Purdue Pete to Reveal Makeover

Life’s been a whirlwind for Purdue Pete since the 1940 advertising logo first took human form in 1956. The always-silent character has lost his head in public, rallied fans at bowl games, helped out with a marriage proposal, broken his collar bone, and filmed an ESPN commercial.

The unofficial athletics mascot — the Boilermaker Special train holds the official title — has sported various looks over the years, too, from bug eyes to square ears and grins to scowls. One constant: his over-sized head.

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1940 logo came to life

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Mrs. John Kelmier from Brumbaugh’s hometown, Union City, Indiana, made the head. Anne Ream (CS’57) and graduate student Ora Russell sewed the costume. John Knot (LA’59), the third Purdue Pete, from spring 1958 to spring 1959, says the head weighed 56 pounds. He lost it when he tackled Bucky Badger after the Wisconsin mascot stole his hammer. “I tackled him in the end zone, and the head fell off and rolled near the goal post,” the retired radiologist recalls.

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from 1976 to 1978 and now owns Michigan Veterinary Supply Co. in Vermilionville, Michigan. Jackson remembers narrowly escaping Bloomington fans who tried to steal Pete's 47-pound head off his shoulders. "Fortunately, we were aided by IU's police."

Pete, a legend

At the dawn of a new decade in 1980, the Pete logo now 40 and the human mascot nearly 25, it was time for a grownup look. Out swept the scowling Pete with thick, furrowed eyebrows. The 10-pound head was a welcome lighter weight. A fiercer logo had been created five years earlier by Keith Butt, art director in the Telecommunications Center, and fans clamored for a tougher mascot, too. A 1979 athletics memo reads, "The head projects an image of a stupid, top-heavy, wooden mascot," and recommends, "The face should look, if not highly intelligent, not like the village idiot."

Butz collaborated with Donald Carter, a designer in the office of publications, on a fierce look, a September 18, 1980, Lafayette Leader article reported. Pete still sported the grease-protecting hat, but the sweater was replaced by a jersey. Perhaps that mean image helped Purdue... designs, says Josh Rutherford (CFS'98), Pete from 1995 to 1998 and now owner of six downtown Chicago restaurants.

New era begins

Now, it's time for a new look, say athletics, marketing and media, and branding and advertising representatives. "Purdue Pete has undergone numerous changes in his history, so we are exploring how we can improve the mascot's look," Burke says. Also, at $2,600 each, heads are pricey, and each student needs a custom-fitted one. Some children are frightened by Purdue Pete. And, says Bozetti Roy, director of branding and advertising, "Pete has a poor retail presence right now. People don't buy him."

Butz spearheaded research that included surveys at athletic and alumni events, focus groups, a look at other mascots, and a review of how other characters, such as Mickey Mouse and Bugs Bunny, have evolved.

Overall, she reports, designers found Pete cartoon-y and mean. "Our goal is to make Purdue Pete more friendly," Roy says, and to communicate strength, determination, and heroism. And the full-body costume will allow anyone to play Pete. "We'll characterize Pete as heroic and approachable rather than childish and scary," says Terri Thompson, vice president of marketing and media.

Some Boilermakers welcome the change, others resist. A Facebook page, Save Purdue Pete (again), has nearly 5,000 members. One asks, "What's next, changing the Boilermaker Special to an SUV?"

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Freshman Matt Altepeter, born in Boilermaker country after today's look debuted, says, "I don't think it will be that big a deal. It will still be Purdue Pete. But it would be odd if they made him a big furry thing."

Knote, who wore the first design, says, "I hope the next Pete visage is one of pleasantry and strength." Other former Pete designers say it's "a blue collar everyday fan of Purdue," King, "Fearless and determined, but not mean or angry"; and Jackson, "powerful, inspiring, and traditional."

former Pete Sean O'Connor (LA02), says, "I'd like to see a more modern costume used, something like Nebraska University of Virginia, or Vanderbilt's. They seem to have made the transition from fiberglass heads on human bodies to full costumes."

His favorite memory: making a backward hoop shot during halftime at the 75th anniversary of Purdue Basketball. He also broke his collarbone when fans piled on during a bit of horse-play with Bucky Badger.

In 2006, the idea of a soft-sculpture Pete was floated but dropped.

So far, 73 male Purdue students have played Pete, some for multiple years. Stinus as Pete have been popular with students in Alpha Gamma Rho; the ag fraternity boasts about 20 brothers chosen to be Pete.

During Pete's first 22 years, one student covered all appearances. From 1978 to spring 1990, two students shared duties, then three a year did until 1993. Since then, three or four students have served each year.

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On the Road

Vernon Pratt II (EDU'07) loved traveling to Hawaii with the 2006 football team. "I had Thanksgiving dinner with the team, spent a few days in Hawaii, and got to cheer the team on as Pete from the field."

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