

WORLD CUP WILLIE: HOW A LION WITH A BEATLE HAIRCUT CHANGED THE COMMERCIAL FACE OF THE GAME

To modern fans the term 'football mascot' immediately conjures up images of an adult dressed in some furry costume clowning around with the aim of entertaining the under 10s in the crowd at a match, or perhaps a group of young children whose families have paid an arm and a leg for the privilege of leading their favourite team onto the pitch. Both are part of the fabric of the modern commercial game; indeed almost every professional sports team these days seems to have its own furry creature: simultaneously a marketing tool, expression of corporate and club identity, and entertainer. Mascots, however, have a long and relatively honourable association with soccer dating back over a century or more, although the origin of the species was a source of good luck rather than commercial opportunity.

The concept of the mascot predates most professionally organised sports, for example a number of British Army regiments had live animals as good luck charms in the nineteenth century. One well-known instance is that of the 95th Derbyshire Regiment of Foot, who adopted a ram during the Indian Mutiny Campaign in the 1850s; the ram subsequently became a symbol associated with the city of Derby and, of course Derby County who were given the nickname of 'the Rams'. The use of the word 'mascot' became popular in the early 1880s with the advent of the operetta *La Mascotte* (translated as *The Mascot*), which was performed in both England and the United States from 1881. It was soon after this that mascots began to become associated with sports teams on both sides of the Atlantic. The first athletic mascot in US College sport is believed to have been 'Handsome Dan', a bulldog donated to Yale University by a student in 1889. A decade later a correspondent in *The Athletic News* was able to write, "Mascots are the fashion in the football world now-a-days." (22 February 1909). That journal's editor JAH Catton was even inspired to write on the subject:

This is an age when even sensible people believe in mascots. The superior persons who at once assume that this is an amiable weakness peculiar to feeble minded footballers need not be seriously considered. I remember that Harrow Wanderers, a party of gentlemen cricketers from the old school on the hill, used to carry a mascot on their tours in days gone by. Moreover, was there not a yellow terrier on board one of the yachts which defended the America Cup when Lord Dunraven first challenged. The mascot is not the invention of those who are weak in the head and chase a football.
(*The Athletic News*, 8 March 1909)

Indeed football seemed overrun with mascots during the 1908-09 campaign. Most appear to have been employed to produce luck in the FA Cup, a competition where perhaps that extra margin of fortune was the difference between success and failure. That season Manchester United was supported by a billy goat, Newcastle by a Great Dane, Sunderland by a black cat, Bradford City by a bantam cock and Sheffield Wednesday by a live monkey adorned in blue and white ribbons. United's success, with billy goat in tow, was followed 12 months later by a Barnsley team, who were runners-up, backed by an ass known as Amos. It is of interest to consider the story of Sunderland's black cat as perhaps typical of how mascots were 'born'. The animal was found inside the Roker Park ground when the club met Bury on 2 January 1909 during a relatively lean spell on the field. The team responded with a 3-1 win and two weeks later went on to win 3-2 at Sheffield United in the first round of the FA Cup and the cat was quickly adopted as the club mascot. Its success was not just a result of the association of black cats with good fortune, but by the fact that the cat is an obvious predator of the magpie, nickname of the club's bitter local rivals Newcastle United. Although these early football mascots were essentially symbols of good fortune they were also used in marketing albeit in a very limited way. Postcards of Sunderland's black cat were soon selling more than the combined total of those of all the team's individual players, while there was also a popular series of postcards featuring Amos, Barnsley's ass.





Some 1960s Mascots with World Cup Willie in the centre; clockwise from top left hand corner: Clarrie Blue (Aston Villa), Beau Brummie (Birmingham City), The City Gent (Bradford City), Sky Blue Sam (Coventry City), Sammy Shrimper (Southend United), Ozzie Owl (Sheffield Wednesday), Prince Val (Port Vale) and Avenue 'Arry (Bradford Park Avenue)



The practise of employing live animals as mascots seems to have declined when football resumed after the First World War, to be replaced by adults, often dressed in costumes and representing the local community or club identity. In the 1920s Millwall had a figure dressed as a lion, while amongst the post-1946 characters were Portsmouth's sailor man, Bristol Rovers' pirate, a figure dressed as an ARP warden at Bristol City and the Everton toffee lady, while at Carlisle there was a stuffed fox named Olga (an anagram of 'goal'). Olga was the property of George Baxter a supporter who dressed in a blue tailcoat and white trousers and a white top hat. He would trot onto the pitch before each home game and place Olga on the centre circle, then when the teams came out he would collect Olga and meet the two captains. These characters were there to entertain the fans; they engaged in banter with both home and away supporters and sometimes led the singing of club songs. However, by the mid-1960s problems caused by the prevalence of hooliganism meant that interaction with the crowd was often no longer a viable, or indeed safe, option.

The 1960s had also seen the emergence of a marketing revolution in English football, partly in reaction to a steep decline in attendances, which was led by the likes of Jimmy Hill and Derrick Robins at Coventry and Vic Bernard at Stockport. It was therefore in fitting with the new spirit of commercialism that the Football Association decided to use a marketing image to promote the 1966 World Cup finals. A modern character-licensing firm, Walter Tuckwell & Associates, was engaged to work on the project and a marketing design produced: the Jules Rimet trophy imposed upon the Union Flag. Why the FA wished to promote the event as a celebration of Britishness rather than Englishness is unclear, but nevertheless this was the logo selected to promote the tournament. Walter Tuckwell was an interesting figure, born in Australia but brought up in New Zealand and very much a Kiwi. Described as, "A David Niven look-alike, although a bit chunkier," he had previously worked for J Arthur Rank and Walt Disney before establishing his own company in the late 1950s. His business involved brokering the rights relating to characters to manufacturers who would pay royalties. The company had previously worked on well-known children's fictional characters, such as Noddy, or characters from television and film, (James Bond, Dr Who) with most of the products aimed at children. There was a feeling within the company that the FA's image was too staid and formal and unless more life was breathed into the project it was unlikely to become a financial success. One afternoon FA officials were present in Tuckwell's offices at Piccadilly in central London when this issue was raised and it was agreed that the company could produce another character that would appeal to youngsters. The task was entrusted to freelance commercial artist Reg Hoyer and young New Zealander Richard Culley. They got straight to work and after rejecting the idea of a bulldog came up with a lion, World Cup Willie, that same afternoon. Hoyer produced four images which were submitted to Dennis Follows, the FA Secretary, and the figure selected became World Cup Willie. Described as 'a lion with a Beatle haircut, a Union Jack jersey and an address somewhere in Yogi Bear's Jellystone Park' the character went on to become hugely popular. World Cup Willie could be found on all manner of merchandising from soft toys to t-shirts, bags, caps and even beer; singer Lonnie Donegan produced a pop hit 'World Cup Willie'; the character was everywhere and quickly entered the culture of British football; there was even a World Cup Willie Collectors' Club for a while.

Although World Cup Willie eventually faded from the scene, the venture was a commercial success for the FA and the character is still remembered today, over 40 years later. The concept of using a marketing character to promote major sports tournaments was new, but is one that has been replicated many times since. In 1968 the Winter Olympics was blessed with an unofficial mascot 'Schuss' a little man on skis and every Games (summer from 1968, winter from 1976) and World Cup tournament since has had its own mascot or, these days, group of mascots.

World Cup Willie also had a significant impact on the commercial side of domestic soccer as clubs realised that there was money to be made from merchandising. At least two clubs, Birmingham City and Sheffield Wednesday, followed the path taken by the FA and employed Walter Tuckwell to produce club mascots. Both were linked to specific campaigns. At Birmingham this was the 'Rebirth of the Blues' campaign launched by new club chairman Clifford Coombes in the summer of 1966. Plans to develop a mascot were



announced in August but it was not until October that the character of Beau Brummie appeared, partly because the firms producing merchandising items were still trying to clear the backlog of orders for World Cup Willie items. The following January Sheffield Wednesday launched Ozzie Owl, coinciding with the club's centenary celebrations; it is perhaps of significance that Dr Andrew Stephen was both chairman of Wednesday and of the Football Association, and would have been aware of the commercial rewards that the venture might produce. Club shops, previously perhaps little more than a kiosk selling programmes, tickets for away games and badges, were transformed into boutiques selling all manner of items. By January 1969 Birmingham City's Beautique was offering around 40 separate items for sale ranging from ballpoint pens and scrapbooks to tankards and ash trays. There were two records ('Keep Right On' and 'Home & Away'/'Good Old Brummagem') and the Beaunanza Monthly Magazine.

Over the next two or three years many clubs followed in their wake: Aston Villa launched Clarrie Blue the Villa Villain, based on a design by local newspaper cartoonist Norman Edwards, Coventry employed a promotion artist to produce Sky Blue Sam, whilst others relied on the outcome of competitions in the local press or in the club programme. Few of these characters remain, although two notable figures from this era are The City Gent (Bradford City) and Toby Tyke (Barnsley). Many others fell by the wayside including Avenue 'Arry (Bradford Park Avenue), Turfy Topper (Burnley), Tangerine Tommy (Newport County) and Prince Val (Port Vale). The characters were generally introduced with laudable aims, but often there seemed little in the way of ideas on how to develop these. This is how Coventry announced the arrival of Sky Blue Sam: "We felt the need for something – a lovable, jovial character – who would bind our followers into one big happy family. It had to be something that could easily and readily be identified with Coventry City Football Club ... We looked for something that would be synonymous with the Sky Blues and acceptable everywhere. Yet it had to be a character-figure that was not a "softy" and at the same time would be one with a certain amount of charm. It had to be easily animated, and like so many cartoon characters, one who could get up to mischief without offending anyone." (Coventry City programme, August 1969)

Those characters that were successful were linked to sustained and clear plans for marketing, but also became quickly accepted by the supporters. Birmingham and Sheffield Wednesday were not only two of the earliest clubs to adopt mascots but they employed a successful company with a proven record (Walter Tuckwell) to carry out the work and launched with a clear campaign in mind which could be used to market products. One of the other early successes, Bradford City's 'City Gent', may have been due to the fact that the club chairman, Stafford Heginbotham, was a toy manufacturer outside of football and would have had better knowledge than most club officials on how to use the character to best effect. Why did so many of these characters disappear so quickly? In some cases it is apparent there was no clear marketing plan (Coventry), in some cases the club entered a decline in fortunes on the field (Aston Villa), in other cases the character was not one that readily appealed to a mass audience (Prince Val springs to mind here). Some disappeared only to return much later on in their modern incarnation, as is the case with Sky Blue Sam. These early characters existed as figures on badges and other items of merchandising but not as 'real life' figures. There may have been a life-sized cardboard cut out but these were inanimate objects which were there purely to boost the marketing potential of clubs. Gradually the characters were dropped, although a hardy few remained until the late 1980s when the modern trend towards furry creatures began.

Every Football League or Premiership club is now a major commercial enterprise. Indeed each now has its own store, some of these being of near supermarket size. Many Premiership clubs have stores both in the town centre and attached to the ground and merchandising has become a significant source of income for them. World Cup Willie, the daddy of them all, so to speak, is responsible in his own way, both for the numerous mascots that appear linked to seemingly every major sporting tournament and for the expansion of merchandising and marketing within football – a significant legacy.

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