

Every year since 1958, one or two students have served as the face of OSU at sporting events, groundbreakings, birthday parties and weddings. Yet, we'd probably never recognize them on the street. We rarely see their faces. These are the students who portray America's greatest mascot: **Pistol Pete**.



BEING PISTOL PETE

Story by **Kristen McConnaughey**
Photos by **Phil Shockley**

Two students are selected each year

to bring Frank “Pistol Pete” Eaton to life.

The former U.S. marshal served as a living mascot for Oklahoma A&M from 1923 until his death in 1957.

In 1958, Charlie Lester was the first student to actually wear a head modeled after Eaton. In the 54 years since the first paper mache head was constructed, the image of Frank Eaton has blossomed into one of America’s most recognizable mascots.

Between 10 and 15 students try out for the mascot every summer, each with hopes of leading the Boone Pickens Stadium crowd in OSU cheers and chants during the upcoming football season. A panel of former Pistol Petes judges the annual tryouts.

Rick Wilson, a 1986 management graduate, was the first Pistol Pete named an All-American Mascot. Except for a few years, Wilson has been judging the tryouts since he graduated.

“We’re looking for someone who has the ability to connect with people,” says Wilson, who served as Pistol Pete from 1984-1986.

“When you’re Pete, it’s important you not only connect with those who are close by, but also that you’re able to connect with the guy who is at the top of the football stadium or basketball arena. That’s a characteristic not everybody has the ability to do.”

FINDING THE PERFECT PETES

The selection process includes an interview and the candidate showing how he can act as Pistol Pete with the mascot’s head on. Wilson says the interview is the most important part of the process.

“That’s when we’re going to find out who this student is and why they are here,” Wilson says.

“Your bubble is a little off-center if you’re trying out for Pete in the first place,” he says. “There’s a lot of guys who can put the head on and go out there, but they don’t have the character and maturity to be able to handle the position.”

Wilson was chosen to be Pistol Pete after trying out only once. In his interview, Wilson talked about his farming background.

“I wanted it,” Wilson says. “I had to have it, and I was going to do everything in my power to convince them.”

Wilson’s passion for OSU’s mascot can be traced to an interaction he had as a 5-year-old with Pistol Pete at a wrestling dual.

“I went down to get Pistol Pete’s autograph, and he had gone over to the side to take a break,” Wilson says.



Pistol Pete hopefuls gather at Gallagher-Iba Arena at the base of the statue of the man they hope to portray. Between 10 and 15 people attend tryouts each summer, often preparing months in advance.

“He asked me, ‘Do you want to put the head on?’ and I said, ‘Absolutely,’” Wilson recalls. “He picked the head up and lowered it down to my shoulders, and he held it up so it wouldn’t knock me over. I was on top of the world.”

Wilson says when he became Pete, he wanted to remember that moment every time he had an event.

“Every time I put the head on, I’m going to remember that 5-year-old little boy,” Wilson would tell himself. “Because if I don’t, then I don’t respect it, and it becomes just another thing. Some guys don’t take it to that extreme, but I took it to that extreme because that’s how I saw Pete, and it all came back to that one wrestling dual in Gallagher 43 years ago.”

Not every candidate gets accepted after his first tryout. Jason Hynson, who served as Pistol Pete in 2002-2003, says it’s common for students to try out multiple times.

The Stillwater native served as the Peter Pioneer mascot during his senior year at Stillwater High School.

He tried out to be Pistol Pete as an OSU freshman, but the committee felt he was too young for the position. Summer scheduling conflicts prevented his selection following his second tryout, but in his case, the third time really was the charm.

“When I walked in to my third tryout, I told them, ‘This is my third year. I want this so much. My schedule is open, and I’m committed to being Pistol Pete.’”

(continues)

“Your bubble is a little off-center if you’re trying out for Pete in the first place.”

— Rick Wilson, former Pistol Pete

PISTOL PETES

1958-59	Charles Lester
1959-60	Bill Smith
1960-61	Curtis Manley & Bill Wehner
1961-62	Pete Fay & Dave Davis
1962-63	Ed Dobson
1963-64	Joe Sullivan & Gene Dorris
1964-65	Ed Dobson
1965-66	Phil Glasgow
1966-67	Steve Costello & Mitch Dobson
1967-70	Bill Johnson & Dale Clark
1970-71	Bill Ransdell & Ned Kessler
1971-72	Bill Ransdell & Richard Forshee
1972-73	Gary Bridwell & Mike Martin
1973-74	Joe Elsener & William E. Beckman
1974-75	Tom Bennett
1975-76	Mark Whitlaw
1976-77	Rick Dillard & John Michael Entz
1977-78	Rick Dillard & Wendall Hicks
1978-79	Dwain Gibson
1979-80	Scott Kirley & Kelley Green
1980-81	Kurt Carter & Don Giles
1981-82	Don Giles & Shane LaDuke
1982-83	Shane LaDuke & Rob Reynolds
1983-84	Rob Reynolds & Jesse Lancaster
1984-85	David Treece & Rick Wilson
1985-86	Rick Wilson* & Scott Petty
1986-87	Scott Petty & Scott Noble
1987-88	Lance Millis & Jack Franks
1988-89	Matt Ketchum & John Price
1989-90	John Price & Kent Walstad
1990-91	Billy Sigmon & Chris Moody
1991-92	Billy Sigmon & Trey Stewart
1992-93	Trey Stewart & Brad Chelf
1993-94	Vince Kirkes & Chris Carroll
1994-95	Vince Kirkes & Jeff Walls
1995-96	Ryan Stafford* & Cody Eden*
1996-97	Ryan Stafford* & Matt Ralls*
1997-98	Matt Ralls & Brock Allen
1998-99	Preston Williams* & Rhett Minson*
1999-2000	Rhett Minson & Rob Neville
2000-01	Wes Magill* & Joe Winchester*
2001-02	Tyler Mullman* & Stormy Phillips*
2002-03	Jason Hynson & Steven Sturgeon
2003-04	Josh Pulver*◊ & Jared Wiley*◊
2004-05	Josh Pulver*◊ & Jared Wiley*◊
2005-06	Brett Adkins* & Eric Stroud*
2006-07	Ryan Nickel*◊ & Cale Walker*◊
2007-08	Michael Harris*◊ & Ryan Nickel*◊
2008-09	Matt Barnes* & Rhys Gay*
2009-10	Derick Dillard* & Josh Bailey*
2010-11	Derick Dillard* & Wyatt Swinford*
2011-12	Jordan Northcutt*◊ & Taylor Venus*◊
2012-13	Austin Bowles*◊ & Dillon Craig*◊

* ALL-AMERICAN MASCOT
◊ MOST COLLEGIATE MASCOT



Hynson's plea and his audition won over the committee. Ultimately, he says his drive to serve as Pistol Pete kept him on track in college despite changing his major four times.

"I was sort of lost," Hynson says. "The only thing that felt consistent to me was to be Pistol Pete. Being Pistol Pete really helped me get my priorities straight and grow up during my college years."

WALK THE WALK: MIME THE TALK

Following the interview comes another big challenge — putting on Pistol Pete's head and getting into character.

"Putting the head on and being able to impress four or five older Petes is kind of the icing on the cake," Wilson says. "Everybody is Pete in their own way."

Those interested in attending the Pistol Pete tryouts usually start preparing months in advance.

Lance Millis, assistant director of the Student Academic Services in the College of Education, served as Pistol Pete from 1987-1988. Year after year, students come to him for advice on depicting OSU's mascot.

"Every time I meet with somebody I say, 'What you want to do is make sure you don't leave any question in their mind you're going to look right,'"

"I can't think of any other mascot that could represent our Cowboys and Cowgirls better or more proudly."

— Tracey Wittwer,
OSU Spirit coordinator

Pistol Pete is ready to fight as a mascot hopeful keeps the judges smiling during the annual tryouts to be America's greatest mascot.



says Millis, a 1988 recreation management and 1999 natural and applied sciences graduate.

“Once you put those 45 pounds on your head, you’re going to look bowlegged anyway,” he says, “but I have to remind some of the guys this is an old Cowboy you’re impersonating; bouncing around isn’t appropriate.”

Clinics are held the week before tryouts to let the students get familiar with the Pistol Pete head. Millis says pantomime was a fixture of the tryouts for years, and it appears to be making a comeback.

“I thought doing pantomime was a good idea because with Pete you can’t talk, so you have to show the judges and former Petes you can get across a point of story without using words,” Millis says.

“I think more focus is on the interaction with alumni and the necessity of providing a really good face for OSU in everything you do,” he says. “It’s not that it wasn’t important early on, it’s just become more important.”

Scott Petty, a 1988 public relations graduate, has been involved in judging the tryouts since moving back to Stillwater in 1995. He says three or four guys were asked to mime this year.

“It used to be that everyone did a mime,” says Petty, who served as Pistol Pete from 1985-1987.

“Asking a candidate to mime is more random today, and it really depends on how the interview goes. But it takes some special traits to be able to take that face and show happiness and disappointment.”

WORK ETHIC

The students chosen as Pistol Pete will make close to 600 appearances during their yearlong term. Pete is required to be at nearly every athletic event. Sometimes both students are on hand to relieve the other during extended durations in character.

Tracey Wittwer has served as the OSU Spirit coordinator for 13 years. She assists in the interview and selection process for OSU’s mascot and also manages the Petes’ schedules outside athletic events.

“Besides his normal appearances at university events, weddings and birthdays, Pete’s been asked to carry a newborn baby out of the hospital and to visit a seasoned fan in his last days,” Wittwer says.

“As an icon of OSU, every Pistol Pete must not only be mature, responsible and academically sound, but also comfortable in large social settings and good with time management.”


Even after a student serves as Pistol Pete for a year, Wilson says there’s no guarantee he’ll serve again if he applies, and the second interview is by no means easier.

“The second time I tried out was like going to the dentist,” Wilson says. “They did everything they could to get in my head, and I walked out thinking I wasn’t going to get chosen.

“They did it on purpose because they wanted to push me to become better than I already was. Just because you are Pete the first year doesn’t mean you’re going to be Pete the next year.”

The selection process and character requirements for being Pistol Pete might seem a bit extreme, but Wittwer says the process is necessary to ensure the legacy of OSU’s once-living mascot lives on.

“Pistol Pete is one of the few mascots that represents a real human being,” Wittwer says. “He is a symbol that automatically earns respect and even a little bit of healthy fear and intimidation.

“I can’t think of any other mascot that could represent our Cowboys and Cowgirls better or more proudly.” 



Scan this QR code or go to gopok.es/statef12 to view the video interview with Lance Millis.

