” said USD senior David Estes, a member of the Lower Brule Sioux tribe.

Because the term has been in use for so long, critics of the controversy have wondered why this year has seen such a strong debate over the name. After all, the Washington Redskins have been a part of the NFL since the 1930s.

“I think some people have been aware of it and have been making it a big deal for a long time, and some people are just not realizing it,” suggested Tyler Tordsen, a Sisseton Lakota tribal member.

Tordsen is a USD senior double majoring in political science and economics. He is also a current senator with the Student Government Association. Political involvement seems to run in his family. His grandfather, Phil St. John, has been an advocate for changing high school team names and mascots that reference Native Americans since the 1970s.

Tordsen doesn’t buy the argument that the longstanding history of the team’s name makes it worth preserving.

“Just because it’s been a tradition for so many years doesn’t necessarily make it right,” he said.

The Redskins’ name alone isn’t the only source of contention when it comes to professional sports and their relation to Native Americans.

“I don’t mind the Kansas City Chiefs or the Florida Seminoles, which are more general names,” said Estes.

“Redskin is a derogatory name. Kind of like the Cleveland Indians. They use a derogatory mascot. I think ‘the Redskins’ is a derogatory mascot and a derogatory team name.”

While Torsden agrees that the “cartoon-like” logo of the Cleveland Indians is problematic, the Redskins’ mascot is less of an issue to him.

Rather, he is troubled by some fan traditions.

“When you see fans in headdresses that are supposed to be sacred, or beating drums in the stands or something like that where they don’t necessarily have the educational background on it—that’s where I feel it’s pushing a line,” Torsden explained.

He isn’t the only one who feels this way.

“What also comes with name is the way people dress at the football games, and the way that they do the war whoops ,” said Oskolkoff, who was at the center of her own controversy over the D-Days weekend in October.

According to Oskolkoff, while she and her young son were dressed in traditional regalia for the D-Days parade members of the student group Strollers pointed, jeered and gave war whoops. Strollers has since issued an apology.

“It brings it back to what happened over D-Days: people making fun and mocking. They don’t know that those are things that are very sensitive to Native Americans,” Oskolkoff added.

Oskolkoff’s son, 10, has expressed his own opinions to his mother.

“One thing he told me was that people dressing up that way makes fun of us as human beings. He believes that we earn our eagle feathers for our achievements. He knows how hard I work on his regalia and how expensive it is. For people to dress up in a $20 suite to mock us is an insult to him.”

Recently, Dr. Cheeseman watched a Redskins game on television and noticed with disgust how some of the fans were dressed.

“They’re wearing war paint, and war paint is very spiritual in Native cultures. The Ojibwe used to put paint on their babies’ cheeks and put them out on a table so the Creator could see them. There’s meaning behind those things!”

Tordsen, who went to predominantly white schools in Rapid City, remembered debating these points with classmates even in middle school.

“Some people would use the argument that it’s honoring, like the New England Patriots,” Tordsen said.

“My example back would be if there was a team recognizing the Priests or the Saints or something like that, and there was a guy at half time running out on the field with a Bible and dancing around, some people might be offended by that. ‘Well, it’s just honoring.’ It depends on the context.”

Dr. Cheeseman, in contrast, is firm in his outlook.

“You can’t honor somebody by giving them something and saying that that’s an honor. I have to be honored by it in order for it to be an honor to me. That’s something that’s pretty deeply written in Native cultures everywhere.”