

# IU athlete became early Tarzan

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"Captain Pierce of the Phi Delta startled the crowd with three baskets from the middle of the floor."

Pierce's classmates at IU included some persons whose names would later become well-known in Bloomington — Marion C. Rogers, Robert Woolery, Donald A. Rogers, Ruth Alexander, Everett Dean, Ed Von Tress, Merle Gilstrap, Lee Norvelle and Luther Ferguson. At that time had Pierce attempted to write a scenario for the rest of his life, it could not possibly have included acting in the movies. But act he did, and after leaving IU with a bachelor's degree in economics, his next appearance in Bloomington was on the screen at the Indiana Theater.

**AFTER GRADUATION** Pierce headed west to California and landed a job as a coach at Glendale High School, then on the outskirts of Los Angeles. Acting in the movies, he was later to recall, was the farthest thing from his mind. He was, instead, seriously considering going to law school.

In the summer of 1926, his blind date for an El Caballero Country Club swimming party was a girl by the name of Joan Burroughs. Trimmed down from his IU entrance weight to 190 pounds, he was a healthy looking specimen.

Joan's father — Edgar Rice Burroughs — certainly thought so. As the author of the Tarzan novels, Burroughs had been involved in translating his books into the relatively new medium, silent movies. Two earlier ventures starring Elmo Lincoln, a Hoosier from Rochester, had not pleased the author.

Years later in an article for *Screen Play* magazine, Burroughs wrote that it took some tall talking to get Pierce to go to the Film Booking Offices (FBO) to make a screen test. Burroughs confided in a friend, "... he (Pierce) came nearer approaching my visualization of Tarzan of the Apes than any man I had ever seen. If he can only act, I believe that he is a distinct find..."

"**TARZAN and the Golden Lion**," a saga about slave trading and starring both Pierce and Burroughs' daughter, Joan, was filmed in 1926. The film was to be distributed by FBO, one of whose officers was Joseph P. Kennedy, father of John F., Robert and Ted.

One of Pierce's recollections about the first day of filming was that he could not run barefoot through the brush without pain. He remarked that his painful yelps were the origin of the famous Tarzan jungle call. Thereafter, his tender feet were protected by flesh-colored tennis shoes. Another problem was a barely-

trained and temperamental lion named Numa. Tarzan, Pierce ran ahead of the lion, who was induced to follow a trail of fresh chicken blood. The lion's enthusiasm made Pierce nervous, but he had few opportunities to look behind him, because he was leaping over rocks and logs.

Unfortunately, Burroughs was disappointed in the film, and so was everyone else. In 1927, the author wrote to his brother, "... don't be afraid of hurting my feelings about the picture, which I think is rotten ... Poor direction and 'rather stupid cutting' were the culprits, he reflected later.

"**TARZAN and the Golden Lion**" arrived in Bloomington on May 12, 1927, as part of a double feature for a two-day engagement. Admission prices at the Indiana Theater were 10 and 30 cents.

The only notice taken by the two local daily newspapers of Pierce's IU connection appeared in the ads, themselves, which read, "Babe Pierce, Former Indiana All-American Star Center."

The following year Pierce and Joan Burroughs were married. He appeared in only a few more movies and acted in a Tarzan radio series, but for all intents and purposes, his acting career was over.