

What's In A Name

By Andrew Destin

BELLEFONTE, Pa. — The sound of an imitation war whoop echoes throughout Rogers Stadium.

It's the kind of sound used in old Hollywood westerns, the sound children playing "Cowboys and Indians" might make as they move their hands over their mouths. When Bellefonte high plays Penns Valley in an early October football game, fans let out the cry as the Red Raiders rush onto the field. To the fans it's just another Friday night, as it has been since 1936. Others in town would definitely not approve.

In a year of division all over the country, high school football has been at the center of a fight that's as bitter in these parts as the presidential election — Democrat Joe Biden won 52% of the vote in Bellefonte precincts — or attitudes toward the coronavirus pandemic. A petition started in June called on the Bellefonte school board and superintendent to change the district's mascot from the Red Raiders to something "better."

Kelly Berthold, who co-started the campaign and graduated from Bellefonte Area High School in 2007, works as a mental health therapist at the Penn State psychological clinic.

In the aftermath of the protests over George Floyd's killing, and other nationwide movements for racial equality, Berthold said it was time for her to drive change within her own community. Since the petition went viral, Berthold said she has received hateful threats over social media, including a message which said she should be "eliminated."

She would not be deterred by a few racist individuals, however, and didn't blame the people who threatened her. Berthold feels they are just part of a society that perpetuates racism from generation to generation.

"This is a human rights and human dignity issue," Berthold said. "To me, it does not seem decent to categorize Native Americans as Red Raiders."

The debate in Bellefonte is part of a trend for professional, collegiate and even high school sports teams across the United States to move away from using Native Americans as mascots. The fight against such mascots has been going on for decades, but 2020 has been something of a watershed year for the movement.

The NFL's Washington Redskins changed their name to the Washington Football Team in July, even though longtime owner Daniel Snyder had said just seven years earlier he would "never change" the nickname, even with a spirited campaign against it.

In the Canadian Football League, the Edmonton Eskimos originally announced they would keep their nickname in early July. But weeks later, the team reversed course and is now known as the Edmonton Football Team.

Chicago's Lane Tech College Prep decided in August to rid itself of its nickname, the Indians. After 100 years of being known by that name, the local school council voted 12-0 to remove it.

And thousands of miles away in Hawaii, Kahuku High and Intermediate School on Oahu will no longer be known as the Red Raiders. The school's principal, Donna Linsey, said the nickname was "disrespectful" and "potentially discriminatory" toward Native Americans.

But while transition continues for sports teams throughout North America, such a move hasn't happened in Bellefonte. Though a mascot is no longer embodied as a person at games — that was eliminated in 1991, according to the school district — the nickname remains, and locals still use the term "mascot" to refer to the Red Raiders.

Despite calls for a different moniker at the school board level dating back to 1994, Bellefonte will keep the Red Raiders nickname for the foreseeable future.

Kathryn Pletcher, a local since 1983 and member of the Bad River band of the Lake Superior Ojibwe tribe, said Bellefonte is full of people scared of change.

Pletcher has spoken at school town hall board meetings, and on one occasion claimed to have her car egged afterward. She has also received death threats for her persistent calls to change Bellefonte's mascot, which she says portrays Native Americans as thieves and invaders.

In a town where traditions reign supreme, Pletcher feels it's time to say goodbye to this one.

"I understand people's reluctance to changing the name of their beloved school mascot," Pletcher said. "I do not believe that the current name was meant to be intentionally racist. However, I think the time has come to consider a change. We must evolve."

Bellefonte sits a few miles northeast of State College and Penn State University, a borough of around 6,000 people, of which the vast majority are white (96.3% according to the 2010 U.S. census). Meanwhile, Native Americans make up just 0.1% of the population — that's about a half-dozen people — in an area where the original Native Americans fled due to an influx of Europeans settling in the region as early as the 1760s.

Bellefonte grew up as a borough reliant on natural resources. Its wealth of iron ore reserves and first-rate timber allowed for the rapid expansion of furnaces and saw mills in the 19th century.

But now, the industrial past is fading. Microbreweries like Big Spring Spirits and the Gamble Mill have taken over a match factory and grist mill, respectively. In its own way, the town has started a transition like many bigger cities in the Great Lakes region.

Yet many here don't see the changes as a reason to throw out the familiar.

Jack Bechdel, a former football player for the Red Raiders himself, stresses the importance of maintaining tradition and sees no reason to get rid of the Red Raiders nickname.

"It's a small town and part of the reason why we've taken issue with the Red Raider debate is because the school is the focal point of the community," Bechdel said. "It's the symbol of the school. It's something that we take pride in."

The Red Raiders football team has amassed an 81-97 record over the last 17 seasons, though Bellefonte has fared better under eighth-year head coach Shannon Manning. His 2017 team made it all the way to Pennsylvania's PIAA 4A championship before falling to Selinsgrove High School, 37-3.

Dating back to the Great Depression, Bellefonte Area High School has gone by the Red Raiders. The school drew its inspiration from the then-nickname of Colgate University, a college that has been known as simply the Raiders since 2006.

After Berthold posted her petition to the internet, Bechdel — a class of 1984 graduate and lifetime resident of Bellefonte — created a counter-petition to save the Red Raiders. If Bellefonte were to change the mascot to the Governors or anything else, Bechdel says such a transition would be racist in itself.

"You're saying that the Native American is not enough, not good enough to be a mascot," Bechdel said. "So you replace the red man with the white man? If that's not the epitome of racism, you'd be hard pressed to find something better."

"Save Our Mascot" yard signs, adorned with an Indian head, dot a community where, on some blocks, the presidential election was fought out house by house and sign by sign. Ciara Semack, who was born and raised in Bellefonte, requested a sign but has yet to receive it.

She runs The Blonde Bistro restaurant in town and would prefer to keep the mascot. Semack was awarded "most school spirited" as a senior at Bellefonte high, and she thinks the mascot debate is "silly" since she believes the Red Raiders name honors Native Americans.

"It's kind of a different version of COVID," Semack said. "It's a sore subject. You don't want to bring it up because it's like 'Hmm, am I going to get into a mouth battle with somebody over this?'"

Despite such polarized views on the mascot situation from different members of the Bellefonte community, or maybe because of them, the situation is unlikely to be resolved any time soon. School administrators have been reluctant to change.

At a Bellefonte Area School District Board of Directors meeting in mid-October, members debated over whether the nine-person board should decide the fate of the mascot or open it up to a public referendum.

Board President Jon Guizar fears coming to a decision to either change the mascot or keep it as it is would create “more animosity” and “more division” in the community. Rather than move quickly to affect change, Guizar would prefer that the board and school district as a whole take their time.

“Rushing a decision to keep the mascot has the potential to really miss some opportunities for growth and real understanding of the decision,” Guizar said. “Rushing the process is the key I’m trying to avoid.”

As board members like Guizar stay committed to neutrality and the search for a “happy medium,” the Red Raiders are here to stay at least into the near future. Guizar will continue to lean on historical precedents and anticipates a methodical transition for Bellefonte’s mascot.

“Each time it’s been decided that some level of change would take place, and some level of keep would take place,” Guizar said. “I think we’re at that crossroads again.”

But for proponents of changing the mascot like Pletcher, time is of the essence. She would like to see a quick and overarching change in the wake of social justice movements from the summer and wonders why more time is somehow the answer.

“Was it too soon to end slavery?” Pletcher said. “Was it too soon to give women the right to vote? Is it too soon to give people their long awaited justice? I don’t understand. Now is the time.”

As 2020 serves as the backdrop for a debate which could ultimately rock the very foundation of the changing town of Bellefonte, Pletcher sees the mascot argument as being about more than just high school sports teams.

“The people entrenched on the ‘keeping’ side would be the same people not seeing the division in the country right now,” Pletcher said. “It’s indicative of the divide in the nation. It’s a microcosm of American disagreements.”