# A Taxonomy of Secondary School Athletic Team Names and Mascots in the United States

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Athletic team names are a fascinating yet understudied topic in onomastics. Inspired by the work of Nuessel (1994) and Smith (1997) and framed by the extensive toponymy approach described by Tent (2015), this study proposes a taxonomy of team names and mascots used by high schools in the United States. A list of 20,853 schools procured from the Clell Wade Coaches Directory catalyzed the study, and content analysis of school websites and social media accounts determined the mascots of ambiguous team names. The results include seven general categories: humans, fauna, flora, inanimate objects and phenomena, deities and spiritual beings, mythological creatures and beings, and schools not using team names. Most schools use an animal or human mascot, and prevailing themes among all names include a strong degree of convention in their selection, a high frequency of bellicosity in their character, and a small but notable observance of local distinctiveness in their presence.

KEYWORDS   team names, mascots, high schools, toponymy, taxonomy

## Introduction

Team names used by secondary schools to represent the interscholastic activities of its students is an understudied topic in onomastics. Nuessel's (1994) seminal examination of race, gender, and religious-based team names included a nationwide analysis at professional and collegiate levels and a case study of their use in Illinois and Indiana high schools. Smith's (1997) insightful analysis of team names used by high schools in Washington State includes a taxonomic classification based on the degree of violence the name implies and considers the degree to which they carried derogatory meanings to historically marginalized racial/ethnic groups, social groups, or individuals. Zeitler and Petzold (2001)

employed a mixed-methods approach to classifying and describing the origins of 422 public secondary school team names in Wisconsin. Their geographic framework identified schools that incorporated local economic activities, demography, historical geography, and physio-environmental characteristics into their team names. A small group of passionate high school team name enthusiasts in Texas (Barlow *et. al* 2005; Sledge 2005), Illinois (Willman 2005) and Indiana (Houck 2003) have published books for a general audience that include origin stories for team names within their respective states. Houck's (2013) similar work of approximately 1,000 discrete team names in the United States is the most impressive work on this topic. These books reveal the rich stories of team names on a case-by-case basis but do not analyze trends or patterns in team name use.

This study contributes to the body of onomastic knowledge through an examination of 20,883 high school team names and mascot imagery at a national level. Tent (2015) describes this type of analysis as extensive toponymy, a research approach that involves the quantitative analysis of large datasets. The absence of a comprehensive nationwide study of secondary school team names and mascots, to date, is understandable. The sheer number of schools, lack of centralized databases in some states, and time required to collect names makes accumulation prohibitive. State interscholastic athletic and activities associations are great resources as they often provide online directories of schools, but team names are not always listed. This study circumvented these issues through the purchase of a privately produced, national database published by the Clell Wade Coaches Directory. The primary market for this decades-old and annually updated database is college athletic recruiters who use it, as the directory's name implies, to contact the coaches of high school athletic teams. The directory also includes general school information, including enrollment numbers, team names, and school colors (Clell Wade Coaches Directory 2016).

Three terms—*team name*, *mascot*, and *logo*—are often used synonymously to describe a team, but each refers to a distinct characteristic of a team's textual and visual representation (Nuessel 1994). The *team name* (colloquially called a *nickname*) refers to the linguistic name (or names) of a team. The term *mascot* refers to a three-dimensional living, costumed, or inanimate representation of the team name. In a handful of cases, the mascot does not match the moniker (i.e. the *Berries* of Logansport, Indiana use Felix the Cat of comic book fame as its mascot). Finally, a team's *logo* refers to a static, visual representation of the team name and/or mascot.

## Team Names and Place Identity

Just as place names originate from the need or desire to distinguish one place from others (Stewart 1970, xxviii), team names were selected to set a school and its community apart from its neighbors. Thousands of cities and towns in the United States proudly display a welcome sign that boasts of its winning teams adjacent to, or sometimes attached to, the official highway sign of the

community. Wilbur Zelinsky linked this practice with the perceived need to "document uniqueness, to boost [themselves] above the commonplace, to humble the competition" (1988, 1). Team names and mascots used in high schools serve a similar purpose, as they were selected by administrators, students, community members, or the local press to characterize a team's style of play or to provide an icon that symbolized a community characteristic, ideology, or another source of pride. They are "often more descriptive, diminutive, humorous, or affectionate [than place names] … and often used to conjure images of power, strength, fearlessness, and victory over a hapless opponent" (Zeitler and Petzold 2001, 25). These are indeed criteria for many nicknames, but there are some, including the Omaha, Nebraska Benson High *Bunnies*, that hardly strike fear into an opponent's heart. Their purpose extends beyond the practice of distinguishing schools and communities from one another—team nicknames provide an integral source of place identity for community members and alumni. In theory, the list of possible team names is virtually endless, and this thought lingered as the examination of high school team nicknames commenced.

## Methodology

A dataset of secondary public and private schools used in the United States (not including overseas territories) was purchased from the *Clell Wade Coaches Directory*, a company that for decades has sold aggregated information about schools, including contact information for their coaches, to college athletic recruiters. The procured data includes school names, address, enrollment, and team names for 20,853 schools open during the 2015–2016 academic year. Thirty co-educational schools using distinct names for their girls' teams were included in the dataset and therefore added to the overall count, resulting in a total of 20,883 team names for analysis.

   The development of a taxonomy of these names prioritized exhaustive categories that maximized exclusivity. A minimal number of categories covering all team names was desired but the size and breadth of the dataset made exclusivity between them challenging. For example, names referencing aspects of ancient Greek society appear in multiple categories. The process of examining team names for prevailing themes was extended to the development of subcategories within all primary categories except animals, where biological taxonomy was employed, and schools not using team names. Subcategories are discussed in the results section.

   In the spirit of developing as thorough a taxonomy as possible, a content analysis of online imagery hosted by school websites, their social media accounts, and affiliated websites, was conducted to identify mascots (Rose 2016). Thousands of human-based team names comprised the majority of this work. For example, team names like *Raiders*, *Rebels*, and *Warriors* were considered too ambiguous and demanded an examination of their logo and/or mascot to ascertain what type of person was representing these names. *Rebels*, for

example, are represented in high schools by likenesses of ancient Greek and Roman fighters, knights, Vikings, colonial soldiers of the American Revolutionary War, and Confederate soldiers of the American Civil War. In most cases, school webpages included a logo of its mascot and the team name could be assigned to a category. Many schools using a controversial mascot, such as a Confederate soldier or an Indigenous person, displayed an unassuming "Rebels" or "Warriors" text logo on their websites to detract attention. However, school-sponsored social media accounts frequently included photos that revealed the identity of their mascot. When the mascot for an ambiguous team name could not be identified, it was included in the same category as those that were identified but noted as generic. Although time consuming, this methodology produced a database more definitive than the oft-cited list compiled by Massey Ratings (Massey 2017), which is based on team names alone.

## Results

A lengthy examination of prevailing themes among the team names ultimately resulted in seven categories: fauna, flora, humans, inanimate objects and phenomena, deities and spiritual beings, mythological creatures and beings, and schools not using a team name. Collectively, fauna are the most popular team name and mascots in high school athletics (11,638 schools; 55.73% of all schools). Humans rank a distant second (6,945; 33.26%), and inanimate objects and phenomena third (1,017; 4.87%). Deities and spiritual beings (703; 3.37%), mythological creatures and beings (428; 2.05%), flora (54; .26%), and schools choosing not to use team names (98; .47%) round out the remaining names.

### Fauna

A total of 11,638 team names and mascots reference animals, and more than two thirds (7,946) are mammals. Carnivores, a biological order which include the feliformia (cat-like) and caniformia (dog-like) suborders, comprise 6,363 (80%) of these mammals. Cats are very popular icons, as 4,219 teams (20.2% of all schools) use tigers (965), panthers (840), wildcats (687), lions (626), and other feliforms as mascots. Among the 2,144 caniforms used include a variety of dogs (1,117 in total), with bulldogs (836) and huskies (150) being the most popular, and bears (482), wolves (287), and wolverines (141) also frequently used. Common mascots from other orders of mammals include horses (752), sheep (325), cattle (148), and bison (95).

Neoaves, a biological taxonomic clade consisting of the vast majority of modern birds, comprise 2,877 (98.5%) of the 2,921 schools using birds as team names or mascots. Raptors, including eagles (1,419), hawks (454), and falcons (388) are the most frequently used, with cardinals (293), jays (79), and owls (73) following.

**Fauna (11,638)**

| | |
|---|---:|
| ├─ Mammals | 7,946 |
|   ├─ *Carnivora* (Cats, Dogs) | 6,363 |
|   ├─ *Perissodactyla* (Horses) | 786 |
|   ├─ *Artiodactyla* (Sheep, Cattle, Bison) | 668 |
|   ├─ *Rodentia* (Beavers, Gophers, Squirrels) | 65 |
|   ├─ *Cetacea* (Dolphins, Whales) | 19 |
|   ├─ *Lagomorpha* (Rabbits) | 18 |
|   ├─ *Diprotodontia* (Kangaroos, Koalas) | 11 |
|   ├─ *Proboscidea* (Elephants) | 6 |
|   ├─ *Primates* (Apes, Monkeys) | 5 |
|   ├─ *Tubulidentata* (Aardvarks) | 3 |
|   ├─ *Cingulata* (Armadillos) | 1 |
|   └─ *Chiroptera* (Bats) | 1 |
| ├─ Birds | 2,921 |
|   ├─ *Neoaves* | 2,877 |
|     ├─ *Accipitriformes* (Eagles, Hawks) | 1,877 |
|     ├─ *Passeriformes* (Cardinals, Jays) | 449 |
|     ├─ *Falconiformes* (Falcons) | 388 |
|     ├─ *Strigiformes* (Owls) | 73 |
|     ├─ *Cuculiformes* (Roadrunners) | 25 |
|     ├─ *Caprimulgiformes* (Night Hawks) | 21 |
|     ├─ *Pelecaniformes* (Pelicans) | 9 |
|     ├─ *Charadriiformes* (Gulls, Auks) | 8 |
|     ├─ *Sphenisciformes* (Penguins) | 8 |
|     ├─ *Cathartiformes* (Condors) | 4 |
|     ├─ *Gruiformes* (Cranes) | 4 |
|     ├─ *Columbiformes* (Doves) | 2 |
|     ├─ *Psittaciformes* (Parrots) | 2 |
|   ├─ *Galloanserae* (Ducks, Geese) | 44 |
|   └─ Other (Wings) | 3 |
| ├─ Insects | 475 |
| ├─ Reptiles | 177 |
| ├─ Fishes | 75 |
| ├─ Arachnids | 21 |
| ├─ Amphibians | 13 |
| ├─ Mollusks | 5 |
| ├─ Crustaceans | 2 |
| ├─ Echinoderms | 2 |
| └─ Microorganisms | 1 |

**Inanimate Objects and Phenomena (1,017)**

| | |
|---|---:|
| ├─ Weather & Related Natural Phenomena | 461 |
| ├─ Machines for Transport | 223 |
| ├─ Celestial Objects | 152 |
| ├─ Weapons | 66 |
| ├─ Fire-related | 53 |
| ├─ Industrial Machinery | 24 |
| ├─ Non-Industrial Products | 17 |
| ├─ Magic | 5 |
| ├─ Atomic Components | 4 |
| ├─ Feelings | 7 |
| └─ Letters and Punctuation | 2 |

**Deities and Religious Beings (703)**

| | |
|---|---:|
| ├─ Christian | 504 |
|   ├─ Devils and Demons | 362 |
|   ├─ Saints | 128 |
|   └─ Angels | 14 |
| ├─ Greek | 192 |
| ├─ Norse | 6 |
| └─ Roman | 1 |

**Mythological Creatures and Beings (428)**

| | |
|---|---:|
| ├─ Dragons | 169 |
| ├─ Ancient Greek or Roman | 158 |
| ├─ Indigenous | 39 |
| ├─ Ghosts and Psychopomps | 21 |
| ├─ Book Characters | 12 |
| ├─ Wizards and Witches | 9 |
| ├─ Giants | 5 |
| ├─ Gremlins, Goblins, and Gnomes | 6 |
| ├─ Sea-based | 5 |
| └─ Locally Unique | 5 |

**Flora (54)**

| | |
|---|---:|
| ├─ Leaves | 23 |
| ├─ Trees | 12 |
| ├─ Seeds | 10 |
| ├─ Flowers | 5 |
| ├─ Vegetables | 3 |
| └─ Fruit | 1 |

**No Team Name**      98

FIGURE 1. Frequencies of fauna, inanimate objects and phenomena, deities and religious beings, mythological creatures and beings, flora, and no team name taxonomic classifications.

Insects comprise 475 (2.3%) of all team names and mascots used in the United States. Hornets and yellowjackets, wasps known for their aggressive behavior, are used in 434 of them. Reptiles are used in 177 schools, with alligators (91), rattlesnakes (28), and cobras (26) being the most popular. Sharks (41) are the most common team name or mascot among 75 schools using fish.

Others include rays (7), marlins (6), and tarpons (4). The remaining animal team names include 21 arachnids (*Scorpions* and *Spiders*), 13 amphibians (including *Bullfrogs* and *Toads*), four mollusks (including *Snails* and *Nautilus*), two crustaceans (*Sandcrabs*), two echinoderms (*Starfish* and *Urchin*), and one reference to microorganisms, the *Biohazards* of Life Academy of Health and Bioscience in Oakland, California (Figure 1).

## Humans

As sports are widely considered to have metaphorical connections to warfare, it is no surprise that aggression is a prevalent theme among the 6,945 human-based team names and mascots. No category of names is larger than those refer-encing people trained to kill, which comprises 2,530 (36.43%) of all teams in this category. Medieval warriors, represented by names such as *Knights*, *Crusaders*, *Cavaliers*, and *Lancers*, are the most popular lot (1,161). Colonial soldiers of the American Revolutionary War (386), Indigenous people repre-sented in the imagery of *Warrior* team names (382), and Confederate rebels of the American Civil War (109) are other frequently used representations.

Indigenous people appear again in a category of team names based on the theme of race and ethnicity. Of the 1,734 schools in this category, 853 (49.2%) reference them through the use of names such as *Indians* (403), *Braves* (110), and *Chiefs* or *Chieftains* (106). Ninety-one controversial names refer to the so-called "red" skin of Indigenous people (including 59 *Redskins*), 89 names reference tri-bal nation names (such as *Mohawks*, *Utes*, and *Apaches*), and other names include *Savages* (10), *Blackhawks* (8), *Sachems* (6), *Maidens* (4), and *Squaws* (2). Greeks of antiquity, including *Trojans* (358) and *Spartans* (302), dominate the list of 721 schools using ancient ethnic group monikers. *Gaels* (16), *Celts* (12), *Saxons* (7), and *Vandals* (6) are among others used. Contemporary ethnic groups are used as mascots in 160 schools. Scots (75) and Irish (54) comprise 80.6% of them, but others, including the Dutch (16), Germans (10), Turks (1), Arabs (1), Armenians (1), French (1), and Swedes (1) are represented as well.

Individuals with reputations for lawlessness comprise the third largest group of human-based team names and mascots with 1,095 schools employing them for names and imagery. A variety of people are represented by the *Raiders* team name, including knights, soldiers of the Confederate Army, cowboys, and Indigenous people. Pirates, however, are the most frequently referenced people (441). These swashbucklers, along with their elder seafaring cousins, the Vikings (387), make up 75.6% of the schools in this category. The western American frontier setting inspires another family of team names, as 92 schools using names such as *Outlaws*, *Renegades*, and *Rustlers* use cowboys and masked horse riders in their logos, and 70 schools represent *Marauder* and *Raider* names with Indigenous people.

A group of 658 team names and mascots referencing economic activities often pay homage to local industries or famous residents. Those reflecting work in the

primary sector, which includes agriculture (206), mining (74), forestry (50), and fishing (19), outnumber those of other sectors with a total of 349 schools, or 53% of all schools in this category. Names in these categories include *Cowboys* (97), *Rangers* (21), and *Aggies* (16) in agriculture, *Miners* (31) and *Oilers* (13) in mining, *Lumberjacks* (23) and *Loggers* (14) in forestry, and *Whalers* (5) and *Fishermen* (3) in fishing. Tertiary-level jobs that include work in transportation (109), civil service (99), and entertainment (27), are used in 205 schools (31.15% of schools in this category). Popular transportation-related team names include *Flyers* (25), *Mariners* (19), and *Sailors* (15). Names and mascots referencing law enforcement, including *Rangers* (21), Canadian *Mounties* (4), politics, including *Senators* (9), and *Ambassadors* (7), and entertainment, including *Matadors* (16) and *Magicians* (4) represent trades in this realm. The industrial production of material goods (35), food (19), and transportation infrastructure (19) are secondary sector jobs found in 74 team names. *Railroaders* (13) dominate the transportation construction subcategory, *Ironmen* (10), and *Boilermakers* (5) are common among goods manufacturers, and *Packers* (9) and *Millers* (6) are the most frequently used team names commemorating food makers. Seventeen schools, with names such as *Surgeons*, *Engineers*, and *Chemics*, reference employment in the quaternary sector. The last group of 13 team names in this category, including the *Surfriders* of Kailua High in Hawaiʻi and the *Skiers* of Aspen High in Colorado, reference local leisure activities.

A small number of schools, 210 in total, allude to economic and, by extension, social class in their team names and mascots. References to nobility, including *Royals* (65), *Monarchs* (35), and *Kings* (15) are used in 158 of them. Honorific titles such as *Dons* (24) are used in 28 schools, and titles tied to specific cultures like *Pharaohs*, *Sultans*, and *Sheiks*, are used in 13. The *Delta Kings* of Stagg High School in Stockton, California are among four schools claiming "nobility" of a local physical feature. Five schools, including the *Millionaires* of Williamsport, Pennsylvania and Lenox, Massachusetts note wealthy landowners in the community.

Imagery associated with *Pioneers* (97), *Mountaineers* (22), *Trailblazers* (6), *Plainsmen* (3), *Colonists* (1), and *Settlers* (1) team names are among those representing groups of European colonizers to North America. Of the 148 schools in this distinct category, 119 (79.3%) use a logo of a man wearing a coonskin hat made famous by Davy Crockett, the early white colonizer of the Appalachian frontier (Lofaro 1985). Other icons witnessed in this category include weapons such as rifles, bowie knives, and axes (53) and the Conestoga wagon (6).

Of the 135 schools whose team names or mascots were chosen to honor historical figures, 59 do so for politicians with names such as *Senators* (9), *Governors* (7), and *Presidents* (6). Military leaders from the American Revolution (20), the Confederate Army (12), Union Army (9), World War II (4), and abroad (4) are referenced in 49 schools.

References to religious titles and groups exist in 69 instances. Catholicism, with names such as *Padres*, *Brothers*, and *Friars*, is most frequent (25). *Quakers*

**Humans (6,945)**

| | |
|---|---|
| ─ Race and Ethnicity | 1,734 |
| ├ Indigenous Peoples | 853 |
| ├ Ancient Peoples | 721 |
| └ Contemporary Ethnic Groups | 160 |
| ─ Warriors | 2,530 |
| ├ Medieval | 1,161 |
| ├ American Revolutionary War | 386 |
| ├ Indigenous | 382 |
| ├ Ancient | 200 |
| ├ No Imagery Identified | 138 |
| ├ Confederate States of America | 109 |
| ├ Weapons, no person | 57 |
| ├ Ethnic Groups | 34 |
| ├ Contemporary | 33 |
| └ Unassociated Rank Titles | 30 |
| ─ Lawless Individuals and Groups | 1,095 |
| ├ Early Modern | 441 |
| ├ Medieval | 431 |
| ├ Western U.S. Frontier | 92 |
| ├ Indigenous | 70 |
| ├ No Imagery Identified | 28 |
| ├ America Revolutionary War | 15 |
| ├ Confederate States of America | 12 |
| └ Ancient | 6 |
| ─ Economic Activities | 658 |
| ├ Primary Sector | 349 |
| ├ Tertiary Sector | 205 |
| ├ Secondary Sector | 74 |
| ├ Quaternary Sector | 17 |
| └ Leisure Activities | 13 |

| | |
|---|---|
| ─ Socioeconomic Class | 210 |
| ├ Nobility | 171 |
| ├ Titles of Respect | 28 |
| ├ Non-Noble Wealth | 6 |
| └ "Nobility" of Physiographic Landmark | 5 |
| ─ Demonyms | 207 |
| ├ Physiographic Demonyms | 107 |
| └ Political Demonyms | 100 |
| ─ Colonizing Peoples | 148 |
| ├ Frontiersman | 119 |
| ├ No Imagery Identified | 23 |
| └ Conestoga Wagon | 6 |
| ─ Historical Figures | 135 |
| ├ Politicians | 119 |
| ├ Military Leaders | 23 |
| ├ European Explorers | 9 |
| ├ Frontiersmen | 4 |
| ├ Writers | 3 |
| ├ Civil Servants | 2 |
| ├ Athletes | 2 |
| ├ Civil Rights Leader | 1 |
| ├ Educator | 1 |
| ├ Entertainer | 1 |
| ├ Inventor | 1 |
| └ Town Founder | 1 |
| ─ Characteristics of student athletes | 99 |
| ─ Religious Individuals and Groups | 69 |
| ─ Colors worn by athletes | 57 |
| ─ Body Parts | 3 |

FIGURE 2. Frequencies of human taxonomic classifications.

(21), Calvinists (5), Muslims (2), Pilgrims (2), and other Christian-based team names, including the *Fighting Fundamentalists* of Fairhaven Baptist Academy in Chesterton, Indiana, round out the rest.

Team names inspired by aspects of local geography exist in 207 schools. These schools incorporate aspects of the local natural or cultural setting (107) or demonyms (100) into their team names. Examples of the first group include the Horicon, Wisconsin *Marshmen*, the Los Alamos, New Mexico *Hilltoppers*, the *County Seaters* of Belvidere, New Jersey, and the *Borderites* of Blaine, Washington. Demonyms are used as beloved team names of teams in Sand Springs, Oklahoma, home of the *Sandites*, and in East Hampton, New York, where the *Bonackers* compete for interscholastic glory.

A small number of schools, 99 in total, use team names that reference the prowess of their students. Thirty-one schools, such as the Bessemer, Michigan

*Speedboys* and *Speedgirls*, refer to quickness. Other names like *Giants*, *Scrappers*, and *Olympians* reflect characteristics of size (19), fierceness (16), and overall athleticism (9). A few dozen schools, 57 to be exact, prefer to be known by the color of their jerseys. Variations of red, including maroon and crimson (28), and blue (12) are the most popular among them, but six team names, including the *Orabs* (Orange and Blacks) of Sheldon, Iowa, reference two colors. Lastly, the smallest and most unusual category in this taxonomy belongs to human body parts – the *Hearts* of Sacred Heart in Waterbury, Connecticut, the *Flaming Hearts* of Effingham, Illinois, and the cleverly named *Feet* of the Webb School in Bell Buckle, Tennessee (Figure 2).

### Inanimate Objects and Phenomena

Just under five percent of all team names, 1,017 in total, reference an inanimate material object or natural phenomena. Naturally occurring objects and phenomena such as weather, tides, rocks, and minerals comprise 461 of these names. Team names relating to atmospheric phenomena account for 360 of them, including storms in general (43) as well as specific meteorological hazards such as lightning (95), tornadoes (78), hurricanes (61), thunder (30), cyclones (29), dust devils (9), and extreme temperatures (6). Non-threatening phenomena like rainbows (1), sundogs (1), and the aurora borealis (1) are used by a handful of schools. Natural events and materials occurring on or below the surface of the earth account for 100 team names, with waves (53), tides (21), and 22 geologically-related names such as *Hematites*, *Agates*, and *Artesians* responsible for the majority of the group. *Blazers* (26) and *Flames* (22) are among the 53 team names using fire as a mascot. A total of 152 schools have looked beyond Earth in search for a team name, using *Comets* (91), *Stars* (40), and other celestial objects as a result.

Back on *terra firma*, products of the industrial revolution have inspired hundreds of team names and mascots. Modes of transportation on land (22), water (33), air (58), and space (108) are used, as are other products for industrial purposes (24) such as *Sparkplugs*, *Satellites*, and *Lasers*. Weapons such as swords (31), arrows (17), hatchets (8), bullets (4), and bombs (3) are used as team names in 66 schools, 15 of which include visual references to Indigenous weaponry in their logo. Lastly, products made for non-industrial consumption, such as playing cards, textiles, shoes, and food, are used as mascots in 17 schools (Figure 1). As the *Pretzels* of Freeport High School and New Berlin High School in Illinois illustrate, anything can be used as a symbol of school spirit!

### Deities and Spiritual Beings

Although many are visualized in human form, incorporeal religious deities and beings were assessed as a distinct category. They are used as team names and mascots in 703 schools (Figure 1). Ancient Roman or Greek deities such as

Titan (171) comprise 192 of these names but are outnumbered by 504 figures typically associated with Christianity, including *Devils* and *Demons* (362), *Saints* (128), and *Angels* (14).

### Mythological Creatures and Beings

A total of 428 schools use mythological creatures and fictional beings as mascots (Figure 1). Dragon mascots (169) are the most popular, but admiration for ancient Greek and Roman culture is evident in the 158 schools using mythological creatures such as the *Phoenix* (76) and *Griffin* (60). Indigenous-based names are witnessed though the use of *Thunderbirds* (36) and *Menehunes* (2). Twelve schools use fictional characters from books, including William Tell (*Marksmen*) and the Headless Horseman (*Horsemen*), as inspiration for team names. Others include beings popular during Halloween such as *Ghosts* (19), *Wizards* (6), *Witches* (3), *Gremlins* (4), *Goblins* (1), and *Reapers* (1).

### Flora

Fifty-four schools use team names inspired by plants. Twenty-three of these schools use leaves, and the young sprigs of clover known as *Shamrocks* (21) are the most prevalent name in this category. Eleven schools using this name are affiliated with the Catholic church, suggesting ties to a local Irish community. Trees (11) such as *Maples*, *Oaks*, and *Evergreens*, and seeds (10) such as *Acorns*, *Kernels*, and *Buckeyes* are team names. Additional food-based team names appear in this category, as potatoes (*Spuds* and *Russets*) and *Berries* are used in four schools (Figure 1). Five schools, including the *Ramblers* of Rose Bud, Arkansas and the *Awesome Blossoms* of Blooming Prairie, Minnesota, use a place name-team name association.

### Schools not Using Team Names

A small number of schools, 98 in total, do not use a team name or mascot. Many are charter schools that emphasize academics over athletics, but most are private religious schools that prefer their teams be known by their institutional name rather than an adopted mascot.

## Discussion

Three latent themes emerge from this rich dataset of team names and mascots: convention, bellicosity, and local distinctiveness. A guidebook for selecting a team name is not known to exist, yet most schools adhere to the popular convention of selecting them from a handful of names in two taxonomic categories. The 20 most frequently used team names comprise 53% of the national total. The top ten, which are used by 37% of all schools, is comprised of predators

and people trained to inflict harm. *Eagles* (1,419) top the list, followed by *Tigers* (931), *Panthers* (840), *Bulldogs* (836), *Knights* (705), *Warriors* (701), *Wildcats* (687), *Lions* (626), *Cougars* (509), and *Hawks* (454). Historically, collegiate teams such as the Yale *Bulldogs* and Princeton *Tigers* influenced high school team name selection (Franks 1982). Alliteration, consonance, or assonance may partially explain this tradition, as they are observed between school and team names in 8,350 (40%) of all schools. The custom of using popular nicknames remains common practice. For instance, the final options for the soon-to-open South Garner High School in North Carolina are the *Aggies*, *Gators*, *Grizzlies*, *Raiders*, and *Titans* (Stevens 2018). Evolution in linguistic standards (Smith 1997) and an administrational desire to avoid culturally insensitive names and mascots may also influence name selection.

As is the case among professional and collegiate team names (Franks 1982; Nuessel 1994), bellicosity is a prevailing theme among team names and mascots used on the fields and in the gymnasia of secondary schools in the United States. Animals known for their aggressive nature, from alligators to yellowjackets, and humans associated with war and lawlessness, whether they are ancient, medieval or modern, seafaring or terrestrial, are employed to both motivate those who wear the jersey and to intimidate their opponents. "Fighting" is used as an adjective for 120 team names in the dataset, including *Indians*, *Farmers*, *Frogs*, and *Mermaids*. *Trojan* and *Spartan* mascots are exclusively exhibited as warriors, not farmers or artisans of their respective city-states. Highland warriors appear in the imagery of 52% (39) of the 75 schools using names relating to Scots, and the *Hillbilly* of Ozark High School in Arkansas wields a shotgun, which is prominently displayed on the school's web page (Ozark Public School District, 2018). Thousands of schools commemorate, often controversially, those involved in violent struggles over religion (*Crusaders*), independence (*Patriots*), enslavement (Confederate *Rebels*), and territorial control (*Indians*). Indigenous people and aspects of their cultures are mascots in 1,373 schools, amounting to 19.8% of all human-based team names and 6.6% of all team names. Notably, they are frequently portrayed as hostiles; weapons such as arrows and tomahawks are iconic symbols used in 158 (39.2%) of schools using *Indians* as a team name, and, to reiterate, they are employed as mascots in more than half of *Warrior* team names (380) and in 70 team names in the outlaw category.

Local distinctiveness describes the desire of a school to be recognized for an aspect of the community's physical or cultural geography, including a hometown landmark, famous son or daughter, historical event, folklore, economic activity, or natural phenomena. The use of distinct team names often evokes a strong sense of place and pride among community members, but it also can become synonymous with the community itself and attract interest from outsiders living hundreds of miles away. Although less common, this theme is evident in every major taxonomic category (less the unnamed, of course). Local pride is particularly prominent in the family of names relating to demonyms and economic activities. Examples abound: from the *Zee-Bees* of Zion-Benton Township,

Illinois and the *Vineyarders* of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts to the Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania *Chucks*, Key West, Florida *Conchs*, Salem, Massachusetts *Witches*, and Sishmaref, Alaska *Northern Lights*. Many team names preserve a historically relevant niche of the local economy that no longer exists. Although the sugar beet refinery in Chinook, Montana closed decades ago, the community's teams still wear their *Sugarbeeters* apparel with pride. In other cases, a team name captures a glimpse of the popular culture of the period in which the name was selected. Kewpie dolls, which were as popular among children in the second decade of the twentieth century as fidget spinners were to children one century later, are memorialized as the team name and mascot at Hickman High School in Columbia, Missouri. Although the *Kewpies* name remains is outdated, it has stood uncontested. That is not the case elsewhere, as the frequency of renaming controversial monikers has increased in recent decades. Indigenous team names have been contested in high schools for generations (Taylor 2013; Zeitler 2008), and recent local-level discussions to retire names which commemorate the Confederacy (Moody 2018) and remove gender exclusive "-men" suffixes (Roemeling 2018) may represent the next wave of making team names and mascots non-discriminatory and inclusive to all students.

## Conclusion

No country uses as many athletic team names and mascots as the United States. Analysis of the taxonomy of secondary school team names and mascots proposed in this paper sheds light on preferences and values held by society that extend beyond school grounds. A tendency to use conventionally used bellicose names and imagery mirrors the national custom of appearing resolute in character, while at a more intimate scale, many communities celebrate locally distinctive traits and traditions. Many practices revealed here are worthy of deeper examination.

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## Disclosure Statement

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