Behind the Mask

Essay 3 | English 212s | December 7, 2012

“When I’m in the suit, everyone loves me. When I’m not...well, that’s not the case.” He sat down in front of me and gave a wry smile. He was, without his suit, completely normal and unassuming, just another face in a campus full of high-achieving students. Little seemed to distinguish him from his peers. He played IM basketball, had an overloaded schedule, and did research on the side. You would often find him at the Loop with a brownie sundae, indulging in his guilty pleasure after a long day of studying.

When he slipped on the suit and walked into Cameron Indoor Stadium, however, it became clear that he was no typical Duke Student. Once the mask came on, once the layers of “black muscle suit, blue pants, the blue shirt that goes over the muscles, the fire-fighting hood to cover the neck, the long socks, the jersey shorts, the jersey top, the gloves, the helmet, the cape” were put on, he transformed into someone completely different—a symbol, an icon—the Duke Blue Devil.

The Blue Devil mascot is ubiquitous at football and basketball games, and has become inextricably associated with Duke Athletics. He is the faceless representative of Duke, a confident-bordering-on-arrogant figure with a larger-than-life personality and a touch of Southern gentleman thrown in the mix. At any major Duke game, the mascot is always present and yet, who is the person behind the mask?

The answer actually differs from game to game. There are usually at least three different students who take turns putting on the cape of the Blue Devil at any time. The three often negotiate over the opportunity to go to certain desirable games, trading one game for the other. When the Duke-Stanford game was at stake, one of the mascots suggested doing a coin toss while another offered to give up his right to do any other game.

Who are these anonymous students? The one I interviewed was a senior who initially tried out during his junior year. The other Blue Devils, both current and past, were also traditionally upperclassmen, with a few exceptions. One of the past Blue Devils was actually a law school student and his ability to do backflips made him stand out. All of them, however, had in common their enthusiasm for Duke athletics, ability to pump up a crowd, and a commitment to the prestige and responsibility of the position.

The process of becoming the Blue Devil is extremely selective—only those who are nominated by someone close to the athletics department even hear about the opportunity. When they were searching for new mascots the previous year, 12 people were initially nominated during the fall semester. Over
the course of the year, they gradually narrowed the candidates down to 8, then 4, until finally only 3
were left at the end of the year. Having such an extended audition period served a double purpose. It
provided the athletics department with more time to evaluate the candidates and pick the best mascots.
In addition, having so many additional mascots eager to prove their qualification for the position meant
that Duke didn’t have to worry about finding people to mascot all of the women’s basketball games.

As for this particular mascot’s motivation for trying out, it was unconventional, to say the least. In
response to my question about why he wanted to become the Blue Devil, he laughed and said, “I chose
to do it initially for selfish reasons…I actually had a crush on one of the cheerleaders.” When he was first
nominated, he was unsure about whether or not he really wanted to do it, but seeing one of the
sophomore cheerleaders during his tryouts quickly changed his mind. “I thought I would be able to
spend more time with her and could get to know her better if I was the mascot.”

Ironically, although he had “never worked so hard for a girl in his life,” he never really got to know her.
Rather, his motivation to be the mascot changed to the “right reasons”—for the fans, the kids, and the
community—and good thing it did. Being the mascot was a rather thankless task, to say the least. It
involved long hours, exhausting work, and on top of everything else, the pressure of having to stay
anonymous and protect the identity of the Blue Devil. With a sigh, he admitted that “at times, I kind of
wish that people knew so I would get credit for doing it.”

To make things even more difficult, living up to the image of the Blue Devil was hard work. “One of the
things they taught us during training was to make sure that we were always moving. Even when we
were standing still, we had to be swaying, doing something. It’s constantly exerting effort to be in the
suit because it’s hard to breathe and it’s so hot inside under all the layers.” From giving kids high-fives or
engaging the student section to pump them up for the game, to running across the court to entertain
the crowds during half-time, the mascot often got more of a workout than some of the players.

“It’s never like you’re rewarded for working hard—the more you give, the more they want from you.
Once you start getting all excited and take pictures, it starts an endless line of people who want pictures.”
Each event takes a toll. “I feel exhausted afterwards.” The people who attend the games get to enjoy the
environment and have fun, but the mascot is constantly running around, working nonstop to keep the
energy going. Even after the game ends, the mascot responsibilities don’t end. “You still have to get the
suit, take it back, clean it, go take a shower, and it’s kind of demoralizing because you’re done and you
think, man I just did all that work and I didn’t even get credit for it.” He compared basketball games to
“a party that everyone can enjoy, but you have to work during and afterwards, after it’s all said and done, no one will ever give you credit for it.”

The suit imposed many limitations upon those who were given the privilege of wearing it. For one, the mascots were not allowed to talk while inside the suit to avoid giving away their identity. Anonymity was of the upmost importance and nobody was allowed to know who was actually behind the mask. Behavior while inside the suit was also strictly controlled. When one mascot chose to publicly wear a sign telling people to vote against Amendment One while in the Blue Devil suit, he was severely reprimanded. The Blue Devil was a representative of Duke University, and as such, was not allowed to show any biases or take any stances on controversial issues. Behind the enthusiasm and positive energy of the Blue Devil’s image, there were always serious reminders that being the mascot was a job and a privilege, not something that could be taken lightly. “It all kind of boils down to one thesis where they ask a lot of you—and there’s no room for negotiation or complaints because they know you’re easily disposable.”

Despite the seriousness of the position, at games and events, the Blue Devil is always supposed to be an energetic and upbeat figure. “You have to assume the personality of the mascot and it’s 100% positive, trying to cater to the needs of everyone while me, in real life, I’m way more balanced and neutral.” So how does this discrepancy play out when he is performing? When asked if he smiled underneath the mask while he was high-fiving and taking pictures with fans, he replied, “No. I typically kept a bland facial expression.” It was draining, both physically and mentally for him to have to constantly be moving and coming up with new ideas for how he could entertain the crowds. “I’d be doing goofy things and taking pictures with people but not smiling underneath my mask because I thought of it more as doing a job. I had to take being goofy and spontaneous seriously.”

Even though it was a job, mascots do not get paid for games—and even though many other colleges give their mascots scholarships, Duke does not. Being the Blue Devil is considered an honor and the mascot position is already competitive enough without the need for additional perks to attract more candidates. “Compared to how other ACC schools with much less money treat their mascots, [Duke’s treatment] has room for improvement.” They used to get some supplemental income from doing events outside of Duke, from weddings to birthday parties that requested the Blue Devil, but he often volunteered to do the events, especially kids’ parties, for free. Recently, the mascot supervisors decided that the mascot should no longer get paid for private events. “That money actually goes to the school athletic funds and you don’t get any money at all.”
Even if he did not get much monetary benefit from being the Blue Devil, the position was not completely without its perks. When he was applying for a competitive internship, he felt like the mascot position made him stand out and helped him get an interview. As a key member of the athletics department, he also got free tickets to games, Duke athletic gear, and the opportunity to travel with the team. Walking around campus in the suit would make him feel like he was a celebrity. People would rush up to him to ask for pictures, crowd around to give him high-fives, and hug him and tell him he was awesome.

So did all that attention go to his head? He responded with a much more jaded view—“It’s a false impression that everyone loves you and cares about you, but they don’t—they only care about the mascot himself.” All they saw was the suit, the mask he wore. They loved what he stood for, but that attention did not transfer to the person behind the costume. Having people be so nice to him when he was the mascot actually changed the way he viewed his fellow students in his more everyday experiences. The suit acted as a barrier that removed his sense of self-awareness, “it’s protection from people knowing that it’s you so you can do whatever you want.” While hidden behind the mask, he was able to take on the identity of the “most popular kid on campus.” “There’s a lot of freedom in that you are anonymous and they don’t know who you are and you can be goofy.” People wanted to be around him and actively sought him out when they saw him. Having the suit on made people treat him like he was special, but that illusion quickly faded away once the mask came off. “I felt that when I was outside the suit, protection was not there anymore.”

In the end, being the mascot was both an honor and a burden, an anonymous contribution he made to the school and the community. “It’s definitely an escape from reality and it does kind of feel like a superhero type thing—like Durham is my Gotham.”

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank all of the Duke Blue Devils, especially the one I interviewed, for their dedication and hard work. Your anonymous contributions are appreciated and Duke basketball games wouldn’t be the same without you. I would also like to thank Professor Harris and my writing group for their patient and honest feedback throughout the multiple revisions of this piece. Your suggestions and guidance were invaluable in producing this final version and I am extremely grateful for all of your help this semester.