

National Indian Health Board



November 1, 2021

Terry McGuirk
Chairman, Atlanta Braves
Truist Park
755 Battery Avenue
Atlanta, GA 30339

Robert D. Manfred, Jr.
Commissioner of Baseball
The Office of the Commissioner of Baseball
1271 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

Re: Atlanta Braves and the “Tomahawk Chop”

Dear Mr. McGuirk and Mr. Manfred,

On behalf of the National Indian Health Board (NIHB)¹ and on this first day of Native American Heritage Month, we write to express deep and troubling concerns about the Atlanta Braves and their usage of both a Native “derived” team name and the “Tomahawk Chop” fan cheer during their baseball games. **The Atlanta Braves must acknowledge their role in perpetuating harmful behaviors and attitudes towards American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) people, change their name, and abandon their usage of Native inspired imagery.** Our people are being hurt by these derogatory and harmful activities of the Atlanta Braves. The organization and Major League Baseball must take steps to mitigate that harm.

The “Tomahawk Chop” cheer, which has been utilized by the team’s fanbase since 1991, has routinely been denounced by organizations that represent AI/AN peoples. Further, the cheer and its associated imagery derive from the team’s usage of the name “Braves” and their appropriation of AI/AN cultural status and imagery, which we experience as insulting, demeaning, belittling and a breeding ground for further cheers or chants that trivialize our people and our cultures. These practices constitute erasure of true cultural and sacred practices. They trivialize and commodify cultural practices that have been under assault for centuries.

Native mascots, their associated imagery and cheers are destructive to AI/AN youth and contribute to negative thoughts and feelings our young people experience. In fact, a recent study, published in June 2020, affirms what we know experientially: Native mascots “in particular lower self-esteem, lower community worth, less capacity to generate achievement-related possible selves, and greater levels of negative effect.”² They also increase prejudices among the non-Native population. According to the same study, “these mascots activate, reflect, and/or reinforce stereotyping and prejudice among non-Native persons.”³ These concerns around mental health are longstanding. In 2004, the American Psychological Association called for the immediate

¹ Established in 1972, the National Indian Health Board (NIHB) is an inter-Tribal organization that advocates on behalf of Tribal governments for the provision of quality health care to all American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/ANs). The NIHB is governed by a Board of Directors consisting of a representative from each of the twelve Indian Health Service (IHS) Areas.

² Laurel R. Davis-Delano, Joseph P. Gone & Stephanie A. Fryberg (2020) The psychosocial effects of Native American mascots: a comprehensive review of empirical research findings, *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 23:5, 613-633, DOI: 10.1080/13613324.2020.1772221

³ *Id.*

retirement of Native mascots on the basis of their contribution to adverse mental health outcomes.⁴ Outdated mascots like the Braves and cheers like the “Tomahawk Chop” contribute to the dehumanizing of AI/AN peoples.

The Braves organization has a history of using its name as a launching point for demeaning imagery. From 1966-1985, the Braves utilized “Chief Noc-a-Homa” as their mascot, even having him “live” in a teepee in the outfield. In 1983, he was joined by “Princess Win-A-Lotta.” While both mascots are gone, the introduction of the “Tomahawk Chop” in 1991 and its continued popularity show the potency of a name as a launching point for demeaning imagery and mocking behaviors. The Braves influence even extends beyond the baseball diamond and into other sports. When the current Washington Football Team was created in 1932 in Boston, Massachusetts, they shared a stadium with the Braves and even used the name “Boston Braves,” mirroring their baseball counterparts. When the two teams ceased sharing a stadium, the football team kept the Native iconography and adopted the “R” word mascot that they held until they recently decided to change to be on the right side of history.

In addition to the damage the team’s name and chant behaviors currently perpetrate on American Indian and Alaska Native Peoples, the long history of the Braves baseball team being a seed for further offensive imagery, whether it be created by the team itself or created by others, creates a need to act swiftly to mitigate future damage. **We call on the Braves to acknowledge their role in propagating harmful AI/AN stereotypes and imagery and change their name.** As history has shown, eliminating the “Tomahawk Chop” will only result in something else taking its place within a matter of years. To prevent this outcome, the Braves must cut off the source and eliminate AI/AN imagery and names from its organization.

Recently, Major League Baseball has taken steps to right the wrongs of the past and mitigate the damage being done in the future. They have acknowledged that the policies of an earlier time, born out of ignorance and racism, have no place in contemporary society. Last year, the Commissioner of Baseball announced that the Negro Leagues would be retroactively acknowledged as Major Leagues, giving African American players who played before integration their rightful spot in the record books alongside their white counterparts. In July, the Cleveland Indians announced their name change to the Cleveland Guardians. There is still more work to be done, but the time is now. Major League Baseball and the Atlanta Braves organization must work together to chart a path forward that is respectful of AI/AN people and our cultures. We believe that a sport that prides itself on being the National Pastime should be inclusive of all Americans.

Sincerely,



Stacy A. Bohlen, *Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians*
Chief Executive Officer
National Indian Health Board

⁴ See <https://www.apa.org/pi/oema/resources/indian-mascots>