

A Short History of SHSU's Bearkat Mascot

Episode 59: Feb. 15, 2011

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Before 1923, varsity sports teams at the Sam Houston Normal Institute were known as "The Normals." When the school's name was changed in 1923 to Sam Houston State Teachers College, the "Barkats" nickname emerged in the athletics program.

The name "bearcat" is sometimes applied to several real-life animals. One of these is the binturong, an Asiatic civet with a prehensile tail. The binturong is often called "bearcat" in English, though it is not in fact a bear or a cat. Another animal which is sometimes called a "bearcat" is the kinkajou, a small South American mammal in the raccoon family which is also referred to as a "honey bear." The kinkajou is one of two carnivores with a prehensile tail, the other being the binturong.

"Tough as a Bearkat" was a common saying around the time that the school's athletic nickname changed, and this is probably what the Bearkat name was intended to reference, rather than an actual animal. The name conveyed the toughest qualities of both wild cats and bears. The spelling originally varied, appearing as either one or two words, with "cat" using either a C or a K. Eventually the spelling was standardized as one word spelled with a "k", to help distance the mythical cat/bear hybrid from any association with a real animal.

However, from the 1950s through the 1970s, the school occasionally (and not very successfully) kept a live kinkajou as a mascot, which students would help to care for. The presence of this animal on campus probably contributed to confusion concerning the meaning of the Bearkat name.

Towards the end of the 1940s, SHSU President Harmon Lowman tried changing the mascot to the Raven, because of the connection to General Sam Houston, who was nicknamed "the Raven" among the Cherokee. However, the alumni attachment to the Bearkat was too strong by this time, and the raven was defeated.

Sammy Bearkat, a character that today's SHSU students know quite well, did not appear on campus until 1959. His first incarnation—a paper mache head wearing a sailor's hat—was the result of a design by assistant dean of women Dorothy Meek, art instructor Mabel Taylor, and various art students and cheerleaders.

The early Sammy often had to share the limelight on campus—first with Tripod, a stray dog who spent approximately 15 years as the school's unofficial mascot, and later with the live kinkajou mascot of the 1970s.

Sammy underwent numerous makeovers during the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. During some unfortunate periods, he resembled a fox or a dog more so than either a bear or cat.

The cartoon-like image that we know and love today debuted in 1997, brought to life from the imagination of student and cartoonist James Pharaon. The character was designed to appear both tough and friendly, with certain features resembling a cat—especially the eyes and tail—and other traits resembling a bear. One last small makeover around 1999 gave Sammy smaller, lighter hands and head so he would be able to perform more athletic stunts at school events.

A female counterpart to Sammy, named Samantha Bearkat, also appeared for a time during the 1990s, but has since been retired.

In December 2009, SHSU celebrated Sammy Bearkat's 50th birthday. Although he had a rocky start, competing against other candidates for school mascot and struggling to find the image that would serve him best, he has now become an important and beloved symbol of the spirit of Sam Houston State.

Go, Bearkats!

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