



Chief Wahoo has been the face of Cleveland baseball for more than 60 years. Originally designed in 1947 by 17-year-old draftsman Walter Goldbach, Wahoo was the brainchild of former Tribe owner Bill Veeck, one of the greatest marketers baseball has ever seen.

Veeck wanted a unique image for his team, something apart from the statuesque Indian heads in profile that had served as the team's logos up to that point. Goldbach devised a grinning cartoon Indian with a large nose and yellow skin. That version of Wahoo was perched on the left sleeve of the Tribe's uniforms when they won their last World Series in 1948.

In 1951, the logo was redesigned to its current form. Wahoo's red face, white teeth and eyes, and blue hair correspond to the team colors. Since then, Wahoo has been somewhere on the Tribe's uniforms at all times. He was perched on the cap, encased in a wishbone-C for much of the 1950s. He moved down to the left breast on the Tribe's sleeveless uniforms of the 1960s. He was given a body in a 1970s logo revision that featured a leg-kicking Wahoo about to swing a bat.

In the early 80s, the head-only logo returned to the left sleeve, where it has stayed ever since. For the 1986 season, the logo returned to the cap, unadorned. Along with the Orioles and Blue Jays, the Indians were one of the few teams to place their logo on the team caps instead of a

city-initial monogram.

The Indians wore Wahoo on their caps exclusively until the 2002 season, when a script-I version debuted. That cap was eventually retired in favor of a block-C cap, reminiscent of the early-'80s caps. For the past several years, the Indians have alternated the Wahoo cap with blue-on-red and red-on-blue versions of the block-C cap.

But Wahoo has always been there. And it's easy to see why.

In a sports landscape dominated by logos that feature balls and shields and ferocious-looking animals, Wahoo is something that stands out. Veeck and Goldbach set out to create something unique, and they did exactly that. Wahoo is instantly identifiable with the Cleveland Indians, and Wahoo-adorned merchandise still sells, both in Greater Cleveland, and among the large footprint of Cleveland expats who have fanned out across the country and globe.

But there is another side to Wahoo, and no matter how much we as a fan base want to dismiss it as a hot wind from politically-correct extremists, it's something the Indians, their fans, the city of Cleveland and Major League Baseball will be forced to address at some point – and quite possibly sooner rather than later.

Wahoo is the product of a different era, with different social mores. At the time of Wahoo's creation, it was still socially acceptable for cartoons to portray African-American, Asian, Hispanic and Indian characters with exaggerated features and mannerisms. Bugs Bunny in blackface? A Tom and Jerry cartoon featuring a slanted-eyed cat or mouse wearing a cymbal on his head like a rice paddy hat? Speedy Gonzalez stealing cheese for his lazy, shiftless, tequila-chugging Mexican mouse friends? No censor batted an eyelash.

But as America became more integrated over the ensuing half-century, the "we" and "they" of 1950 became the "us" of the 21st Century, and the culture shifted. A new imperative developed: start viewing people as individuals, and not members of a generic race that possess a common set of lampoon-worthy characteristics.

Wahoo belongs to the old line of thinking, with his red face, big nose and prominent feather sticking up behind his head. As the decades have passed, people around the country have started to find less and less favor with the Tribe's longstanding logo. The movement against Wahoo is growing, and soon, the Wahoo supporters will comprise little more than a small island of defiance.

The opponents of Wahoo are no longer limited to Native American protestors demonstrating on Gateway Plaza. Powerful people in prominent positions are aligning to retire Wahoo – by force, if necessary. The full force of the hurricane hasn't hit yet, but it will.

If the Indians are determined to hang onto Wahoo until the bitter end, they can hide until the powers that be are done wrestling with the Washington Redskins. Recently, President Obama [spoke out](#) against the Redskins nickname – viewed as a blatant racial slur by many Native Americans – and NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell is on record saying the [NFL has to do "what's right"](#) regarding the club's nickname.

The Redskins nickname will likely be the first domino to fall. After that, they're coming for Wahoo. Once the Washington Redskins are no longer the Washington Redskins, the next-most-blatant example of racially-stereotypical Indian imagery in professional sports is Chief Wahoo.

That is, unless the Indians take the initiative and retire Wahoo of their own free will, before having to face the judge, jury and executioner in the court of public opinion.

There would be life after Wahoo. Plenty of teams change their logos and color schemes. Every year, it seems like some team in some sport is debuting a new look. Even stalwart franchises like the Lakers, Cowboys, Celtics and Red Sox have been known to tinker with their uniforms.

If you're worried that giving up Wahoo might lead to a slippery slope that ends with the death of the Indians nickname, those fears are probably unfounded. It should be a reasonable condition to expect the retention of the Indians nickname. Plenty of Native Americans refer to themselves as Indians, so the nickname can't be retired on the grounds of racism, like the Redskins'

nickname can. If I were running the Chiefs, Braves or Blackhawks, I'd dig my heels in on the nicknames, too. If the name isn't explicitly derogatory, it's defensible.

But imagery is another topic, and mascot-imagery is the real hot button. Nobody has raised much of a fuss about the Braves' tomahawk icon, which has adorned their jerseys for much of the past 65 years. But when the Braves reportedly made plans to resurrect their "Chief Noc-A-Homa" screaming Indian logo on their 2013 batting practice caps, the idea was [quickly shelved](#) amid public pressure.

Could the Indians get away with a logo that features a bow and arrow? A teepee? A head dress or feathers that don't adorn a human head? There isn't a solution that will satisfy every person with an opinion on the matter, but a human face is the definite line in the sand. Any logo that renders an Indian person as a mascot will draw enough fire that the idea probably won't get past the drawing board.

These are difficult discussions to have. Native American tribes and nations have their heritage, but Wahoo is a part of our baseball heritage, and when we are forced to give up a part of that heritage, it doesn't seem fair -- especially when there are so many other pressing matters in the world.

But these are necessary discussions. Society has permanently changed, and any time stereotypes are shattered, it's a change for the better. The burden is on us as a community of Cleveland baseball fans to have a long and frank discussion about the future of the Tribe's image. The longer we put it off, the harder we're going to make it on ourselves. Because it's only a matter of time before Wahoo rides off into the sunset.

The debate is no longer about whether the logo is racist. It is to what degree the Indians need to alter their image to remain marketable amid current societal norms.

Either the Indians brass is going to take the initiative and update their image on the club's own terms, or it's going to be a sloppy, embarrassing procedure that involves lots of unwanted attention and pressure from bigwigs in Washington and the Office of the Commissioner.

But it's going to happen, one way or another. It's inevitable.