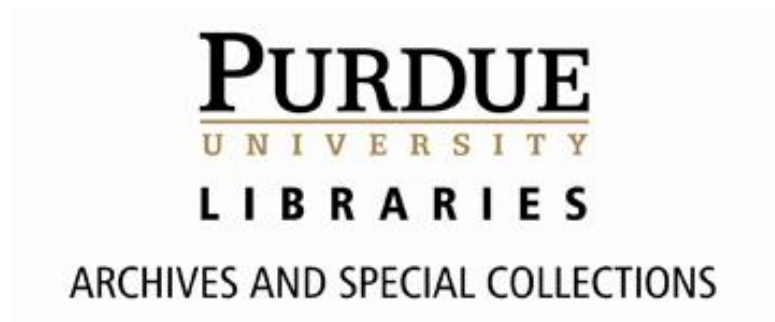


Ezra Becker

Conducted by Sammie Morris on October 27, 2016



The following interview was conducted with Ezra Becker [EB] for the Purdue University Oral History Project. It took place on October 27, 2016, over the phone. The interviewer is Sammie Morris [SM], University Archivist and Head.

SM: My first question was, just to give me a little bit of background about you and sort of how you approached Purdue. Could you tell me, for the record, when you first enrolled at Purdue and when you tried out for Purdue Pete?

EB: Let's see. I started at Purdue January of 2005. I was a transfer student. Starting January 2005, I had done a semester at a very small school on the East coast, but decided I didn't like the small school atmosphere. It didn't have the sports. It didn't have the big college feel like at Purdue. So, I started out in 2005 and went there for Nuclear Engineering- did not graduate with that. I was a political science major and then an environmental science minor. And that was in December of 2012. I was there for the typical four-year stint, just not the fall to spring four-year stint.

SM: Okay, do you remember how you became interested in trying out?

EB: Yeah, I forget how many games, but for some reason my mom was involved in the PTA or the booster club at my high school, and every once in a while she would ask, "Hey the normal mascot can't participate in this football game. Can you?", and I was like, "Sure yeah sounds great". So, I think I did a couple of games for my high school, and I realized it was a pretty fun gig to do the mascot stuff. And then when I got to Purdue, I had a friend who took me to my first Purdue basketball game. And I saw Pete, dancing around and having a great time on the

sidelines, and was like, “wow that looks pretty awesome.” I have to figure out how I can do that. So, I did a quick little google search and found the Purdue mascot. I found out who to contact, and how to get in touch with them. I think there was a simple email and he said, “Oh hey, tryouts are coming up in April or whenever the tryouts were,” and so yeah the rest was history as they say.

SM: When trying out, where you asked to just kind of come up with something on your own to demonstrate to the judges or did they have a script or something that they wanted you to follow?

EB: So if I remember correctly, the process was you have your own creative routine and then there was a “how to react to situation”. So, they’d say, “Okay, a fan just wants an autograph and their child starts to cry... what do you do?” And then there was; “Okay show us how you do the fight song and general Purdue songs”. So, that was the actual me as Purdue Pete part. Then when I was there, they had a basic interview with a couple of people on a panel. I’m not sure if they still do that or not. I feel like they got rid of that at towards the end of my stint. But the process was pretty cool. You show up to Mackey- you were on the floor of Mackey- and they say, “Okay, put on the head. Put on the pads. Dance around. Have fun. Show me what you got.” So that’s what I did.

SM: Okay, so they would give you the costume to put on there and each person would wear the Purdue Pete costume in the try-out?

EB: Yeah. It got pretty stinky behind the tryouts [laughs].

SM: When did you find out and how did you find out that you were selected?

5:00

EB: So it was coupled with the cheerleading tryouts, and when I was brought on Elvis Moya was the coach, and it was a Saturday. I showed up at Mackey in the morning and I think by mid-afternoon we were all done. He said to come back at 4p.m. and then we'll have a list of who made it and who didn't for both cheerleaders and Pete. So, I showed back up at four and it was pretty unceremonious. It was like show up and "Oh hey! Ezra Becker. Your names on the list- we'll get in touch with you afterwards." So, I went home and walked back to my dorm-Owen- and gave my mom and dad a call and said, "Hey I'm now the Purdue mascot." They actually had no idea, I kept it under wraps because I didn't know what the heck it was going to turn out to be. They were pretty excited and a little confused but they were like, "Oh hey that's cool".

SM: So do you know approximately how many people tried out?

EB: I think my year, we had 6 or 7, and we took on 4.

SM: How do they decide which Pete's do what?

EB: So, the process may have changed when I was doing it but the way we did it was pretty democratically. The coach at the time, either Arthur Smith or Elvis Moya would say, "Okay Pete's here's the events that we need to do", and left it up to the Pete's to decide. Most of my time—it think two years—was spent with John Langenkamp [?], Carl Reback [?] and Woody Nickels [?]. John and I were kind of the captains, so we're the head dudes, and it was a, "Okay if he can't make it,

we'll make it" type thing. It was really who wants to do it, who can do it, and who would like to do it. It kind of goes through the process of, "Okay we have this wedding in Indy. Who's able to? Well, I can't because it's my brother's birthday or whatever it may be." So, it's pretty fluid, pretty easy way of deciding who has what event. And then for footballs games, home football games were always everybody was there, and we split up by quarter. Away football games it was one Pete would travel with the team and do the whole game. And that was kind of done by who wants to go to the game and who can go to the game. And then Basketball, volleyball, same idea, who can go to the game, stuff like that.

SM: So, for a home football games there would be kind of multiples of you switching off, but then for the away games, basketball, and volleyball it would just be one of you?

EB: Exactly. So, for football games, there were tailgating Pete. He would go out and run around and say "hi" and take pictures and autographs with all the fans. And then majority of the time we would hang out with him as in the other Pete's who were not currently dressed. They would hang out with him and just kind of do security detail a little bit. Once that game started, the dressed Pete would run out with the team and do the first quarter, or switch it up and then we'd change by quarters.

SM: Okay, well that's a good way to keep Pete fresh.

EB: Yeah, yeah, it's a good way because everybody has their own type of interpretation of their idea of Pete, so yeah. Carl Reback [?] really enjoyed doing the shout

dance, so third quarter he would do the third quarter Pete for the majority of the time.

SM: Ah okay. Did you have a signature move?

EB: I think people told me I do, but I couldn't tell you what it is. I was a happy Pete and I don't know just being a goofball. Being Pete is really who you are as a person and how you can bring that out the biggest way possible as Pete.

SM: Yeah, what were some of your favorite strategies for getting the crowd motivated?

EB: I really just liked interacting with them, so walking up into the stands to dance around and have fun. Every time you could possibly mess around with somebody on the field, within reason, I would try to do that. Just as much as fan engagement as possible.

SM: So, when they make you Pete officially, are there any rules about what you can and can't do as Pete?

EB: Ooh, good question! I don't remember any specific- I know there are- I don't remember any specific ones that... Yeah, I think it's where you don't interfere with the game. Your job is to be there and interact and motivate the crowd. You represent the school, so do that in the best way possible. I think I want to say that there's closed conduct for Purdue University that you're meant to follow, the basic don't be a butt face to people, be kind. And the biggest thing is that Pete doesn't really talk- I think that's true for all mascots-but those are all the big things, but I can't remember.

10:00

SM: Did you ever encounter kids who might have gotten scared and started crying?

What did you do in those situations?

EB: Oh, yeah. It happens a lot. I think it shows with anybody who's dressed up.

Whether it's a clown or Purdue Pete. Typically, you'd back away slowly and I feel like up to one years old, I think they'd be okay with it. But that one to maybe three years old, they were a little confused on who the heck you were, so that was the dicey age. From three up, everybody kind of knew what was going on, so they were cool and accepting. One to three you have to get down low, get to their level, and interact with them as much as possible. Usually, their parents are there supporting like, "hey give Pete a high-five", and if they're not taking then you leave. You don't want to traumatize them!

SM: At least it's not as scary as a clown, in my opinion.

EB: I would agree, I would agree.

SM: Tell us honestly what it's like to wear the head.

EB: You can't really see much of anything. The first thing you notice is that you can't see much, hear much, it smells a little funky, and its movement pivoting. So, it's not able to move a whole ton, and it's kind of on the heavier side of things, too. Especially when you have the hammer, the head, the pads- yeah, it just gets to be a little bit on the heavier side if you're not used to it. My first football game, my shoulders and right arm—I'm right-handed—that I held the hammer with was just all sorts of tired. I was like, "Oh man, I should start working out a little more".

SM: You suddenly have more muscles in one arm.

EB: [laughs] exactly, exactly!

SM: Do you remember the performance you did before you were officially named Pete, and did you have any stage fright or challenges?

15:00 **EB:** Oh, yeah. The first thing I had to do as Pete was in the middle of August, before school started, right in the middle of August 2009, there was a West Lafayette Little League Baseball game kick off or something like that. So, I had to throw out the first pitch, and so I was like, "What do I do?" Of course nobody was like, "This is what you should do", but I went, showed up and changed in a ground-keeping closet. Which is one of the funny things probably all mascots run into is you're told go do this performance and show up as a normal person and say, "Hey I'm Ezra Becker and I'm going to be Purdue Pete, what would you like me to do?" And they'd so, "Oh yeah it's nice to meet you, I want you do to XYZ, and you can go change over here"; usually "The change over here" is in some kind of closet or something. But yeah with Little League West Lafayette I changed in a tool shed and went out to do the first pitch, went around and messed around with some kids, then I was like oh, that's how that goes. I definitely had a little bit of stage fright though. Like, what do I do, but really at that point it was like you can do whatever you want, as long as you're having fun and everybody is having fun. That's the joy of being Pete.

SM: That's great. Yeah, I think it would take some time getting used not being able to see and having to throw. What's the most unusual request you've gotten from someone when you've been Pete. Do people ask you to do odd things?

EB: Not really. You know, once in a while you get the drunk guys are like, "Hey Pete come kiss my wife." It's always the touch of alcohol that would bring out the interesting ones. There's nothing that sticks out in my mind as being very, very weird though. There's nothing that's really made me feel weird and uncomfortable. Not really anything specific.

SM: Do you have a memory or moment when you felt most proud being Pete?

EB: Um, that's a good question. Yeah, I think walking through campus or tailgating was always the most fun and rewarding for me. Mostly because to most important part to me was the fan interaction. Anything that got me out, taking photos, shaking hands that was the most memorable part. Pregame stuff, after game stuff, or just walking through campus there's been a couple of times where I've been out on a random Friday and was like happy Friday. I always had someone with me, and they'd be my mouthpiece and I'd be there just hanging out.

SM: So sometimes you were given assignments and other times you were able to just go out and be Pete whenever you wanted to?

EB: Yea, that's the joy of having the costume. We have the costume and access to Mackey, so you'd go in to change and go do Pete. We didn't do that very frequently. That was more of like a Friday before a big football game, when there

was a lot of people on campus. I think they start doing the bridge walk- I want to say that I started doing the bridge walk in 2010, and so we started walking around campus 2008 maybe 2009. Oh, and I think going back to my first day as Pete, I gave you an incorrect date of 2009. It was 2005, August 2005 would've been my first Pete date with the West Lafayette Little League.

SM: August 2005?

EB: Yeah.

SM: Okay, did you have any rivalries with other mascots?

EB: No, I mean everyone in the Big Ten is a rival of Purdue, obviously. But there wasn't
20:00 a built up story between like Purdue Pete and Goldie the Goffer are arch nemesis and every time they see each other they fight. It was nothing like that. If there was a rival, it would be whoever was against you on that day.

SM: What about the people that try to play pranks on you? Like I've heard that some of the other people have gotten their head stolen or people would try to steal their heads. Has anything like that happened to you?

EB: Oh, yeah. The hammer was always the first thing to get grabbed when walking through a crowd, whether at home or away. You just had to hang onto it pretty tightly. Then for costume security, after everything we'd head back to Mackey, which at the time we had a locker room access code and our own lockers that were coded as well. So, we had double form security and I don't think anything

went missing, like a head or a hammer, when I was there. We kept everything pretty under wraps.

SM: Was it ever difficult to balance your school work and homework assignments with your Pete duties?

EB: No, that was the joy of having three other Pete's to work with is that it never got too overwhelming. Had it just been one of us, then I think it would've been pretty tough. There are some pretty busy times where it's homecoming and there's a homecoming game, a homecoming parade, a homecoming walk, a homecoming volley ball game and all the other stuff, but there was never a time where it was like, "oh man this is way too stressful." Because at the core of Purdue Pete, or any mascot, is just having fun, so yeah.

SM: That seg-ways into my next questions. Which was, What is the secret to being a good Pete or a good mascot in general?

EB: I think just having as much fun as you can. Enjoying the joy that people get out of seeing you out and about. And just interacting with people and getting their feedback, hopefully positive feedback. I think a key to being a good Pete is to be as good of a person. Have as much fun, be as good of a person as you can be and especially as a mascot, make it as big as possible too.

SM: Yeah, definitely. One thing I wanted to get on the record for each Pete if I can, is what is your major and what your graduation date was, and if you have any advice for any future Pete's.

EB: My major was Political Science, so a B.A. from the school of Liberal Arts and then I graduated in December of 2008. My advice going back would be again just make sure you have as much fun as you can with it and know that you represent a great institution, Purdue University, and to be that fun-loving face of the university.

SM: That's great. I wanted to be sure and ask you because I'm not sure if this is true and I should confirm with you, did they propose any changes to Pete during your time?

EB: So like the costume?

SM: Yeah.

EB: Um, I think I was at the very tail end of that if I remember correctly. I want to say they proposed that in some time in 2009 they had a new costume design, maybe it was 2010, but it was shot down by just about everybody in the university.

SM: [laughs] I heard about that.

EB: Yeah, quite aware that- so when I was back for homecoming, I came back up, and
25:00 we were like, "Yeah where the heck is that costume?" Nobody seemed to know.

SM: Oh my goodness. It may be really valuable one day.

EB: Exactly, exactly. One thing that we did is that they had Rowdy.

SM: Yeah, I did want to ask you about that, because they didn't have Rowdy for a long and so I think it's important to document his time at Purdue and try to find all the people who played Rowdy as well. What was that like, interacting with him?

EB: So Rowdy was—what was Rowdy—he was one of those inflatable “dancey” things that people would get in. I think they have a bunch at in the MBA. He was there two and half out of my four years. So, 2005 for me until 2007ish. I am not sure why they got rid of him, probably because he was a huge pain in the butt. The motor kept blowing up and would die frequently. Then there were holes in the suit and there were just issues. Rowdy was just kind of like the goofier, younger brother of Pete. So, you'd hop around and jive as much as he possibly could for a few seconds, then turn him off, fill him back up, and then do it again, jump back into the locker room and change.

SM: Wow. Did you have a love/hate relationship with the Boilermaker Special? [laughs]

EB: No, no, I mean that thing is pretty awesome! It's the official mascot, but I think Pete is recognized as the on-field mascot that kind of fulfills the normal mascot duties of a school. The Boilermaker Special is gorgeous. It's pretty fun, you get to ride around and have fun with it. That's always a joy, too. There's always a whole bunch of people who are like, “ooh this is a rare opportunity”, so.

SM: Yeah, I always see people looking really happy when they're on it, so. Just one last question for you. I know that a whole bunch of former Pete's got together at homecoming for a reunion. Did you guys do anything special or have any secret

handshakes or traditions amongst the former Pete's that we should let the public know about.

EB: Uh, probably shouldn't let the public know about anything [laughs]. Supposedly they developed a secret handshake and they told me about it and it was goofy [laughs]. At Homecoming it was Pete's 60th birthday, and they brought a whole bunch of old Pete's onto the field. I think they had Pete number three.

SM: Oh, wow.

EB: Yeah, John Note [?]
—I'm not sure how to say his last name—was there, and I think he was Pete number three. That was cool, but for special things we just got together and we had a little barbeque and hangout.

SM: Oh, that's nice. I imagine it was a very energetic crowd.

EB: Yeah, it's crazy to think I've been removed from Purdue since 2008 essentially. I haven't seen some of the guys in a real long time and in that time period a lot can change. But in the same time, the guys are still exactly who they were when we were at Purdue, and it was really great being able to see everybody. Also, it's exciting to see change because it's been a while too, so.

SM: Yeah, well that was my last question for you. I was wondering if you, Ezra, have anything- any memories- that you wanted to share?

EB: Yeah I think you got them all. I can't stress enough how much fun being a Pete was both for the school and more importantly it really helped me find my niche at Purdue. It provided me with a great group of guys to hang out with, and it also

30:00

provided me with an awesome way to see the university that I wouldn't have otherwise been able to see.

SM: That's wonderful. Well we really appreciate your service as Pete. I think it's great that it definitely takes a love of the university to do that kind of work, so it's not a position where you could never be in a bad mood.

EB: No, yeah that's very true.

SM: I really appreciate the time you've taken to answer my questions, and just to give you a sense of what we'll do next is we have student workers who transcribe the interviews and then we send the transcript to you to look over and see if there's anything we misspelled or anything we couldn't understand on the recording that you wanted to clarify for us. Then, once you've looked it over, we make it part of our collection here so people can see that we have it here on our website and they can ask for a copy or come in and listen to it. That's our process, and we really appreciate it.

EB: Yeah, well it's been a pleasure talking to you too. Once you get that all transcribed, let me know and we'll go from there.

SM: Perfect, thanks so much. I hope you have a good rest of your day.

EB: Thanks, Sammie. You, too.

SM: Thank you, bye.

END OF INTERVIEW

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