

THE WASHINGTON R*DSK*NS

By the time you're reading this, Washington's football team will probably have a new name.

For now, it's simply called...the Washington Football Team. How did it come to this?

Here's the controversial history of one of the NFL's most revered franchises.

CANCEL CULTURE

Change was in the air in the summer of 2020. In the midst of nationwide demonstrations for racial justice and equality, a bevy of brands bade goodbye to outdated stereotypes like Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Mia (the Land O' Lakes girl). All over the country, statues of Confederate leaders and Christopher Columbus were taken down—some by protesters, some by the municipalities in which they stood. In Washington, D.C., outside the abandoned RFK Stadium, workers removed a statue of George P. Marshall, the home team's controversial founding owner. All of a sudden, it was looking like the impossible might actually happen: The Washington R*dsk*ns might finally change their name.

"We'll never change the name, it's that simple. NEVER—you can use caps," team owner Daniel Snyder famously said to *USA Today* in 2013. That was shortly after Snyder received a letter from members of the Congressional Native American Caucus, including Tom Cole (R-Oklahoma) and Betty McCollum (D-Minnesota), who pleaded with Snyder to change the name: "Native Americans throughout the country consider the R-word a racial, derogatory slur akin to the N-word among African Americans." [Editor's note: That's why we've added the asterisks.]

LIFELONG FANS

After the *USA Today* interview, Snyder was called to a meeting with NFL commissioner Roger Goodell, who asked Snyder to reconsider. He wouldn't budge. The notoriously stubborn owner was only 34 years old when he purchased the team from previous owner Jack Kent Cooke's estate in 1998. "My father took me to my first game in 1971," boasted Snyder, "and I fell in love with the R*dsk*ns and the NFL right then. I was hooked. And we didn't even win that game."

Another lifelong Washington fan is Chief Billy Redwing Tayac of the Piscataway Indian Nation, who has long maintained that the name "is a racist term." Like Snyder, Tayac grew up in the D.C. area and had also been attending home games since the '70s. That's when Native Americans—often in traditional dress—began protesting outside the stadium every Sunday. Chief Tayac joined the effort in 1985 and became its most visible member. As he often pointed out, his Piscataway ancestors had occupied the area for thousands of years before it got an NFL team. "The term has only continued to be acceptable because Native people have been

Classic riddle: Q: What has the eyes of a cat, the fur of a cat, and the paws of a cat, but isn't a cat?

A: A kitten.

decimated and don't have the political or economic clout to stop it," Tayac said in 1998, a year after the team moved a few miles outside of D.C. into Jack Kent Cooke Stadium in Landover, Maryland. In 1999, after Snyder took over, FedEx bought the naming rights for \$7.6 million per year. The R*dsk*ns' home became FedExField. And the protesters showed up there, too.

THE MARSHALL PLAN

Snyder, just like Cooke before him, argued that "R*dsk*ns" can't be racist because it was named by "an actual Indian." According to team lore, when the franchise was still in Boston in 1933, the head coach—a Sioux named William "Lone Star" Dietz—changed the name from the Braves. That was the story Marshall told, but the truth is that Marshall changed it himself to avoid confusion with the Boston Braves baseball team. He wanted to keep the Native connection, though, so he went with another word that people used to describe American Indians. (Interestingly, Dietz wasn't even Native American; he only said he was to avoid the World War I draft, and was jailed for it in 1920.)

When the franchise arrived in Washington in 1937, it became the league's southernmost team. Marshall's plan was to help turn the fledgling NFL into the same kind of entertainment package that college football had become—complete with marching bands, halftime shows, cheerleaders, and fight songs. And he really pushed the Native imagery: "Besides my coach [Dietz]," Marshall boasted, "I've got half a dozen Indian players signed up, and I'm going to have them wearing Indian war bonnets, and blankets, and everything."

WHAT THE HAIL?

Snyder often referenced his team's famous fight song in defense of the name: "We don't say, 'Hurt anybody'...We sing, 'Hail to the R*dsk*ns. Hail victory. Braves on the warpath. Fight for old D.C.' We only sing it when we score touchdowns." (So, not a lot, then.) The lyrics were written by George Marshall's wife. Here's the original second verse:

*Scalp 'um, swamp 'um, we will
Take 'um big score.
Read 'um, weep 'um, touchdown,
We want heap more.*

At home games in Washington (a city located near the northern boundary of the Confederate South), the lyric "Fight for old D.C." was often replaced with "Fight for old Dixie." Marshall, an outspoken segregationist, was the last NFL owner to integrate his team, and he only did so after Congress refused to let him build a new stadium in Washington in 1961 unless he signed black players. His response: "We'll start signing Negroes when the Harlem Globetrotters start signing whites." In 1961, after



Ice can't incorporate salt into its crystalline structure, so sea ice has only a tenth the amount of salt as seawater. Melt it, and you can drink it.

a debilitating stroke, Marshall sold the team to Cooke; in 1963, he was inducted into the NFL Hall of Fame.

As the civil rights movement gained steam in the mid-1960s, and African Americans had proven that organized activism could bring them new rights and protections, American Indian activists felt more emboldened to air their grievances as well: Europeans had driven them from their homelands; federal, state, and local governments had broken nearly every treaty; and Native people had become relegated to the fringes of society. Most white people knew “Injuns” only as caricatures in films and on television...and as sports mascots.

THE MAN ON THE HELMET

In 1972, Walter “Blackie” Wetzel, a member of the Blackfeet tribe in Montana and president of the National Congress of American Indians, led a delegation to D.C. to officially demand the name be changed. Cooke said no. Seeking a compromise, Wetzel convinced the team to let him design a new logo for the helmet, which, at the time, was a burgundy “R” in a white circle surrounded by gold. Wetzel replaced the “R” with the profile of an American Indian, based on the Buffalo nickel. The image on the nickel was actually a composite of several Indians, one of which was a Blackfeet chief named John Two Guns White Calf, and it’s White Calf’s profile that became the R*dsk*ns logo.

The second verse of the fight song was toned down from “Scalp ’um, swamp ’um, we will” to “run and pass and score.”

Wetzel got the team to make a few other small but significant changes: The miniskirted cheerleaders no longer had to wear braids and feathers (but they were still called the R*dsk*nettes, or as some fans would later call them, the “Pocahotties”). And the second verse of the fight song was toned down from “Scalp ’um, swamp ’um, we will” to “run and pass and score.” But the team’s name remained intact.

MOUNTING PRESSURE

As the years passed, the protests ramped up. When Washington went to Super Bowl XXVI in January 1992, the American Indian Movement organized a rally of more than 2,000 people who demonstrated outside the Metrodome in Minneapolis. “The fact that a football team in the nation’s capital could be named the R*dsk*ns in this day and age shows how pathetically ignorant this country is,” Charlene Teters of the Spokane Indian nation told the *Philadelphia Daily News*. “I’ve had some tell me the team is honoring the Indian people by using that name. I said there are better ways to honor the Indian people.”

“I like the name, and it’s not a derogatory name,” Cooke said in response to the protests. “To me, the name represents pride, courage, adventure, derring-do, and bravery.” After Snyder took over, he toed the same line, saying, “The name really

Secretariat won horse racing’s Triple Crown in 1973
and set speed records in all three races that remain unbroken today.

means honor, respect.” He even had “scientific proof”: In 2004, the NFL hired a private firm to conduct a phone poll that asked Native Americans what they thought about the name. According to a statement released by Snyder himself, “The highly respected Annenberg Public Policy Center polled nearly 1,000 self-identified Native Americans from across the continental U.S. and found that 90% of Native Americans did not find the team name...to be ‘offensive.’”

THE R-WORD

But was it offensive? Apologists often justify use of the word by insisting that it was actually coined by Native Americans, and there is some scholarly debate over whether that’s true. But regardless of who started using it, by the mid-19th century, there was little doubt as to its intended meaning. For example, this announcement ran in Minnesota’s *Winona Daily Republican* in 1863:

The State reward for dead Indians has been increased to \$200 for every r*d-sk*n sent to Purgatory. The sum is more than the dead bodies of all the Indians east of the Red River are worth.

Merriam-Webster defines it as “a contemptuous term used to refer to a North American Indian.” (There’s no second definition mentioning “honor, respect.”) Chief Tayac explained it like this: “Just like the hide of a deer is called a ‘deerskin,’ and the hide of a beaver is called a ‘beaverskin,’ the scalp of an Indian was called a ‘r*dsk*n.’... People want to see us riding horses and living in tepees, but Indians are modern people and we want the same respect that has been applied to other peoples. We are men and women—not animals.”

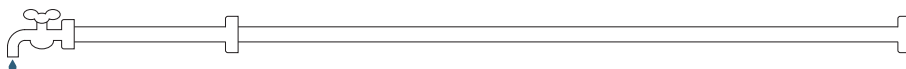
FULL COURT PRESS

A decades-long legal battle ensued in 1992 when Chief Tayac and other activists filed a lawsuit claiming that the federal government cannot protect a trademark if said trademark is a racial slur. The team’s lawyers countered that the term is synonymous with “Indian,” therefore it is neutral. The case went all the way to the Supreme Court... which the Washington franchise finally won on First Amendment grounds in 2017.

Yet even as Snyder held firm—despite heartfelt pleas from friends, family, and several other team owners—most other teams with that name had ditched it. In the 2013 letter sent to Snyder by the Congressional Native American Caucus, the lawmakers cited the fact that “28 schools in 18 states have dropped that name in the last 25 years.” When Miami University switched to RedHawks in 1997, Washington’s NFL franchise became the last major U.S. sports team to be called the R-word.

PUBLIC RELATIONS

Feeling the heat, Snyder hired a PR firm to run interference. In 2014, he announced the formation of the “Washington R*dsk*ns Original Americans Foundation.”



Sad statistic: On average, two NCAA college football players die each season.

Although the foundation was supposed to “provide meaningful and measurable resources that provide genuine opportunities for tribal communities,” *Sports Illustrated* reported in 2020 that Snyder had “cut back his support when public scrutiny waned following the resolution of a lawsuit over the team’s trademark.” The PR firm also launched a website dedicated to defending the team’s name: “It epitomizes all the noble qualities we admire about Native Americans—the same intangibles we expect from Washington’s gridiron heroes on game day. Honor. Loyalty. Unity. Respect. Courage.”

But Snyder’s most effective PR boost came from his hometown newspaper. In 2016, the *Washington Post* conducted a phone poll that resulted in the same “90% Indian approval rating” as the 2004 NFL poll. As the *Post* reported, “The results—immediately celebrated by team owner Daniel Snyder and denounced by prominent Native American leaders—could make it that much harder for anti-name activists to pressure [team] officials, who are already using the poll as further justification to retain the moniker.”

FLAWED METHODOLOGY

In response to the *Washington Post* poll, writer and activist Jacqueline Keeler wrote in *The Nation*, “Given that I have 50 first cousins who are enrolled in the Navajo and Yankton Dakota Sioux Nations, none of whom likes the team name, I found the results to be curious. When I looked more closely at the methodology of the poll, I was appalled.” Among the flaws Keeler notes: The pollsters asked even fewer “self-identified Native Americans” than the 2004 study had. More than half of those polled couldn’t even name what tribe or nation they belong to. “Imagine asking 500 white Americans for an opinion about Europe,” she wrote, “and not caring that more than half had no connection to their ancestors’ place of origin.”

In February 2020, a new study, this one conducted by the University of California–Berkeley, concluded that “57% who strongly identify with being Native American and 67% of those who frequently engage in tribal cultural practices were found to be deeply insulted by caricatures of Native American culture.” The study mentioned other personal fouls from the sports world, but the carefully worded conclusion made sure to include “especially the R*dsk*ns.”

FOURTH DOWN

By the late 2010s, the team name controversy wasn’t even Snyder’s worst problem. During his tenure as owner, the R*dsk*ns had gone from Super Bowl contender to perennial bottom-dweller, and most fans blamed him. Amid numerous front-office and player scandals (not to mention some disastrous player trades), in 2019, Snyder was mocked in the press and on social media for flaunting his \$2.6 billion wealth by purchasing a \$100 million “superyacht” with an IMAX theater.

By this point, the sponsors were jumping ship. Nike’s “Salute to Service” gear

Why are the eyes of many albino animals red? Their irises lack pigment and are thus transparent, allowing the blood vessels in their retinas to be visible.

included every NFL team's name...except for the one that more and more news outlets were awkwardly referring to as "the Washington Football Team." Meanwhile, legislators were threatening to deny Snyder permission to build a new stadium in Washington if the team still had that name. He *still* wouldn't budge.

Elsewhere in the sports world, after mounting pressure, in 2019, the MLB's Cleveland Indians retired their cartoonish mascot, Chief Wahoo. Not long after, the MLB's Atlanta Braves and NFL's Kansas City Chiefs announced they would be phasing out the "Tomahawk Chop," a chopping motion popular with fans that has been criticized for reinforcing the stereotype that American Indians are savages.

SNYDER'S LAST STAND

It all came crashing down in the summer of 2020 when the calls to change the name reached a fever pitch. The *Washington Post*, only four years after its controversial phone poll, ran an op-ed titled "Change the name of the Washington NFL team. Now." But Snyder held firm. If he could ride out this latest storm, as he had all the others, then the calls for change would most certainly die down again.

Then, in mid-July, the *New York Times* reported that Snyder had decided to review the team's name. What changed his mind? The stadium's sponsor, FedEx, had threatened to "back out of an \$8 million naming rights deal unless the team's name was changed." A few days later, the change was made official. The name was gone. (So was the logo, which upset some supporters of the name change.)

Chief Tayac, now 80, was thrilled. When asked by ABC News why he thought Snyder finally relented, he said it wasn't because the owner suddenly grew a conscience. "Money talks...He realizes that he's fighting a losing battle. And that's the bottom line."

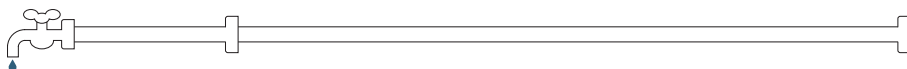
Despite continuing demands (from both inside and outside the franchise) for Snyder to step down, he was still Washington's majority owner as of this writing. When his nameless team took to the field in 2020, they were still wearing their familiar burgundy-and-gold uniforms, but the man on the helmet had been replaced with the player's number, and the once-ubiquitous R-word was nowhere to be seen.

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LITERATURE QUIZ

Q: What famous book (and later movie) character is named Oscar Zoroaster Phadrig Isaac Norman Henkle Emmannuel Ambroise Diggs?

A: The Wizard of Oz. In L. Frank Baum's fourth Oz book, *Dorothy and the Wizard in Oz* (1908), the wizard explains why he goes by that name: "When I grew up I just called myself O.Z., because the other initials were P-I-N-H-E-A-D; and that spelled 'pinhead,' which was a reflection on my intelligence."



Sharks are buoyant thanks to their big livers, which are filled with oils and fats that are lighter than water.