Running Head: CLEVELAND INDIANS ORGANIZATION

Cleveland Indians and Chief Wahoo

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**History**

Cleveland has been a home to baseball for hundreds of years. Professional baseball began in Cleveland in 1869, where the team was known as the Cleveland Forest Citys (“Cleveland Indians”, 2015). Baseball continued to become popular in Cleveland and Frank DeHaas Robison took ownership of the baseball franchise in Cleveland, which became known as the Cleveland Blues. Frank DeHaas Robison was a baseball executive and put a lot of money into funding the baseball team in Cleveland (Thomas, 2015). The Cleveland Blues struggled with losing great players and had a losing record. With that being said, they ended up getting dropped from the National League (“Cleveland Indians”, 2015). The dropping of the Cleveland Blues opened the door for Cleveland to create a new franchise for a new league (“Cleveland Indians”, 2015).

By the beginning of the 1900’s, Charles Somers, a Cleveland executive for the coal industry put some money into creating the American League for baseball (“Cleveland Indians”, 2015). This team started to play at the famous League Park in downtown Cleveland. The baseball team in Cleveland became the first team to play for the American League, and then all the rest of their games ended up getting rained out (“Cleveland Indians”, 2015). This team ended up playing home games in Cleveland at the famous League Park. In 1901, the team was still referred to as the Cleveland Blues, but in 1902, the team became known as the Cleveland Broncos (“Cleveland Indians”, 2015).

The Cleveland Broncos did not last long as the name for the baseball team in Cleveland. In honor of their new star player, Lajoie, the Cleveland Broncos changed their name to the Naps (“Cleveland Indians”, 2015). The team was under the management of Lajoie, until he decided to just be a player and not the manager of the team. After a couple of winning seasons, the Naps started to greatly decline and in 1914, they lost 102 games, which set a franchise record (“Cleveland Indians”, 2015). The losing stemmed from the death of one of their best players and then everything went downhill after that. Furthermore, the losing seasons and declining numbers in attendance brought about the end of the Lajoie era for Cleveland. Since Lajoie left Cleveland, the team decided a name change was necessary. With that being said, the president of the team chose two Cleveland newspapers, The Plain Dealer and The Leader, to pick a new name to replace the Naps. The newspaper writers came up with the name the Indians, and that has been the name of the team ever since. The writers chose Indians because it had been a name tied to the baseball organization at one time in the previous years.

In 1928, the Cleveland Indians debuted the first logo of Chief Wahoo, but they did not refer to this logo as Chief Wahoo yet. This first season with Chief Wahoo as the logo, the Indians went 62-92 (Friedman, 2014). Next, during the 1929 to the 1932 seasons, the Indians went four straight seasons above .500 (Friedman, 2014). The Indians went third in 1929 and then fourth in the following three seasons (Friedman, 2014). The Indians continued to have winning seasons, but they still never finished out on top.

The Chief Wahoo logo continued to change and transform throughout the years. From the years 1946 to 1950, the Indians transformed the Chief Wahoo logo into what may have been the most offensive one yet (Friedman, 2014). This Chief Wahoo had a long banana nose and the Indians ended up with a 426-345 record over the four seasons with this Chief Wahoo as their logo (Friedman, 2014). The most current Chief Wahoo logo is the one that baseball fans are used to seeing today. This logo came about in 1951 and has since been the main logo for the Indians (Friedman, 2014). The term “Chief Wahoo” was created by sports writers and stuck with the team. Even though Chief Wahoo has been a symbol for the Cleveland Indians for several decades, there has been a great amount of controversy surrounding the name. Many people believe that the Chief Wahoo logo is offensive to the Indian tribe and that the Indians need to completely get away from the Chief Wahoo symbol.

**Issues**

The Indians organization has seen more protests and people speak out against Chief Wahoo as the team’s symbol. Even the Cleveland Plain Dealer, the newspaper that created the name of the franchise, has spoken out and said that the team needs to get rid of their Chief Wahoo logo (Levenson, 2014). In an editorial for the paper, it was written that Chief Wahoo is a “racially insensitive stereotype of Native Americans” (Levenson, 2014). It was also stated that Chief Wahoo plays absolutely no role whatsoever in the team’s performance and that it “makes the team seem hopelessly backward in the eyes of the world” (Levenson, 2014). Chief Wahoo was a major part of the Indians identity when they first started out as an organization, but times have changed and sports teams represent a lot more than just their symbol.

In the early 2000’s, the Indians introduced the cursive I as an alternative to the Chief Wahoo symbol, but Chief Wahoo still remained a major part of the team’s logo. More recently, in 2008, the Cleveland Indians introduced the “Block C” logo, which is a throwback to the classic Indians baseball caps (Friedman, 2014). The Indians have been trying to incorporate the block C into their uniforms and apparel by pushing it as their main mark instead of Chief Wahoo, but they have not completely taken away the Chief Wahoo logo.

The Indians organization has slowly been trying to incorporate a new logo for the team by having the block C on a majority of their new merchandise, but Chief Wahoo still appears on a number of the clothing items associated with the team. In the Indians Team Shop, it is not uncommon to see apparel and memorabilia with Chief Wahoo on it. The Cleveland Indians organization has sent out fan satisfaction surveys in the past to find out the fans’ opinions on the Chief Wahoo logo. An example question from the survey was, “This logo represents more than the team-it represents the city of Cleveland” (Ruiter 2013). Fans had the opportunity for answers ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree (Ruiter, 2013). The team also asked similar questions regarding the block C and the script Indians. The Indians organization wants to please the fans and provide them with the best experiences possible. They understand that attending a baseball game is much more than the game itself, and that the fan experience at the ballpark is everything. The Indians use a Systems Resource Approach, meaning that they are not closed to the public and their fans. The Indians created the survey to receive feedback from the fans. Conducting the survey allowed the Indians organization to take into consideration how the fans felt about the logo. This survey also gave front office workers for the Indians insight into what may happen if the organization did change the logo.

During the recent offseason, the Indians have made a number of renovations and have added a number of new restaurants and other places throughout the ballpark to make the experience at the game even better for the fans. The Indians have been receiving criticism for the Chief Wahoo logo and the controversy that it brings, but they are beginning to realize that coming to a Major League Baseball game is more about the experience. In the new additions to the ballpark, the Indians have put the block C and the cursive Indians logo around the stadium. The Indians are slowly but surely getting away from the Chief Wahoo symbol. When looking at the Indians website, there is no Chief Wahoo symbol that is visible. The only symbols that are on the website are the block C and the cursive Indians. The Indians do have Chief Wahoo on their home jersey sleeves and the caps. Those two locations are the only part of the jersey that Chief Wahoo is visible. This shows that the Indians are moving away from Chief Wahoo without really even saying anything or making a big announcement to the public.

The Cleveland Indians have made an evolutionary change with their logo. The Indians have not made any major announcements to say that they are completely doing away with Chief Wahoo, but as stated earlier, they are starting to incorporate the block C as the main logo. The Indians have chosen to start using a block C, which is not controversial, and it will please the fans that believe Chief Wahoo is racist. This is also an evolutionary change because the Indians have been making incremental adjustments. They first started to introduce the block C on the players’ uniforms, and now they are making the block C the main identity of the Cleveland Indians.

**Theory**

As previously stated, the Cleveland Indians organization has faced some controversy due to the Chief Wahoo symbol. There are a number of people who believe that the Chief Wahoo symbol is racist and disrespectful to Native American people and therefore want it removed as the logo for the Indians. There are also a number of Indians fans that feel connected to the Chief Wahoo symbol and want it to remain the logo for the Indians. The social identity theory can be used to examine why Cleveland Indians fans do not want the Chief Wahoo logo to be changed.

Taijfel (1979) created the social identity theory and states that social identity is a person’s sense of who they are based on their group membership (McLeod, 2008). Different groups that people belong to allow for people to identify themselves within that group and provide people with a sense of pride and self-esteem (McLeod, 2008). Furthermore, these groups give people a sense of belonging to the social world. This concept definitely applies to sports. Sports fans identify themselves with their favorite team and develop a sense of pride and belonging to that team. People invest so much time and money to their favorite sports teams and feel connections to the history of that team (McLeod, 2008). Many Indians fans feel close to the Chief Wahoo logo and identify themselves with that logo since it has been a part of the team for a number of years. Indians fans spend large amounts of money on merchandise for the team and whenever they see Chief Wahoo, they automatically associate it with the Cleveland Indians.

A major argument for older Cleveland fans is that Chief Wahoo is a symbol of their childhood. These fans watched the Indians games growing up and always saw Chief Wahoo on the players’ uniforms and helmets. Sports fans consider their team’s logo to be extremely special to them, especially if it is a logo that has been with a team for a long time. Sports fans also join themselves into groups, depending on which team they support. Many people find a common ground with each other when they realize they like the same team. Similar to what the social identity theory states, Chief Wahoo provides the Indians fans with a sense of pride and self-esteem. Wearing Indians gear that has Chief Wahoo on it allows fans to identify themselves within the Indians culture and brings fans closer to other fans.

**Evaluation**

The Cleveland Indians organization has made progress in trying to stay away from using the Chief Wahoo logo. Chief Wahoo remains on the home uniforms and is featured on the caps and jersey sleeves, but the fans have seen less of him overall, especially over the past couple of seasons. The Indians organization has slowly started to implement the block C as the main logo for the team. The block C is currently featured on a few of the players’ caps and uniforms. This symbol is on a majority of the gear and memorabilia that is located in the Indians Team Shop. The block C is also the logo the Indians use when they do promotions and events. The Indians have not come out to the public and announced that they were getting rid of Chief Wahoo, but they have definitely been de-emphasizing the logo. The Indians have spring training in Arizona, where a number of Native Americans live. The Indians did not want to upset the Native Americans that live in Arizona and have therefore lessened Chief Wahoo’s visibility at spring training.

As stated earlier, the Indians organization has also issued out a survey to the fans in order to see how they feel about Chief Wahoo as the logo. This survey was created just to get an idea of how fans would feel if Chief Wahoo was completely done away with as a logo for the team. Even though the Indians have the block C as the primary logo, Chief Wahoo is still a part of the organization. When looking at the social identity theory, it is clear that sports fans feel a special connection to the Chief Wahoo logo because of all the memories that were created. The Chief Wahoo logo also gives fans a sense of belonging to each other because they have bonded over that logo and everything that Chief Wahoo represents. The Indians will continue to slowly marginalize Chief Wahoo, but for now no major movements have been made.

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