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Guardians

Name game: Why the Cleveland Indians changed their name and why the Atlanta Braves didn't

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Commissioner Rob Manfred (left) and Major League Baseball Players Association executive director Tony Clark speak before Game 1 of the World Series between the Atlanta Braves and Houston Astros on Tuesday night at Minute Maid Park in Houston. AP



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By [Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com](https://www.cleveland.com)

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- The World Series opened Tuesday night with the Atlanta Braves beating the Houston Astros at Minute Maid Park in Game 1 of the best-of-seven series.

Before the game Commissioner Rob Manfred was asked by reporters about the Braves name and their fans use of the Tomahawk Chop at Truist Park.

“It’s important to understand that we have 30 markets around the country. They’re not all the same,” Manfred told reporters. “The Braves have done a phenomenal job with the Native American community. The Native American community in that region is wholly supportive of the Braves’ program, including the chop. For me, that’s kind of the end of the story. In that market, taking into account the Native American community, it works.”

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Manfred said he understood that not all Native American groups feel that way.

“I don’t know how every Native American group around the country feels,” he said. “I am 100 percent certain that the Braves understand what the Native American community in their region believes and that they’ve acted in accordance with that understanding.”

Naturally, this struck a nerve with fans of Cleveland's baseball team, many who are still angry over the franchise's decision in July to drop the name Indians and open the the 2022 season as the Cleveland Guardians. Although that name change is currently being challenged in court.

Here are six questions and answers explaining why two big-league teams have chosen different paths regarding their name.

No.1: What caused the Indians to change their name?

A. It was not a directive from MLB. When the Indians made the decision to drop Chief Wahoo as their logo at the end of the 2018 season -- a decision strongly encouraged by Manfred -- owner Paul Dolan was committed to retaining the name Indians. But after the death of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, and the nationwide unrest that followed, the NFL Washington Redskins announced that they were changing their name. The Indians, after Washington's announcement, said they were considering a name change as well.

When the Indians finally announced the name change in July of this year, the organization said the change was made to foster unity and social justice in the Cleveland Community. Dolan believed that a professional sports team should unite a city, not divide it. The Indians had been criticized for decades over their name and use of Chief Wahoo.

Dolan said the decision was based on discussions with fans and Native American groups and stakeholders in the team. Washington's move to change its name was prompted by protests from sponsors. Cleveland said it had not received any negative push back from its sponsors.

No. 2: What was the Braves' stance on a possible name change?

A. When Washington and Cleveland announced that they were considering name changes in 2020, the Braves ownership said they saw no reason to change their name. The Braves had formed a strong relationship with the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians in North Carolina. In the past the EBCI has supported the Braves name and the chop.

Last year, however, Chuck Hoskin Jr., principal chief of the Cherokee Nation, told The Athletic, "We appreciate that the Atlanta Braves are trying to honor the Native community, but the best way to honor us, is to stop the use of Native American depictions across sports."

Braves ownership during the 2020 pandemic told the Atlanta Journal-Constitution that a decision on the chop had not been made. But the chop has continued through the 2021 regular season and postseason.

Ownership also emailed season ticket holders a statement in 2020 which read in part, "Through our conversations, changing the name of the Braves is not under consideration or deemed necessary. We have great respect and reverence for our name and the Native American communities that have held meaningful relationships with us do as well. We will always be the Atlanta Braves."

No.3: Why wasn't Cleveland able to form a similar type of relationship with a Native American tribe?

A. Dolan, on the day the name change was announced, said the Indians were in a different situation than the Braves. They had no large Native American group to bond with and, perhaps, support them when it came to keeping the name. In doing their research concerning the name change, they talked to the Lake Erie Native American Council and the National Council of American Indians.

No. 4: What put the Indians in Manfred's crosshairs?

A. In 2016, when the Indians were getting ready to play the Blue Jays in the ALCS, a [Native American activist in Ottawa filed a motion](#) to prevent them from wearing the Chief Wahoo logo and the name Indians on their uniforms for Game 3 of the ALCS at Rogers Centre in Toronto.

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The Indians traveled to Toronto with spare uniforms in case the motion was upheld. It was denied three hours before game time.

Bud Selig, who preceded Manfred as commissioner, believed a decision on the Indians team name and logo should be made by the team. Manfred, however, anticipated more legal challenges to Chief Wahoo and pushed the Indians to drop the logo.

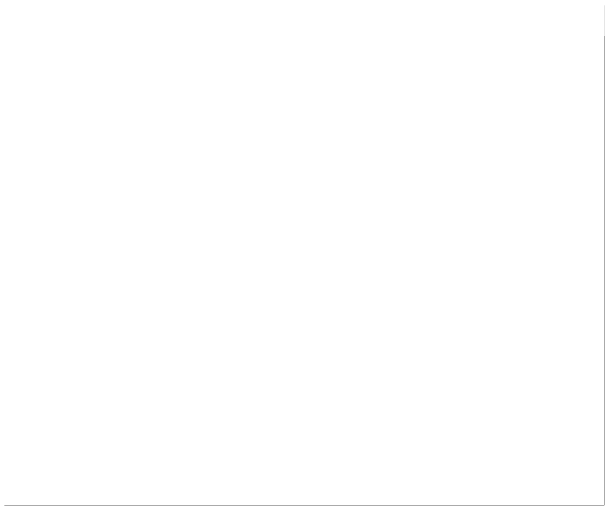
No. 5: Did the Indians get the 2019 All-Star Game for dropping Chief Wahoo after the 2018 season?

A. Manfred and the decision makers with the Indians deny that. But it was certainly an interesting coincidence.

No. 6: What concessions have the Braves made to Native Americans?

A. The Braves main logo from 1966 through 1986 was the laughing head of a Native American warrior. That has been dropped with the main logo showing the name Braves above a tomahawk.

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Atlanta used to have a Native American mascot called Chief Noc-A-Homa from 1966-85. The Chief was retired in 1986 reportedly because of a salary dispute.