

What's in a Name? Lots.

Guest editorial by Richard Campanella, published in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, May 10, 2012

Local ownership has re-forged the relationship between New Orleanians and their professional basketball franchise. Native-born owner Tom Benson said as much when he invited consideration of a new and locally relevant nickname for the Hornets, something nearly 90 percent of respondents to a recent survey said was long overdue.

I've found the ensuing civic discussion on renaming the Hornets informative because it has pressed people to capture their complex city concisely, and because nearly everyone seems to have something to suggest.

City nicknames are significant because they both reflect and drive the inscription of character to place—or in this case, to a team associated with a place. They warrant contemplation because, for better or worse, they help form mass perception. It's no coincidence that New Orleans, so rich in historical and cultural imagery, has earned or generated more nicknames and slogans than just about any other city. Some sobriquets, such as "Crescent City," "Queen of the South," "Creole City," "City that Care Forgot," "America's Most Interesting City," "Birthplace of Jazz," and "The Big Easy," have embraced or promoted the place. Others, like "The Great Southern Babylon," "Necropolis of the South," and "Sodom and Gomorrah," condemned it.

So how have New Orleanians attempted to define the character of their city via renaming the Hornets? My unscientific analysis finds the suggestions falling into three groups.

Many people reached into the treasure chest and pulled out historical allusions (the Crescents, the Buccaneers), ecological themes (Pelicans, Alligators, Crawfish, Gars, Mudbugs, Swampdevils, Trawlers), and cultural artifacts (Big Chief, Spy Boys, Flambeaux, Krewe, Parade, Revelers, Mojo, Voodoo). Others offered musical refrains (Beat, Bounce, Brass, Rhythm, Tunes), culinary references (Bellpeppers, Poor Boys, Spice), or both (JAMBalaya). Certain Mardi Gras images like the Royals, Jesters, and Knights already form familiar team names.

A second group took the renaming exercise as an opportunity to opine, with varying levels of irony and cynicism, on New Orleans' problems and flaws. They include the Storm, the Surge, Hurricanes, Oilers, Disasters, Evacuators, and the Contraflow, not to mention the Sinners, Demons, Potholes, Kickbacks, Bullets, and Murder. One suggestion, the Dukes, generated online controversy because it was unclear whether it was intended as a Group-1 reference to carnival royalty, or a Group-2 reference to former Klansman and gubernatorial candidate David Duke.

A third group refrained from looking backwards or downwards and instead reached upwardly, by proposing inspirational names tinged with the same sort of secular spirituality that underlies the appeal of the name "Saints." Suggestions in this group—the Angels, the Energy, the Future, the Soul, the Spirit—gently acknowledge the Katrina tragedy but focus positively on the recovery.

What struck me was how, as a whole, the suggestions form a microcosm of local society. Three main local personality types are discernible: there are the preservationists, the cynics, and the idealists. And most of the conversation we've been having about the character of this place, particularly since Katrina, falls into the same three groups: appreciating our historical, cultural and ecological heritage; grappling bluntly with our socio-economic, governmental, and geo-physical problems; and contemplating the willpower that lifted this city out of its darkest moments and shined light on its future.

Euphony and marketability will weigh as heavily as content and meaning in the eventual decision. For now, I offer that the public discussion over renaming the Hornets has revealed something about New Orleanians and how they perceive New Orleans, and that, once selected, the final name will help influence how the rest of the world perceives New Orleans to be.

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