

The Athenaeum Society

Who'd A Think It: Kool-Aid, Bobcats, and....Scrotums?
April 5, 2012

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To me, the Athenaeum Society symbolizes men of character from doctors, lawyers, college professors, school teachers, candidates for office, insurance salesmen, entrepreneurs, and others among dignified professional ranks. Each of us has a story, and throughout the year we as members learn a bit more about the individuals that sit next to us during our monthly meetings. Just to name a few items, what our interests are, hobbies, musical genres of note, and favorite sports teams (such as our current President and his love for UGA). I come into each meeting taking some characteristic from previous member's papers and relating it to their personality the next time I see them. Well, tonight should be no different.

It's no secret that I am devoted to my profession as an educator. I wouldn't change it for anything. Well...maybe some days. I'd also be remised to not mention the fact that since the age of 18, my life has been completely altered in direction from one such member in the room who will remain nameless in the field of history. History and education are the foundations of which my life has been built. And, as stated previously, we are all men of character that have foundations that run just as deep.

However, we all have an inner child where we dreamed often of doing something else in life. Whether it were being an astronaut, a pilot, or even

suiting up for the University of Kentucky Wildcat basketball team. But, somehow those ambitions were never followed through with for one reason or another. Tonight, gentlemen, I stand before you stating the fact that, among many, my ambitions haven't always been fulfilled either. You see, I always wanted to be a school's mascot. That's correct....a mascot!

Tonight's paper is laced with a personal ambition, an argument, and of course, history and education.

Have you ever paid close attention to the responsibilities of a mascot not to mention the symbolizism behind each one? A mascot is the sparkplug of pride and unity that students of schools across the nation rally to cheer their teams to victory. Mascots are also symbolic of that inner child that wants to dance, act an idiot, and not have to conform to society's pressures and norms. A person's identity is concealed and one can just, if you will, "let loose". One person comes to mind in Christian County that could be considered "our" mascot who doesn't even have to conceal his, and that person is none other than Steve Page. Yep, you guessed it, Bird Dog. Bird Dog can dance, cluck like a chicken, meow like a cat, gobble like a turkey, bark like a dog, or give you a combination of the five. Nevertheless, Bird Dog puts a smile on our face when we hear him make those noises and he doesn't even have to wear a costume. Well, you get the drift....

This idea of this paper was spawned not only out of a personal ambition that was never fulfilled, but also out of many discussions and disagreements between one of my friends and me over Western Kentucky and UK's mascot. College rivalry is an attribute that many of us rally around to have a "house divided" type relationship with the ones we interact with on a daily basis. Whether your team is in fact the University of Georgia, the University of Louisville, Duke University, the University of Alabama, Western Kentucky University, Murray State University, or the eight-time NCAA Basketball National Champions the University of Kentucky, each school has a mascot that we wouldn't trade for the world. UGA the Bulldog, the Blue Devil, Big Al, Big Red, the Racer, and of course the Wildcat. But, have you ever wondered why? Why would they choose such mascots to represent your beloved university?

Big Red, from Western Kentucky University, is a prime example of that question. Why would university officials and members of the NCAA select and approve such a mascot that resembles the trademark and face of Kool-Aid? I laugh every time I see him on the football field and basketball court. Big Red is a huge red blob whose mouth is never synchronized just right in the act of cheering. That's where this debate gets interesting and filled with that foundation of education and history. Until researching for

this paper, those statements made previously were my opinions but each mascot has some historical reference to the college itself, region of which the school is located, and even born in the minds of college students. In fact, a WKU student, Ralph Carey, created Big Red in 1979. The idea behind the design was to symbolize the spirit of WKU students and alumni as well as the sports teams' nickname, the "Hilltoppers". If you've ever noticed, Big Red's head is shaped like a hill and a forever reminder that the name was chosen because the campus sits atop a hill standing 232 ft above the Barren River. Ok...it makes sense. Big Red is a legend. And after research, I retract my opinions considering that Big Red has won the "Key to the Spirit" award at the Universal Cheerleading Association competition in 1980, 1981, and 1983. He was awarded 2nd college runner-up to collegiate Mascot of the Year in 1990. In 1996, he reached the Final Four of ESPN's "Battle of the Mascots" and has been selected eight times to compete in the Capital One Mascot Challenge in the competitions ten year history, reaching the semi-finals in 2006. He's even been replicated by an Italian television station and involved in a multi-million dollar settlement in a lawsuit surrounding the replication.

My personal bias for the University of Kentucky "Wildcats" led me to believe that a wildcat was much more suitable than a blob named "Big Red".

In fact, laughing at the sight of the Kool-Aid paralleled blob is still eminent even though he remains a legend in Bowling Green. The wildcat, on the other hand, is known for its fierce attack on predators, one that embodies the Big Blue Nation spirit. The bobcat, for which the wildcat was chosen, can be found in areas all over the state of Kentucky, more predominantly found in Eastern Kentucky. The bobcat is also known as a “wildcat” all over the United States. The wildcat mascot originated during the 1976-1977 season at UK. During the 35 year tenure at the University of Kentucky, the “Wildcat” always receives an immediate response while making the arm gestures of C-A-T-S....Cats, Cats, Cats! Yes, you must be a true Wildcat fan to appreciate that. A few years after the birth of UK’s wildcat, a second wildcat was introduced to symbolize the twin tower era of Melvin Turpin and Sam Bowie. “Scratch” not only joins the original wildcat today at athletic events, but also is the host of UK’s official Kid’s Club. In the fall of 2003 and 2004, Scratch was named to the Capital One’s All-American Mascot teams and competed for the title of the Capital One Mascot of the Year.

Personal biases aside, you be the judge of the two considering the history behind the naming of each mascot and the logic behind it. At this point, let’s delve into notable teams of the NCAA tournament. Just as the

previous two mentioned have an argument for each, each team's mascot exudes a kindred spirit for the team they represent. The University of North Carolina Tar Heels got its nickname from inhabitants of the state during the Civil War. Because of the state's importance on the Confederate side of the spectrum, troops that represented the state of North Carolina were "stuck to their ranks like they had tar on their heels". However, if you have ever paid attention to North Carolina's mascot there is no representation from this historical theory. Their mascot, named Rameses, is a Bighorn Ram. The history of this mascot dates back to 1924. During the 1922 football season, star fullback, Jack Merritt, was given the nickname "the battering ram" for his performance on the field. Carolina's head cheerleader at the time, Vic Huggins, suggested the idea of a ram mascot to the athletic business manager, Charles T. Woollen, and had this idea approved. \$25.00 was used to purchase the ram and it first appeared at a pep rally before a football game against the Virginia Military Institute on November 8, 1924. Legend has it that during that game, three scoreless quarters plagued both teams. During the fourth quarter, field goal kicker, Bunn Hackney rubbed the head of the ram for good luck and kicked the winning 30 yard field goal.

The Ohio State Buckeyes. A team in which needs no introduction considering the history of both football and basketball programs. Ohio State

selected the buckeye after much debate during the 1960s. College students, Ray Bourhis and Sally Huber decided the school needed a mascot in 1965. At this time, it was popular for mascots to be generally animals that were brought into the arena or stadium. A buck deer was considered at one point until they realized the control of such might prove impossible. The buckeye, Ohio's state tree, was then selected and students made a paper-mache chocolate worn over the head and torso with the legs sticking out. As you can imagine, the mascot costume did not last long and was soon replaced by a fiberglass shell. Brutus the Buckeye was selected by 21 year old student, Kerry Reed, as the name of the mascot after a "Name the Buckeye" contest on November 21, 1965.

And finally, the Jayhawks of the University of Kansas. The term "Jayhawk" can be coined around 1848. The name combines two birds – the blue jay (a noisy, quarrelsome bird known to rob other bird's nests, and the sparrow hawk (a stealthy hunter). As noted in the research, the message here is for one not to turn their backs on this bird. During the 1850s up to the onset of the Civil War, the Kansas territory was filled with such Jayhawks. The area was a battle ground between those wanting a state where slavery would be legal and those committed to a Free State. Each faction looted, sacked, rustled cattle, stole horses, and otherwise attacked

each other's settlement. For a time, both sides of vigilantes were known as Jayhawkers. However, the name mostly applied to the free staters.

Lawrence, Kansas, where the University of Kansas, was founded was considered to be a free state stronghold. During the football season of 1886, the bird appeared in the infamous cheer of the "Rock Chalk" chant. Debate has surfaced for years as to how one exactly draws a Jayhawk. In fact the design has changed six times since cartoonist student, Henry Maloy drew the first image in 1912.

I do apologize at this point if your sports team has not been mentioned. This paper could be submitted in several volumes regarding the research of sports teams and their mascot. It goes on and on. However, before I sign off this evening and step down from the podium, I must mention some of the weirdest designs and decisions for mascots that I never knew existed. For instance, Mary Baldwin College, a women's liberal arts college located in Staunton, Virginia, has the coined mascot of Gladys the Fighting Squirrel. A squirrel? Legend has it that since Mary Baldwin co-founded the school they decided to honor a squirrel that was part of her family crest. I get paying tribute to the schools benefactor but seriously naming the squirrel Gladys sounds like an old squirrel with white hair sitting

in a rocking chair reading a book to five year olds. And so it goes, I guess if it ain't broke, don't fix it.

Nonetheless, schools have proven to choose weirder and more bizarre representations of their schools and athletic teams. Seemingly, some colleges pride themselves on the oddity of their school mascots and play off the idea by wearing school apparel that have the mascot placed front and center. At the University of California, Santa Cruz, the students rally behind such a mascot known as Sammy the Slug, a bright yellow banana slug. Typical to California, the banana slug sounds just like its name sake. It is 10 inches long and hangs out in woods, nasty in nature. When the school joined the NCAA in 1980, the chancellor wanted the mascot to be a sea lion, but the student body rebelled. This caused a five-year battle over which mascot to use. Obviously, humor prevailed and the Banana Slugs became the official mascot. Just as in this case, other schools have chosen to be humorous in their selection. Mississippi Delta State University is known as the Fighting Okra, and the University of North Carolina's School of the Arts is the Fighting Pickles. I suppose by adding the word "fighting" to the prefix of their mascot makes it okay. As you can hear, vegetables have also been popular selections as one of the best, in my opinion is Artie the Artichoke, the infamous mascot from Scottsdale Community College in

Arizona. At first, he looked like an artichoke with legs, but over the years a more masculine, herculean artichoke was born. This mascot idea was conceived in the 1970s as part of a student rebellion against an administration that some thought was spending way too much money on athletics. To the administrations surprise, the students fought back and held an election to which Artie the Artichoke was selected and proved once again that humor sometimes cannot be defeated.

And last, but certainly not least, is the most unprecedented, weird, bizarre, crazy idea for a mascot in the annals of mascot history. The Rhode Island School of Design by name obviously focuses on art and design rather than athletics so it's no surprise that their athletic teams do not take things seriously. Students of the school were sold on the idea that the school's mascot would be named either "Farts" or "Whoopee" in early discussions. However, the school is most known for its hockey team and the birth of the new "official" mascot was born in 2001 when the mascot was introduced looking more like a Halloween costume. Scrotie, as he is now known, is a giant replicated scrotum that skates on ice to support the hockey team. That being said, the hockey team at the school is called the "Nads". Hockey attire is sold at games and at the college bookstore with the slogan, "Go Nads". Each team organized since has developed an idea around Scrotie in which

the basketball team is now known as the “Balls”. Their slogan, “When the heat is on, the balls stick together”. The cheerleaders even go by the name “The Jockstraps” since they support the “Balls”. How these names passed through university administration will forever be a mystery. However, they have become part of a school tradition.

In conclusion, the ambition of being a mascot will forever run through the veins of my body despite how each school received the selection of such. The idea of me putting on the uniform of a wildcat, artichoke, pickle, or even a scrotum to display my loyalty to a team in which I am dedicated to will always be embedded in the back of my mind. Stepping outside of the box at times is what we all need to push through the stress in our lives and go back to that inner child that we all have inside of us. True, you might find other ways to display yours by not having to put on such a costume and dancing around some arena. But, who knows, you might visit a Hopkinsville High athletic event in the near future and see the mascot acting an idiot during a game. At that point, you might wonder, is that Chris Gilkey in that suit? Identity concealed, you will never know. Human nature combined with humor at times is an amusing concept at times to sit back and watch. Seeing exactly how things unfold and repeating the story is the best part of history.