



A few years ago, Nimrods were all the rage thanks to a little northern exposure courtesy of ESPN.

What's In a (Nick)Name?

**Nimrods and Speedboys and Magi, Oh My!
High School Nicknames range from the ridiculous to the sublime.
Unless, of course, you *are* a Nimrod (or Martian, or Magi, or ...)**

Without sports, who would cheer for Nimrods? Or, for that matter, Martians, Dreadnaughts, River Rats or Devils dressed in red, blue or green?

A total of 764 Michigan high schools sponsor athletics. With the exception of nine schools, all have christened their athletic teams with a nickname, and they come in all shapes and sizes.

Some 619 Michigan miles separate the "Speedboys" and "Speedgirls" of Bessemer from the "Kicking Mules" of Temperance Bedford. In between, we find prep teams outfitted in regalia with designs that span the full array of Crayola colors.

At last count 43 variations of "Eagles" soar above the state's high school athletic fields, while 29 "Panthers" prowl the state's sidelines. Print and broadcast media carry stories about the 26 individual lineages of "Vikings" that populate this great state.

Within the state's borders, sports fans might confront "Maroon Giants" and "Green Dragons." "Gremlins" attempt to sabotage athletic success, while Swashbuckling



"Swordsmen" and axe-wielding "Lumberjacks" stand in the way of triumph.

Scanning the landscape we see a wildlife refuge that includes "Bears," "Pumas," "Zebras," and a host of other animals.

Biblical and mythical figures dot the landscape. On any given night, one might find "Cosmos" clashing with "Rocks," or "Comets" battling "Shamrocks." Nickname trivia has been played by sports fans for many years. Within the state, there are 226 possibilities, of which 136 are unique. Of course, these numbers ignore schools that have been shuttered due to consolidation and economics.

In 1986, ESPN's "Sports America Show" compiled a list of the 10 top nick-

names for high school sports teams. Two schools from Michigan landed on the list, appearing on the next page. In a strange twist of fate, the "Nimrods" of Watersmeet were featured in ESPN's "Without Sports" advertising campaign in 2004, and parlayed their new-found fame into a guest appearance on *The Tonight Show* with Jay Leno. This fall they land on the Sundance Channel, as stars of an eight-episode series airing on Mondays, beginning Nov. 26.

Geographically located in Michigan's Upper Peninsula Ottawa National Forest, Watersmeet began using the Nimrod nickname in 1904. According to biblical accounts in the Old Testament, Nimrod was "a mighty hunter before the Lord." It is said that residents and school officials adopted the name because the forest is prime hunting land for waterfowl, deer, and bear.

The Kingsford Flivvers were the state's second representative on the list.

In 1920, Henry Ford contacted Edward G. Kingsford, a real estate agent and the owner of an Upper Peninsula area Ford dealership, to facilitate the purchase of 313,447 acres of land in the U.P. for Ford Motor Company. The husband of Ford's cousin, Minnie Flaherty, Kingsford complet-

ed the deal, and on Dec. 29, 1923, the charter for the newly formed Village of Kingsford was approved. Ford built a world-class facility to manufacture the wooden components for Ford automobiles.

In honor of their association with Ford, Kingsford High School selected “**Flivvers**,” a nickname for a Ford Model T, to serve as the moniker for their athletic teams. The logo, of course, features an illustration of a Tin Lizzy.



ESPN’s original list could have easily been expanded to encompass hundreds of nicknames from across the nation. The state of Michigan itself overflows with unusual or unique nicknames, past and present.

Start with “**Martians**.” At Goodrich High School, students and school officials are often asked, “Why would anyone want to be named after little green men from outer space?”

The 1898 H.G. “Wells novel *War of the Worlds*, and the 1938 Orson Wells radio adaptation of the novel did much to popularize the definition of Martians as most people know it. However, Goodrich’s use of the term “Martian” is actually a mythological reference to Mars, the Roman god of war. The son of Jupiter and Juno, the king and queen of gods, Mars was the god of spring and growth in nature.

Prior to the 1930s, Goodrich athletics were known as the Goodrich Gladiators. At that time, Goodrich was still a farming community and the school system bore the official title of “Goodrich Rural Agricultural Schools” – hence the appropriate selection of “Martians” as a nickname.

The Vassar Vulcans also take their name from Jupiter and Juno offspring. Vulcan was the god of destructive fire, and the brother of Mars.

“It’s allowed the student body to be creative when they’ve attended games,” notes Dave Bossick, a former sports editor for the *Tuscola County Advertiser*. “At a Regional girls basketball game a few years ago Vassar played Swan Valley. A handful of students were dressed up as Romans/Vulcans. They had the faux twigs and leaves and togas on (with clothes on underneath). It was very funny and one of the lasting memories I’ll have of watching student cheer groups from Michigan.”



Travel to the northern-most expanses of the U.P. for additional examples. Since the basketball season of 1946-47, Houghton High school athletic teams have been known as the “Gremlins.” A creature of folklore, coined during the Second World War, Gremlins are know as mischievous, mysterious and mechanically inclined – an ideal moniker for a prep athletic squad.

“The Calumet High School team nick-

name has been the ‘Copper Kings’ since the early 1950s,” notes Bob Erkkila, a sports historian from the area. “The school ran an area-wide contest with the ‘Copper Kings’ being selected over such other popular entries as ‘Miners’ and ‘Red Jackets.’ The nickname was in honor of the great copper mining heritage here in our area.”

Industry, economic growth and the pride that is associated within a community can play a large role in the selection of a nickname.

The city Dearborn was named after Henry Dearborn, an American Revolution General and former Secretary of War under President Thomas Jefferson. However, for many years, the world headquarters of Ford Motor Company and the legacy of the company’s founder, Henry Ford, have cast a huge shadow in the community. The influence of Ford appears in the nicknames of two of the city schools. Dearborn Fordson, nicknamed their teams the “Tractors” – a direct reference to a product manufactured by Ford in the early years of the company. Alumni remember halftime of football games usually included a trip around the field by a 1917 Fordson Tractor. Dearborn Edsel Ford High School, named after Henry Ford’s only child, opened in the late 1950s. The school is nicknamed the “Thunderbirds,” after the Ford personal luxury automobile introduced with great success in 1955.



At a 1939 assembly at Mancelona High School, a suggestion was made that the school should call their football team the “**Ironmen**.” The name was selected to honor the Antrim Iron Works Company, an iron manufacturing plant located about a mile south of town that opened in 1882. Using the charcoal method to manufacture iron, at one time it was one of the largest employers in northern Michigan. The students backed the proposal with a vote.

The Iron Works closed in 1945, and for a short period of time the team took on the nickname “Polar Bears,” but according to legend, students rebelled, and the nickname was restored. Today, a bigger-than-life sculpture of an Ironman stands outside the school.

The mineral baths of Mt. Clemens were once world famous. According to period advertisements, the area’s sulphur-rich waters could cure a host of ailments, and over the years the city’s bathhouses attract-

THE ESPN TOP 10 HS NICKNAMES

1. SYRUPMAKERS of Cairo, GA
2. BEETDIGGERS of Brush, CO
3. NIMRODS of Watersmeet, MI
4. IMPS of Cary, NC
5. ATOMSMASHERS of Johnson Prep, Savannah, GA
6. ANGORAS of Clarkston, GA
7. FLIVVERS of Kingsford, MI
8. SQUIRRELS of Winslow, AZ
9. PEGLEGS of Stuyvesant in New York City
10. DOTS of Poca, WV

ed a variety of celebrities and sports luminaries including Hollywood stars Clark Gable, Mae West and Eddie Cantor, boxing’s Jack Dempsey and baseball’s Babe Ruth.

According to former athletic director Richard Chapman, the school’s nickname, “Battling Bathers” dates to the 1920s.

“It started when we played a Bay City school in football,” Chapman was quoted as saying in an Associated Press article in 1974. “They were ranked No. 1 in the state and we weren’t supposed to have a chance, but we lost only 6-0. The Bay City coach said, ‘Those battling bathers put up quite a fight.’ The quote was publicized, and the name stuck.”

In 1926, magician and illusionist Harry Blackstone Sr. purchased over 200 acres of land on Angel Island located on Sturgeon Lake near Colon to serve as a retreat from touring during the hot summer months. Ranking behind only Houdini in notoriety, Blackstone and an Australian magician, Percy Abbott, formed the Blackstone Magic Company in 1927. After a disagreement, the business was dissolved, but Abbott stayed on, married a local girl and opened the Abbott Magic Novelty Company. In 1934, Abbott hosted the city’s first magic convention, “Abbott’s Get Together,” with 80 magicians visiting. With that, the city of Colon declared itself “Magic Capital of the World.” For years, the high school athletic team has called themselves the “**Magi**.”



Public input is often solicited when selecting a nickname. The *Ann Arbor News* sponsored an essay contest to find a nickname for the Ann Arbor High in 1936. The first prize of five dollars was awarded to

Richard J. Mann, an Ann Arbor High graduate, who was one of six to suggest "Pioneers" to the district. In later years, Mann would serve as President of the Ann Arbor school Board.

In the 1940s, poultry farms in the city of Zeeland produced 18 million chicks per year, providing employment for 3,000 workers. Highlighting the city's status within the industry, Zeeland Public Schools called their prep teams the "Chix."

According to Holly Arens, an athletic administrative assistant at Zeeland West, an attempt to alter the mascot and school colors in the late 1970s failed.

"They wanted to change the mascot to the "Golden Bears," recalled Arens, a student at the time, "because 'Chix' was too weird." Students were asked to vote on the proposal, and chose to keep the existing nickname. "They liked having something different," said Arens.

As the new millennium approached, the possibility of change surfaced again. Growth in the area meant that a second high school would be built. Scheduled to open in August 2002, the community was asked to weigh in on an issue, "What should the nickname and school colors be for the new high school?"

A total of 777 entries came in with a myriad of suggestions, from Chewbakas and Darth Vaders to Power Ducks and Bunny Hoppers. Still, more than 70 percent of the entries suggested they keep "Chix" and the brown and gold school colors.

Five nickname and school color combinations were presented as final candidates at a town meeting. A vote was cast by 6th-12th graders throughout the district. The students stuck with tradition and kept the "Chix" name and color scheme for the newly renamed Zeeland East High School. Using the same phonic, they chose "Dux" to represent athletics at the new school, Zeeland West. It seems a fitting choice for two schools built right next to each other.

In Michigan we have the "Blue Streaks" (Ida) and "Thunderbolts" (Mio). Once there was the "Blue Bolts" from Dollar Bay but they changed their nickname to the "Bays" some years back.

We also have "Fighting Bees" (Bath), "Fighting Tigers" (Battle Creek St. Philip), and "Fighting Scots" (Caledonia). Once we had the "Fighting Knights" from Clinton Boyssville, but the school lost a battle for survival in the late 1960s.

Of course we have "Fighting Irish" (Ann Arbor Gabriel Richard, Kalamazoo Hackett, and Pontiac Notre Dame Prep). Those Irish use green as a primary color. Interestingly, "Irish" can also be found at Mount Pleasant Sacred Heart, however, there is no "Fighting." Their primary uniform color is

red.

Like a nickname attached to a friend, the name might be endearing.

Gladwin was nicknamed the "Flying Goshawks" after an aggressive raptor native to the area. The name was shortened many years ago to the "Flying G's". Their logo incorporates the head of a Goshawk.

Occasionally, a nickname comes from an off-the-cuff remark or even a disparaging comment.

A new high school located on the shore of the Huron River in Ann Arbor, built near an old medical waste site, was scheduled to open in 1967. According to some residents, the building would serve students from "the wrong side of town." During construction, students scheduled to transfer to the new school were often referred to as "River Rats" by their classmates.

When Huron High School opened in 1969, plans were in place to use "Hurons" as the sports nickname. But, to the surprise and disappointment of many members of school administration, the transferred students embraced the derogatory remark and wanted to use "River Rats" as their nickname. An attempt by school officials to find an alternative failed, and for several years, Huron operated without an official nickname. In spite of this, local newspapers began referring to Huron teams using variations on the "River Rats" name. Eventually, school administrators relented, and the name became a symbol of pride.

In at least one instance, inspiration was found in the circumstances surrounding a construction delay. In Detroit, Charles E. Chadsey High School was built to honor the former Detroit Superintendent of Schools from 1912-19. Scheduled to open in time for the start of the 1931-32 school year, delays meant that students began the school year at the adjacent Munger Intermediate School after its classes had been dismissed each day.

On Columbus Day, Oct. 12, 1931, the building was ready for occupancy. Hence, the athletic teams were christened the "Explorers."

History, of course, can play an important role in the selection process. In some cases, the nickname is unusual, yet completely logical.

Opened in 1930, John J. Pershing High School in Detroit was, naturally, nicknamed the "Doughboys." A West Point graduate, General Pershing led the American Expeditionary Force – the United States Military force commonly known as Doughboys – that were sent to Europe in 1917 when the U.S. entered World War I. In honor of his accomplishments, Pershing was given the highest rank possible for a

member of the military, General of the Armies of the United States, following the war.

In Dexter, another important figure from WWI served as inspiration for the team nickname. In 1906, the British Royal Navy introduced a revolutionary battleship to their fleet. The design of the HMS

Dreadnought, propelled through the water using steam turbines, featured an innovative "all-big-gun" armament. The advances were adopted by nearly all battleship builders and Dreadnoughts became a generic term used to describe the style of battleship. Dexter High School took on the

American spelling, "Dreadnaughts" as the team nickname in the mid-1940s.

Inspiration can also be found in consolidation of schools into a single larger consortium.

When the Iron River, Iron River Bates and Stambaugh schools chose to consolidate into a single district, a need arose for a new nickname and mascot. On Feb. 8, 1968, Brandon Giovanelli, art teacher at Stambaugh High School was given five minutes to design a mascot for the newly consolidated district of West Iron County. He created a "Wykon" - a three-legged mythological creature. The term was

coined by school counselor Floyd Carlson and Donald MacDonald, a football coach.

Occasionally, nicknames are created by the media, such as Kalamazoo Central's "Maroon Giants." Former

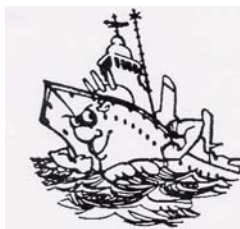
Kalamazoo Gazette sports editor Jerry Hagen began using the term when referring to the school's athletic teams in the mid-1930s, which were comprised of some students of unusual size for the era.

Of course, nicknames can spur controversy.

East Jordan is one of four state schools tusing a "Red Devil" for a nickname. The district made national news in 1987 as they debated the appropriateness of their chosen nickname in the *New York Times*. The school board was given a petition with over 200 signatures requesting a new name and team logo. The request was countered by a second petition, prepared by the school's cheerleaders that contained 500 signatures, asking that no change be made. Some 40 years previous, the school had changed its nickname from "Crimson Tide" when McCarthy-ism and Communist concerns were at a peak. This time, no change was made.

— Ron Pesch

Ron Pesch is the historian for the MHSAA. To submit story ideas and potential statistical records, write to Pesch at: records@mhsaa.com



Sacred Heart