

OSU mascots learn to balance time, tradition

Pistol Pete: The ultimate Cowboy

He slips into a pair of black Wrangler jeans, followed by a vest to complement a white long-sleeve, button-up shirt. Boots go on one foot at a time. Soon, his heart starts racing as he straps on his chaps. The oversized, fiberglass head goes on and he becomes Pistol Pete, the ultimate Oklahoma State University Cowboy.

As the official OSU mascot since 1923, Pistol Pete was named after Francis "Frank" Eaton when the school was still known as Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College and the mascot was a tiger.

"Pistol Pete is a real, historic figure with a rugged individualism of the Oklahoma settlement," said Harry Birdwell, OSU athletic director.

In his younger years, Eaton was a real cowboy, gun-fighter, blacksmith and a Deputy U.S. Marshal. Students chose Eaton as OSU's mascot after he appeared in Stillwater's Armistice Day parade on horseback.

Afterward, the tiger mascot was dropped and Oklahoma A&M became the home of the Cowboys. Students figured a cowboy represented Oklahoma better than a tiger, which was copied from Princeton University's mascot.

Although Eaton died in 1958, his spirit lives on. Each year two students are chosen to represent OSU in the legendary Pistol Pete uniform. Jared Wiley and Josh Pulver serve as Pistol Pete for 2003-04. Wiley, an agricultural communications junior, comes to OSU from Ardmore, Okla. Pulver, a leisure services management junior, hails from Elk City, Okla.

"I tried out for Pistol Pete to achieve a life-long dream," said Wiley.

The tryouts are similar to an interview process. Approximately six or seven former Pistol Petes come back to OSU and conduct business-like interviews.

The interviewees try on the head to act out different situations, said Wiley. The purpose is to see how a person reacts while wearing the head. The former Pistol Petes then choose the best candidates for the job.

"Pistol Pete has to be strong with the ability to carry a large amount of weight on his shoulders," said Pulver. "My legs often get tired from squatting to be on the level of children."

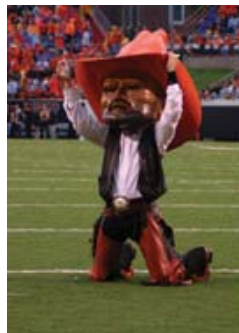
The newest Pistol Pete heads were designed between 15 and 20 years ago by The Walt Disney Co. The company literally broke the mold when they were completed.

"The heads have come in three series with the first ones being made from papier-mâché," said Pulver. "The second series was a combination of papier-mâché and fiberglass. The third series, which we use, are made from fiberglass."

On a game day, the guys are spared from wearing the
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Pistol Pete and the Spirit Rider are an essential part of the OSU fan fare. Each mascot plays an integral role in the spirit of OSU and keeps a beloved tradition alive. (Pistol Pete photos by Dwayne Cartmell; above photo and Spirit Rider photos by Amanda Jones)



Spirit Rider: Riding with Cowboy pride

Balancing life in college can be challenging. Along with school, many students have jobs, a variety of extracurricular activities and a social life; however, one student adds additional duties each year by representing Oklahoma State University as the OSU Spirit Rider.

Meriruth Cohenour, an agricultural communications senior, is that student. Last spring, she was chosen as the 2003-04 Spirit Rider. Cohenour served as a member of the ground crew in the 2002-03 season and is now the fifth female to ride as the Spirit Rider.

Cohenour began riding horses at a young age at her home in Claremore, Okla.

"I was on a horse before I could walk," she said.

Her mother and grandfather went on horseback trail rides and toted Cohenour with them.

When she was 7 years old, Cohenour received her first horse. Shortly after, she began taking riding lessons. She is trained in western, English, dressage and jumping.

Cohenour also showed with the Pinto Horse Association of America and the Paint Horse Association, as well as in 4-H.

"I grew up active in the Rogers County 4-H," Cohenour said. "I also held national officer positions in the PTHA and the APHA. College has slowed down my show schedule tremendously, but I still find time to ride and train my own horses."

Cohenour's passion for riding has grown with time, and she hopes to pursue a career that relates to horses.

"It has already been an amazing experience," she said.

"I wanted to be the Spirit Rider because I had such a great experience last year on the ground crew."

"It's exciting to be able to combine my passion for riding and the school I love by representing it as a mascot," Cohenour said.

The OSU Spirit Rider first appeared in 1984. The late Eddy Finley, who was asked to come up with a mascot for the band, started the Spirit Rider program. Finley, an agricultural education professor, wanted a mascot who could carry the OSU flag down the field after each touchdown.

Finley's idea originated from Texas Tech University's Masked Rider. Finley and his wife, Nancy, were both Texas Tech graduates who wanted to see a similar tradition brought to OSU.

John Beal Jr. was the first OSU Spirit Rider. Beal was a member of the OSU Rodeo Team and rode his own horse, a black mare named Della.

Ellis and Mary Grace Hostmeyer donated a 5-year-old gelding named Stars Parr Money four years after the program's initiation. This horse would be used as the official spirit horse for the OSU Athletic Department in

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The ultimate Cowboy

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head all day. They do, however, end up wearing it for eight or nine hours. Since game times differ, there is not an exact schedule to follow, they said.

Both Pulver and Wiley admitted to getting an adrenaline rush when they get ready to act as Pistol Pete. The rush comes with the territory.

"When I start putting on the chaps, my legs start shaking. Then I load up my gun and that's when my heart starts racing," said Wiley. "I'd say every time I get ready I'm nervous, but once I get started the nervousness goes away after about 10 minutes."

Pulver and Wiley decide prior to each game who will make which appearance. Some of the appearances are at the same time, which is the reason there are two Pistol Petes.

"For an evening game, I start my appearances around 2 p.m. I have one at Chris' University Spirit. One of us has to go to the Spirit Walk and one of us has to go to the family fun zone," said Wiley. "Josh goes to For Pete's Sake and there are usually two or three tailgate parties we go to."

Their main jobs at the various events are to promote OSU and get the fans excited about the game.

Additional places we go are the marching band practice and the alumni tent," said Wiley. "Another way we decide who gets to do what is by our class schedules."

During the game, Pistol Pete has to battle challenges a person would not normally think about.

"Walking up and down stairs, seeing people and not running into things are sometimes difficult tasks to accomplish," said Wiley. "The head weighs 45 pounds and only allows for a certain amount of vision without turning the head all the way to one side or the other."

Heat is a challenge that makes breathing in the head difficult. An additional challenge people may not think about is giving autographs.

"The hardest thing I have come across when signing an autograph has to be the actual fingers of little children," said Pulver. "Sometimes these kids want every finger signed. I don't know why, but they do."

Both Pulver and Wiley practice their gun twirling. Pistol Pete's gun is heavy and it took the men some getting used to for spinning it and shooting.

"At the game, I shoot the gun a lot," said Wiley. "I play Pistol Pete. I just have fun and go out there and try to get the crowd involved. I sign a lot of autographs for little kids and give bullets away. Mostly, we are there for the kids and the alumni. We try to make everybody happy."

The more the crowd gets into the cheering, the more Pistol Pete swaggers around to encourage the crowd. He raises his arms, claps his hands and shoots his gun.

"When I am out there in front of 40,000 people at Boone Pickens Stadium, shooting that pistol, and hearing the crowd yell 'state' at the end of 'Oklahoma,' that gets my blood pumping," said Wiley.

After the game, Pistol Pete mingles with the fans. Then Pulver and Wiley usually tailgate with their family and friends. After the physical exertion of being Pistol Pete, these guys like to get a little rest and relaxation.

"Being Pistol Pete can be exhausting at times, especially in the heat, but it is so much fun," said Wiley.

Pulver and Wiley get a few extra incentives for their duties as Pistol Pete. "We get a free faculty parking permit and free tickets to get into the games," said Wiley. "When OSU goes to a bowl game, we get the commemorative T-shirts free. The staff at The Territory western store helps us tremendously with discounts as well."

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Pistol Pete works to ignite the crowd at a 2003 OSU football game. (Photo by Kendra Kelton)

Riding with Cowboy pride

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return for season tickets and decoration credit. The horse's common name, Bullet, was chosen after a campus-wide contest was held.

Approximately 65 students have participated in the program as either the Spirit Rider or a Spirit Team ground crew member. The Spirit Rider and crew are responsible for the care and maintenance of Bullet. The crew also is required to make appearances at parades, schools, rodeos, Special Olympics and other university-related functions.

Many times the spirit crew travels without the horse to put on promotional programs at elementary schools across the state. These programs are designed to get elementary students thinking about OSU at a young age.

These appearances, however, put a certain pressure on the rider. The chosen Spirit Rider must be able to balance class work, appearances and other duties expected by most college students.

Being an OSU mascot can have its perks; however, there also are challenges that arise. Cohenour balances a 15-hour class schedule, a job in the animal science department and fulfilling the duties of being the Spirit Rider. Cohenour also usually tries to spend eight to 10 hours per week riding Bullet.

"Appearances are what have made people love Bullet," Cohenour said.

The horse is famous nationwide.

"Bullet has become a tradition," said Harry Birdwell, OSU athletic director. "He is an ongoing symbol that is part of OSU fan fare. He is fun, beautiful and a reflection of Oklahoma life."

Football games are the most important appearance the Spirit Rider makes. The Spirit Rider leads the Spirit Walk, marches to the field with the OSU Marching Band and runs to the 30-yard line after a touchdown.

Game days for the Spirit Rider start at least three hours before kickoff. The rider and the ground crew meet at the horse barn to brush and dress the horse. They then travel to the Seretean Center for the Spirit Walk.

After the walk, the rider and horse return to the Edmon Low Library to lead the band to the field. For 15 minutes before game time, the Spirit Rider and the band march to Lewis Field at Boone Pickens Stadium to make their grand entrance.

The band marches on the field and splits into two groups. As the crowd goes wild, the announcer yells, "Here ... comes ... Bullet with Spirit Rider Meriruth Cohenour!"

"One of the most exhilarating experiences I ever had was the first time I came down the tunnel of Lewis Field and heard my name over the loudspeaker as I ran through the middle of the band," Cohenour said. "It was just awesome."

Throughout the game the Spirit Rider waits for each touchdown, so the OSU flag can be flown high across Lewis Field.

"As I make my entrance onto the field, I always say, 'Bullet, I hope we run your legs off,'" Birdwell said.

The Spirit Rider is popular among the fans. Cohenour said during halftime fans are allowed to pet Bullet and she signs Bullet trading cards, footballs, shirts, caps, calendars and game tickets.

"It is amazing how much of an impact a live animal has on people," Cohenour said. "Everyone likes the cheer leaders, the band and Pistol Pete, but when you get down to it, everyone wants to see Bullet."

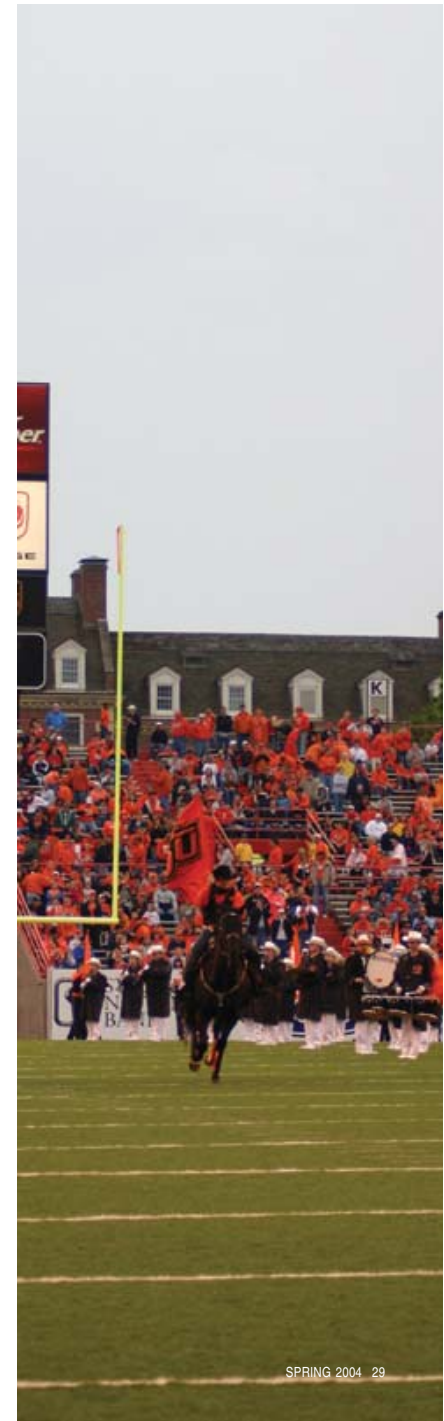
The appearances expected of the Spirit Rider also are time-consuming. Bullet and the rider must be at each home game, all Stillwater parades and approximately 10 other appearances around the state.

Cohenour said she would not trade this experience for anything.

"I am always amazed at what a profound effect Bullet has on the fans at the game, especially children," she said. "Every time we go somewhere with

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Spirit Rider Meriruth Cohenour makes her entrance during pre-game. (Photo by Dwayne Cartmell)





Jared Wiley (kneeling) and Meriruth Cohenour spend time together coordinating OSU spirit activities to make sure gameday experiences are enjoyable for all. (photo by Jamie Wherley)

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"We are lucky because we can use the weight room with the athletes and we get a membership to a local athletic club for being Pistol Pete," said Pulver.

At times, being a student may seem like a full-time job, but imagine also having to make 200 personal appearances a year at sporting events and private functions. Pistol Pete is paid a \$25-per-hour fee and 32 cents per mile for all private events.

"We go to private functions like birthday parties, weddings and graduations," said Wiley.

Time management is one of Pulver's and Wiley's biggest issues. They must balance their class loads with all the other tasks they must do.

"We are required by football Coach Les Miles to work out two times a week if we want to be on the field during a game," said Wiley.

Pulver and Wiley must keep in contact with the spirit office and keep track of all their engagements by returning phone calls or e-mails.

"To handle my class loads I get up in the morning, go to class, do reading and homework as soon as I can after class be-

cause I know at night and on the weekends I'm going to be loaded down and not have time," said Wiley.

Both Pulver and Wiley said they think being Pistol Pete will help them in the future because they have made beneficial contacts and have developed time-management skills.

Anyone wanting to audition for Pistol Pete must be a full-time student with a 2.0 grade point average. In April, the society squares section in the *Daily O'Collegian* runs a notice for tryouts.

"Everyone should try out," said Birdwell. "It is a highlight in the college experience. You get to live a part of the spirit and interact with kids."

Students interested in trying out can call the spirit office in Gallagher-Iba Arena at (405) 744-8039. Any student is encouraged to try out.

"Pistol Pete represents OSU more than just on Saturday ... more than just an ESPN highlight or anything like that," said Wiley. "Pistol Pete represents OSU to kids who are two years old to people who are 102. Pistol Pete is the essence of OSU. He represents OSU and its traditions." ♦ *By Lynette Rushin, Mustang, Okla.*

Riding with Cowboy pride

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the horse, hundreds of people tell us Bullet is their favorite part of the whole game."

"I love knowing I am carrying out such a beloved tradition," Cohenour said.

After each game Bullet is taken back to the horse barn, where he lives and is cared for by the Spirit Rider and the ground crew.

This year a change was made to the program – Stars Parr Money was retired.

"Stars Parr Money was just getting too old," said Steven Cooper, OSU animal science assistant professor. "He was a great horse for OSU, and he played his part well. We felt he just needed to be retired."

The new horse, Morgos Smokin Man, is a 5-year-old gelding purchased by the OSU Athletic Department.

The new horse posed an additional challenge Cohenour has faced.

"The biggest challenge was just not knowing what to expect," she said. "We had no idea how he would react on game day. It is hard to simulate 44,000 screaming fans."

When the athletic department purchased the horse, he was already broke to ride. Last year's Spirit Rider, Jason Wright, also worked with him when he could, just to try to get him ready. Cohenour spent the summer working with him.

The OSU Athletic Department supplies the rider and each member of the ground crew with their uniforms. The uniform consists of an orange shirt, black jeans, a black vest and black boots.

The Spirit Rider is an important tradition to OSU, said Birdwell. There is a statue of the Spirit Rider in front of Gallagher-Iba Arena on the OSU campus.

"Every morning when I drive up to work and see that statue, I feel a sense of pride overwhelm me," said Birdwell.

Tryouts for the Spirit Rider are held each spring. The tryout consists of a written application, an analysis of horsemanship using OSU's geldings and an interview.

"Although it is a time-consuming task, the sense of pride I feel every time I put on that uniform and get Bullet ready for the game makes up for all the hours I spend working with him," Cohenour said. "I will never forget this experience." ♦ *By Afton Jameson, Geary, Okla.*

One rider and four ground-crew members are selected each year. For more information about the Spirit Rider or trying out, call Cooper at (405) 744-6065.