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## Washington football team fixtures 2020

Jonathan Newton / The Washington Post / GettyBlack fans of the Washington Football Team are adapting to a new future for their beloved franchise—and reckoning with its past disregard of Native Americans.Three years ago, the Washington Football Team hosted its first-ever Thanksgiving Day game. The franchise had played—and lost—on the holiday many times before. But the 2017 game wasn’t notable just because the team, then known as the Redskins, actually won. That afternoon, a small group of Native American activists gathered outside FedEx Field, the Maryland arena where Washington plays, to educate D.C. fans about the grim irony of the event: A team whose name is a dictionary-defined slur against Indigenous people was playing on a holiday based on damaging myths about Native Americans. Simon Moya-Smith, a writer of Oglala Lakota tribal lineage who organized the protest, remembers that some fans were surprised to see him there. “There are literal black-and-white images that people have in their heads of what an Indian is supposed to look like,” he told me recently. “So here I come, not on horseback, wearing skinny jeans and carrying a latte, trying to engage with them about what the word means.”This year, the team is again playing on Thanksgiving, but today’s game against its longtime rival, the Dallas Cowboys, will look different from past games. When Washington players take the field, their helmets won’t feature the burgundy-hued face of a Native American man. The old name, which activists campaigned against since at least 1972, will be gone, having been “retired” in July—a once unthinkable move that followed pressure from sponsors amid national protests sparked by the police killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd.Since the historic name change, the team’s owner, Dan Snyder, has faced other issues, including allegations that he has presided over a workplace rife with sexual harassment, which spurred a still-ongoing NFL investigation. (Snyder has denied many specific charges and said he’s committed to creating a better workplace culture.) Last week, The Washington Post reported on claims of sexual harassment at the Original Americans Foundation, the nonprofit that Snyder started in 2014 to appease critics of the team name. Even supporters of the franchise complain about Snyder’s apathy. “For years [advocates have] been tryna get him to change that name,” Bob Johnson, a fan from Southeast D.C., told me. “But as soon as FedEx and the people that help sponsor him say they wanted to pull out, he changed [it]. Money talks.”This year’s Thanksgiving game is an important reminder that the stakes of the team’s decisions are greater than one owner’s legacy, and they reverberate far beyond idle sports chatter. Think of it this way: This is the first holiday game between Washington and Dallas that won’t be re-creating the violence baked into Thanksgiving history with a battle between Cowboys and Indians. The symbolism especially matters in light of the tens of millions of TV viewers who watch football on Thanksgiving Day. For decades, the Washington team’s presence on such broadcasts reinforced harmful stereotypes about Native Americans. Though hundreds of sports teams across the country still use Natives as mascots, activists hope that the rebranding of the Washington Football Team can help send a different message.Read: Football has always been a battleground in the culture warLike so many controversies in the sports world, the name-change debate is fundamentally about identity. For many Indigenous advocates like Moya-Smith and Black D.C.-area fans like Johnson, the shift is about more than new uniforms and team merch; it is also a reflection of who they are as Americans and of the challenges of their respective communities have faced in this country. Because the Washington Football Team has a history of resistance to racial progress for Native Americans and Black Americans alike, the name change has thrown into relief the importance of solidarity between marginalized groups, and why the outside influence of professional sports can make that solidarity harder to achieve.Until 2020, the campaign to change the D.C. franchise’s old name gained national visibility every couple of years, but this summer’s Black Lives Matter protests against police brutality were a turning point. A powerful movement for racial justice was spurring overdue reforms in various industries, and the team’s corporate sponsors decided that it was D.C.’s turn. The immediate connection between the franchise’s name and the racial-justice protests might not have been obvious to some, but Moya-Smith explained the powerful relevance. “This is a term that means ‘dead Indian,’” he said, adding that the word is especially glaring to hear given the disproportionate rate at which Native Americans die at the hands of police. “If you’re willing to ... you can connect the dots between the team name, Thanksgiving, and police brutality in Indian Country.”LANDOVER, MD: Redskins fans walk past as Native Americans and supporters protest the name and logo of the team before a Sunday game in December 2014. The protesters could not get onto the grounds at FedEx Field so nearby Jericho City of Praise, one of the largest Black churches in the country, offered them space. (Toni L. Sandys / The Washington Post / Getty)Black racial-justice groups have been connecting the dots. The NAACP condemned the Washington team’s old name for nearly three decades and called on the media not to use it. (The organization was also one of many to sign the Change the Mascot campaign’s 2017 letter tying the slur to the damaging spectacle of the Thanksgiving Day game in particular.) And before the name change was announced, the local Black Lives Matter chapter had spoken out against the former label, even asking protesters not to come to the newly christened “Black Lives Matter Plaza,” near the White House, wearing the team’s gear. This viewpoint isn’t universally held by Black fans in the D.C. metro area (known as “the DMV”), who make up a large segment of the team’s longtime supporters. Still, many of the Black supporters I spoke with said they felt the change was a necessary growing pain; some told me their own opinions about the old name had evolved. “I don’t know if it comes from maturity or getting older and being a minority myself, [but I realized that] there’s a word that’s controversial in our community [as well],” said Monica Williams, a Southeast D.C.–born fan who noted that she has family members who oppose any usage of the N-word. “So I had to put myself in someone else’s shoes and say, ‘You know what? It’s time.’” DJ Flex, a veteran host at the popular local radio station WPGC, phrased it more bluntly: “I would hate to be the Washington Negroes; I don’t want that,” he told me. “So I understand. If one person feels disrespected, we all gotta respect that.”The comparison of the old team name to anti-Black slurs is apt for historical reasons, not just rhetorical ones, but Moya-Smith explained the power of the franchise, which was moved down to Washington from Boston by then-owner George Preston Marshall in 1937, was the last NFL team to integrate Black players. By 1955, Marshall, who saw radio broadcasts of his team’s games as a means of courting revenue from white Southern audiences, was the only holdout in the league. His reluctance to draft Black players drove some local Black fans to root for the Cowboys, which had already integrated. For these fans, the reasoning was simple: Why should they care about a team that clearly didn’t care about them?After Washington finally integrated its ranks in 1962, the achievements of the team’s Black players fueled enthusiasm for the team among Black fans. At the 1988 Super Bowl, Doug Williams became the first Black quarterback to lead an NFL team to a championship. Williams, who now serves as the team’s senior vice president for player development, doesn’t take the reverence that Black fans have for him lightly. That Super Bowl victory bolstered the city at a time when white flight and the Reagan administration’s punitive drug-enforcement policies had ravaged Black communities in D.C. Williams told me he’s met older Black fans who said they prayed for him, because they’d rarely seen themselves represented—let alone winning—on a national-sports stage. “When they say that, I’m thinking about my daddy, because I know ... what they went through,” Williams told me. “For them to see a Black man walk on the field on Super Bowl Sunday and come off a winner—that was amazing.”In Minneapolis, a protester holds a sign echoing calls to change the name. (Education Images / Universal Images Group / Getty)In an area most often written about through the lens of outsiders, the football team inspires hometown pride and a sense of community. This is especially true for Black residents, who are routinely overlooked by federal lawmakers, mainstream publications, and even local magazines in the rapidly gentrifying city. “There’s so much more to the area than Capitol Hill,” said Lewis Johnson (no relation to Bob Johnson), the D.C.–born creator of the “Washington Football Clubhouse” Facebook group. “Past racial barriers, ethnic barriers—no matter where you come from, we can all agree on one thing for a couple of hours. And that’s the Washington Football Team,” he said. Historically, however, that regional unity has excluded many Native Americans, whose existence alone can make some fans uncomfortable or defensive. “We’re the last people in this country that can piss off an entire sports bar just by our race and not by the jersey we’re wearing,” Moya-Smith said of his experience entering some D.C. bars.Solidarity between Black Washington Football Team fans and the Indigenous critics of the former name has proved difficult in the past, in part because of widespread misconceptions about Native Americans. The groundwork is laid early in U.S. schools, where whitewashed accounts of the country’s founding often reduce Native people to caricatures. “One of the first lessons American children learn in elementary school is that it’s okay to play another race,” Moya-Smith said, adding that this curriculum influences students of all backgrounds. “Where do they learn it? The Thanksgiving play. They have authority figures ... looking at them saying, ‘Oh how cute. Look at that little injun.’” The notion of Native Americans as symbols is further normalized by the prevalence of sports teams with names like Indians and Braves.When sports media covered the Washington name controversy, pundits often downplayed the sentiments of Indigenous people. Commentators would point to anecdotes or polls that concluded that most Native Americans weren’t offended by the team’s name or logo. In 2013, the then-ESPN columnist Rick Reilly wrote a lengthy defense of the team’s name based on the claim that his own father-in-law, a Blackfoot elder, didn’t think it was offensive. (Bob Burns, Reilly’s father-in-law, later disputed that characterization.) But that popular justification is flawed. A major academic paper published in March—billed as the “largest scientific study to date regarding Native Americans’ perceptions of Native mascots”—argued that many previous polls oversimplified the complex opinions of a diverse demographic. The study found that Native Americans, in fact, widely “opposed the Redskins team name in particular and the use of Native mascots in general.” Unsurprisingly, respondents who identify strongly with their heritage were most upset by such distortions.Read: Rick Reilly offers a poor defense of the Washington Football Team’s nameRay Halbritter, the representative of the Oneida Indian Nation, told me that Washington’s former team name has long been a unique blight on the American sports landscape. He mentioned the psychological damage that widespread usage of the slur does to young Native people in particular. “Some things may be, in fact, a political question. But this isn’t that.” Halbritter said of the epithet’s mental-health consequences. He added that the team’s former name was also especially painful for the Oneida Nation because of the tribe’s history with the United States capital. “We were the first and forgotten allies of this nation. And here you have [the] Washington [team], which is named after George Washington, whom we fought alongside [during the Revolutionary War], dishonoring us. Here’s the city that bears his name, and [its football team] bears a racial slur.” Halbritter and other community leaders who have been part of the “Change the Mascot” campaign, or who have privately petitioned the league, commended the franchise’s decision to rebrand. But the slur hasn’t vanished entirely from the sports landscape; as of last month, 45 secondary-school teams still used it.This year, as professional athletes in different leagues continue with their own activism, the Washington Football Team has a clear opportunity to foster genuine solidarity with Native Americans in D.C. and beyond. Current players, including the starting quarterback, Dwayne Haskins, who has attended Black Lives Matter protests in D.C., speak about the change in cautious yet vaguely optimistic terms. For Doug Williams, the beloved former quarterback, the retiring of the old name is an extension of the racial-justice efforts that he and other Black players have championed for decades, even in the face of institutional barriers. And he believes it’s incumbent upon both fans and players to consider other groups, especially Indigenous people, as they work to make the league more inclusive: “I’ve always said [the Washington Football Team and its fans] should be example setters. We are the nation’s capital,” he told me. “It shouldn’t be about what’s wrong and right in our opinion,” he added. “It should be about what’s right for people and how you treat them.”To Lewis Johnson, the team’s new chapter is an opportunity to build on the hard-won social progress that first cemented his love of the sport. Black players weren’t part of football’s early history, but they’ve shaped its legacy. “You grow up thinking, ‘Okay, these are the guys that I may look up to. These are the athletes that have made a difference in the sport, not only as area football players, but as African American athletes in general,” he said of players such as the former cornerback Darrell Ray Green. Johnson, who changed his Facebook group’s name from “Redskins Rally” after news of the team’s shift, said the joyous moments in the team’s history won’t suddenly be erased, as some name-change opponents are claiming. “We can have our history,” he said. “But we have to move forward.”Fans of the Washington Redskins football team smiling, Washington D.C., 1980. (Atro American Newspapers / Gado / Getty)Read: Disease has never been just disease for Native AmericansHowever begrudging Snyder may have been about the name change, its symbolism is reverberating throughout the fan base. Some, like Monica Williams (no relation to Doug Williams), are hoping that fans who felt alienated by the change will be replaced by young football enthusiasts now willing to give their local team a chance. “All the fans that were upset about the racial unity going on within the organization, that said we ruined football for them—they’re gonna leave. And there’s gonna be a whole ‘nother crop of fans,” she told me. As of last year, only 8 percent of District residents under the age of 40 named their hometown franchise as their favorite NFL team. Williams mentioned her “socially conscious” 18-year-old daughter, who had misgivings about the Redskins-branded gear her mother had bought her, as one example of a young person to whom the team might be more appealing now.Though the team is expected to stick with its interim name for the 2021 season, the search for a more permanent identity has sparked opportunities for creative input from fans. By the end of September, a submission form on the team’s new website had amassed almost 9,000 responses from people suggesting new names. In a recent blog post addressed to fans, the newly hired president, Jason Wright, the first Black president of any NFL team, asked for patience with the renaming process: “Bruh/sis, cut me some slack, we need some time to do this right!” he wrote. Wright’s plea, joking or otherwise, reflects the weight of the decision ahead: After decades of outright disregard for Native Americans, the team needs to ensure that its next steps are thoughtful and considered. Thankfully, there’s no shortage of possibilities to evaluate. And regardless of which one wins out, at least one part of the franchise’s identity will stay the same. “Leave us our burgundy and gold,” DJ Flex said of the team’s colors. “We all right. We’re gonna figure out this name and everything else.”LANDOVER, MARYLAND - JULY 13: Hand-painted concrete barriers stand in the parking lot of FedEx Field, one week after the D.C. football team announced it would no longer use the racist name it held for decades. (Photo by Chip Somodevilla / Getty)

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