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COMMENTARY

“Playing Indian,” Power, and Racial Identity in American Sport: Gerald R. Gems’ “The Construction, Negotiation, and Transformation of Racial Identity in American Football”

C. RICHARD KING AND CHARLES FRUEHLING SPRINGWOOD

Gerald R. Gems deserves praise for his comparative history of race, sport, and identity. Too often scholars neglect the significance of sport for marginalized groups. Gems avoids this, in part, by drawing together histories and cultures frequently segregated to examine the implications of playing football for Native Americans and African Americans. Sport, as he demonstrates, has had profound effects on individual identities, social movements, and cultural values. As useful as Gems’ account is, however, it offers neither an adequate nor a complete interpretation of the significance of playing football for marginalized groups. In contrast with Gems, who nicely recounts the heroic players and great games of old in an effort to unravel the importance of sport for racial identity, we argue in what follows that one cannot understand the significance of Native Americans and African Americans playing football without an understanding of the significance of “playing Indian” in association with it.

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We want to suggest in this brief comment that to apprehend the importance of football, the symbolic presence and ritual uses of "Indianness" as team mascots must be appreciated as well.

One of the key strengths of Gems' account is its comparative framework. Juxtaposing the experiences of Native Americans and African Americans opens a novel analytic window onto the articulations of race, sport, and identity. It suggests the ways in which marginalized individuals manipulated asymmetrical social contexts to craft meaningful lives. Ironically, this comparative discussion does little to clarify the increasingly divergent presence of and possibilities for Native Americans and African Americans in football. Indeed, Gems remains silent on the virtual disappearance of Native Americans from football after 1930 and the rising participation of African Americans since the Second World War. He also fails to address the distinct semiotic valence of signs associated with African Americans and Native Americans. Whereas football teams and their fans have rarely adopted images of Africans or African Americans as mascots, innumerable schools, clubs, and institutions have appropriated, and even invented, Native American peoples to represent themselves. The differential presence of such mascots and their absence from Gems' analysis is troubling.

Native American mascots have played a central role in American athletics, particularly in association with popular sports like football, basketball, and baseball, since the early years of the twentieth century. It is perhaps ironic that Native Americans so actively participated in the crystallization of football as a national spectacle, as athletes, coaches, executives, and icons, but linger largely in the form of racist stereotypes which efface this proud past. As numerous commentators have suggested, mascots caricature, mock, and dehumanize Native Americans as they have decontextualized beliefs and behaviors and perpetuated well-worn clichés. As a consequence, they structure asymmetrical public spaces, imbued with the certainty of conquest, the security of white domination, and the romance of imperial nostalgia. Importantly, Gems offers only one glimpse of the symbolic force of such images in sports in his description of a game between Carlisle and Dickinson. "When Dickinson's pre-game festivities included a cowboy scalping an Indian in 1905, Carlisle retaliated with a Dickinson dummy and proceeded to shoot arrows into its chest with each score in a 36-0 rout."¹ Beyond this one moment of terror and resistance, Gems refuses to engage images or mascots and their significance for the kinds of identities formulated by Native Americans, African Americans, and Euramericans. Such an engagement, we want to suggest briefly, not only complicates Gems' account, but also offers a more complete appreciation of the articulations of race, power, and sports he wants to understand as well. Three examples clarify our position.

Perhaps most obviously, a multitude of high school, college, professional, and club teams adopted Native American mascots between 1890 and 1960. The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, as we have elaborated elsewhere, typifies this pattern.² Early in this century, the sports teams at the land-grant university were known as the Fighting Illini, a name said to honor the spirit and legacy of the Native peoples of what is now known as Illinois.

Beginning in 1926, Chief Illiniwek represented them. The Chief, as fans and alumni still affectionately call the mascot, first appeared during half-time of the University of Illinois-University of Pennsylvania football game in Philadelphia. Bursting onto the field accompanied by the marching band, the invented Indian mascot danced a dramatic routine, dressed in an impressive feather headdress and a buckskin outfit manufactured by an Oglala woman who purportedly witnessed the Battle of the Little Bighorn, before smoking the peace pipe with William Penn. The spectacle elaborated a dangerous set of fictions—the Plains motif, the bellicose, hyper-masculine warrior, the wild dance, the decontextualized sacred objects—which persist even today at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where fans at tailgate parties—in response to Native American student protests—proudly remark, “Kill the Indians, save the Chief.”

Even sports teams without Native American mascots incorporated popular (mis)understandings of “Indianness.” Simpson College, a small liberal arts college and alma mater of George Washington Carver located in Indianola, Iowa, originally dubbed its teams the Red Men because of the brilliant colors the local maples turned in autumn. Later, students elaborated a tradition drawing on their interpretations of Native Americana, writing a victory cheer popularly known as “The Scalp Song.” This song not only was sung at sporting contests after 1910, but reached a wider audience through annual radio broadcasts coinciding with the school’s homecoming, and even was included in a musical program broadcast in New York City in January 1928.

A scalp, a scalp, a scalp to hang up on the trophy wall!
The foe, the foe, the wretched foe was taken to a fall!
Victoria! “Round the glare of mighty fires dancing figures, great and small,
Will hoot and yell, as warriors there assemble at the call.
Jah, Jah, Jah,
Jah, Jah, Jah.

We’ll broil, we’ll broil, we’ll broil them on the grid-iron ’till they’re done!
Their hides, their hides, their hides we’ll tan as covers for our drum!
A banquet! Hollow skulls will serve as drinking cups to toast the victory won,
Then to our tents at rising of the early morning sun.
Hi, jah, jah, hi, jah, jah,
Hi, jah, jah, hi, jah, jah,
Hi, jah, jah, hi, jah, jah.

In retrospect, the racism and stereotypes enacted in this song are readily apparent. Native Americans, far from being understood as equals, peers, or even moral persons, are compressed in a series of well-worn clichés: cannibalism, savagery, wildness, inhumanity. Surely, such texts enabled racial identity, fostering Euramerican subjectivities through the imagined Indians. “The Scalp Song” is

one of numerous fight songs and cheers penned and performed during the period Gems discusses. Clearly, as “The Scalp Song” demonstrates, we cannot ignore the racist sentiments of such texts if we are to grasp the significance of playing football for Native Americans and African Americans during this period.

More disturbing are those instances in which Native Americans “played Indian,” in addition to playing football. The Oorang Indians of the early National Football League completes our interpretation of Native Americans and football. In 1922, Walter Lingo created a sporting spectacle to publicize his Airedale dog-breeding business in La Rue, Ohio by purchasing an NFL franchise and hiring Jim Thorpe as a player-coach. Nicknamed the Oorang Indians, the team consisted exclusively of Native American players. Viewing his all-Indian team basically as an advertising vehicle, Lingo insisted that they play mostly “road” games. During half-time, the Oorang players would assemble on the field, with the Airedales (as well as coons, coyotes, and a bear named Queen Mary), and perform exhibitions in trailing and treeing the canines. To complete this spectacle of “playing Indian,” the players also performed “Indian dances” and demonstrated Native American skill in throwing the tomahawk and shooting the rifle. Perhaps such activities drained their energies, for the Oorang Indians survived only two seasons, winning a mere total of four games. In spite of their fleeting existence, the Oorang Indians underscore the force and significance of such symbols and performances of “Indianness” in association with athletics. Native Americans enacted the very encrusted, racist images their participation in football potentially challenged.³

These instances raise a number of troubling questions about Gems’ account, in particular about race, sports, and identity in American sports more generally. How do popular attitudes about Thorpe—the “World’s Greatest Athlete”—articulate with his half-time performances? If football was such a powerful arena for Native Americans to redefine themselves and resist Euramerican expectations, how was it possible for primarily Euramerican audiences to reinvent themselves through racist understandings of them? How could Euramericans, who invented Native American mascots, have fervently believed that they were honoring rather than harming Native Americans? How might this context have affected Native American and African American athletes, not to mention students?

The complexities of these three instances of “playing Indian,” particularly when read along with Gems’ history, bring us closer, we believe, to what he had envisioned in his comparative history. The signs and spectacles associated with Native American mascots clarify the networks of power structuring football, racial identity, and American society. As such, it opens a dialogue about hegemony, a dialogue which Gems seems to want to foster, but which he continually defers in his text. Hegemony is a Gramscian concept that allows for a clearer appreciation of the way power is exercised, authorized, negotiated, reconfigured, and resisted—in short, how it is practiced. For the practices under consideration here, football and the experiences of Native Americans and African Americans, Gems is correct in noting that, given the particular ways in which power shaped American society early in this century, certain forms of power were recuperated as these variously oppressed minori-

ties achieved success in football. Yet we feel that his reading of these activities is overly optimistic.

Hegemonic power is most effective, yet subtle, within those spaces where social relations, symbols, signs, and common sense articulate, precisely because it does not seem to be about power at all. Rather, the social world and its inequities come to be viewed as merely the way things naturally are. Gems fails to locate the ways in which social power emerges (variously and with great overlap) as the power to name, to represent, to structure opportunity, and even to have one's values and practices be the *predominant* ones in society. Hegemonic power is constantly resisted in both obvious and unseen ways, to be sure, but given this understanding, it seems that the early participation of Native Americans and African Americans in football often unfolded in terms of a Euramerican imagination and sensibility.

In the end, Gems overestimates the significance of playing football for popular perceptions of marginalized peoples and in turn neglects the importance of "playing Indian": "The minorities' athletic feats and successes destabilized norms, expectations, and stereotypes ascribed by whites, but socially they remained members of alternative cultures, marginalized with dual identities and limited inclusion, particularly off the field."⁴ In contrast with this assessment, we believe that "playing Indian" not only reinforced many of the very stereotypes challenged by Native American and African American athletes, but surely also restabilized racist sentiments, reconfirming their marginal position and limited possibilities. Thus, Gems' failure to account for the significance of "playing Indian" and its entanglements with playing football undermines his comparative history and the conclusions he wishes to draw from it.

NOTES

1. Gerald R. Gems, "The Construction, Negotiation, and Transformation of Racial Identity in American Football: A Study of Native and African Americans," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 22:2 (Summer 1998): 142.

2. See C. Richard King, "Spectacles, Sports, and Stereotypes: Dis/Playing Chief Illiniwek," in *Colonial Discourse, Collective Memories, and the Exhibition of Native American Cultures and Histories in the Contemporary United States* (New York: Garland, 1998), 41–58; Charles Fruehling Springwood and C. Richard King, "Race, Ritual, and Remembrance: Manifest Destiny and the Symbolic Sacrifice of 'Chief Illiniwek'," in *Exercising Power: The Making and the Re-Making of the Body*, eds. Cheryl Cole, John Loy, and Michael Messner (Albany: State University of New York Press, forthcoming).

3. Robert L. Whitman, *Jim Thorpe and the Oorang Indians: The N.F.L.'s Most Colorful Franchise* (Defiance, OH: Marion County Historical Society, 1984).

4. Gems, "The Construction, Negotiation, and Transformation of Racial Identity in American Football," 145.