The campaign against Indian nicknames and mascots presumes that they offend Native Americans--but do they? We took a poll, and you won't believe the results

Solve this word problem: Billy Mills, the former runner who won the gold medal in the 10,000 meters at the 1964 Olympics, is on a commercial airliner hurtling somewhere over the U.S. It is August 2001. Because Mills's father and mother were three-quarters and one-quarter Native American, respectively, he grew up being called half-breed until that was no longer socially acceptable. As sensibilities shifted over the years, he heard a variety of words and phrases describing his ethnic background, from Indian to Sioux to Native American to the one with which he is most comfortable, the age-old name of his tribal nation: Lakota.

Mills is sitting in first class. A flight attendant--the words steward and stewardess are frowned upon today--checks on him every so often. The man is African-American, the preferred designation for his racial background; before that, society called him black or colored or Negro. The man is friendly, doing his job. Each time he addresses Mills, he calls him Chief. Mills doesn't know if the flight attendant realizes that he is Lakota. Maybe he calls everyone Chief. Maybe he means it as a compliment. Mills motions him over.

"I want to tell you something," Mills says. The man leans in. "I'm Native American, and you calling me Chief, it turns my stomach. It'd be very similar to somebody calling you Nigger."

The flight attendant looks at Mills. He says, "Calling you Chief doesn't bother me…Chief."

Who is right and who wrong? Whose feelings take precedence? Most important, who gets to decide what we call one another?

If you've figured out an answer, don't celebrate yet. The above confrontation is only a warmup for sport's thorniest word problem: the use of Native American names (and mascots that represent them) by high school, college and professional teams. For more than 30 years the debate has been raging over whether names such as Redskins, Braves, Chiefs and Indians honor or defile Native Americans, whether clownish figures like the Cleveland Indians' Chief Wahoo have any place in today's racially sensitive climate and whether the sight of thousands of non-Native Americans doing the tomahawk chop at Atlanta's Turner Field is mindless fun or mass bigotry. It's an argument that, because it mixes mere sports with the sensitivities of a people who were nearly exterminated, seems both trivial and profound--and it's further complicated by the fact that for three out of four Native Americans, even a nickname such as Redskins, which many whites consider racist, isn't objectionable.

Indeed, some Native Americans--even those who purportedly object to Indian team nicknames--wear Washington Redskins paraphernalia with pride. Two such men showed up in late January at Augustana College in Sioux Falls, S.Dak., for a conference on race relations. "They were speaking against the Indian nicknames, but they were wearing Redskins sweatshirts, and one had on a Redskins cap," says Betty Ann Gross, a member of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Sioux tribe. "No one asked them about it. They looked pretty militant."

Gross's own case illustrates how slippery the issue can be. She grew up on a reservation in South Dakota and went to Sisseton High, a public school on the reservation whose teams are called the Redmen. Gross, 49, can't recall a time when people on the reservation weren't arguing about the team name, evenly divided between those who were proud of it and those who were ashamed. Gross recently completed a study that led the South Dakota state government to change the names of 38 places and landmarks around the state, yet she has mixed feelings on the sports issue. She wants Indian mascots and the tomahawk chop discarded, but she has no problem with team names like the Fighting Sioux (University of North Dakota) or even the Redskins. "There's a lot of division," Gross says. "We're confused, and if we're confused, you guys should be really confused."

Indeed, a recent SI poll (charts, above) suggests that although Native American activists are virtually united in opposition to the use of Indian nicknames and mascots, the Native American population sees the issue far differently. Asked if high school and college teams should stop using Indian nicknames, 81% of Native American respondents said no. As for pro sports, 83% of Native American respondents said teams should not stop using Indian nicknames, mascots, characters and symbols. Opinion is far more divided on reservations, yet a majority (67%) there said the usage by pro teams should not cease, while 32% said it should.

"I take the middle ground," says Leigh J. Kuwanwisiwma, 51, director of the Hopi Cultural Preservation Office in Kykotsmovi, Ariz., and an avid devotee of the Atlanta Braves. "I don't see anything wrong with Indian nicknames as long as they're not meant to be derogatory. Some tribal schools on Arizona reservations use Indians as a nickname themselves. The Phoenix Indian High School's newspaper is The Redskin. I don't mind the tomahawk chop. It's all in good fun. This is sports, after all. In my living room, I'll be watching a Braves game and occasionally do the chop."

Native American activists dismiss such opinion as misguided ("There are happy campers on every plantation," says Suzan Harjo, president of the Morning Star Institute, an Indian-rights organization based in Washington, D.C.) or as evidence that Native Americans' self-esteem has fallen so low that they don't even know when they're being insulted. American Indians--unlike, say, the Irish Catholics who founded Notre Dame and named its teams the Fighting Irish--had no hand in creating most of the teams that use their names; their identities were plucked from them wholesale and used for frivolous purposes, like firing up fans at ball games.

"This is no honor," says Michael Yellow Bird, an associate professor of social work at Arizona State. "We lost our land, we lost our languages, we lost our children. Proportionately speaking, indigenous peoples [in the U.S.] are incarcerated more than any other group, we have more racial violence perpetrated upon us, and we are forgotten. If people think this is how to honor us, then colonization has really taken hold."

Regardless, the campaign to erase Indian team names and symbols nationwide has been a success. Though Native American activists have made little progress at the highest level of pro sports--officials of the Atlanta Braves, Chicago Blackhawks, Cleveland Indians and Washington Redskins, for example, say they have no intention of changing their teams' names or mascots--their single-minded pursuit of the issue has literally changed the face of sports in the U.S. Since 1969, when Oklahoma disavowed its mascot Little Red (a student wearing an Indian war bonnet, buckskin costume and moccasins), more than 600 school teams and minor league professional clubs have dropped nicknames deemed offensive by Native American groups.

What's more, the movement continues. On Jan. 9 the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments, which represents 17 local governments in D.C., southern Maryland and northern Virginia, voted 11-2 to adopt a resolution calling the Redskins name "demeaning and dehumanizing" and asking team owner Dan Snyder to change it by next season. A week earlier former Redskins fullback Dale Atkeson had been told by the California Department of Motor Vehicles to remove his vanity plates reading 1 REDSKN. The word Redskin was banned on plates by the DMV in 1999.

"We consider ourselves racially sensitive," says D.C. council member Carol Schwartz, who introduced the resolution against the Redskins, "yet in this one area we are so hypocritical. Since when is a sports team's name more important than the sensitivities of our fellow human beings? For decades we had the Washington Bullets, and [owner] Abe Pollin on his own changed the name [in 1997, because of the high murder rate in D.C.]. Guess what? The world did not stop spinning. Why we would keep this racist term is beyond me."

While those who support names such as Seminoles (Florida State) and Braves can argue that the words celebrate Native American traditions, applying that claim to the Redskins is absurd. Nevertheless, Redskins vice president Karl Swanson says the name "symbolizes courage, dignity and leadership and has always been employed in that manner"--conveniently ignoring the fact that in popular usage dating back four centuries, the word has been a slur based on skin color. Swanson trots out research that traces the term redskin to Native Americans' custom of daubing on red paint before battle. Many experts on Native American history point out that the red paint was used not for war but for burial, and that the word redskin was first used by whites who paid and received bounties for dead Indians. "If you research the origin of redskin, no one would want that associated with his team," says pro golfer Notah Begay III, who is half Navajo and half Pueblo. "Trading-post owners used to offer rewards for Indian scalps. Signs would say something like, 'Redskin scalps, worth so much.'"

However, what's most important, Swanson counters, is intent: Because the Redskins and their fans mean nothing racist by using the nickname, it isn't racist or offensive. "This has been the name of our organization for 70 years," Swanson says. "We believe it has taken on a meaning independent of the word itself--and it's positive."

Not so, says Harjo: "There's no more derogatory word that's used against us, about us, in the English language. Even if it didn't have such heinous origins, everyone knows that it has never been an honorific. It's a terrible insult."

Harjo is not alone in her thinking. A slew of dictionaries agree that redskin is contemptuous, and so do Native American academics, nearly every Native American organization and three judges on the U.S. Trademark Trial and Appeal Board. In April 1999, responding to a lawsuit brought by Harjo and six other Indian leaders, the board stripped the Washington Redskins of federal protection on their seven trademarks. If the decision stands up under appeal, the team and the NFL could lose an estimated $5 million annually on sales of licensed merchandise.

Even though no team name is under more sustained attack, there's evidence that for the Redskins, a name change would be good for business. In 1996, after much pressure from alumni threatening to withdraw their financial support, Miami (Ohio) University acceded to the Miami tribe's request that it change its team names from Redskins to Redhawks. The following year alumni gave a record $25 million to the school. "Someday it will change," Miami spokesman Richard Little says of the Washington Redskins name. "And you know what? There'll still be a football team there, and there'll still be those ugly fat guys in dresses cheering for it."

Swanson says the vast majority of Redskins fans like the name, and indeed, beyond the protests of politicians, there's no groundswell of outrage against it in D.C. In a city so racially sensitive that an aide to mayor Anthony Williams was forced to resign in 1999 for correctly using the nonracial term niggardly, there's nothing hotter than the mass pilgrimage of 80,000 fans to Landover, Md., on Sundays in autumn to sing Hail to the Redskins at FedEx Field. Williams mentioned changing the name at a press conference once, but "no one really paid attention," says his aide Tony Bullock. "It's not something that anyone is really talking about." Nevertheless, Bullock says, "the mayor believes it is time to change the name."

That the name is offensive to Native Americans is easy for non-Natives to presume. It resonates when an Olympic hero and former Marine Corps captain such as Mills, who speaks out against Indian names and mascots at schools around the country, insists that a team named Redskins in the capital of the nation that committed genocide against Native Americans is the equivalent of a soccer team in Germany being called the Berlin Kikes. Says Mills, "Our truth is, redskin is tied to the murder of indigenous people."

Somehow that message is lost on most of Mills's fellow Native Americans. Asked if they were offended by the name Redskins, 75% of Native American respondents in SI's poll said they were not, and even on reservations, where Native American culture and influence are perhaps felt most intensely, 62% said they weren't offended. Overall, 69% of Native American respondents--and 57% of those living on reservations--feel it's O.K. for the Washington Redskins to continue using the name. "I like the name Redskins," says Mark Timentwa, 50, a member of the Colville Confederated Tribes in Washington State who lives on the tribes' reservation. "A few elders find it offensive, but my mother loves the Redskins."

Only 29% of Native Americans, and 40% living on reservations, thought Snyder should change his team's name. Such indifference implies a near total disconnect between Native American activists and the general Native American population on this issue. "To a lot of the younger folks the name Redskins is tied to the football team, and it doesn't represent anything more than the team," says Roland McCook, a member of the tribal council of the Ute tribe in Fort Duchesne, Utah.

The Utes' experience with the University of Utah might serve as a model for successful resolution of conflicts over Indian nicknames. Four years ago the council met with university officials, who made it clear that they would change their teams' name, the Running Utes, if the tribe found it objectionable. (The university had retired its cartoonish Indian mascot years before.) The council was perfectly happy to have the Ute name continue to circulate in the nations' sports pages, but council members said they intended to keep a close eye on its use. "We came away with an understanding that as long as the university used the Ute name in a positive manner that preserved the integrity of the Ute tribe, we would allow the use of the name and the Ute logo [two eagle feathers and a drum]," says McCook. Florida State, likewise, uses the name Seminoles for its teams with the express approval of the Seminole nation.

Like the Ute tribe, most Native Americans have no problem with teams using names like Indians and Fighting Illini--or even imposed names like Sioux. "People get upset about the Fighting Sioux, but why?" Gross says. "We're not Sioux people, anyway. The French and the Ojibway tribe gave us that name, and they're our hereditary enemies. We're not braves, and we're not really Indians. I know the history. For me those names are not a problem." Many Native Americans are offended, however, by mascots such as Illinois's Chief Illiniwek and others that dress up in feathers and so-called war paint. "Just do away with the imagery--the dancing, the pageantry," says Gross.

Which brings us to the point at which the word problem becomes a number problem. Say you are a team owner. You kiss Chief Wahoo goodbye. Stop the chop. Dump the fake Indian garb, the turkey feathers and the war paint. Get rid of, say, the Redskins name because it's got a sullied history and just sounds wrong. Rename the team the Washington Warriors--without the Indian-head logo--and watch the new team hats and jackets hit the stores. Money is going to pour in, you see, and someone will have to count it.