

By Pearl Walker

Native Americans throughout the country have been underrepresented in the media, government, and athletics. The media portrays Native Americans through a European's view, reducing the validity of the cultural "facts" shown on the screen. The government has repeatedly ignored the provisions that were stated in the first treaties, as well as the problems confronted within the reservation. In the athletic world, it is a completely different story relying on perceptions, rather than a European's perspective or ignored provisions and problems. Native American representation is largely stereotyped, and it plays a major role in how non-Indians perceive Indians.

The lifestyle of Indians on reservations is not only hard, but it also creates an atmosphere of stereotypes for most non-Indians. Native Americans appear most often in the news for drinking under age, use of illegal drugs, driving under the influence, abuse, or committing suicide. Although some Native Americans appear in the news for positive things such as winning athletic events, helping out their community, or representing the Indian nation in the U.S. senate, most are recognized for doing negative things. When Native Americans have worked hard to prove they are capable of succeeding, the doubters of their hard work and success create stereotypes. Non-Indian people look at where Indians come from rather than where Indians are going. They look at their surrounding environment: -- poverty, alcoholism, drugs, unemployment, dropouts – and what is seen in the news. Their perceptions amount to the belief that every Native American is that way. Even though, many non-Indians that accept Indians know this is not true, there are not enough to change a stereotypical point of view.

These racial stereotypes make it especially difficult for Native American student-athletes. Out of the Native Americans graduating from high school, only 17 percent attend college; in comparison overall graduate rates are at 62 percent (Whitney n.p.). Statistics show that Native American athletes attending college have the lowest graduation rate of all the minority groups, and a success rate of 30 percent (Whitney n.p.). Many high school graduates who have worked hard to build up their potential, rarely carry on after high school and end up sulking in the poverty of the reservation life. Reasons for low advancement and success rates refer back to reservation life and stereotypes of Native Americans.

Forced to live under the reservation system first established in 1786, Native Americans were given few privileges or promises. They were to remain within the reservation boundaries and most stipulations stated in treaties were seldom granted or became useless. Missionaries and recommendations of the Board of Indian Commissioners made life on the reservation worsen. Native Americans were being forced to learn and live the Christian and "civilized" way. They did not like adapting to the reservation. More conditions that occurred on the reservation were identified through the Meriam Report in 1927. This report revealed that Native Americans did not adjust to the economic and social system, generally had bad health in comparison to the average American, were living with life-threatening disease, earned fairly low income, received ineffective education, inadequate boarding schools, and weakened Indian services, all of which were ignored by Congress.

When alcohol was introduced to Native Americans, it not only became another good to trade off, it led to the disastrous effects in today's Indian communities. Hunters used to sell their game just for a bottle of rum. This later caused the poverty in many reservation

families, and still exists today. The most long-lasting problem alcohol has brought to Native Americans is damaged social relations. Alcoholism is the primary source for domestic abuse, deaths, and poverty on reservations.

The social and economic problems Indians face have unfortunately contributed to where people place them in society. The oppression of Native Americans has been existent since the colonists invaded Indian lands. Oppression feeds on the stereotypes formed by perceptions of non-Indians about Indians. The stereotypes have given many Native Americans an attitude which intimidates many non-Indians. The attitude Native Americans have causes them to either work harder or go the opposite way by not trying or not being goal oriented. The majority of Native Americans who do not try are often times captivated or oppressed by the reservation life, and feel they have no hope of "going places" or "making it big." They doubt their talents because of what oppression by stereotypes have put into their minds. They live up to the standards of not trying, being lazy, doing drugs, giving up, having bad attitudes, accepting the motto "good enough for an Indian," and running on "Indian Time."

These habits contribute to the under representation and little voice Native Americans hold in government, but there are many who have proven the perceptions and stereotypes wrong. From the Pine Ridge reservation, the poorest of all reservations, Billy Mills has proven to be very successful. He worked extraordinarily hard every day to rise above the oppression of reservation life. His perseverance and determination were demonstrated at the 1964 Olympics in Tokyo, Japan. Mr. Mills is the only Native American ever to represent the United States of America in the 10,000 meter run. Billy shocked thousands of spectators who were certain that he would have a chance at placing: he came home with

the gold. Since then, no American citizen has captured first place in the 10,000 meter run. After retiring from competitive running, Billy Mills has set the example for many Native Americans by presenting motivational speeches about how to overcome under-representation and change non-Indian's perceptions of Indians. Another helping hand for the advancement of Native Americans is a leadership program. This program, for Native Americans of all ages, is designed to help Indians realize they can be leaders and make a difference in their communities if they change themselves. "Change yourself first, and the world around you will change," is one of the many motivational quotes taught to live by in the leadership program (Life Skills Center 26). Once Native Americans change themselves, they will be able to change the problems confronted in Native American communities, including success rates and outside perceptions. When people set their mind to something and believe in it, great things will be accomplished. Native Americans need to join together, stop fighting over men, money, and food, and stop blaming others for what has happened in the past. It is time to change the future, to become recognized as the indigenous people of America, and to represent the leadership of the warrior inside of them.

Works Cited

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