



Delusional Optimism

Jack Allen
Sports Editor

Mardi Gras mascots

This time every year, the streets of South Louisiana, my home state, are filled with parade floats, beads and a terrifying, seven-foot-tall half-dressed plastic baby.

Yes. It's as terrifying as it seems.

Between the Catholic holidays of Epiphany and Ash Wednesday, the New Orleans Pelicans release havoc upon the streets of the Big Easy by unveiling their seasonal mascot The King Cake Baby (KCB) as an homage to the seasonal pastry associated with Mardi Gras.

KCB was first introduced to the Pelicans faithful in 2014 but did not come into the national spotlight until the 2017 NBA All-Star Game in New Orleans. Over All-Star Weekend, he appeared on several ESPN shows and scared several high-profile NBA athletes.

During its seasonal reign, KCB often goes to the homes of season ticket holders to deliver King Cake and show the franchise's support. More often than not though, the ticket holders respond with fear more than gratitude. The mascot's large baby blues are the fuel of nightmares.

Gaudy and unusual mascots are not new to the world of sports. In the 1940s, the University of Nebraska introduced its first mascot, Corn Cob, which was simply a person dressed in green and wearing a large corn cob on his head. In 1980, Syracuse unveiled Otto the Orange, an androgynous cartoon orange.

While most mascots are designed to intimidate opponents or promote some element of a team's local culture, others are ambiguous and hold no bearing on the team's location or culture.

As a result, some of these sports symbols can be weird, funny or flat-out creepy.

These are some of the weirdest and creepiest mascots to ever grace the world of sports:

1) Gritty: Philadelphia Flyers

Unveiled this season, Gritty has taken the world by storm. It is unclear what the orange-haired beast is exactly, but his unblinking yellow googly-eyes made him destined to become an internet sensation. Gritty has been seen eating snow from a Zamboni, streaking across the stadium and shooting Flyers promoters with a Tshirt cannon. His identity may be questioned, but the laughter he causes is undeniable.

2) Weezy the Weevil: University of Arkansas – Monticello (UAM)

Harding's neighbor to the south has one of the most unusual mascots in all of college sports. UAM introduced the mascot in 1925, naming it after a cotton-eating beetle that had infiltrated southern crops. The physical mascot is a green beetle with a long, floppy nose, two antennae and a subtle toothy smile. The women's teams at UAM share a different name: the cotton blossoms.

3) The Stanford Tree: Stanford University

Galloping across the field during halftime alongside the Stanford Marching Band, the Stanford tree is a hipster treasure. A loose conglomeration of felt leaves and googly eyes, the dancing tree is an enigma in the mascot world. Why is it wearing a hat? Why does it have eyelashes? The world may never know.

4) Big Red: Western Kentucky University (WKU)

When Big Red opens his mouth, it looks as though a portal to a new dimension has been opened. It is just that big. Big Red was one of the first mascots to ever appear in a "This is SportsCenter" commercial. Described by WKU as a "large, fuzzy red blob," Big Red is as lovable as he is massive.

5) Gunnersaurus: Arsenal F.C.

Even across the pond in London, weird and wacky mascots roam the pitch. Gunnersaurus was an idea submitted by an 11-year-old and selected as part of a write-in competition. The eight-foot-tall dinosaur bobs around North London looking like Barney's bewildered brother. The mascot has nothing to do with the team's official mascot, a cannon, although it might be nice to see Gunnersaurus shot out of one.

As weird and terrifying as these mascots are, perhaps the most terrifying mascot can be found here at Harding. There are few things as frightening as a mascot whose name is based in an old style of grammar. Even KCB would be scared to see that.

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FOR THE LOVE OF THE GAME

Photo by EMILY GRIFFIN

Harding students run on treadmills in the Ganus Activities Center on Feb. 27. According to Harding sports psychology professor Brian Cox, exercise is important to physical health, but if taken too far, it can cause negative consequences.

A look into the effects of exercise addiction on Harding students

JACK ALLEN
sports editor

In high school, senior pitcher Eric Hansen trained for baseball 365 days a year. Some nights, he would stay at his school until 11 p.m. to finetune his game. After being home only a few hours to sleep, he would head back to school for 4 a.m. workouts. Despite multiple injuries and long nights, Hansen's love for the game has not wavered. For some athletes and Harding students, however, this passion for exercise can turn from healthy competition into an unhealthy addiction.

Identifying Exercise Addiction

In 2013, the American Psychiatric Association took the step to include behavioral addictions as mental disorders in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). Although the DSM did not go so far as to list different types of non-substance addictions, it did lay the groundwork for ways to identify behavioral addictions in individuals using the same criteria for substance dependence.

According to the DSM, substance abuse can be identified by determining if an individual shows signs of withdrawal, lack of control, a desire to reach a buzz or sense of accomplishment, inability to stick to a routine, an increase in time spent exercising, reduction in other activities and continuance despite pain. Using the same criteria, researchers hope they can also identify exercise addiction in individuals.

Brian Cox, professor of sports psychology, said it is particularly hard to define exercise addiction because it has not been officially recognized as a disorder.

"The definition is basically when exercise has a negative impact," Cox said.

Cox said exercise addiction is often associated with other disorders like anorexia and bulimia because they all typically deal with people who struggle with personal body image.

Exercise and eating disorders can both

be unhealthy ways to deal with that struggle.

"Because exercise is beneficial, it is a matter of when it becomes maladaptive that we start seeing it," Cox said.

Once identified, an individual struggling with exercise addiction will often be referred to a counselor who can prescribe methods for dealing with the addiction and other potentially associated disorders.

Effects of exercise addiction in students

One of the major effects Cox said students struggling with exercise addiction experience is decreased social activity.

"Some of the red flags include when it starts to affect relationships," Cox said. "So, you would rather exercise than be with your friends or do things with your significant other."

According to Cox, people struggling with exercise addiction often exercise alone multiple times a day. They also tend to miss out on other significant life experiences because they are exercising.

Exercise addicts are also at an increased risk for injury or harm because they continue to exercise even when they experience pain. By constantly adding to their workload, they can put themselves in situations where their bodies are pushed beyond their physical capacities. This can result in further injury or pain.

Differentiating athletes from addicts

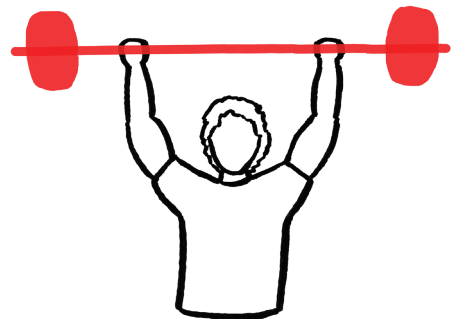
When considering the average college athlete, it can be easy to see similarities between their characteristics and the listed identifying traits of exercise addiction. For example, athletes often spend many hours preparing for, engaging in and recovering from exercise. They also often see a decrease in activities outside of sports and can struggle to keep up with the routine of school.

Athletes may not struggle with exercise addiction, even though they may exhibit many characteristics of it.

In high school, baseball was Hansen's sole passion. He played all 12 months of the year, often missing weeks of class to play in tournaments throughout the country. As a catcher, his body took a beating from the day-to-day grind, but he remained injury-free until his junior year.

Hansen tore his hip flexor his junior year, broke his hand his senior year and then slipped a disk in his back his sophomore year of college at the University of Indiana.

Each time, Hansen tried to come back



stronger, fighting through injuries to get back on the field. He transferred to Harding after his sophomore year.

"My trainer used to joke with me," Hansen said. "He would ask if I was fine, and we would joke that my 'fine' is not like everyone else's 'fine.'"

His injuries left him sidelined for months at a time. During long periods away from the game, athletes are more likely to exhibit the effects of exercise addiction.

"They start experiencing irritability," Cox said. "It can affect their sleep patterns ... That doesn't prove they have an addiction, but it does show they thrive on exercise."

According to Cox, when athletes are injured, they can suffer from Sudden Exercise Abstinence Syndrome (SEAS). SEAS occurs because athletes are immediately removed from their normal, day-to-day activity. The sudden change is too much for their bodies to adjust, causing them to struggle.

Marilyn Freimuth, a leading researcher on the subject of exercise addiction, breaks down exercise into four phases: recreational, at-risk, problematic and addiction.

At the heart of her research, Freimuth determined the distinguishing factor between recreational and at-risk exercise is motivation.

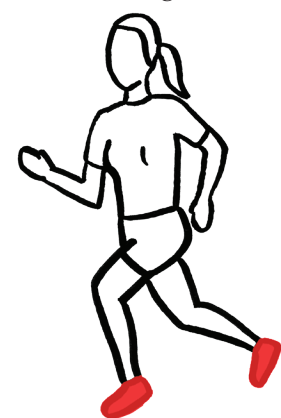
"An addiction is more likely when the primary motivation is not enjoyment from the activity, but rather relief from stress or other types of dysphoria or to improve self-esteem," Freimuth said.

Hansen said his motivation to recover every time he was injured was simple; he did it for the love of the game. He plans to one day become a coach and dedicate his life to the sport of baseball.

Athletes are distinguished from addicts by their enjoyment of their sport. It is only when the sport becomes "life's main organizing principle" that athletes encroach on addiction.

Students who believe they struggle with exercise addiction can seek help from the Harding Counseling Center.

Illustrations by JOHN DAVID STEWART



PLAYERS ONLY

Tyler Moore
Freshman Forward

Pain as a mental game

Injuries are not foreign to me. All four years playing high school basketball, I had had to sit out at least one month during each season because of some type of minor physical obstacle. It started with a broken wrist, then I got an avulsion fracture on my hip, then a fractured foot, and finally I was let off easy my senior year after I just had a minor finger injury.

So, discomfort and I know each other pretty well. However, this is the first time I've been able to play through an injury,

and I like that much better. It is not the fact that I can still do what I love on a daily basis, but the psychological gain I've been awarded. Plus, when I am back to 100 percent, I will be able to do two times as much as before. My opinion on pain is that it can be good for you. You have to change your perspective and quit focusing on how you feel. Place your focal point on the moment the pain will finally stop. What will I gain from it and what has it taught me?

Pain is not only physical; pain can also be spiritual and emotional. There are lessons to be learned from all forms. That is why Romans 8:18 sums it up best, "The pain that you have been feeling, cannot compare to the joy that is coming." The joy is the life-lessons that are being instilled in you. Therefore, whenever you are feeling pain of any kind, remember this: The pain does not last long, but the lessons learned from it will be with you forever.

"Players Only" is a special column written by Harding athletes. In this week's issue: Bisons freshman forward Tyler Moore discusses how he has dealt with injuries during his basketball career.