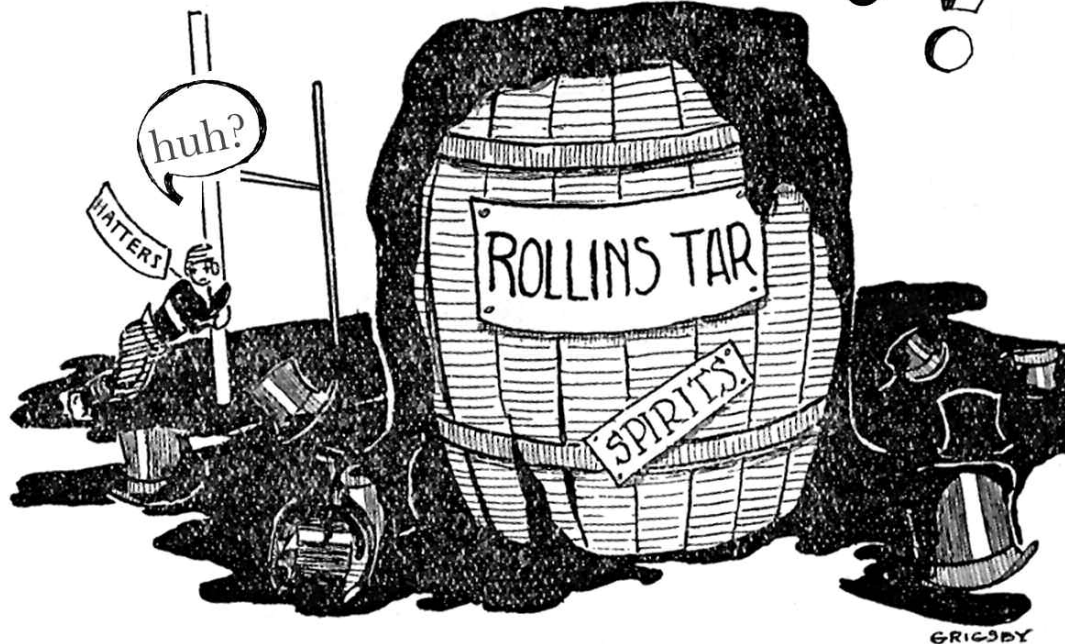


What's a TAR?!

By Bobby Davis '82



It's an age-old question uttered countless times by first-year Rollins students and their parents, not to mention athletic opponents and their fans: what's a Tar?

The Rollins community has often grappled with this singular symbol of its identity, and last year, as the College undertook an initiative to strengthen its image, the obscurity of its nearly century-old mascot led College administrators to ponder another question: should we trash the Tar?

There are other unusual collegiate athletic nicknames—the Salukis, Billikens, Banana Slugs, Anteaters, Horned Frogs, Poets, Hatters (our neighbors at Stetson), and even the Fighting Okra of Delta State—names that however silly somehow make sense. The “Tar” is most certainly unique—no other institution of higher learning has adopted it as its mascot. North Carolina comes closest with its Tar Heels, but “Tar Heel” is a nickname of long standing for denizens of that state, reportedly springing from a description of its soldiers' refusal to run from battle, while “Tar” has

no clear connection to a small town in Winter Park or a college on the shore of a lake. Are there tar pits in Winter Park, like the La Brea Tar Pits of Los Angeles, one might wonder? Is asphalt highly prized by the natives of Central Florida? Uncertainty abounds—at least for those who don't do crossword puzzles regularly.

For the record, “Tar” is a traditional nickname for the sailors of the British Empire, the “Jolly Jack Tars” who ruled the ocean waves, defeated the Spanish Armada, prevailed against Napoleon's navy at Trafalgar, and served as the proud forebears of our own national Navy. [1] For the purposes of athletics, “Tar” conveys the requisite qualities of aggressiveness, indomitable spirit, and power, with a certain jauntiness thrown in that seems to fit Rollins. No reptilian Moccasins or mythological Tritons for us; Rollins alumni sail our lives with the wind at our back and a boundless horizon before us, and we know how to survive the occasional hidden reef or violent storm. We're Tars on the Seas of Fate.

[1]

Though “Jack Tar” originally applied only to those men who worked the highest reaches of the rigging, over time it referred to all deep-water sailors. These sailors used tarpaulin, a canvas permeated with tar, to cover and seal deck hatches to protect cargo. Tarpaulin was also used to make windproof clothes for these men working in rigging in nasty weather. In addition, sailors slathered tar on the rigging to protect it from the elements, and even on their long hair to keep it in place. The large square collar, or bib, you see on sailor suits protected the sailors' uniforms from the tar in their hair.

Where Did the Tar Come From?

The use of “Tar” as Rollins’ athletic nickname and mascot begs the question, however: whence did it come? Lake Virginia is lovely, and the Atlantic Ocean is an hour’s drive away, but how did the eponymous English mariner become the symbol of the College?

The irony, as Special Assistant to the President Steve Neilson noted, is that “there never was a concrete decision made by anyone to adopt the Tar as

[2] The United States was sorely unprepared for World War I, and decrepit whaleboats were probably the best the Navy could provide for training the sudden influx of naval volunteers. These boats, the article went on, “after lying for several years, abandoned and rotting on the shore near the old boat house, were finally burned, much to the delight of Chase Hall and the disgust of the Winter Park Fire Department.”

our symbol and mascot; it just sort of evolved over time and took on a life of its own.”

An article in the *Rollins Alumni Record* in March 1928 refers to “the [bygone] days when the Rollins Tars were actually ‘tars,’ and used to ply the oars and trim the sails on the three heavy old whaleboats that were donated by the Navy Department.” [2] “The days” referred to were in 1917, when Lake Virginia served as a small training center for sailors bound to protect cargo ships and fight German destroyers in World War I. Before 1917, Rollins’ athletic teams were known as the “Blue and Gold.” Only 10 male students remained at the College in 1917-18, so the lonely females left behind turned their attention to the snappily dressed sailors on board their ships in Lake Virginia. One coed jokingly referred to them as “Tars,” and the name stuck for the College’s athletic teams after the war.



A “Pictorial Presentation of the 1931 Football Season” features a cartoon of a ship named the “Rollins Jack Tar,” helmed by head football coach “Skipper [Jack] McDowall,” sailing through seas populated by sea monsters from rival schools. The cartoon’s caption—“Alumni!—Come Cheer the Rollins Mariners On!”—suggests that use of the mascot name wasn’t very consistent at the time.

The name was loosely applied as the years passed, even fading out almost entirely during the 1940s. In a revival effort, in 1956 President Hugh McKean ’30 ’72H saw fit to donate a new Rollins mascot, a Mexican burro named “Tar Baby.” (McKean started Fox Day that same year—a more successful innovation to enhance school spirit.) Tar Baby, who was named after the Uncle Remus story about Br’er Rabbit and the briar patch (though the name would

be considered objectionable today), spent most of his time grazing on the grass

of the Horseshoe in front of the old library, but occasionally was summoned to the gymnasium, baseball field, and crew course to stand and “cheer.” [3] The first official image of the Rollins Tar

appeared in April 1948, when Wanita Mutispaugh ’35, who had studied art with McKean when he was an art professor, submitted a sailor emblem as a possible Rollins symbol. [4]

With surprisingly little discussion, it was sanctioned as the official “Tar” image. Mrs. Mutispaugh’s illustration, however, was of an extremely rotund sailor in profile who looked

According to her son Dan ’76HH, Wanita Mutispaugh went on to become an accomplished artist who exhibited in the Winter Park Sidewalk Art Festival and elsewhere.



[3]

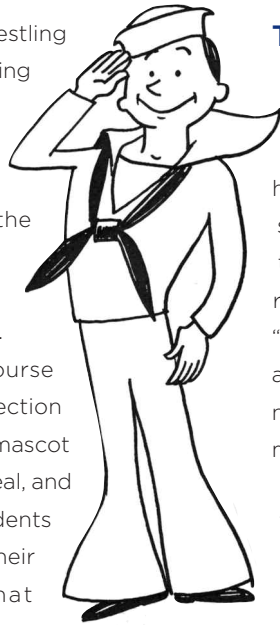
A whimsical Letter to the Editor of *The Sandspur* in 1958 from “Tar Baby” reveals the ludicrous reputation into which he had fallen. Tar Baby said he could no longer be found grazing the Horseshoe because not only did students throw balled up newspaper at him, and tease him at night, but they also painted the poor creature with “smelly, sticky paint.” An outraged President McKean moved Tar Baby to his ranch. Tar Baby did say he missed being bathed by the Pi Phis and taking part in the Alpha Phis’ Hell Week.

[4]

more suitable for a sumo wrestling team than any lean, mean fighting machine. Small wonder the Tar had little emotional resonance for students. Accordingly, in April 1965, the College officially adopted a “more trim and zestful” Tar that would stick around for decades.

Rollins set the Tar upon a course of permanence and even affection in the 1960s, reintroducing the mascot with the 1965 Annual Fund appeal, and through the '70s and '80s students seemed content to cheer on their sailor surrogates. During that time, the College's first “human” mascot appeared on the athletic scene—a creature with a big plastic head and eyes in the shape of anchors. Tony Lembeck '79 even wrote a College Fight Song called “We're the Tars,” [5] while Spike McClure '81 devised a chant similar to the song “YMCA,” using his body to spell out the letters for “TARS” at basketball and soccer games, to the delight of the crowds. [6] The Tar was actually kind of “cool” in the '70s. But so were Fonzi and mood rings and polyester leisure suits.

In 2005, the Tar received new personification in the form of “Tommy Tar,” a costumed mascot who is a sort of cross between Pop-eye and the Pillsbury Dough-boy. Tommy Tar isn't quite as popular as the San Diego Chicken, but he is a favorite with students at athletic and other College events.



Trashing the Tar

Over the years, the unusual and mysterious beginnings of the symbol and its desultory application and dubious connection to the College have led some to demand a change. Cheerleaders, it seems, have often borne the burden of defining a Tar to fans of rival teams, leading Carol Leff to set the record straight in a 1941 issue of *The Sandspur*. “Rollins ‘Tars’ cheerleaders have deplored the origin and nickname of the ‘Tars’ and hope to decrease the number of queries by sharing their find” about the mascot's origins, she said.

In the early 1990s, enough students found the Tar too meaningless or too objectionable that some began demanding change. On September 9, 1992, *The Sandspur* published an official “Trash the Tar”

entry form to be submitted to the Student Government Association. [7] “The Tar was a symbol of our past,” the writer argued, “of days when war ravaged the world. The Tar has become irrelevant within the context of our society. The teams with which we compete don't know what a Tar is, neither does half the Rollins student body, nor the surrounding Winter Park/Orlando community.” Nonetheless, the Tar weathered the storm.

In 1994, after the shopworn image of the Tar was replaced by a new, modernized logo that simply featured a stylized treatment of the word “Tars,” the SGA formed a committee to “re-evaluate the status of our mascot,” to find “a different, more spirited nickname.” According to a *Sandspur* article by Kim Hanisak '98, a significant

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McClure noted that he adapted his work from that of David Herbster '80 and Mark Xenakis '80, who performed a similar “R-O-L-L-I-N-S” cheer.

===== [5] =====

(Sorry, Tony, but in the interest of the historical record.)

ROLLINS FIGHT SONG

“Oh, we're the Tars of Rollins,
We're the mighty Tars of Rollins College,
Singing loud and feeling proud of our academy,
Our spirit is unending, our honor we're defending,
We want a victory.

“We're the Tars of Rollins College.
Gathering together to support those competing,
We will fight and scream and back our team,
Until the job is done.

“And when the battle is over, and the Tars have won,
We will sing a song for Rollins,
The mighty Tars of Rollins College.
We're always number one!”

—Tony Lembeck '79

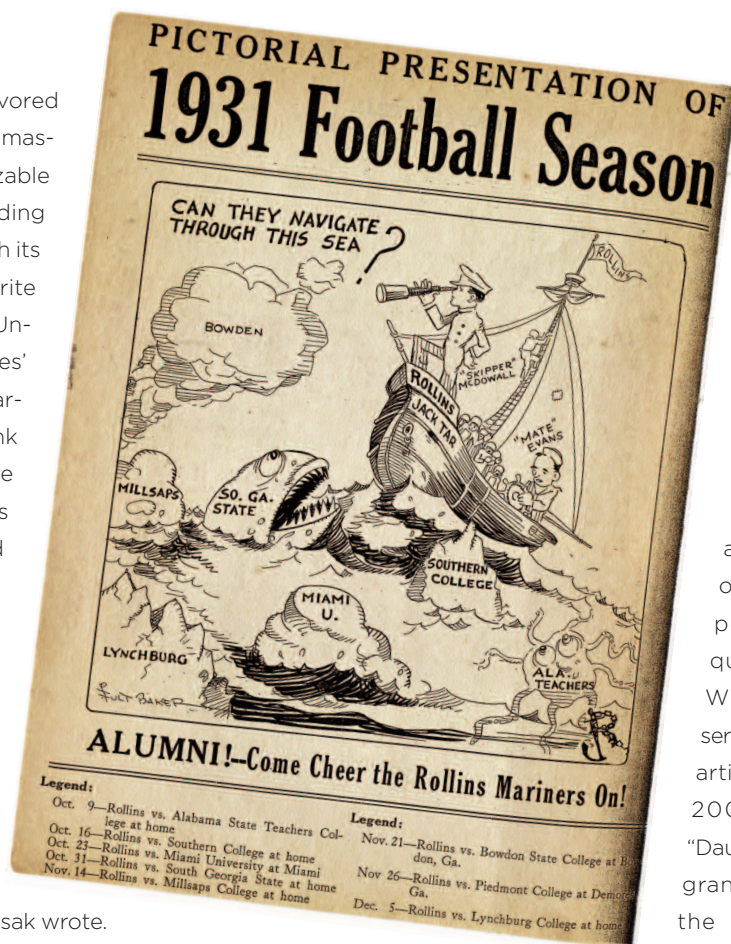


number of students favored changing the name and mascot to “Fox”—a recognizable icon with a longstanding history at Rollins through its connection to a favorite student holiday. [8] Understandably, the athletes’ feathers were ruffled. Varsity baseball player Frank DiGiovanni ’96 got all the members of his team as well as the men’s and women’s basketball teams to sign a petition against any change. Indeed, the petitioners were “disgraced at the idea that non-athletes are so willing to change the mascot that represents the athletic teams,” Hanisak wrote.

Some have deplored the militaristic connotations of the Tar. In 1994, Greg Mullins ’96 was quoted as saying, “Rollins no longer has any ties to the military” and “There is no reason to have a military mascot for a non-military school.” DeGiovanni countered: What’s so bad about honoring the military, which “exemplifies qualities essential for a winning team: organization, common goals, and teamwork”?

The fox dates back to the era of the venerable President Hamilton Holt (1925-1949), when statues of a cat and a fox were located at the site of today’s Alford Pool. The statues represented exclusive societies of elite students elected by the student body each year—four women to the Cat Society and four men to the Fox Society. Given the possibly sexist connotation of “Foxes” for female athletes, adopting the symbol of an exclusively male society might have added insult to injury.

Coordinator of Recreational Programs John Langfitt ’81MS was characteristically strong and humorous in his opinion: “A Tar is a fat little doughboy! We’re not a military school. We should use something



indigenous to Florida, like a Hammerhead. No one else has Hammerheads! We need something the students can have fun with and get excited about.”

The Tar has also fallen afoul of modern gender politics in some quarters. Susan Williams ’05HH asserted in a *Sandspur* article on Halloween 2003, addressing “Daughters and great-grand-daughters of the feminist movement...all female voters,

athletes, authors, actors,” etc., that “There is no such thing as a Lady Tar.” (In the past, it was common for collegiate athletic teams to append “Lady” to the traditional mascot; the University of South Carolina Gamecocks female athletes have been called the “Lady Gamecocks,” for example.) And Ms. Williams is right: there were no female sailors in the Royal Navy, and the official Rollins image is certainly male.

“It bothers me just a little bit,” she said, “that upholding tradition and history outweighs taking pride and ethical responsibility to reflect a sense of equality on this campus.” Those who would change the

mascot must do so in light of feminist sensibilities about the portrayal of women. Can the male Tar be stretched to represent Rollins women students and athletics?



Students in 1992 were asked to bring their “Trash the Tar” entries to the *Sandspur* office and the top three entries would receive tickets to see the rock band They Might Be Giants. In contrast, students in a 2008 survey were solicited on Zoomerang.com to respond electronically and be entered into a drawing for a free iPhone.





New Image, New Attitude

In light of the Tar's ongoing identity crisis, in 2008, as part of the larger aim of an institutional re-branding, President Lewis Duncan charged a committee led by Neilson with exploring a comprehensive change in the College's mascot. Students, faculty, staff, and alumni were asked to weigh in on the issue, and they didn't hold back. While a number of interesting alternative mascot ideas were proposed—some amusing (Rhinos, Rastamen, Fire Ants, Gopher Tortoises) and a few that racked up enough votes to be worthy of consideration (Foxes, Suns, Mariners, Lakers, and Raiders)—in the end tradition won out and the Tar prevailed—albeit in significantly altered form.

Welcome to the new Tar-nation.

Our humble sailor, haphazardly originated and for a long time cartoonishly delineated, will

now take his place on the world stage in his new millennial uniform as part of the College's redefinition of its image for the 21st century. With the help of a collegiate athletic branding agency, the "new," more authentic Tar came on board this fall, complete with companion logos that now adorn the Warden Arena floor. The rest of the Rollins community appears to be on board as well. Already, students sporting their new Tars T-shirts have become a common sight on campus. As for Tommy Tar—fortunately, his life has been spared, although he will undergo a slight makeover.

And so, after all the criticism and good-natured mockery, the hardy 18th-century sailor remains anchored in our tradition, alive to sail the Good Ship Rollins on the seas of a new century.

We are the Rollins Tars. ■

"A BRITISH TAR"

Ralph, Boatswain & Carpenter.
A British tar is a soaring soul,
As free as a mountain bird,
His energetic fist should be ready
to resist
A dictatorial word.

His nose should pant and his lip
should curl,
His cheeks should flame and his
brow should furl,
His bosom should heave and his
heart should glow,
And his fist be ever ready for a
knock-down blow.

Ralph, Boatswain & Carpenter.
His eyes should flash with an
inborn fire,
His brow with scorn be wrung;
He never should bow down to a
domineering frown,
Or the tang of a tyrant tongue.

His foot should stamp, and his
throat should growl,
His hair should twirl, and his face
should scowl;
His eyes should flash, and his
breast protrude,
And this should be his
customary attitude.

— Gilbert & Sullivan,
HMS Pinafore (1878)

