

LSU's Live Tiger Mascot, Mike VI

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Mike the Tiger, the famed live Bengal Tiger serves as the graphic image of all LSU athletic teams, resides between Tiger Stadium and the Pete Maravich Assembly Center.

In 2005, a new environment (gallery) was created for Mike that is 15,000 square feet in size with lush planting, a large live oak tree, a beautiful waterfall and a stream evolving from a rocky backdrop overflowing with plants and trees. The habitat has, as a backdrop, an Italianate tower - a campanile - that creates a visual bridge to the Italianate architectural vernacular that is the underpinning of the image of the entire beautiful LSU campus. This spectacular new habitat features state-of-the-art technologies, research, conservation and husbandry programs, as well as educational, interpretive and recreational activities. It is, in essence, one of the largest and finest Tiger habitats in the United States.

Mike's ride through Tiger Stadium before home games in a cage topped by the LSU cheerleaders is a school tradition. Before entering the stadium, his cage on wheels is parked next to the opponent's locker room in the southeast end of the stadium. Opposing players must make their way past Mike's cage to reach their locker room.

Tradition dictates that for every growl elicited by Mike before a football game, the Tigers will score a touchdown that night. For many years, Mike was prompted to roar by pounding on the cage. Objections of cruel punishment brought about the use of recorded growls to play to the crowd before the games. That practice was discontinued shortly afterward and, today, Mike participates in the pregame tradition without provocation.

The Tiger mascot stopped traveling with the LSU team in 1970 when his cage overturned on Airline Highway in an accident en route to a game. Mike IV traveled four times in recent years, though, as he appeared at a Mardi Gras parade in 1984, the 1985 Sugar Bowl and LSU's basketball games in the Superdome. Mike V made his first road trip in December 1991 to the Louisiana Superdome to witness the LSU men's basketball team with Shaquille O'Neal defeat Texas, 84-83.

In the mid-1980's, pranksters cut the locks on Mike IV's cage and freed him in the early-morning hours just days before the annual LSU-Tulane clash. Mike roamed free, playfully knocking down several small pine trees in the area, before being trapped in the Bernie Moore Track Stadium where police used tranquilizer guns to capture and return the Bengal Tiger to his home.

The incident was reminiscent of a kidnapping of Mike I many years ago by Tulane students before a Tiger-Green Wave battle.

MIKE VI

Birth date: July 23, 2005 (named "Roscoe")

Donated by: Great Cats of Idaville, Ind.

Heritage: Bengal/Siberian mix

Weight: approx. 300 lbs.; may reach 700 lbs. as an adult

Arrived in Baton Rouge: August 25, 2007

First Public Appearance: September 1, 2007

Designated as Mike VI: September 8, 2007

Thoughts of the state of Indiana may produce images of Bobby Knight, Peyton Manning, John Mellencamp or the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. In the minds of LSU supporters, the Hoosier State will now also be remembered as the source of the university's new live tiger mascot, Mike VI.

The two-year-old Bengal/Siberian mix, formerly known as "Roscoe," was donated to LSU last month by Great Cats of Idaville, Ind., a nonprofit sanctuary and rescue facility for big cats and other large carnivores. LSU veterinarian Dr. David Baker began the search for the young tiger after his predecessor, Mike V, died in May of renal failure at the age of 17.

"We were looking for a tiger that was suitable both in appearance and in temperament," Baker explained. "We wanted a tiger that was confident and not fearful. When this tiger first entered his enclosure on campus, there was no sign of fear or apprehension. This tiger is full of vigor and enthusiasm and affection. I expect that he will grow into an excellent mascot."

Mike VI arrived in Baton Rouge on August 25, and he was originally scheduled to be quarantined for two weeks in the "night house" of his habitat across the street from Tiger Stadium. However, the quarantine period was reduced to just one week after it became apparent to Baker that Mike had adjusted quickly to his new surroundings.

Mike VI was released into the outside portion of his habitat on September 1, making his first public appearance before a throng of adoring LSU fans. He was officially designated as the successor to Mike V on September 8, when LSU played host to Virginia Tech. Six days later, on Sept. 14, 2007, a ceremony was held to honor Mike V and dedicate the habitat to Mike VI (photos).

"Think of a 10-year-old boy who has been moved from away from his family into completely new surroundings, and it gives you an idea of what this tiger has experienced," Baker said. "It can be extremely stressful; however, he remained completely healthy during his quarantine period and has adjusted very well to life at LSU."

The university does anticipate that Mike VI will attend some home games this season as he becomes more comfortable with his new environment. For the moment, fans can admire the great cat's power and grace as he playfully roams about his habitat.

"I would describe him as awesome," Baker said of Mike VI, "and that's a word I don't use very often."

MIKE V

Mike V was donated by Dr. Thomas and Caroline Atchison of the Animal House Zoological Park in Moulton, Ala. Avid LSU supporter Charles Becker, a member of the LSU booster group the Tammany Tigers, put Dr. Sheldon Bivin of the LSU School of Veterinary Medicine in touch with the Atchisons. Bivin traveled to Alabama and brought the baby tiger back to Baton Rouge. Born Oct. 18, 1989, the new tiger was introduced to LSU fans at a basketball game against Alabama in February of 1990. He officially began his reign on April 30, 1990, when he was moved into the tiger habitat across from Tiger Stadium. Mike V died on May 18, 2007, at the age of 17.

MIKE IV

Mike IV reigned over Tiger athletics for 14 years after being donated to the school by August A. Busch III from the Dark Continent Amusement Park in Tampa, Fla., on Aug. 29, 1976. Born on May 15, 1974, Mike's age and health were determining factors in his retirement to the Baton Rouge Zoo in 1990. The centerpiece of the Zoo's cat exhibit, Mike weighed in at 500 pounds. His only hiatus from the LSU campus before 1990 was the summer of 1981 which he spent at the Little Rock Zoo while his cage was being refurbished. Ironically, the Little Rock Zoo was the birthplace of Mike I. Mike IV died of natural causes in March of 1995 at the age of 21.

MIKE III

Just in time for the 1958 national championship season, Mike III was purchased from the Seattle Zoo following a "national search" by then-athletics director Jim Corbett. The student body contributed \$1,500 for the purchase of the tiger. Mike III served as mascot for 18 seasons, dying after the only losing season of his reign as LSU posted a 5-6 record in 1975.

MIKE II

Mike II served a brief reign, lasting only the 1957 season, before dying of pneumonia in the spring of 1958. He was born at the Audubon Park Zoo near the Tulane campus in New Orleans.

MIKE I

In 1936, the original Mike was purchased from the Little Rock Zoo for \$750, with money contributed by the student body. Originally known as "Sheik" at the time of his purchase, his name was changed to Mike for Mike Chambers who served as LSU's athletic trainer when the first mascot was purchased. Chambers had played football at Illinois where he blocked for the legendary Red Grange.

The first Mike was housed in the Baton Rouge Zoo for one year before a permanent home was constructed near Tiger Stadium. Mike I reigned for 20 years before dying of pneumonia in the midst of a six-game LSU losing streak in 1957.

Fearing the LSU faithful would give up hope upon the death of the mascot, Mike's death was not made public until the Tigers finally ended the losing streak.

LSU's Mascot

The live Bengal Tiger whose habitat lies across the street from Tiger Stadium has been a part of the LSU tradition since the early days of athletics in Baton Rouge (Nov. 21, 1936). Meanwhile, his two-legged furry costumed counterpart that stalks the sidelines of LSU athletics events has been on campus since the 1950s.

Mike travels throughout the country with many of the Tiger teams, while also making public appearances to promote LSU athletics in Baton Rouge and surrounding communities.

Mike was named "Most Collegiate Mascot" at the UCA Collegiate Camp held on the campus of the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa both in 2002 and 2003.

Mike appears in television commercials annually, including an ESPN College Football Game Day commercial, and ESPN Sports Center commercial featuring Mike being rescued from a tree by former LSU great Shaquille O'Neal, and an advertisement for Tippen Motor Homes.

The Nickname: "Fighting Tigers"

Way back in the fall of 1896, coach A.W. Jeardeau's LSU football team posted a perfect 6-0 record, and it was in that pigskin campaign that LSU first adopted its nickname, Tigers.

"Tigers" seemed a logical choice since most collegiate teams in that year bore the names of ferocious animals, but the underlying reason why LSU chose Tigers dates back to the Civil War.

According to Arthur W. Bergeron, Jr., PhD. and the "Guide to Louisiana Confederate Military Units, 1861-1865" (LSU Press, 1989), the name Louisiana Tigers evolved from a volunteer company nicknamed the Tiger Rifles, which was organized in New Orleans. This company became a part of a battalion commanded by Major Chatham Roberdeau Wheat and was the only company of that battalion to wear the colorful Zouave uniform. In time, Wheat's entire battalion was called the Tigers.

That nickname in time was applied to all of the Louisiana troops of Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. The tiger symbol came from the famous Washington Artillery of New Orleans. A militia unit that traces its history back to the 1830s, the Washington Artillery had a logo that featured a snarling tiger's head. These two units first gained fame at the Battle of First Manassas on July 21, 1861. Major David French Boyd, first president of LSU after the war, had fought with the Louisiana troops in Virginia and knew the reputation of both the Tiger Rifles and Washington Artillery.

Thus when LSU football teams entered the gridiron battlefields in their fourth year of intercollegiate competition, they tagged themselves as the "Tigers."

It was the 1955 LSU "Fourth-Quarter Ball Club" that helped the moniker "Tigers" grow into the nickname, "Fighting Tigers."

Thanks to Arthur W. Bergeron, Jr., PhD., a historian at the Pamplin Historical Park, for contributing to the above information.