

**NATIONAL COALITION ON RACISM  
IN SPORTS AND THE MEDIA**

403 Scovill Street, Urbana, Illinois 61801

April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2006

Dr. Walter Harrison  
Chairman, NCAA Executive Committee  
President  
University of Hartford  
200 Bloomfield Avenue, Sports Center  
West Hartford, CT 96117-1545

Dear President Harrison:

We wish to commend the NCAA staff committee's response to the second appeal by the University of Illinois (March 7, 2006) and to express our strong agreement with the NCAA criteria for championship sites. However, we were surprised that the NCAA accepted the rationale of the University of Illinois regarding its nicknames "Illini" and "Fighting Illini" and we feel compelled to express our serious concerns about the nicknames one more time. Although this process has been long and deliberative, we would appreciate the Executive Committee's reconsideration of arguments against the retention of the nicknames. We remain concerned that a partial solution will not bring an end to racial hostility towards Native Americans and their allies on the Urbana-Champaign campus, and will not result in "an atmosphere of respect for and sensitivity to the dignity of every person" (NCAA Memorandum, March 7, 2006).

The appeal of the University of Illinois argued that, "Illini, the nickname for the University's athletics teams, derives from the State's name. It is not directly associated with Native Americans."

In contrast, we find the opposite to be true. **Illini is, and always has been directly associated with Native Americans.** The University has only recently separated the mascot (Chief Illiniwek) from the nicknames (Illini or Fighting Illini) in a strategic bid to keep its Indian sports identity while complying with the NCAA policy. In reality, the "Chief Illiniwek tradition" incorporates three inseparable elements: a performing mascot, a logo, and a nickname. These three elements are intertwined in the minds of Illinois athletics supporters and coalesce to form the Illinois sports team identity: a tribe of fans (Illini) led by a chief (Illiniwek).

We urge the NCAA to re-consider the following points about the nickname:

1. It is disingenuous to argue that the name "Illini," has nothing to do with Native Americans because it is derived from the name of the state when the name of the

state is itself derived from the (mis-understood) name of the Native peoples living there when the French arrived.

2. Illini and Fighting Illini pre-date the invention of “Chief Illiniwek.” The mascot became popular precisely **because students already thought of themselves as a pretend tribe, the Illini**. The earliest reference to the term “Illini” in the university’s sports program is the “Tribe of Illini,” an association of letter athletes created in 1914. (*The Illio*, 1916, vol. 22, p. 230). **From its origins, the term “Illini” has been used to refer both to the actual Illinois Indians (whom students thought, and still think, had vanished) and to a pretend tribe of students on campus.**

3. Public information explaining the university’s traditions proudly made the connection between the nickname and Native Americans explicit:

"ILLINI TRADITIONS include the University motto, "Learning and Labor," school colors, which are orange and blue, and its symbol, the Indian, representing the original inhabitants of Illinois who gave the state its name. From the Illini Indians (pronounced ill-eye-nye) come references to the University's football teams as the "Fighting Illini" and many other references involving the name "Illini," as well as Indian-named honorary organizations and Illiniwek, chief of the Illini, symbolized by an authentically Indian-garbed student appearing with the football band and on other occasions."

University of Illinois Reference Folder, 1973-74, p25, U of Illinois Archives.

4. In its appeal the University cited the 1920s fundraising slogan for Memorial Stadium, “Build That Stadium for Fighting Illini,” as evidence of the idea that “Fighting Illini” refers to students and alumni killed in World War I. **The university failed to mention that the 1921 stadium fundraising booklet illustrates that phrase with an Indian rather than a soldier**. American Indian imagery was a significant part of the fundraising campaign and the stadium was described as a symbol of “a new, united fighting, aspiring tribe of Illini.” The University has recently revived this little known reference as part of its strategy to dupe the NCAA and keep the nickname. (See images in Appendix 1)
5. While “Illini” is not a name the Peoria Tribe calls itself, it is frequently used by others to refer to the Peoria Tribe and their ancestors. This is acknowledged by the Peoria Tribe. For example, in the resolution requesting that the university retire its mascot tradition, the Peoria identify themselves as the “descendants of the Kaskaskia, Peoria, Piankeshuw, and Wea tribes, a group of tribes **known as Illiniwek, or Illini**, or Illinois Nations whose members were removed from their homelands and forced to move first to Missouri, then Kansas and finally into the northeastern part of Indian Territory, now Oklahoma...” (Boldface added).
6. Finally, the “History of the terms “Illini” and “Fighting Illini” contained in the University’s appeal is full of irrelevant, unsupported, and erroneous information. The trustees have been reproached by two distinguished professors of history for their attempt to rewrite the University’s history (See Appendix 2).

Even though the mascot and logo may not be visible at NCAA championship events, if allowed to keep the nickname, Illinois fans will continue to identify themselves as “Illini,” whom they define as Indians. With no pressure or incentive to create a new sports identity, Indian imagery will continue to proliferate at Illinois sports events. In fact, if the trademarked logo is retired, fans may be motivated to create their own “Indian” imagery over which the University will have no control. Unfortunately, in that case, the NCAA’s goals will have been totally undermined and tensions between Native and non-Native students will likely persist.

Although the NCAA process has been a careful and deliberative one and we appreciate the careful attention the NCAA leadership has given to this issue, we would ask the Executive Committee to once more re-consider whether the University of Illinois has persuasively and accurately argued that the nickname “Illini” is not directly associated with Native Americans. Southern Americans insisted that the Confederate battle flag was not linked to segregation or slavery and was simply a symbol of Southern tradition and heritage. In much the same way, the University of Illinois now claims that “Illini” is an invented term that is simply a nickname for a resident of Illinois. The evidence simply does not back up this claim.

Finally, the NCAA Memorandum of March 7, 2006 “strongly recommends that the University undertake an educational effort to help those among its constituents and in the general public understand the origin of the term and the lack of any direct association with Native Americans.” We have absolutely no faith that the trustees of the University of Illinois will follow through on this recommendation unless coerced. Although they have participated in the inquiry forced on them by the NCAA, Illinois trustees have demonstrated no commitment to the larger goals behind the NCAA policy and no understanding of what it means to promote cultural diversity with respect and dignity for all. The trustees were made aware of the information in Dr. Fryberg’s studies of the harmful effects of these practices (cited in the March 7, 2006 Memorandum to the NCAA Executive Committee) *prior to their last two appeals* to the NCAA, for example. Our concern is that while outwardly complying with the NCAA, Illinois will covertly continue to promote its romanticized attachment to its own “Tribe of Illini” and Native Americans will continue to be sports mascots rather than equal citizens on the Illinois campus.

Sincerely,

Brenda Farnell and Carol Spindel  
Co-presidents, Illinois Chapter,  
National Coalition on Racism in Sports and the Media

cc: Myles Brand, Bernard Franklin, NCAA Executive Committee