

TEAMS KNOWN AS “SACHEMS”

By Ellen Knight¹



For decades Winchester high school teams have been known as the Sachems. This was not the first name for the high school athletes, nor were the students the first to use the name.

“Red and Black” is the first identifiable name used in newspapers for the football team. Because early articles are skimpy, it is difficult to pin down its beginning, but in 1905 the boys had black sweaters with a six-inch crimson “W,” and in 1915 “Red and Black” was called “the ensign of our high school.” Various athletic teams continued to use “red and black” throughout the 1940s.

The football team dropped the name, though the colors became those of the school.² During the 1950 and 1951 seasons, the name “Indians” was used, though the transition to “Sachems” had begun in 1951. Why the names changed is not clear. The yearbooks and newspapers of the time used it, without any comment. However, some possible influences on the decision may be identified.

The story of the Squaw Sachem as a friend of the colonists was well enough known around town, before and after her story was included in the 1936 *History of Winchester*. Articles about her appeared in the newspapers at varying intervals.

During the state’s tercentenary in 1930, a sign about Squaw Sachem’s land was placed at the corner of Cambridge and Arlington streets.³ A mural depicting the sale of Winchester territory by the Squaw Sachem to the colonists was installed in the library building in 1934. The name of her husband, the Sachem Nanepashemet, usually translated as “New Moon,” was memorialized as a crescent moon on the Winchester Country Club’s seal. A street on the western hill known as Indian Hill was named Sachem Road in 1928.

Since the historical sachems’ territory spanned many modern towns, the name was used by various other communities. The Arlington Boy Scout Council adopted the name Sachem, apparently also in the 1930s. The name “Saugus Sachems” also appeared in that decade.

Not only was the name well associated with the area, there was precedent for using it as a team name. After World War II, a group of Winchester veterans interested in playing basketball formed a team in January 1947. They played baseball during the summers. Growing up during the 1930s, they would have been acquainted with the traditional story. For whatever reason, they called themselves the Sachems.

Most of the men had played for the high school and some for college teams and, as veterans, played well against other towns’ teams. In their first season, the basketball team won 12 out of

16 games. In their second season, the Sachems won the Greater Boston Basketball League championship in March 1948 after beating the Lexington Warhawks. During the summers of those two years, the Sachems had a team in the town softball league. At least three members played both basketball and softball. The softballers played such other teams as the Rockets, Atomics, and Comets, as well as the VFW and other groups. In 1947, the Sachems won the league championship and were runners-up the next summer.

Despite their successes, after just two seasons the Sachems evidently disbanded, since reports disappear from the newspaper. So, during the 1949-1950 season, while the high school football team called itself the Indians, the name Sachems had a good reputation but was not claimed by any other team in town.



The first "Sachem" image on a yearbook cover was in 1951, repeated in 1964. The same image was also found in other contexts such as the "Sachem Spirit" car decorations.

When the year 1950 came along, Winchester celebrated its centennial. Once again, the town's history was featured in the newspaper, in the classrooms, and in local programs. Having settled on the name Indians (a common image for that era), one may imagine, the team saw a simple transition to the name Sachems as a nod to local history. "Sachem" also happened to be more distinctive at a time when several communities used the name "Indians." For whatever reason, the Winchester Indians became Sachems.

The *Winchester Star* still called them Indians during the fall of 1950, but they were also called Sachems by the time the class of 1951's yearbook was published. In April 1951, a group of eight varsity players used the name when competing in the Boys Club Basketball Tournament in Charlestown. During the fall of 1951, the *Star* used both names, mostly "Indians." The *Boston Globe* continued to use "Indians" occasionally through 1956. Thereafter, "Sachems" took over.

During the 1940s, student drawings and caricatures of Native Americans appeared in several yearbooks, along with a variety of other subjects. Before it became a team symbol, the Native American figure was apparently a popular motif. It was not until 1951 that such a drawing was placed on the yearbook cover.



A costumed mascot was never used. A logo created by Simon Donovan (later a professional artist and art teacher in Tucson) was hung on the building as a gift from the Class of 1977. The suggestion that it represents a Native American of the Plains rather than of New England became one point of contention with later generations.

In 2016, the Educational Facilities Planning and Building Committee approved a new version of the symbol for the front entrance, on clear substrate film applied to the interior face of the glass. The old Sachem image was moved from the exterior wall to the gym.

CONTROVERSY

A question over keeping the name and logo arose at the end of the 20th century, when the use of Native American names and images as nicknames and mascots became controversial across the nation. Local feelings were divided over whether using “sachem” as a nickname, mascot, or logo for sports teams was disrespectful or not.

Following some public meetings, in Feb. 2000, the School Committee approved keeping the name “to be used consistent with its historical definition as leader...to connote the quality of leadership/service for others.”

However, it created a task force charged with looking into a replacement logo. The group reportedly consulted with the Massachusetts Commission on Indian Affairs and concluded, in a split decision, that the existing image did not need to be replaced.⁴ In March, 2000, a non-binding referendum vote to retain the sachem name and preserve the logo passed 3,517 to 612 (with 113 blanks and 68 percent of the electorate not voting). Though not entirely comfortable with retaining the logo, School Committee members decided to respect the vote, for the time being.

More discussion followed at the local, state, and national levels over the next 20 years. On July 28, 2020, the School Committee voted unanimously to remove the name and imagery.

¹ This article © 2019 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on June 10, 2016. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² Red and black were not always the school colors. Formerly, each class chose its own color.

³ The tercentenary commission raised a series of markers, five in Winchester, indicating structures or places related to the early settlement. Meant to be permanent, one was placed on Rt. 3 at the Winchester-Arlington line to mark the Squaw Sachem’s Reservation. It has disappeared, as has a second marker on Rt. 3 indicating Increase Nowell’s farm.

⁴ A written task force report (if one ever existed) has not been found. Communication with the Commission was discussed in newspaper articles. In a letter to *The Winchester Star* of Jan. 13, 2000. Mary Pronski wrote, “I contacted Mr. John Peters Jr., executive director of the Commission on Indian Affairs in Boston. He stated that he does not find the Winchester Sachem logo offensive. This is consistent with the finding of his father, John Peters Sr., who served as the executive director of the Commission on Indian Affairs in Boston in 1977. That was one of the compelling reasons the logo was adopted by the Winchester Public Schools in 1977.”

A *Star* report printed on Jan. 20, 2000, stated: "John Peters, Jr., the executive director of the Commission on Indian Affairs, said he had recently been contacted by Winchester residents Mary Pronski and Peggy Schleicher for his opinion on the Sachem. In his capacity with the commission, Peters serves as a liaison between the Native American community and the state. He also said he works under the commission's six commissioners.

"Peters said his father, John Peters, told a representative of the School Committee back in 1977 that the logo created by former student Simon Donovan was not offensive.

"As for his own personal stance 23 years later, Peters said, 'I didn't exactly say that I didn't think it was offensive. But I don't really know if that's the main point, though. The real issue to me is not whether the logo is offensive, but it's whether people are treating it with a level of respect. That's where we run into those problems with using Native American logos. I've heard stories about that from both sides, so I don't know. But the logo looks okay. Although it looks more like a male to me than a female [honoring Squaw Sachem].'"

A letter was also addressed to the School Committee from Janice Falcone, a member of the Commission on Indian Affairs. "Personally," she wrote, "the issue of Indian names and images used as logo mascot symbols for sports teams are very offensive to me. Non-Indians using our identity for any reason is not an honor to Indian people. I urge you to retire the Sachem logo."

That different Native Americans held different opinions on the issue was reported in the *Boston Globe* of Jan. 24, 2000. Among others, June Manning of the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah) was interviewed. "You know," she was reported as saying, "if you spoke with 10 different people in Aquinnah, you'd get 10 different opinions." Individual members of the Winchester School Committee and its task force, as well as residents, also held varying opinions.