



HISTORY
MEMBERSHIP
FAQ: THE TRADITION
FAQ: THE SOCIETY
HALL OF CHIEFS
UPCOMING EVENTS
WHAT CAN I DO?
IN THE NEWS



Frequently Asked Questions about the Chief Illiniwek Tradition

Why did the University choose "Illini" as the name of its sports teams?

When French explorers first journeyed down from Canada to the upper Mississippi Valley in the early Seventeenth Century, they found the region inhabited by a vigorous, populous Algonquin nation who called themselves "Hileni" or "Illiniwek," which means "men." This, the French explorers rendered as "Illinois." The University of Illinois was established in the year 1867. Soon after, it began fielding athletic teams named the "Fighting Illini." The University was as proud then, as it is now, to be associated with the native peoples for whom the state was named.

Is it correct to use the tribal name "Illini"?

It has been claimed that the use of any Native American tribal name is abusive to some individuals. However, numerous towns, states, villages, regions, and landmarks retain Native American names, many of which were originally chosen to honor the inhabitants that originally settled the areas.

How was the Chief named?

The expression "Illiniwek" was first used in conjunction with the University of Illinois by Football Coach Bob Zuppke in the mid-1920's. Coach Zuppke was a philosopher and historian by training and inclination, and he was intrigued by the concept the Illini peoples held about their identity and aspirations. They spoke a dialect of the Algonquin language and used the term "Illiniwek" to refer to "the complete human being-the strong, agile human body; the unfettered human intellect; the indomitable human spirit."

How can Chief Illiniwek be a symbol?

As a reminder of our only common geographical ancestor, Chief Illiniwek reminds us of the high ideals of the First Nation people who made up the Illini confederation of tribes for which the state of Illinois is named. The Illini tribes took their sustenance from the same land we share today. Although the original Illini disappeared from the region long ago, they are remembered through the Chief Illiniwek tradition.

What do actual ancestors of the Illini tribes think of Chief Illiniwek?

Over the years, the Chief Illiniwek tradition has had continued endorsement of Native American descendants. Since the tradition's inception in 1926, there has been considerable support for the Chief by Native American leaders, including several that trace their lineage to the original Illini tribes.

How authentic is the dance?

On October 30th, 1926, Chief Illiniwek made his first appearance at Memorial Stadium. Portrayed by co-creator Lester Leutwiler, the Chief thrilled a crowd of nearly 60,000 spectators with an authentic Indian dance during half time of a football game against Penn State. The original dance was based on Leutwiler's Eagle Scout studies. It has evolved over the years to make its movements more visible to spectators, and is similar to the "fancy dancing" that is part of some Native American celebrations.

Is the dance sacrilegious?

Opponents of the tradition have charged that the dance of Chief Illiniwek burlesques Native American religion and, thus, is demeaning. Today, Native American gatherings, called "pow wows," held across this country include elaborate dance competitions in which Native Americans and others who dress as Native Americans dance side-by-side. Prizes may be awarded, not for authenticity or religious intent, but for the beauty of the attire and skill of the dancers.

It would be wrong to call the art of Native American dancing inherently demeaning if performed by a non-Native American, even in a more public venue. Certainly, the evidence from Native American gatherings does not justify the claim of sacrilege.

How authentic is Chief Illiniwek's attire?

The current regalia worn by the Chief is authentic and reflects the dress of the Plains Indians. The Illini tribes were of a much earlier culture, and less is known about their style of dress, however, it is believed to be simpler and less ornate than that used to portray Chief Illiniwek today.

Are eagle feathers used in the Chief's headdress?

Today, the feathers used in the Chief's headdress are turkey feathers, dyed to simulate eagle feathers. Because of their sacred status, the eagle feathers originally provided by the Native American craftsmen were returned to them.

Why are minority groups opposed to the use of Chief Illiniwek?

Individuals and organizations that consider any ethnic representation stereotypical or negatively racist may oppose Chief Illiniwek. Although Chief Illiniwek is recognized as an honored symbol of the University, rather than a cheerleader or team mascot, there are strong feelings by some individuals and groups that all ethnic representations should be eliminated.

The strategy that drives most of the opposition is not promoted publicly, but is documented as the primary force behind the anti-Chief efforts. Six teams—the Florida State Seminoles, the Fighting Illini at the University of Illinois, the Atlanta Braves, the Washington Redskins, the Kansas City Chiefs, and the Cleveland Indians—have been targeted by an organization of Native American activists, the National Coalition Against Racism in Sports and the Media.

The Chief Illiniwek tradition has been singled out as a key element of the group's strategy. Chief Illiniwek's status as an honored symbol is unique. By declaring the Chief Illiniwek tradition as a negative portrayal of First Nation People, all such portrayals will be considered indefensible.

A conscious decision to sacrifice an honored symbol in order to accomplish a goal has been made; a decision that, if allowed to become a reality, will be a great injustice to all.

Is Chief Illiniwek a racist mascot?

Webster's Dictionary defines racism as:

- 1. A belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race;*
- 2. racial prejudice or discrimination.*

Under the first definition of racism, the Chief is racist only to the extent that a Native American is perceived as a higher quality of human than others. Thus, it is argued that Native Americans should be proud that the University seeks to honor those perceived traits. Additionally, under the second definition, the elevation of the Native American does not show a prejudice against him nor discrimination.

Does the Chief Illiniwek tradition create a racist environment?

There is no evidence that this noble symbol has created a racist or hostile climate. Actually, there are several facts to the contrary:

- In 1980, 8% of the undergraduate population of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign were identified as minorities. Today, that number has risen to 26.1%. Within the Big Ten, the University of Illinois ranks consistently among the top three in terms of minority undergraduates.
- Minority tenured and tenure-track faculty has increased by 100% since 1990. In that same time period, the number of minority academic professionals has increased by 75%.
- According to the 1990 U.S. Census, 0.2% of the population in the State of Illinois identified itself as "American Indian." That percentage is identical to the current number of Native American students at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
- Following a 20-month investigation, the decision of the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (11/30/95) concluded that there was insufficient evidence to show that a racially hostile environment existed at the University.

Why is it so important that the University keep Chief Illiniwek as the symbol?

For 75 years, the Chief has been the symbol of the spirit of a great university and of our intercollegiate athletic teams, and as such is loved by the people of Illinois. The University considers the symbol to be dignified and has treated it with respect. His ceremonial dance is performed with grace and beauty.

Chief Illiniwek embodies the attributes valued by alumni, students, and friends of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The tradition of the Chief is a link to our great past, a tangible symbol of an intangible spirit, filled with qualities to which a person of any background can aspire: goodness, strength, bravery, truthfulness, courage, and dignity.

The Chief Illiniwek tradition can be transformed into an educational asset, to both the University and to the Native American community. Elevating the symbol of Chief Illiniwek provides an opportunity for the University to promote the attributes that have come to be identified with this tradition.