

From the Outside: Traditionally Speaking
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By Rick Snee

Tradition: it's the one aspect of college that alumni hold most sacred. Tradition in college is rooted in a series of images that allow students to participate in the institution's culture. These are the adoption of mascots, the wearing of certain colors and participation in official college events, such as Homecoming, the Highlander Festival or—until two years ago—Quadfest.

After spending four—or often more—years at a university, we want to think that, somehow, our alma mater will be the same place we left. We realize, of course, that all places change in time, but the idea of tradition and homecoming is rooted in an idea that we can always return to that place where we experienced our firsts: the first home away from parents, the first keg party, the first serious relationship, etc. And alumni want to bring new friends and family with them so they can get an idea of why we became the flawed and/or tempered adults they now know.

Returning to last week's metaphor, alumni rarely realize that we're the walking dead as far as current students have designated us. Homecoming, as a tradition, gives us the chance to relive some glory days, and also look around and say, "Wow, these kids look so young!" and other zombie babble. As in *The Sixth Sense*, us old-timers on The Outside need you kids on The Inside to help us realize that our sole value to RU is to become accomplished professionals so we donate funds or become famous examples of why RU works; that's the grim secret of homecoming.

As usual, there is a method to my madness here. Tradition has held at this university and others that next weekend would be our Homecoming, that chance to realize that, yes, our former home has continued to go on without us and will continue to do so. It's that moment from *Born Free*—or any other children-with-wild-animals story—where the fully grown lion turns back to the child that raised them before being tearfully admonished to "go on now: you're free." Unfortunately, this tradition has been postponed until February, that frigid time of year when smokers shiver outside to bitch about Valentines Day.

Tori Rhodes ('05)—a.k.a. Tori Pinner before she got married—wrote:

No, I will NOT be attending the Homecoming in February because one, it a bad time of the year for me to visit with my work schedule, and two, why would I want to drive 5 hours to watch a basketball game when most of the time it nothing but cold and rainy during that time of the year at Radford? And possibly ICE or SNOW! [...] Homecoming for whatever school you attend is always in the FALL, not the DEAD OF WINTER [emphasis hers].

Ashleigh Cadieux ('07) wrote:

Homecoming is meant to be at the beginning of the year (when students are coming 'home'), so February doesn't make much sense. I also think that Highlander Fest will have less of a turn-out with alumni if homecoming doesn't coincide.

Admittedly, RU's administration is not postponing Homecoming to intentionally slight alumni, curb attendance or delay that necessary step to realize that we don't belong at college anymore. Their official motive is to foster a new tradition: supporting our basketball teams. It's an understandable move: they

want RU to be just like their big brother, Virginia Tech, whose traditions center exclusively on their football team. Since we don't have a football team, the idea is to go the route of Duke University, who likes to pretend their perennially losing football team doesn't exist, and become a basketball school.

The flaw in this plan is that we have never been a sports school, especially a "basketball school." The only sport we have embraced, rugby, is the one sport that the administration has routinely ignored as a club sport, even though it is the most attended, followed and successful sport at RU. (Adopting it as an officially sponsored RU sport even satisfies the Title 9 argument as there are men's and women's teams.)

As Meredith Knight ('05) wrote, rugby could be just the sport to carry our Homecoming:

One year at homecoming, our National Winning Rugby team played against alumni, which was an excellent experience.

Rugby even fits in with our mascot the Highlander, as it is traditionally associated with the universities of England, Ireland, Wales, Australia, New Zealand and, oh yeah, Scotland. But the traditional Highlander mascot might have to share the spotlight soon.

We were recently reintroduced to Rowdy Red, or as Warner Bros. fondly recalls/trademarked: Gossamer, the big, hairy red monster that tried to kill Bugs Bunny and Duck Dodgers. Rowdy Red is a marginal figure from RU tradition, that dark age of the 1980s that none dare speak about. Apparently, he is related to the Radford Rowdies basketball enthusiast club (which is startlingly similar to another Scottish sports tradition: hooliganism), but no one is really sure which came first and inspired the other. The point is that Rowdy gracefully stepped off the court when the first Highlander mascot appeared because one fits with our Scottish-flavored tradition, and one (Rowdy) don't.

As Pinder put it:

What the heck is a Rowdy Red? Why would someone want to go to a school not knowing what a Rowdy Red is supposed to be? I went to Radford as a Highlander, and I think we should stay the Highlanders!

And Kevin Rhodes ('07) argued with this stirring speech that would make William Wallace weep:

Highlanders are fierce warriors. Red kind of symbolizes anger, I guess, but it just isn't the same. A Highlander eats red meat and throws heavy objects for fun. He shuns traditional armor because it hampers the swing of his mighty claymore. Red is the color of a college student's bank statement. Red, in the case of Radford's former mascot, is best personified as a muppet with a hat. William Wallace and Duncan MacLeod are Highlanders. Kim Jong Il and Carrot Top are Reds. Long live the Highlander. (And make no mistake: there is no room for compromise. There can be only one!)

Granted, the Highlander mascot's Scottishness has been called into question from time to time, but support for it is still overwhelming as Bryan McBournie ('05) writes:

Rowdy had a place in the past, but no more. We're not the Reds; then again, we're not the Horned, Shaven Homosexuals, either. The Highlander is almost totally inaccurate in

terms of Scottish culture. The point is, when it comes to mascots, there can be only one.

Often, the original the Highlander had a crisis of nationality, as Shannon Scott ('07) wrote:

When I first came, we had the Viking-type mascot, and I thought that was pretty cool. Ya know, a big muscled-up mascot who looked like he could kick the crap outta the opposition. That's what Highlanders should do, and I'll admit, I was a bit upset when they changed it to the current mascot. But even then, it still represented RU, and that's what's ultimately important. That Rowdy Red thing...no, doesn't work for me.

Rowdy Red is a contested figure because he represents another confrontation over tradition: our official school colors. Traditionally, the McFarlane tartan is the designated plaid of our school. Listed separately, the colors sound like Technicolor vomit: red, blue, purple, green and white, which explains subsequent confusion and selectiveness when designing licensed banners, t-shirts and thong underwear.

But how acceptable is red and white for a college? They're so acceptable that listing all of the other colleges that use them would put this article over Whim's word count (1500 words) by at least three articles. They're so acceptable that these are the official colors of Alabama, England, Switzerland, Canada, Japan and the International Red Cross. In other words, so acceptable that, by muting the McFarlane tartan to these colors, we will officially be like everyone else, which would be a major PR nightmare for a school trying to competitively stand out.

But, perhaps that is how RU traditionally "stands out." This school has been overhauled countless times over the past 100 years. During that time we've increased in size, become co-ed, changed mascots and colors and are still, somehow, Virginia Tech's little pierced and tattooed art major sister.

So perhaps, as Cadieux also wrote, "[RU] needs to do whatever it takes to heighten school spirit, [and] if that means changing the mascot, so be it."

Right or wrong, alumni and current students are opposed to changing the mascot and colors because, as stated earlier, those were our means to identify with RU. We were proud to be Highlanders, but the majority of us apply that label in the past tense. But, as the beehive on the school seal demonstrates, not all images last forever, and it is unlikely that the class of 2020 will care if RU Catering doesn't wear kilts anymore.

In other words, yes, we have every right to be upset that the traditions we've held dear are disappearing, as we want to share those experiences with the next classes to graduate from RU. But there's a more selfish reason, too: now that we're in the big scary Outside, it's reassuring to think that the school and traditions we left behind will still be—to paraphrase Richard Marx—right there, waiting for us.

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