

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Americas > Brazil > World Cup, Olympics, social resistances (Brazil) > **From the Brazil World Cup to the Washington Football Team, Indigenous (...)**

From the Brazil World Cup to the Washington Football Team, Indigenous People Fight to Be Seen

Wednesday 25 June 2014, by [ZIRIN Dave](#) (Date first published: 21 June 2014).

A thirteen-year-old boy from Brazil's Guarani tribe [1] makes a political stand in front of 70,000 soccer fans and what he thinks is an international audience. A movement led by indigenous women in the United States beats a billion-dollar brand of the big, bad NFL [2]. These two stories share more than the fact that they took place during the same week. They have in common the ways that people in power have been reduced to combatting their courage by trying to render them invisible. They both demonstrate how if you are an indigenous person, you can be on the highest possible cultural platform practically surrounded by fireworks, sparkles and neon signs blaring "LOOK AT ME" and your very presence can still be denied.

Before the opening game of the World Cup, FIFA, the organization that oversees international soccer, thought it would be a good idea to have three Brazilian children each release a "dove of peace". One of those children was a 13-year-old from the Guarani tribe, Jeguaká Mirim. The Guarani are Brazil's largest tribal group [3]. They have also been subject to incredible levels violence by ranchers who occupy their land for cattle and sugar production. Forcibly herded onto reservations where disease and malnutrition are rife, their situation may actually be getting worse. The ruling Workers Party is attempting to take away even more of their land, which led to violent confrontations—and dramatic images—on the eve of the World Cup in the capital city of Brasilia [4].

The effects on the tribe are brutal. There is poverty, there is infant mortality, and in the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso do Sul, the Guarani-Kaiowá suffer the highest suicide rate on earth [5]. Jeguaká Mirim wasn't going to allow himself to be feel-good FIFA scenery while his people suffered. After releasing the dove, he unfurled a banner that read, "Demarcação," or "Demarcation Now!" This is the highly charged slogan used by indigenous groups attempting to retain their land rights.

Jeguaká's father, Olívio Jekupe, said he had no idea that his son was going to do such a thing. Olívio did say that the action "showed the world that we are not standing still.... My son showed the world what we need the most: the demarcation of our lands." [6] There was only one problem however with this brave display; the cameras quickly cut away. His actions went undiscussed by broadcasters and analysts on the scene. They also met with a series of non-comments by FIFA itself as to who made the decision to cut the cameras. Whoever was responsible for censoring Jeguaká Mirim, the end result was that the only politics that FIFA allowed to be on display would be the banality of doves.

There is a similar dynamic happening in Washington, DC, where federal trademark court made legal what was obvious: that the name Washington Redskins is racist as all hell. For now, the team has no trademark protection because the name, it was ruled, "disparages" an entire group of people. This effort to recognize the moral bankruptcy of the name has been led by powerful indigenous women such as Suzan Harjo, Jacqueline Keeler and the person whose name was on the trademark lawsuit, Amanda Blackhorse. It is a movement that stretches back decades but in recent years, the tribal

councils of the Oneida Nation, the Seminole Nation, the Choctaw Nation, and the oldest Native American civil rights organization the National Congress of American Indians have all called upon the team to change the name. A commercial funded by the Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation that aired during the NBA Finals has been viewed on YouTube more than 3 million times [7].

And yet, the response to the victory by DC sports radio host Steve Czaban was that this was really a win for guilt-ridden white liberal sportswriters." Czaban said [8], "Go ahead, dance around and do whatever it does that assuages your white liberal guilt, but nothing has changed.... Maybe we can get therapy for [them], chip in, get to the core of their guilt and understand what is it that's nagging you."

In response to Czaban and his broadcast partner, Chris Cooley, who made similar statements, the NCAI put it perfectly. They said that these comments "represent a sadly typical attempt to dehumanize Native Americans by pretending we do not exist. In this case, Mr. Cooley insultingly pretends that the Native American groups representing hundreds of thousands of Native Americans haven't been leading the fight to end the Washington team's use of a racial slur"

One has to wonder if the Czabans, Cooleys and Chris "Mad Dog" Russos of the world [9] realize how racist it comes off to just willingly ignore the very existence of those who have been "leading the fight." This gets to the heart of the connective tissue between Brazil and the United States—two nations who share a conjoined, horrific history in their treatment of indigenous people—as well as between Jeguaká Mirim and Amanda Blackhorse. The battle by indigenous groups across the hemisphere is for land, recognition, respect and, most of all their own humanity. It is an unassailable argument. Their opponents increasingly realize that they have lost the debate, so they are reduced to pretending their opponents do not exist. But by branding Natives with invisibility, they have provided the most damning possible evidence of both the persistence of anti-Native racism and the power of a new hemispheric-wide movement for indigenous rights.

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P.S.

* "From the World Cup to the Washington Football Team, Indigenous People Fight to Be Seen". The Nation on June 21, 2014 - 5:12 PM ET:

http://www.thenation.com/blog/180370/world-cup-washington-football-team-indigenous-people-fight-be-seen?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_term=email_nation&utm_campaign=Email%20Nation%20%28NEW%29%20-%20Headline%20Nation%20Feed%2020140624&newsletter=email_nation#

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Footnotes

[1] See, available on ESSF (article 32309), [Brazil & Guarani: Indigenous boy protests on pitch during World Cup opening ceremony](#).

- [2] <http://www.businessinsider.com/meet-the-native-american-grandmother-who-just-beat-the-red-skins-2014-6>
- [3] <http://www.survivalinternational.org/tribes/guarani>
- [4] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/28/brazil-indigenous-protest-photos_n_5404045.html
- [5] <http://www.survivalinternational.org/news/10261>
- [6] <http://indianz.com/News/2014/014080.asp>
- [7] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mR-tbOxlhvE>
- [8] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/dc-sports-bog/wp/2014/06/19/chris-cooley-ridicules-name-change-effort-says-hes-now-protesting-the-chargers/>
- [9] <http://thebiglead.com/2014/06/19/keith-olbermann-and-chris-mad-dog-russo-are-sniping-back-and-forth/>