

Genocide Bowl: Activists to protest Super Bowl teams on Sunday



Last year, Native activists protest the Kansas City professional football team's name outside State Farm Stadium in Glendale, Arizona before Super Bowl 2023, which featured the Kansas Team versus the Philadelphia Eagles. (Photo courtesy of Rhonda LeValdo)

Kansas City, February 9 (RHC)-- Come game day Fridays, Kansas City turns red. Law firm office workers, elementary school students, elected leaders in city hall – everyone on both sides of the city whose borders reach into Kansas and Missouri – don NFL gear as a show of support for the hometown team.

Everyone, that is, except Gaylene Crouser. At least that's how it feels for the director of the Kansas City Indian Center. "It permeates everything," she said. "You can't turn on the TV or the radio without hearing that stereotypical song they play to get people to do the chop."

Come Sunday, February 11th, Crouser will continue her tradition of not wearing Kansas City football gear on game day when she joins protestors outside Allegiant Stadium on the Las Vegas strip. That's where the team will be playing the San Francisco 49ers during the 58th NFL Super Bowl.

For the fourth time in the past five years, Native demonstrators and their allies will converge outside the stadium where the NFL championship game is being played to protest the Kansas City team's name.

Rhonda LeValdo, founder of Not In Our Honor, an organization opposed to the Kansas City team's name and associated imagery, said she and other protesters will hold up signs and chant to express their disdain for the team's continued tolerance of racist imagery and behavior.

She said protesters also will express opposition to the San Francisco team's name. The 49ers name refers to the gold miners who flooded California the year after gold was discovered in 1848. The ensuing gold rush brought as many as 300,000 settlers to the state and led to a massive decline of Indigenous people from California as a result of disease, relocation and massacres. From a population of 150,000 before the gold rush, just 31,000 Native people remained in the state by 1870, according to the International Indian Treaty Council.

LeValdo said it's wrong to celebrate an event that heralded the deaths of thousands of Native people, and she said the competition between two teams with offensive names only fuels her opposition to the Kansas City team's name. "I was calling it the Genocide Bowl," she said. "It's so weird how Americans celebrate their teams with this. They're not understanding the history or historical aspects that we as Natives understand."

The fight against racist sports mascots and team names has been long and tumultuous.

In 1992, a group of Native people filed a lawsuit, *Harjo v. Pro-Football*, seeking to cancel six trademark registrations for the Washington NFL team over the team's racist name and associated imagery. The U.S. Trademark Trial and Appeal Board canceled the registrations, but the sports team managed to get the board's decision overturned on appeal. The case eventually landed before the U.S. Supreme Court, which refused to hear the plaintiff's appeal effectively ending the lawsuit in favor of the football franchise.

A subsequent lawsuit, *Blackhorse v. Pro-Football*, again challenged the Washington team's name and succeeded in convincing the Trademark Trial and Appeal Board to cancel the team's trademark. The team appealed the decision, and the case landed before the U.S. Supreme Court. This time, the high court ruled on the issue through a related case, forcing the withdrawal of the lawsuit and reinstatement of the team's trademark in 2018.

The fight took a new turn in May 2020, when Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin murdered George Floyd, sparking nationwide racial justice protests that led to several professional sports teams retiring controversial team names and mascots. They included the Washington NFL team, which became the Washington Commanders, and the Cleveland MLB team, which became the Guardians.

Yet, other professional sports teams – including the Kansas City NFL team, Chicago NHL team and the Atlanta MLB team – have remained recalcitrant.

Crouser said while she is opposed to the Kansas City team's name, she is more frustrated by the team's tolerance of offensive behavior by fans during games. She said she particularly hates "the chop" – the closed fist gesture that fans perform to the sound of rhythmic drumming that elicits old stereotypes of Native Americans – as well as the Native headdresses that fans still wear, despite the team banning them

from Arrowhead Stadium.

“People are like, ‘What’s the big deal about the name?’ It’s not necessarily the name,” she said. “It’s all the imagery they have associated with it.”

She said the Kansas City team didn’t endure the same criticism that other sports teams did during the social justice protests following Floyd’s 2020 death. However, the team has made some changes, such as renaming the “tomahawk chop” to the “chop,” retiring a horse named Warpaint that a cheerleader would ride in the stadium and prohibiting fans from wearing headdresses and face paint, or “red face.”

“They made a few minor changes and gave a lot of lip service, but ultimately they weren’t held to the same standard as other people in other places were,” Crouser said. She added that it’s been difficult to get the Kansas City football team to change its name when other Native people continue to support the team. Kansas City long snapper James Winchester, Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, told ICT in 2023 that he supports his team’s name.

“I answer that every time the same way, for me, it’s not offensive, but to others, it might be. I’ll leave it at that and I’m just proud to be part of this organization, the Kansas City (football team).”

Native support for the team’s name is most evident in November, when the team celebrates Native American Heritage Month by inviting Native dignitaries to a game to be honored. This past November 20th, the team honored representatives from the Kickapoo Nation of Kansas and Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and invited an Omaha Nation drum group to perform.

“It’s a little bit disheartening that they’re always finding people to use as a shield, as a human shield to prevent them from having to make any meaningful change,” Crouser said.

LeValdo, who founded Not In Our Honor in 2005, said tolerance of offensive team names and mascots encourages the mistreatment of Native people everywhere. She said Native student athletes in her own community of Lawrence, Kansas face discrimination by opposing players who heckle them by performing the chop.

“It’s affecting our kids in different ways every day,” she said.

She said the team’s name also excludes Native people from celebrating the team’s successes along with other fans.

“I would like to be a part of that community that could celebrate,” said LeValdo, who is both a Kansas City Royals fan and a fan of the University of Kansas’s sports teams. “Sports bring people together. It involves everybody and we’re not part of that.”

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