Name of *the Game*

In the cultural fruit salad of the USA, racial identity is a metamorphising ingredient, writes Stephen Magagnini

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Several years ago, the American Anthropological Association declared race a false construct created by Europeans to separate and subjugate people different from themselves.

But race remains a political reality. As one successful African American lobbyist in Sacramento put it, 'every time I get turned down for a job, I never know if my race had something to do with it.'

When we write about race or ethnicity, the first step is to figure out how people identify themselves. The fastest way to kill an interview is to insult someone by misidentifying them.

At a charity basketball game in Sacramento some years ago, I approached Manute Bol, the 7-foot-6 inch centre then with the Washington Bullets, and immediately stuffed my foot in my mouth: "You're from Nigeria, right?"

Hakeem Olajuwon is from Nigeria; Bol is from the Sudan. Bol glared at me and said, "I see you have not done your homework. This conversation is at an end."

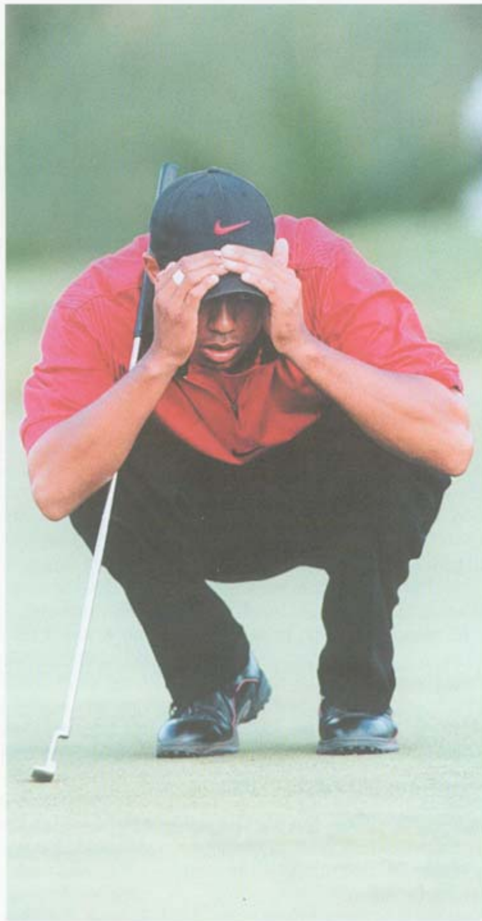
Go around your newsroom and ask people to describe themselves, and you'll probably discover that people of the same 'race' often don't identify themselves the same way. Most American newspapers prefer the term 'African American' over 'black', but there are many immigrants from Haiti, Jamaica and other Caribbean nations who don't want to be called African American. A woman in my office identifies herself as Afro-Jamaican, while other Caribbean immigrants call themselves Jamaican American, Haitian American, etc.

And some Americans prefer the term 'black' over African American because they identify with black culture — music, dress, dance, expressions, inflections — not African culture. Meanwhile, some African immigrants of European or East Indian descent find the term 'African American' misleading, at best. White Americans are often puzzled by African Americans who use the 'n' word amongst themselves but are deeply offended by anyone else who uses it. But while some black rappers, comedians and filmmakers use the 'n' word, many — if not most — African Americans think the 'n' word should never be used under any circumstances.

For a long time, the politically correct term for American Indians was 'Native American,' since the term 'Indian' was 'a mistake made by some white dude who thought he was in India', as one Indian friend put it. But in 1997, while working on a series on California Indians entitled 'Lost Tribes', I met an anthropologist from a southern California nation who said she was neither Native nor American. She, like many indigenous people, chooses to be identified by her nation (i.e., Lakota Sioux, Apache, Pomo, Yaqui).

Even the term 'tribe' is offensive to some American Indians, who say it's a white man's term that devalues their sovereign nations. When identifying Indians by their individual nations is too confusing, the term 'American Indians' is generally acceptable, although I personally like 'First Nations people,' the term used to describe Canadian Indians.

For generations, people of Asian descent were called 'Orientals', a term many find insulting because they say it reeks of colonialism and the stereotypical mysterious, exotic image of Asians. Oriental means 'East of' or 'from the East', which is often a matter of perspective: "If you were in Beijing then a person in London would be 'Oriental'," says Dr. Christina Fa, an Asian American activist in California. Fa is hyper-sensitive about hyphens — she doesn't like to see the term Asian-American because she says it implies that Asians are separate from Americans, or must choose between being Asian and American. 'It devalues Asian American culture as a whole', she says.



Tiger Woods ... called himself Cablinasian; a California kid says she's Blackanese

Fa's parents come from mainland China, but she prefers to identify herself as Asian American because she likes to promote the concept of a pan-Asian/Pacific Islander American. Other Asian Americans — while acknowledging vast differences between Pakistanis, Japanese, Tongans and Hmong, for example — say it's in their political interest to be identified as a whole. Still others, however, choose to identify themselves by their roots — i.e., Korean American — rather than their 'race' (Asian American).

People of Hispanic descent are among the most confusing to identify. While 'Latino' is generally accepted in the western USA, Cuban Americans in Miami generally identify themselves as Hispanic, not Latino, since they don't originate from Central or South America. But in the West, some Latinos reject the term Hispanic because they'd rather not be identified with Spain, which they see as the land of the oppressors.

In the 1960s, many Brown Power activists of Mexican descent called themselves 'Chicanos' — a term some of their parents couldn't stand. In general, people are comfortable being described by their country of origin: Mexican American, Cuban American, etc.

Then, there are white people who, justifiably, don't want to be called 'white' if nobody else is being identified by colour. Caucasian, however, is an old anthropological term that was used along with Negroid and Mongoloid to describe racial characteristics. My guess is that 'European American' will soon supplant 'white' as the identifier of choice.

Finally, the United States has a large and growing number of people of mixed race. Some young people, including at the University of California at Berkeley, call themselves 'Hapas', from the Hawaiian word 'hapa' meaning half. But many Americans of mixed race reject the term because it conjures images of half-breeds.

Others, such as Sacramento attorney Toso Himel — who is of European, Cuban and Japanese descent — are tired of being asked, "What are you?" then, "What are you, really?"

"These questions constantly make you ask yourself, 'What am I, what am I really?'" How people identify themselves by race and ethnicity is a matter of individual taste. Several years ago Tiger Woods began calling himself 'Cablinasian', reflecting his Caucasian, black, Indian and Asian roots.

"What's your ethnic mix?" is a non-offensive way to ask someone about their background. I often ask people, "how do you identify yourself?" or "how would you like to be identified in the newspaper?"

I recently interviewed Tressa Koyomi Murai, 30, a mixed-race Californian who used to be ashamed of her Japanese roots. She said she'd have her (English-Irish American) father — rather than her mother — drop her off at school because she wanted people think she was white.

She hated being asked what she was. But now, thanks to her four-year-old daughter Geneva, Murai always asks others their ethnic mix, and loves being asked. Geneva, who's of African American, French, Japanese and English-Irish descent, is proud of her multiple roots, Murai says. "She says, 'I'm Blackanese'. She's really interested in culture and not embarrassed about her identity. She wants to learn to hula, she loves sushi — she wants to tell who she is."

■ Stephen Magagnini is senior writer for Ethnic Affairs and Race Relations on the Sacramento Bee