

NCAA American Indian mascot ban will begin Feb. 1

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INDIANAPOLIS -- The NCAA banned the use of American Indian mascots by sports teams during its postseason tournaments, but will not prohibit them otherwise.

The NCAA's executive committee decided this week the organization did not have the authority to bar Indian mascots by individual schools, committee chairman Walter Harrison said Friday.

Nicknames or mascots deemed "hostile or abusive" would not be allowed on team uniforms or other clothing beginning with any NCAA tournament after Feb. 1, said Harrison, the University of Hartford's president.

"What each institution decides to do is really its own business" outside NCAA championship events, Harrison said.

"What we are trying to say is that we find these mascots to be unacceptable for NCAA championship competition," he added.

At least 18 schools have mascots the NCAA deem "hostile or abusive," including Florida State's Seminoles and Illinois' Illini. The full list of schools was not immediately released.

Florida State President T.K. Wetherell blasted the NCAA and threatened legal action on Friday, the Tampa Tribune reported.

"Florida State University is stunned at the complete lack of appreciation for cultural diversity shown by the National Collegiate Athletic Association's executive committee. ... That the NCAA would now label our close bond with the Seminole Tribe of Florida as culturally 'hostile and abusive' is both outrageous and insulting," Wetherell said Friday in a statement.

The Seminole Tribe of Florida passed a resolution in June supporting the school's use of the nickname and tribal images. Seminole tribes in other states have disagreed with the Florida group. According to the Tribune, the ruling likely won't affect Florida State's pregame football ritual in which a student dressed as Chief Osceola rides onto the field on a spotted horse and plants a flaming spear in the turf. Since the NCAA does not sponsor a Division I-A football tournament, it has no say in the matter. That control belongs to the Bowl Championship Series.

"I intend to pursue all legal avenues to ensure that this unacceptable decision is overturned, and that this university will forever be associated with the 'unconquered' spirit of the Seminole Tribe of Florida," Wetherell said.

Not all schools with Indian-related nicknames are on that list. NCAA officials said some schools using the Warrior nickname do not use Indian symbols and would not be affected.

North Carolina-Pembroke, which uses the nickname Braves, will not face sanctions. NCAA president Myles Brand explained said the school's student body has historically admitted a high percentage of American Indians and more than 20 percent of the students are American Indians.

Schools on the list could still appeal.

"I suspect that some of those would like to having a ruling on that," Brand said. "But unless there is a change before Feb. 1, they will have to abide by it."

Major college football teams also would not be subjected to the new rules because there is no NCAA Division I-A tournament or playoff.

Arkansas State University, whose teams are known as the Indians, said Friday that their use of the mascot is done with respect and the school's sports teams will continue to use it.

"It is our objective to represent Native Americans in a dignified and stately manner," ASU athletic director Dean Lee said. "We believe that our use of the nickname 'Indians' and 'The Indian Family' as our mascot affords the Native American customs and history the fullest respect and integrity."

Vernon Bellecourt, president of the National Coalition on Racism in Sports and Media, was pleased with the postseason ban but had hoped for even stronger action.

"We would have hoped the NCAA would have provided the moral leadership on this issue, but obviously they've chosen to only go halfway," said Bellecourt, a member of the Anishinabe-Ojibwe Nation in Minnesota.

The NCAA two years ago recommended that schools determine for themselves whether the Indian depictions were offensive.

At the University of North Dakota, where the Fighting Sioux nickname has come under fire, officials said they wanted to study the decision before commenting.

"We just don't have enough information to know exactly what it means," said Phil Harmeson, a senior associate to school president Charles Kupchella.

The NCAA plans to ban schools using Indian nicknames from hosting postseason events. Harrison said schools with such mascots that have already been selected as tournament sites would be asked to cover any offensive logos.

Such logos also would be prohibited at postseason games on cheerleader and band uniforms starting in 2008.

Among the schools to change nicknames in recent years over such concerns were St. John's (from Redmen to Red Storm) and Marquette (from Warriors to Golden Eagles).

Fourteen schools have removed all references to Native American culture or were deemed not to have references to Native American culture as part of their athletics programs: California State-Stanislaus, Lycoming College, Winona State University, Hawaii-Manoa, Eastern Connecticut State, East Stroudsburg, Husson College, Merrimack College, Southeast Missouri State, State University of West Georgia, Stonehill College, San Diego State, Wisconsin Lutheran College and the University of North Carolina-Pembroke.

The College of William and Mary has been given an extension to complete its self-study on the mascot issue.

Other measures approved this week include stronger penalties for schools that repeatedly fall below the NCAA's new academic cutline. Harrison said schools would receive a warning letter the first year; restrictions on scholarships, recruiting and playing time the second year; and a postseason ban the third year. If a school fails to meet the standard four consecutive years, all teams at that school would be ineligible for postseason play.

"I'd fully expect that we never get to the fourth year," Harrison said. "A school should take stronger action before that. But I think this should send a message that there will be real, serious consequences if you don't."

Schools also would receive a bonus point if a player returns to school to complete his or her degree. The board also approved a two-year contract extension for Brand. His deal was to run through Dec. 31, 2007 and now includes an indefinite two-year rollover.

Information from The Associated Press was used in this report.