

Chronicles of Brunonia

Butch Bruno: The Live Bear Mascot

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For a period of sixty years from 1906-1966 Brown University routinely had a live bear as a mascot that would make appearances at football games. As you can imagine, this was quite a sight and during those sixty years a good deal of mishaps and adventures on campus involved the bear. This article is a humorous look at Brown's history of live bear mascots.

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On September 30, 2004, Ian Cropp B'05 wrote a groundbreaking editorial for the *Brown Daily Herald*. In it, he called for the reestablishment of a live bear mascot at Brown University. Cropp saw the poor attendance of athletic events at Brown, and the general lack of enthusiasm and excitement among students, and realized what was missing: the element of danger and surprise that having a live bear at sporting events provides.

Cropp wrote: “With bad weather and fan apathy, Brown sports have been poorly attended this year. I do not want to disparage our current mascot, but he or she does not attract many people to games on his own. The RISD Nads hockey team mascot, Scrotie — a six-foot-tall male member with accompanying gonads — brings more people to the game than the actual event.”

After reading Cropp’s visionary article, one can imagine the early afternoon football game. Brown has the lead early but is starting to falter. The short grass is slick with sweat and dew. It’s third down and a crucial play. Timeout. From the sidelines, the fans begin to cheer. The loud roar of hands and shouted encouragement is drowned out for one perfect moment by the vicious growl of Bruno, the bear. The opposing team looks over in horror. There is a live bear on the sidelines. A half-ton of vicious man-eating machine. And in that one instant, Brown is no longer a liberal Ivy-league division I-AA football team...We’re the team with a bear. And that team is fucking awesome.

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Many years ago, Theodore Francis Green felt Cropp’s same need for a strong mascot on campus. Green placed the head of a real Brown bear above the arch in the trophy room of Rockefeller Hall (which would later become Faunce

House). On January 20, 1904 when the building was opened, the Brown University Bear was officially born. T.F. Green said that he chose the bear as the symbol for Brown because “while it may be somewhat unsociable and uncouth, it is good natured and clean. While courageous and ready to fight, it does not look for trouble for its own sake, nor is it bloodthirsty. It is not one of a herd, but acts independently. It is intelligent and capable of being educated (if caught young enough!) It is a good swimmer and a good digger, like an athlete who makes Phi Beta Kappa. Furthermore its color is brown; and its name is Brown.”

Green’s bear caught on and the next fall the Brown celebration committee decided to get a mascot for the much-anticipated Brown-Dartmouth football game. After a debacle a few years earlier when the committee tried to introduce the Brown Burro (a shy and awkward relative of the donkey), the committee decided to get a real, live bear. W. Douglas Swaffield B1906 rented “Dinks” from Roger Williams Park.

November 27, 1905 rolled around and excitement was high on campus. Although Brown had suffered losses to Dartmouth in the last four consecutive years, including one humiliating 62-point shutout two years earlier, Brown’s football squad looked to have a fighting chance. The average weights of the two teams, which had in past years been heavily in Dartmouth’s favor, were within fractions of a pound. Brown’s captain, G.A. Russ was playing his fourth year of Brown football and he was considered one of the greatest defensive ends in the country. Dartmouth’s captain, N.F. MacGregor, with his large soft forehead and receding hairline looked no match to Russ’ stern brow and angular features. Still, the teams had remarkably similar records and styles of play. The *Brown Daily*

Herald reported that the Brown-Dartmouth match would be “one of the hardest fought contests in the history of their football relations.”

There’s a reason Brown students wanted a bear at their most important game of the year. A bear symbolizes strength, power and courage. As Ian Cropp said, “a bear is pure intimidation.” Well...that should probably be followed by a qualifier. A bear is pure intimidation *unless* that bear is Dinks.

Early that November morning, Swaffield went to the zoo to get Dinks and he refused to leave his cage. This was no ferocious beast, no valiant mascot. This was a big lazy bear that wouldn’t get up from the corner of his cage. Luckily, Dinks’ mate, Helen, was ready to step up and wear the bear pants in their relationship.

Helen entered enemy territory, Hampden Park, and received a standing ovation. This was a mascot. This was no ridiculous half-donkey. This was Helen and Helen was a beast. The Brown men in attendance thought it was a good sign when the Dartmouth team came out onto the field and Helen “squinted at them out of the corner of her left eye, growled ominously and raised a ready paw to strike the first near-redskin to come within radius of her reach.” Despite Helen’s presence on the field and readiness to maul Native Americans, Brown suffered another in a series of disappointing losses to Dartmouth. The tough loss didn’t stop the tradition from being adopted, however, and within a few years, bears became a staple at Brown football games.

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Each bear lived in a cage beneath the stadium and, when on the road, was often housed in local jails. After Helen came a long succession of Brunos. Bruno

II was the first in the new football stadium and served for a remarkable seven seasons before retiring after the 1928 Thanksgiving day game. During his time at Brown, Bruno II also had the distinction of being the only live bear to have a theatrical career, starring in a 1922 production of “Three Live Ghosts,” in a role which originally called for a lamb. Bruno III was a disaster, first getting shockingly fat and then getting stage struck at an away game and breaking loose to hide in a tree. The spectacle of Bruno III’s escape was nothing, however, compared to the shock that Bruno V’s death caused.

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It was a typical New England day in December 1939; cold with a wind that brings a red flush to your cheeks within minutes. Students tightened their scarves around their necks and shuddered under their thick brown sweaters emblazoned with the bold white “B.” The football game had just begun and Bruno V was brought out, a nearly full-grown bear, making his chains clink as they pulled taut in his handlers’ gloves. Bruno V was a particularly well-loved mascot, he had served for an unusually long time and had that perfect mix of ferocity and docility that students adored.

Almost as soon as Bruno V got onto the field, it was clear something was wrong. You can imagine the collective gasp, the sharp intake of air, as Bruno stumbled and fell to the ground. You can almost hear the stunned silence as the game stops, players and fans alike turning in disbelief to watch Bruno, lying on the ground, dead.

What a humiliation, what a cruel joke for Bruno to be taken down by as trivial a disorder as indigestion. The students couldn’t believe it. The next day a

funeral was held. Hundreds of students attended, Brown men in their finest black suits and Pembroke women in calf-length skirts and cozy sweaters. The flag was flown at half-mast as the crowd assembled on middle campus to remember their beloved bear. It's hard to imagine now, the solemnity and seriousness that accompanied the funeral. This was a bear that would be remembered.

After the ceremony, students carried Bruno's body to Aldrich field, across from the football field where Bruno had rallied the crowds. They buried Bruno V there and his body lies there to this day, resting in an unmarked grave.

A long series of Brunos followed including Bruno VIII who faced off against the University of Rhode Island Ram at the annual grudge match in 1947 and was only barely able to be held back from feasting on him. In fact, perhaps out of jealousy at their ram's obvious inferiority to Bruno, it became somewhat of a notorious tradition for URI students to try to kidnap the bears.

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You couldn't say that the Butterfield Hall boys from URI were expert animal handlers. You couldn't say they had a very good plan. But somehow they managed, on a dark morning in 1953, to kidnap Butch Bruno the Fourteenth.

The "bear rustlers" sawed through four locks to get to Bruno's den underneath the football stands. They set off alarms and had Elmgrove Avenue reverberating with the sound of chains and the screech of cut metal. They coaxed Bruno out with South County wild honey, carrots, bread and milk, a mixture that all Brown University Bears since the very first, Helen, had been treated to on special occasions. By the time the police and campus security arrived, Butch Bruno XIV was gone.

The Butterfield Hall boys were lucky. Butch Bruno XIV was a gentle bear. The Brown Key Society had paid more than usual to the Chase Wild Animal Farm in Egypt, Massachusetts for a feisty but amiable bear. A few years earlier some URI boys attempting the same stunt, had a far less satisfying accomplishment when they kidnapped Bruno the Tenth.

Those boys also got Bruno out of his cage and into their car but once there, Bruno X, displayed the kind of angry frustration that's less than endearing in a bear. Bruno threw himself about wildly, scratching faces, tearing clothes, and destroying the upholstery of the car. As the newspapers reported, the URI boys "unstole that bear very quickly." They were escorted to Roger Williams Zoo by several deans and state troopers, the five URI boys riding cramped in the front seat while Bruno lounged comfortably in the back.

Lucky for the Butterfield Hall boys then that they had chosen friendly Bruno the XIV, possibly the nicest mascot Brown had had since Bruno II, "Cuddles." The Butterfield Hall boys made it back to Kingston with their prize and called Brown, ready to gloat.

"We have the bear," the boy said in a deep voice that wavered between the adrenal excitement of stealing a bear and the desire to seem nonchalantly intimidating. "We will return it as soon as we are through with it. Tell Brown not to worry."

Another thing you couldn't say about the Butterfield Hall boys was that they were particularly bright. Halfway through the prototypical post-kidnapping suspenseful phone call, the Brown student asked, "Why did you steal the bear the

day before URI's game against New Hampshire? URI doesn't play Brown until next week."

The surprise was evident in the Butterfield Hall boy's voice. He hadn't even thought that it would be better to steal the bear right before the big game. He murmured something which the Sunday Journal reported as "an oblique response" about an upcoming alumni weekend and hung up the phone.

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After Bruno XIV was returned safely, the history of the bears returned to normal. They came out at football games, gave a growl or two and were led back into their cages. As animal rights became a bigger issue and students started to view the thick chains around Bruno's neck as more cruel than cute, the bears came out less and less.

In 1966, it had been four years since a live bear had made an appearance at a Brown football. Mrs. Walter O'Keefe of Brook St. made a valiant effort to restart the tradition, donating a cub from Delaware that made an appearance at a game against Penn. However, the times had changed and it was clear from the audience's mixed reaction to the chained cub that in the future, the only enormous mammals on the field would be in uniform. President Keeney made it official, declaring that there would no longer be live bears on campus.

Some students must have felt a palpable sense of loss. There's a void that a 500 pound bear leaves that can't be filled by a scrawny sophomore in a cheap costume. The modern Bruno prances, mute, waving his arms and wiggling his short tail. Weighing in at under far less than 500 pounds and lacking any sharp teeth or claws, the Brown bear no longer inspires fear.

Then again, Brown has made a name for itself as a school that practically worships political correctness and a wild animal struggling against its chains while drunk students chant might seem cruelly archaic. Post-1969 Brown really couldn't accept a live bear and Brown's not the only school that's had to change. Dartmouth's Indian has become a pine tree and you don't really need a live bear to fight a pine tree. But while a live bear may not have a place on Brown's campus today, there's still room for dreamers like Ian Cropp because after all, what's more egalitarian than a bear? It doesn't matter if you're gay or straight, man, woman or transsexual, black, white, asian, bi-racial...a bear will eat you. And never look back.

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