

Northeastern State changes its mascot to RiverHawks

By Sheila Stogsdill Published: November 15, 2006 12:00 AM CDT Updated: November 15, 2006 12:00 AM CDT

TAHLEQUAH — Northeastern State University announced Tuesday its mascot will change from Redmen to RiverHawks, ending an 80-year tradition.

University officials said the athletic teams will be known by their new name beginning in the fall. A new university logo will be unveiled before spring commencement.

Green and white will remain the official school colors. A third color will be approved for the new logo, school officials said.

About 150 students, faculty and alumni were present for the announcement.

Of the 4,204 votes cast, RiverHawks received 1,345 votes. War Eagles received 1,181 votes and Wolves 722. The other mascot names on the ballot were Thunderhawks, Thunderbirds and Riverwolves.

"We can make it work," said Randy Gipson, women's basketball coach. "It's been a divisive issue with the school and community. Hopefully, we can get united and people can go forward."

Gipson, who is a not American Indian, said in his eight years of coaching at Northeastern State University he never received negative taunts or comments about the school's mascot.

For some people, the Redmen name signified pride, he said. However, there were arguments on both sides, Gipson said.

The name change was prompted after the university received a letter from the NCAA saying the term Redmen was deemed hostile and an abusive reference to American Indian culture.

University officials decided to change the school's mascot rather than risk being barred from hosting NCAA championship events.

Students and the Cherokee Nation, whose headquarters is nearby, also had expressed a desire to see the name changed.

"For the most part, students understood, and they supported our administration," said Dru Dear, student body president. "The decision was made to change the name of the mascot before the university received the NCAA letter."

Dear, a junior political science major from Stigler, said the change allows for marketing of a mascot. With the previous name, there was no mascot, she said.

Alumni were less enthusiastic than students about the change, Dear said.

The Redmen mascot officially was adopted in October 1924, chosen by a vote of the faculty to replace the name "Warriors."

Williams noted that the transition will be difficult, and the teams will remain Redmen through the end of this school year.

"I urge everyone to remember it doesn't matter what our name or our mascot is," Williams said. "It matters that we get behind and support our student-athletes and our coaches who represent this great university."