

(<http://werehistory.org/>)

Retiring Chief Wahoo

(<http://werehistory.org/retiring-chief-wahoo/>) Chief Wahoo sign inside the Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH (Photo: Todd Arrington/We're History)

The 2018 baseball season promises thrills for fans across the country and around the world. Before the season is complete, there will likely a frenzied wild-card race, a dark horse winning a division, and a new, young ballplayer capturing fans' attention. Among all the anticipation of surprises, though, one thing is certain: it is the last go-round for Cleveland's "Chief Wahoo." He will be gone from the Cleveland Indians' uniforms after this season, ending a long history of the mascot's association with the team. Although the caricature has its defenders and has accumulated a fair amount of mythology surrounding its origins, the true story is more prosaic. It relates to a long history of unquestioned racism toward Native Americans that may be starting to come to an end—albeit for practical rather than principled reasons.

The Indians' symbol for half a century is being retired after the 2018 season from the players' uniforms and all signs around Cleveland's Progressive Field. To some fans, it is a sad occasion to witness the departure of the Chief. He is seen simply as the most identifying factor of the Cleveland franchise rather than a racist caricature long past his prime. Other fans and members of society view the Chief as a humiliating icon offensive to Native Americans. Either way, the franchise's ownership now believes that too much attention has been focused on the controversy, resulting in his ban through an agreement with the Commissioner of baseball.

As a 1901 charter member of the American League, the Cleveland team had a catalog of nicknames, ranging from the somewhat ridiculous "Bluebirds" to the worthy "Naps" in honor of the great second baseman Napoleon Lajoie. The Naps released Lajoie after the 1914 season, raising the need for a new nickname. There are several different versions of why the name "Indians" was selected, the most famous of which is the idea that it was in reference to Louis Sockalexis, a Maine Penobscot who played for the Cleveland Spiders from 1897-1899. In fact, there is little evidence to support the story that the team's name is an homage or refers to any particular person or nation, and the actual origin of the name "Indians" is unknown.



In the early days there was little fanfare about the name. In the climate of that era, few of those attending games saw harm in using the name Indians, as minority groups were often the targets of both subtle and overt racism from the established classes. The persecution of Irish, German, and Jewish players was standard procedure in the major leagues, and black players had been banned since the 1880s. Choosing a name like Indians raised few eyebrows in the America of 1915.

Then the nickname got a picture. In the late 1920s, Cleveland ownership added an Indian caricature to the left sleeve of the team's uniforms. The patch featured a brave or chief in a depiction that few among the team's white fan base found offensive. Some fans even began to arrive at Cleveland's League Park wearing Indian headdresses, a practice usually confined to Opening Day. For the remainder of the 1920s and 1930s, the nickname and sleeve patch drew scant criticism from the public.

At about the same time, the Cleveland Plain Dealer started to display an Indian caricature on the front page the day after a ball game. If the team was victorious, the Indian had a big smile; for a loss he wore a frown and his face was covered with various bumps, bruises, and bandages. This visual sports summary became a popular feature of the newspaper with fans buying the morning edition and looking for the Indian to see how the team fared the previous day. Slowly the caricature gained momentum, emerging as a popular image for the decades ahead.

In 1946, Bill Veeck, one of baseball's greatest entrepreneurs, bought the Cleveland franchise and immediately sought to bring national attention to his latest venture. Veeck introduced brass bands and fireworks at the Indians' Municipal Stadium, creating an entertaining atmosphere for families. In addition to the promotions, Veeck had the Indian sleeve patch re-designed to draw more attention and provide a mascot for Cleveland fans. The new Indian, designed by teenager Walter Goldbach, featured a yellow smiling face, prominent teeth, and a large, crooked nose. On April 16, 1947, opening day of a new season, the image appeared on the upper left side of the players' warm-up jackets. The Cleveland Plain Dealer's game day issue featured the paper's own version of the logo with a large drawing of an Indian brave with the same features but holding a scalp in one hand and a war club in the other. Fans attending the games and reading the summaries could not help but notice the new sketch, and they began to identify it with the ball club.

Several years later the design changed slightly once again to feature a red face and smaller nose. The name "Chief Wahoo" soon became closely associated with the caricature. A number of sports writers used the name from time to time and it caught on with the public, giving an identity to the character seen on

the uniforms and jackets.

In the era of baby boomers and cowboys and Indians on television, young boys grew up with the Chief, locking him in with Cleveland baseball. War whoops and drum beats became trendy things to do when rooting for the Indians. Baseball jackets with the Chief on them were great sellers for the large department stores in the Cleveland area. As fans reached college age and eventually adulthood, they could not attend an Indians game without at least a shirt or sweatshirt featuring the Chief. There seemed to be little thought, or at least little in the way of public discussion, about the image or what it might stand for.

American society went through major cultural changes in the late 1960s and 1970s, resulting in a stronger awareness of the pervasive racism in many aspects of national life—including sports mascots. Native American groups spoke freely about the inherent racism of Chief Wahoo, demanding his removal from the Cleveland uniforms and merchandise. Supporters of the Chief argued about the history of the caricature and his long association with the franchise. Many Indians fans refused to believe the Chief represented any form of racism, deeming the long-time symbol to be harmless.

By the year 2000, Opening Days in Cleveland routinely saw conflict between supporters and critics of the Chief. The new century brought still more negative attention to Chief Wahoo, as many colleges dropped names like Indians or Redskins and replaced them with less offensive mascots. Ultimately, the controversy became a distraction and brought unwanted attention to a team trying to make itself into a contender and excite a new generation of fans.

With pressure mounting and a desire for the team to be known for winning instead of having a controversial mascot, Cleveland Indians' ownership has now decided to end the debate and retire Chief Wahoo after the 2018 season. The focus now will be on baseball and the long, hard road to winning a World Series.