

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF FILM-VIDEO AND MEDIA STUDIES

THE LEGACY OF THE LION

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ABSTRACT

The Nittany Lion is one of the most recognized symbols of Penn State. Every time the Lion mascot makes an appearance at an event, he is immediately flocked by students, alumni, and children for pictures, autographs, or an “ear ruffle.” The Lion’s job is to make the crowd excited about the event and about the university. By connecting with past Lion mascots (and, at the time, the current Lion), I, now, better understand the role of the Nittany Lion and I can fully appreciate all the hard work that being the mascot requires.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS iii

Chapter 1 Information..... 1

Chapter 2 Pre-Production..... 2

Chapter 3 Production 3

 Interviews 3

 B-roll Footage 5

Chapter 4 Post-Production 8

Chapter 5 Conclusion..... 10

Appendix A Documentary Treatment..... 11

BIBLIOGRAPHY 14

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I would like to thank my family for encouraging my decision to study at Penn State and supporting my choice of major. I would also like to thank each member of the film faculty who has helped me find my voice and become the filmmaker I am today.

Most importantly, I would like to thank all the interview subjects of this documentary, without whom this film would not be possible.

Chapter 1

Information

Mascots are common among schools and sports teams, but what does being a mascot entail? *The Symbol of Best* explores life, both in and out of “the suit,” as the Penn State Nittany Lion mascot. The Nittany Lion has represented Penn State since 1907, and more than fifty students have been privileged to don the suit. From sporting events to club or university-sponsored events, past Lions discuss their most memorable stories from their times as the mascot and reflect on how being the Lion helped shape who they are today.

Chapter 2

Pre-Production

My initial idea for this documentary was developed during my first production class at Penn State: Basic Video/Filmmaking. This documentary was to be my final project for this class, and I wanted to make it memorable. After brainstorming for days, I finally decided on this topic. The Lion is relevant to Penn State students and alumni; our mascot is such a big part of the university.

As I began to expand this short documentary into my thesis, I was advised to direct it toward a broader audience. I researched other schools' mascots, specifically other Big Ten schools, to compare our traditions and mascot evolutions with theirs. I was surprised to see just how different earlier concepts of many of the mascots were. The Lion, for example, was originally modeled after a maned, African lion, rather than a mountain lion.

Chapter 3

Production

Interviews

When I first developed the idea for this documentary, I never thought it would grow to be what it is today. The first two interviews I conducted were with Mike Valania (the Lion from 2013-2015) and Jack Davis (2015-2017). These interviews occurred soon after Mike's term as the Lion ended and Jack's term began. Because the identity of the Lion is unknown to the public, I was given strict instructions to not show Jack's face during the film. Since then, his identity has been revealed, and he can now be officially featured and credited in this film.

With the help of the Penn State Alumni Association, I was able to contact multiple alumni Lions, most of whom were eager to help with this project. For the original five-minute version of this documentary, the alumni Lions were only featured with written quotes and a brief "We Are...Penn State!" that they had recorded and sent to me. Once I knew that I wanted to expand this project for my thesis, I reached out to the Alumni Association again in hopes of connecting with more former Lions; and I emailed the Lions with whom I had been in contact to see if there could be a chance of in-person interviews.

One of the alumni Lions I had originally contacted for a written interview, Robert Sterling, was able to sit down with me and record an in-person interview during a football game weekend. I reconnected with other alumni Lions I had previously contacted, but Mr. Sterling was the only one of them available for an on-camera interview. I did, however, receive

responses from other newly-contacted alumni Lions who were as eager to be a part of this documentary as the first group.

I conducted interviews with Brad Cornali, Robert Nellis, Nicholas Indeglio (although he had recorded his interview on his own time and sent it to me), and, once again, Jack Davis. These interviews spanned the last two years, but Jack's second interview took place most recently. Because the first time I spoke with Jack was at the beginning of his term, I wanted to see how his perspective had changed—if at all—over the last two years.

The first time I spoke with Jack, he mentioned how kids seem to always be in awe of the Lion and how he loves seeing kids at various events because of their enthusiasm. His opinion has not changed, and neither have the opinions of any alumni Lions with whom I spoke. Whenever I mentioned children during an interview, no matter who I was interviewing, the subject's eyes lit up (just like Jack's description of children seeing the Lion).

Because interacting with children is such a big part of the Lion's role, I wanted to make sure children were represented in this documentary as well. In Fall 2016, the day of the Penn State versus Iowa game at home, I walked around the family tailgating lot and asked some families about interviewing their children. The responses from the parents were better than I ever could have hoped. Some of the children, however, were a little camera shy and did not want to speak.

The children I interviewed varied in age, which was another factor that I wanted to include. The youngest child on camera seemed to be about one or two years old, while the oldest seemed to be about eight or nine years old.

B-roll Footage

Throughout my time at Penn State, I, like many other students, have taken many photos and videos of and with the Lion. Little did I know during my first three semesters that these photos and videos would be essential for this documentary. Since I began expanding this concept, I have been more aware of the content of the videos I recorded. For example, one-armed pushups are characteristic of the Lion; the Lion does them after each touchdown during the football games. I have more footage of one-armed Lion pushups than anything else the Lion does.

The Lion is also known for doing skits during football games. Skits are such a characteristic thing for the Lion, that, for tryouts, prospective Lions are required to perform a prepared skit as well as an improvised skit with a random object they pull from a bag on the judges' table. This past fall, I was able to record some of the Lion's skits; one of which even included another Big Ten mascot: Goldy Gopher from Minnesota. The theme for that skit was a carnival and the Lion was playing "Whack a Gopher" trying to win a little cheerleader-dressed fan a prize from another University icon, Mike the Mailman, who recently retired.

Another performance I captured from this past season was a dance between the Lion and the current Blue Sapphire, Rachel Reiss. They began the dance with The Black Eyed Peas' "I Got a Feelin'," and ended with the iconic *Dirty Dancing* lift.

In addition to these and other clips from football-related events, I also wanted to make sure that I had footage of the Lion from other events. The football games are important; but as all the Lions I interviewed stressed, the Lion—and Penn State—is more than just football. THON—Penn State's 46-hour no-sitting, no-sleeping dance marathon to raise money for the

Four Diamonds Fund and the Penn State Hershey Medical Center—was an event admired by the Lions, so I was determined to capture at least pictures of the Lion from THON.

I was lucky this year. As a dancer, I had the full 46 hours to collect photos and videos of the Lion at THON. Some of the videos I was lucky enough to capture included the Lion dancing on stage with DNCE, doing 46 one-armed pushups (one for each hour of THON), and helping lead the line dance.

I utilized the Special Collections Library to find older pictures of the Lion mascot. Many of these pictures were taken during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. There was a brief period during the 1970s where the Lion suit reverted to the maned African lion design after having been a mountain lion—like the legend states—for decades. Students were not happy, but fortunately for them, the maned design only lasted for two years before the mountain lion design was reinstated.

I noticed, as with other Big Ten mascots I researched, some early forms of the mascot suits were off-putting. For example, in the 1940s, the mountain lion design looked angry and ferocious. While lions should strike fear into the hearts of their enemies, they should not strike fear into the hearts of their fans.

In many pictures of the Lion, one can sometimes see part of the suit-wearer's face. This was because, as Robert Nellis informed me in his interview, the mesh facemask attached to the Lion head's open mouth was a feature that began when he donned the suit. He, and other alumni Lions, have told me that children can be unpredictable and easily scared of the Lion. As a student, it is difficult to understand how the Lion mascot can be scary, but looking at the Lion through a child's eyes (before the facemask) and seeing a human head inside the Lion's mouth, it becomes clearer as to why the children are scared; they think the Lion ate someone!

I noticed something else while sorting through archival photos of the Lion (before the facemask): When the Lion mascot was taking a picture with someone, more often than not, the man inside the suit would be smiling too.

Chapter 4

Post-Production

I remember thinking when I began expanding this project that editing seemed so far away. I remember thinking that I had so much time to gather interviews, write the two-column script, and organize everything the way I wanted; but I was wrong. Editing crept up on me, and I finally realized just how short of a time I had. I was still collecting interviews after I began editing; and, as always, some things take longer to edit than others.

Two of my interviews were filmed against plain screens—one was a green screen, the other was a white screen. This gave me the opportunity to be creative. I have been taught that interview backgrounds should be interesting and reflect the subject being discussed, so I included the Penn State athletic logo in the background of one interview and a close-up picture of Old Main in the other.

Finding the perfect balance between the foregrounds and backgrounds of these interviews took much more time than I originally thought, especially with the white-screened interview. Every time I fixed a background-bleeding-through issue in one part of the interview, the same issue would arise in another section. Eventually, I found a balance that took care of most of the issues I was having; I took care of the rest by covering those interview clips with b-roll.

Aside from adding to the green screens in the interviews, the most challenging part of post-production was the sound editing. Unfortunately, it was not until I began editing that I noticed the sound quality of some of my interviews. My interview with Robert Sterling was only recording in one channel, and there was a constant high-pitched sound throughout the entire

interview. Eventually I was able to eliminate the sound, but it resulted in the entire interview sounding like it was recorded underwater; I had to settle for a happy medium between the two.

Another interview that was a challenge audibly was Robert Nellis' interview. Our interview was conducted through Skype, which made the video unusable (because of the quality of the video and because my picture was in the bottom right corner of the screen), and the audio disastrous. Looking back, I thank myself for thinking to also record the audio on my phone. The sound was slightly better than what came through the speakers of my computer, and I could adjust it separately from the video. Unfortunately, because of all the adjustments I needed to make, his interview also began to sound like it was recorded underwater. This is the best example from my work that I can find where I agree with my instructors in that "less is more" when it comes to sound editing.

The final piece of my documentary before the credits is a Brady Bunch-style "We Are...Penn State!" featuring almost all the Lions with whom I was in contact. This is a concept I kept from the short version of this project. Many of the Lions mentioned that, while there is only one person in the suit at a given time, no one person is the Lion. I wanted to convey that and the uniformity and inclusion of Penn State as a whole through this ending.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

The goal of every film class I have taken is to “make something you are proud of,” and I know I accomplished that with this documentary. I grew as a filmmaker and as a Penn State student. When I was younger, I was one of the children running around in a cheerleader outfit at football games; Penn State is in my blood. But through doing research and conducting interviews for this film, I learned so much about one of the most important traditions at my soon-to-be alma mater.

I hope this documentary not only informs fans and prospective students of such a pivotal part of our University, but also inspires current and future students to put themselves out there and maybe even try out to be the Lion.

Appendix A
Documentary Treatment

Working Title:

Legacy of the Lion or The Symbol of Our Best

Director:

Kimberlyn Turner

Logline:

Learn about the evolution and traditions of the Penn State Nittany Lion mascot from the current (at the time of the interviews) Lion and alumni Lions.

Working Hypothesis:

The Penn State Nittany Lion mascot is a time-honored symbol of the University, but how much do we truly know about the history of the Lion or about how the tradition is kept?

Theme:

Every Penn State student and alum knows about the Nittany Lion and his role at Penn State, but no one except a lucky few know and understand life inside the suit.

Point of View:

I want as many Lions' inputs as possible. So far, I have video interviews with the current Lion and the "just-graduated" Lion, and e-mail interviews with four other alumni Lions. I am going to contact more

alumni, and reconnect with those from whom I only have written responses. I want to share their stories and experiences with fellow students and alumni.

Structure:

The documentary will begin with a history and evolution of the Lion portion. From there, it will lead into stories from the former Lions, beginning with their first moment of realization where they knew that they wanted to try out to be the mascot, and their reactions to learning that they were chosen over others who had tried out.

It will then transition into the subjects' experiences with other mascots and how the Lion compares to other schools' mascots. After that, the documentary will focus on children, how they view the Lion, and their impacts on the Lion (especially at THON). From there, the film will transition into the Lions' favorite memories.

The documentary will end with a Brady Bunch-style ending of all the Lions (with whom I can contact) saying "We Are...Penn State!"

Style:

From the interviews I have, I can tell that being the Lion mascot is an exciting thing. I want to convey that excitement as much as possible. There will be many photos (archival and ones I am able to take) and videos as b-roll.

Format:

10-15 minutes; 24fps

Timetable:

I have been gathering footage since 2015. All the footage will be collected by the end of January 2017, so plan to begin editing by February 1.

Budget:

There are no extra costs for this film; I have rented equipment from Penn State to film all the footage.

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Indeglio, Nicholas. Personal interview. 10 Feb. 2017

Johnson, Dave. E-mail interview. 21 Apr. 2015.

Nellis, Robert. Online interview. 5 Nov. 2015.

Skinner, Doug. E-mail interview. 17 Sept. 2016.

Sterling, Robert. Personal interview. 18 Sept. 2015.

Valania, Michael. Personal interview. 30 Mar. 2015.

White, Curtis. E-mail interview. 13 Apr. 2015.

Kimberlyn L. Turner

Education

The Pennsylvania State University

Pursuing Bachelor of Arts – Film/Video

Pursuing Minors in French and Theatre

- Schreyer Honors College
- 8 years of French

August 2013 – Present
Expected Graduation May 2017

Skills

- Proficient in Adobe Creative Cloud
 - Specifically: Premiere, Photoshop, After Effects, and Audition
- Experience using different types and brands of cameras
 - I have filmed various projects using Nikon DSLR (D7000 and D7100) cameras, JVC ProHD cameras, Panasonic DVX200 cameras, and Canon C100 cameras.
- Experience with handheld camera
 - I used handheld camera while filming video tutorials for work and during location shoots.
- Proficient in Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, Excel, and Publisher

Experience

Arts and Architecture Information Technology Office (AAIT), The Pennsylvania State University *March 2015 – Present*

Administrative Assistant

- Film and edit tutorial videos about using machines and computer programs used by the college and posted them to YouTube and AAIT's website.
- Co-manage the office's Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts.

AAIT / e-Learning Institute, The Pennsylvania State University

October 2016 – December 2016

Video Production Intern

- Filmed and edited tutorial videos about using machines and computer programs used by the college and posted them to YouTube and AAIT's website.

Lagrapy: Agence Paris Photo Studio, Paris, France

June 2016 - July 2016

Production Intern

- Staged and took photos for advertising, and used Photoshop to edit the photos.

Student Affairs Office, The Pennsylvania State University – York Campus

September 2014 - December 2014

Administrative Assistant

- Used Microsoft Office to create flyers, weekly upcoming events posters, and the newsletter, *The Stall Seat Journal*.

College and Community Activities and Leadership

Videographer, *Penn State's Performing Arts Council*

March 2016 - Present

- Record and edit footage from events to showcase the various groups involved with the Performing Arts Council
 - Spring Theatre Showcase and the End-of-the-Year Showcase

Member, *Penn State Blue Band Silks*

August 2015 - Present

- Perform pregame and halftime flag routines during the Penn State football games.

Member, *THON (fundraising, community awareness)*

August 2013 - Present

- Penn State University's annual 46-hour, no sleeping, no sitting dance marathon to raise money for children with pediatric cancer and pediatric cancer research.
 - Involved with Penn State York's THON organization
 - Involved with The Blue Band's THON organization as the 2016-2017 Alternative Fundraising Captain and a dancer.