

The day of demeaning school mascots is over

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

In 1977, the people running Lewiston schools dropped the repulsive "Savages" as Sacajawea Junior High School's mascot and adopted in its place the "Braves."

Considering the times, it might have sounded like an improvement.

Back then, you could order breakfast in a restaurant called Sambos.

With rare exceptions, network television was virtually all white. If you saw a racial or ethnic minority, often as not it was a caricature.

And remember the sexist airline ads? How about "I'm Cheryl. Fly Me!"?

Sambos long ago served its last plate of pancakes.

The nation looks a little more like itself on television.

Long ago, the "fly me" ad campaign flew away.

But the Sacajawea Braves remain - as do the Orofino Maniacs and the Nezperce High School Indians.

For now.

But for how long?

At best, using a Native American image as a school logo amounts to a white majority appropriating features of another culture.

This is not the University of Notre Dame - a school founded by Irish Catholics - calling itself the Fighting Irish. This is more like the Chinese fielding a sports team and calling it the Patriots or the Cowboys - and then prostrating either in a less than flattering light.

Even if it's subtle to the majority, to the culture being slighted, it's insulting.

At worst, it's singling out Native Americans in a dehumanizing way. You don't see the Cleveland Orientals. Or the Washington Hispanics. Or the Kansas City Africans.

Orofino's mascot is hardly better. It mocks mental illness in the shadow of State Hospital North. Imagine if someone wanted to demean Idaho's current impoverished conditions of unemployment, low wages and comparatively high dependence on social welfare. Would we call that team "the Moochers"?

If mental illness is fair game, how about the steadily expanding group of us who are steadily expanding? Call us the Emmos - for morbidly obese?

You'd feel insulted and have every right to be.

Nearly 20 years ago, the NAACP called for an end of such mascots. The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in 2001 said the use of Indian stereotypical images and names in non-Native American schools was insensitive and could be intimidating to Indian students.

Last week, the mother of a Sacajawea Junior High School student, Alaina Capoeman, told Lewiston School Board members what many of them undoubtedly already know.

"What does this tell our students about Native Americans, about what it means to be a Native American man? I don't think it's meant this way, but I think it is harmful," Capoeman said.

Joining her was the Nez Perce Tribal Executive Committee, which asked Lewiston to retire the Braves and Nezperce to drop the Indians mascot. The Episcopal Church of the Nativity and the YWCA in Lewiston also want the mascot changed.

Lewiston's School Board will take up the question next week; Nezperce has launched discussions with the tribe.

But the pressure for change - in Lewiston, Nezperce and, inevitably Orofino - is only going to build.

You can see where this is leading.

Eventually, someone will come along and decide if a mascot insults and demeans someone, it ought to be dropped.

Why wait? - M.T.