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**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

A Response to "Playing Indian"

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1930w276>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 23(2)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Gems, Gerald R.

**Publication Date**

1999-03-01

**DOI**

10.17953

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## COMMENTARY

# A Response to "Playing Indian"

**GERALD R. GEMS**

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I offer a response rather than a rebuttal to King and Springwood's critique of my recent article in "The Construction, Negotiation, and Transformation of Racial Identity in American Football," for I agree with much of what they state in their discussion. They contend that my study, though "useful," does not "offer a complete interpretation of the significance of playing football for marginalized groups." No one, limited study can purport to do so and I did not make such a claim.

King and Springwood are also correct in calling for greater examination of the symbolic and ritual uses of Indian mascots to elicit a more complete understanding of the dynamics between dominant and subordinate groups. The truth of such matters will be determined by interdisciplinary insights culled from sociology, anthropology, communication theory, and semiotics, in addition to historical studies like mine, which can only be a small piece of the much larger puzzle.

My study is admittedly limited in both its scope and research, and the authors of "Playing Indian" find fault with my singular reference to a retaliatory act when the Carlisle Indians shot arrows in the Dickinson team dummy; but neither I, nor any historian, should draw conclusions unsupported by the evidence. To do so is mere speculation. Certainly the accounts of the Indians' actions in their games against Army, Harvard, and the University of Chicago (pp. 141-142), lend support to an alternative cultural adaptation of football. The more specific study of images and mascots that King and Springwood call for is certainly a worthy one and warranted, but not one that I had enough evi-

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Gerald R. Gems currently serves as the chairperson of the Health and Physical Education Department at North Central College in Naperville, Illinois. He has authored three books and numerous articles.

dence to conduct beyond what I stated. I have attempted to do so in another study of dominant-subordinate relationships between religious groups published elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> as have the authors in their own studies of Chief Illiniwek.

The authors also contend that I “remain silent on the virtual disappearance of Native Americans from football after 1930 and the rising participation of African Americans since the Second World War.” In a study limited to journal length one must set chronological limits, though I did briefly discuss the reintegration of professional and college football by African Americans from the 1940s–1970s (p. 139). As to Native Americans, I discussed the closing of Carlisle, the feeder school from which most Indian players proceeded to the National Football League, and the reluctance, even refusal, of prominent football powers to schedule Haskell Institute, its likely successor in the 1920s, thereby “ensuring that there would be no more Carlisles” and “limiting the Indian presence in the more elite circles” (p. 144).

As the authors suggest there is much more to be done in the examination of sport as a resistive or retaliatory expression against racism. Had space permitted I might have analyzed Jim Thorpe’s well-known retorts to would-be tacklers after he scored a touchdown. His admonishments after bowling over tacklers might be considered “trash talking” today, but the football field still allows a level of violence and both physical and verbal retaliation deemed unacceptable in more civil society. Joe Lillard, the last of the African American pro players during the interwar years, likewise defied white domination in a number of altercations with opponents, teammates, and his own coach, allegedly the reason for his dismissal from the Chicago Cardinals after the 1933 season.<sup>2</sup>

The authors’ discussion of the professional Orang team “playing Indian” to succeed in a white world is likewise not an isolated one. The Harlem Globetrotters, too, played the fool, but took whites’ money in doing so. Such tactics proved common coping mechanisms and strategic ploys among minority athletic teams, who used such stereotypes to manipulate the dominant group for their own purposes. A black Chicago high school team masqueraded as the Globetrotters and once barnstormed through the unwitting burgs of Wisconsin, accumulating white capital along the way. Barnstorming black baseball teams often let small-town white teams win initial encounters just to raise the stakes for their return trip or to retake their losses and more in the carnival events that followed the ball games.<sup>3</sup> Even the Orang team took owner Walter Lingo’s money, purportedly, without extending much effort. Thorpe is reported to have earned five hundred dollars per week as player-manager, although he played sparingly and the team lost by scores of 41–0, 57–0, and 62–0, with only four victories in its two years of existence. Moreover, both the Orang Indians and Lone Star Deitz, the Native American coach of the Boston (later Washington) “Redskins,” allowed themselves to be cast in racist stereotypes during the half-time shows.<sup>4</sup>

As King and Springwood contend, such exhibitions allowed Euramericans to reinvent themselves through “playing Indian.” Other historians have also detailed the process by which Euramericans have defined themselves by inventing traditions and historical memories, often at odds with

the truth.<sup>5</sup> While Native American football players acquiesced in such portrayals, they did so to gain an ultimate and more immediate benefit. Leon Boutwell, the Chippewa quarterback of the Oorangs, explained that

White people had misconceptions about Indians. They thought they were all wild men, even though almost all of us had been to college and were generally more civilized than they were. Well, it was a dandy excuse to raise hell and get away with it when the mood struck us. Since we were Indians we could get away with things the whites couldn't. Don't think we didn't take advantage of that.<sup>6</sup>

I agree with the authors that hegemony can indeed be a subtle and complex theory of power. Both African Americans and Native Americans controlled those aspects of the game within their power to do so, such as the delivery of punishing blows to a white opponent. At other times they seemingly complied in their own denigration, but even these stratagems elicited benefits. Despite the overt racist images, minorities constructed and negotiated their own meanings, reveling in the role of trickster who beat the white man at his own game—taking his money.

I thank professors King and Springwood for their input, analysis, and concern, and trust that we have all benefited from such scholarly endeavor.

### NOTES

1. Gerald R. Gems, "The Prep Bowl: Football and Religious Acculturation in Chicago, 1927–1963," *Journal of Sport History* 23:3 (Fall 1996): 284–302.

2. See Gerald R. Gems, "Shooting Stars: The Rise and Fall of Blacks in Professional Football," *Professional Football Researchers Association Annual*, ed. Bob Braunwart (1988): 1–18.

3. Gerald R. Gems, "Blocked Shot: The Development of Basketball in the African-American Community of Chicago," *Journal of Sport History* 22:2 (Summer 1995): 135–148; *ibid.*, Gems, *Windy City Wars: Labor, Leisure and Sport in the Making of Chicago* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1997), 152; John Holway, *Blackball Stars: Negro League Pioneers* (Westport, CT: Meckler Books, 1988), 26, 36, 57, 262.

4. Bob Braunwart, Bob Carroll, and Joe Horrigan, "Oorang Indians, 1922–1923," *Coffin Corner* 3:1 (January 1981): 1–8.

5. Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991). See the more recent "The Uses of Memory: A Roundtable," *Journal of American History* 85:2 (Spring 1998): 409–466.

6. Braunwart, Carroll, and Horrigan, "Oorang Indians," 3.