

NATIONAL COALITION ON RACISM IN SPORTS AND THE MEDIA

March 30, 2005

DARK CLOUD OF RACISM HANGS OVER ILLINOIS TEAM

In 1989, the last time an Illinois basketball team went to the Final Four, a lone Illinois student, a member of the Spokane Indian nation, stood outside the basketball arena holding a sign that read, "Indians are People, Not Mascots." Sixteen years later, this Illinois alum, Charlene Teters, no longer stands alone. Every national American Indian organization in the U.S., including the Peoria tribe of Oklahoma, the descendants of the Illinois tribes, has asked the University of Illinois to retire the outdated mascot "Chief Illiniwek" -- a white student dressed in Sioux regalia who dances at halftime to a Hollywood "Indian" beat -- and to stop promoting stereotypical Indian imagery on its sports merchandise. The University of Illinois has consistently refused.

The anti-defamation movement against these public stereotypes has received the support of major civil rights organizations including the NAACP, the Southern Poverty Law Center, and the United States Commission on Civil Rights. But the University of Illinois won't budge.

The NCAA has expressed its misgivings about the sports symbol and requested a self-study on the subject, due May 1st, 2005.

The North Central Association, the academic institution that accredits the university, issued stringent advice to the university's leaders to take action. University trustees have not acted.

The Southern Poverty Law Center's Hate on Campus program has expressed concern about the racial tensions on the campus that the battle over the symbol exacerbates. No response from Illinois.

A team this good deserves better. And so do Illinois students, who are bitterly divided over the issue of their mascot, often along racial lines.

This year, sales of Illinois merchandise are skyrocketing and the university is profiting from the merchandising of racial stereotypes -- sports souvenirs displaying the logo of an "Indian chief" in a feathered headdress. American Indians protest that other groups are no longer stereotyped publicly.

Denied any other venue for discussion, American Indians are taking the issue to courts other than the basketball arena. The Illinois Native American Bar Association is suing the University of Illinois for violation of its own mission statement and for violation of the civil rights of American Indians in the state under the Illinois Civil Rights Act of 2003.

The University has already spent a million dollars trying to stifle free speech about the mascot on the campus. The American Civil Liberties Union of Illinois won that lawsuit.

In a third lawsuit, a booster group is being sued by five Native Americans who were denied entry to a reception after having purchased tickets. Despite their attachment to their fictional chief, who dates from 1926, Illinois fans have never welcomed contemporary Native Americans to their campus. On the contrary, after speaking out

against the sports mascot, American Indians are often harassed and intimidated. Minority enrollment is in a steep decline at the campus, where unfortunately racial stereotyping is not only tolerated, but promoted by the university's leadership. However, this same leadership refuses to go on the record to defend the mascot in print.

The National Coalition on Racism in Sports and the Media (NCRSM) urges the University of Illinois to show the same courage as its basketball players, to be a model off the court as well as on, to retire the mascot performance and stop merchandising American Indian images on sports souvenirs. It's all about respect.

NCRSM congratulates the Illinois team on its successful season and wishes it luck in its battle for a national championship. NCRSM regrets that such a dynamic team, a team that epitomizes cooperation and team spirit, must play under this dark cloud of racial stereotyping.

National Coalition on Racism and Sports in the Media

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For more information, see www.retirethechief.org and www.inwhosehonor.com

North Central Association http://www.uiuc.edu/admin2/nca_report/index.html

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