

Redskins: insult and brand

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BOOK REVIEW

Redskins: insult and brand, by C. Richard King, Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, 2016, 226 pp., \$24.95 (hardback), ISBN: 978-0-8032-7864-6

The role of sports in the production, reproduction, and contestation of racism and inequality in the society remains paradoxical. On the one hand, many in the athletic establishment champion sports as a unique arena of exceptional opportunity, fairness, and cross-racial understanding. They celebrate (with some good cause, I think) the institution's leading role in providing opportunities for excellence, advancement, and resistance for people of colour all over the modern world. On the other hand, sport scholars tend to take a dimmer, more critical view. They – or, I should probably say “we” – emphasize persistent racism throughout the sports world and argue further that the success of persons of colour in the athletic arena can distort or distract attention from the realities of racism and injustice in the rest of society. Even more, scholarly critics argue that representations of minority athletic success, innocent and uplifting as they may seem, too often play off of and thus reproduce some of the deepest, most insidious racial stereotypes in Western and world culture.

This last point – the one about the deeply problematic role that romanticized athletic images play in reflecting and reproducing racism in popular culture and the mass media – is, I have argued previously in these pages, where sport studies are at the cutting-edge of racial theory. It is also the starting point and core contribution of an important new book by C. Richard King *Redskins: Insult and Brand*.

In a general way, King's book is about the history, controversies, and problems surrounding the use of Native American mascots, logos, epithets, and imagery in American athletics. King is an expert on this material. Not only has he written several books and numerous papers on Native Americans and sport already, he is also one of the most established and prolific American sport sociologists working in the field right now. And what distinguishes this particular volume is that it is a synthesis of what we know about one of the most egregious and offensive variations on this theme, the mascot and logo of the otherwise storied National Football League franchise located in the capital city of the United States of America.

The book's chapters are organized in a kind of chronological/thematic way – starting with topics like “Origins” and “Uses”, moving into “Erasure” and “Ownership”, and concluding with chapters on “Opinion” and “Change.” King uses this structure to introduce readers to the historical roots of native mascots, detail the many destructive consequences of this imagery, and then track ongoing activism and mounting pressure against the use of the mascot by the team and its ownership. Some of the material is almost unbelievable for those not familiar with it, and one of King's main sociological contributions is to situate the

Washington team's history in the context of white colonialism's dehumanization, extermination, and displacement of Native Americans throughout American history. Indeed, one of King's persistent themes is the erasure and forgetting of history – not only that of the Washington franchise but about Native American mistreatment throughout American history.


King, like many sport scholars who work on racism in sport these days, makes no bones about his critical orientation. From the book's dedication ("For the haters, the warriors, and the future") to his introductory note on language ("I endeavor to avoid the r-word" which King understands as "a racial slur, on par with the n-word"), and his detailed and deeply sympathetic account of recent activist initiatives and accomplishments, King's political views are on display on every page of the book. In fact, even though it is the formal title of the volume, the r-word is actually blacked out on the title page of my copy and appears with a line through it in titles elsewhere in the volume. (More than a few folks who have seen me carrying this book around have actually been moved to comment on the cover's distinctive design and aesthetic.)

The later chapters of the book both bring us up to date information on various protests and policy shifts against the Washington team and also begin to speculate about what the future of such activism and resistance might bring. I wish King had connected these movements to those against other racially offensive mascots and logos in the American sporting scene as well as to the surprisingly progressive policies and positions adopted by an organization like the National Collegiate Athletic Association, the oft-criticized governing body of much intercollegiate sport in the US. But these are just quibbles. The core of the book – its core strength and contribution – is to provide a succinct, decisive, and authoritative overview of all that is problematic (and potentially subject to change) with the Washington, DC, football team's Native American "mascot".

By way of conclusion, let me just say that among the many challenging questions sport scholars all over the world continue to grapple with is why sport – one of the most prominent and passionately embraced institutions in global culture – is not taken more seriously by researchers and scholars? This vexing question holds for societal issues ranging from sexism and homophobia to development and international relations, but none seems more obvious and acute than the complicated dynamics of race and racism. For my part, I only hope books like King's help to demonstrate for all both the power and social complexity of sport as a racial force.

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