

Humor Me

By Ronald P. Culberson

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“What’s In a Name? That Which We Call a Rose or a Turtle...”

Walking through Baltimore-Washington International Airport, I noticed a sign depicting a large angry tortoise tearing through the background of the sign. The caption read, “Fear the Turtle!” Confused, I retreated to the safety of the baggage claim carousel where the only danger I could possibly encounter was drug-sniffing K-9’s that rip apart my bag mistaking my athlete’s foot powder for cocaine.

Fear the turtle? I thought. You’ve got to be kidding. Other than a deliverance-esque childhood tubing trip where I imagined that the water was full of snapping turtles looking for the tasty flesh of a thirteen-year-old boy’s dangling toes, I can’t say I’ve ever been afraid of an animal that can be outrun by a slug.

The terrapin, of course, is the mascot of the University of Maryland. Apparently, in 1932 and probably as a result of some sort of head injury, Curley Boyd suggested that the university adopt the diamondback terrapin as its mascot. I’m guessing his recommendation went like this: “OK, so we need a mascot. What could it be? It has to be intimidating and strike fear in the hearts of our opponents while inspiring our teams to great heights of competitiveness. It must be bold, swift to overcome adversaries, and uphold the proud representation of the university’s character. How about a turtle?”

I only hope the vote was close.

But the University of Maryland is not alone. There have been herds of mascot and nickname blunders over the years, and it makes me truly appreciate how widespread alcoholism really is.

For instance, take the Washington Redskins. As a Cowboys fan, I really mean that. Take the Washington Redskins, please.

“Redskin” is possibly the most inappropriate nickname I’ve ever seen. At least Atlanta chose Braves as their nickname referring to a revered Native American warrior. Redskin, on the other hand, is just a tad more offensive. Can you imagine if Washington had chosen a nickname that referenced Asians or African Americans? The owners would have been scalped. OK, bad choice of words.

Ironically, Washington changed the name of its pro basketball team from the Bullets to the Wizards because of the implication of violence. In other words, Dirty Harry’s .357 Magnum became Harry Potter’s abracadabra. While Wizards is not as intimidating, it

was a necessary change since, at that time, DC was vying for Crime Capital of the Western Hemisphere.

My high school faced a similar problem with its nickname. We were the Patrick Henry Rebels. For a small southern town, the term rebel was clearly associated with the Rebels of the confederate army. As if that wasn't bad enough, our Rebel nickname was accompanied by a confederate flag the size of the Greyhound Bus painted on the side of the stadium and a rambunctious marching band version of "Dixie" played every time the football team scored a touchdown. Thankfully, the flag has since been painted over and Dixie has been replaced with a kinder gentler march by John Philips Sousa who was, by the way, a Freemason. Now there's a nice controversy-free nickname.

The process for choosing nicknames and mascots is obviously flawed. There should be guidelines. A nickname should be a spirited way to depict the personality of a school and its sports programs. It should neither be offensive nor particularly wimpy. And most importantly, it shouldn't be stupid, a guideline that is hard to follow by those who are susceptible to it.

During the weeks of extensive research to write this column, I discovered a few more nicknames that need to be abolished. I share them with you in the spirit of education and ridicule:

- University of California, Santa Cruz **Banana Slugs** – OK, so maybe I *would* run away from that.
- University of Delaware **Blue Hens** – There's just nothing spirited about asphyxiated poultry.
- Wichita State University **Wheatshockers** – I guess if you can scare wheat, you can scare anything.
- University of Tennessee **Volunteers** – At least they'll help clean up after the game.
- St. Louis University **Billikens** – A mascot should never require an explanation.

One day, I hope to live in a world where I can attend a sporting event and enjoy the competition without being confused or offended by the mascot. If you agree, write your congressional representatives and help me eliminate stupid nicknames.

Together we can fight this. And by the way, Go 'Hoos!

Until next time, just humor me.

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