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## What's next for 'Washington Football Team' after name change

The Washington Redskins — now known as the “Washington Football Team” until a permanent name is chosen — has committed to the ultimate rebranding. The National Football League’s Washington, D.C., team announced on July 13 that it was dropping the name “Redskins,” which it had been using since 1933, and the image of a Native American man as its logo.

The team’s majority owner, businessman Daniel Snyder, who acquired the franchise in 1999, had for years resisted calls to change the name. But the sports world’s support for the Black Lives Matter movement, combined with a broader effort to remove racially insensitive symbols such as the Confederate flag, has created mounting pressure to change certain team names and mascots.

The tipping point for Snyder, however, was when his team’s biggest sponsor, FedEx, threatened to pull out of its naming rights agreement for The Washington Football Team’s stadium — FedExField — according to multiple news outlets.

Teams with names and mascots seen as offensive are faced with making big decisions about the future of their brands. The logistics and legal issues involved in changing longstanding names and symbols cannot be understated. But neither can retaining public goodwill in an era when fan engagement is everything — especially in light of this year’s disrupted playing seasons due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Washington’s team has used the Redskins name for the past 87 years and the logo of a Native American man since the 1970s. But public sensibilities have been steadily moving away from sports names that are seen as offensive and campaigns against those names have become increasingly vocal.

In 2013, the Oneida Indian Nation launched its Change the Mascot national campaign to end the use of the Redskins name and mascot, calling directly on NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell to stop



### SPORTS MARKETING PLAYBOOK

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using what is widely considered a racial slur against Native Americans. A year later, the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office canceled the Redskins trademarks on the grounds that the name disparaged Native Americans.

The Washington Football Team defended its Redskins intellectual property all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. The high court stayed the team’s lawsuit while it ruled on similar claims filed by an Asian-American rock band called The Slants, whose application to trademark the name was rejected by the USPTO because the name could be seen as a racial slur against Asians.

In 2017, the Supreme Court ruled in *Matal v. Tam* that barring the federal registration of disparaging trademarks is unconstitutional because it violates the First Amendment’s free speech clause, handing the Redskins an unassailable legal victory. Ironically, now that the legal pressure is off, the Washington team finds

itself influenced by evolving societal attitudes — and the wishes of its big-dollar sponsors.

Snyder’s change of heart is largely attributable to FedEx, the company that signed a deal in 1999 to pay \$205 million for the naming rights to the Washington Football Team’s stadium through 2026. FedEx threatened to walk away if the team didn’t change its name.

The Washington Post and others reported that FedEx notified the team by letter on July 2 that it would pull out of the naming rights deal six years early. The letter reportedly asserted that the team’s name has created a risk of harm to the company’s brand reputation and was inconsistent with the company’s commitment to a more inclusive society. According to news reports, the two-page letter was intended to establish the “cause” for terminating the naming rights agreement and relieving FedEx of its obligation to pay the balance on of its payments — worth approximately \$45 million to the team. Bad press from such a public fallout with its biggest sponsor would also likely damage the team’s image for years to come.

FedEx released a short statement on the same day. Other big sponsors — including PepsiCo., Bank of America and Nike — then released their own statements supporting the name change. Nike, the NFL’s official game day uniform supplier, quickly removed Redskins merchandise from its online store.

Teams in other leagues have dropped offensive names and mascots in recent years. Notably, in 2019, Major League Baseball’s Cleveland Indians ditched its mascot, Chief Wahoo, a Native American caricature adopted by the team in the 1940s, though it still retains the “Indians” name.

Outside of professional sports, progress has been slowly made over the last few decades. More than 200 U.S. universities, colleges and school districts have stopped using racially insensitive Native American

names, says Change the Mascot. Many other teams at all levels of sports are mulling over whether to cease using Native American names and imagery.

The National Collegiate Athletic Association established guidelines in 2005 to encourage universities and colleges to stop using names and mascots that are offensive to indigenous people. An exception is when a school receives official approval from the tribe that inspired the name or mascot. A handful of colleges and universities have done just that, including the Florida State Seminoles and the Central Michigan University Chippewas, according to the NCAA.

Several states have also enacted legislation to prohibit public schools from using racially offensive teams names or mascots. California's Racial Mascots Act banned schools in 2017 from using the term "Redskins" for school or athletic team names, mascots or nicknames. In 2019, Maine became the first state to bar public schools, colleges and universities from using Native American mascots.

Professional sports teams with Native American names remain at the center of the conversation about rebranding because of their national visibility. To date, none has made a definitive move to follow the Washington Football Team's lead.

In the MLB, the Cleveland Indians organization is considering sending the "Indians" name out the door along with Chief Wahoo. The Atlanta Braves has said it has no plans to change its name but is working with an advisory group to evaluate other issues, including the "tomahawk chop" performed by fans at games, according to The Guardian.

The reigning Super Bowl champion Kansas City Chiefs, who call Arrowhead

Stadium home, have not issued a statement so far about its intentions. In the National Hockey League, the Chicago Blackhawks maintain they won't change their name, which honors a Native American leader from the 18th century.

Of course, some teams may be reluctant to make a change because revamping a well-known brand is not an easy — or inexpensive — feat. The Washington Football Team chose to use a generic interim name until it decides on a permanent one for good reason. The logistics of rebranding can take years to fully implement, but in the meantime, the team can immediately start distancing itself from the controversial name and remove it from its team uniform, marketing materials and merchandise.

Settling on the team's new name alone could be a lengthy process. A sports team's name is central to its identity as well as the identities of the city it represents and its fans. While every rebranding process is different, it's likely to involve research, focus groups, and design and marketing firm input, as well as review of numerous potential prototypes.

Once a new name and logo designs are selected, the corresponding intellectual property must be secured before new merchandise, signage, marketing campaigns, among other things, can be created. The team organization must also determine how the name change will affect sponsorships and contracts covering everything from broadcast agreements to concession rights.

In addition, the Washington Football Team organization faces a relatively novel legal challenge that other teams looking to rebrand in the future will likely have to face as well: a Virginia man has already

snapped up the trademark registrations for numerous potential new names for the Washington Football Team.

Martin McCaulay has obviously been paying attention to the names being tossed out as possible alternatives for the team. Starting in 2014 — the year the USPTO canceled the Redskins trademarks — he began filing trademarks applications. McCaulay now owns the trademarks for, or has registrations pending for, 44 names including "Washington Red-Tailed Hawks," "Washington Redtails," "Washington Monuments," "Washington Red Wolves," and "Washington Warriors," CBS News reported.

McCaulay initially stated that he'd like to give the NFL the names for free. More recently, however, he hired an attorney and said that he's open to a monetary offer, according to CBS News. Stay tuned to see how negotiations go.

Another issue is deciding what to do with the team's intellectual property related to the former Redskins name. In other sports rebranding situations, continuing to offer old logo designs as "vintage," "throwback" or "retro" apparel appeals to fans' sense of nostalgia and loyalty to the team. But the negative connotations now associated with the Redskins name means the Washington Football Team won't be encouraging any allegiance to its previous identity. However, the team may need to retain the old trademarks to ensure that other parties don't appropriate the Redskins name for their own purposes.

The only sure thing is that the Washington Football Team's organization has its work cut out as it moves forward with rebranding. The biggest question, of course, is what will the new name be? And then, which team is next?