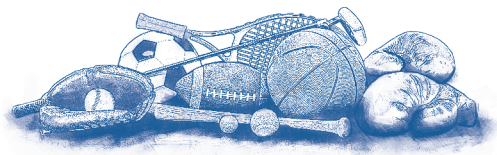


# UP FRONT



## WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA SPORTS MUSEUM

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### Fanimals

There has long been an association between the animal kingdom and sports. Bulldogs and Tigers, Cardinals and Orioles—early football and baseball teams often looked to the natural world for inspiration. Team names and their identity might be drawn from regional connections (the oriole is the state bird of Maryland and thus the Baltimore Orioles) or uniform colors (Princeton became one of the first teams to be known as the Tigers for the orange and black striped socks worn by players in the 1880s). These associations provided a personality for the team based on generally understood attributes of an animal, linked a new enterprise to its location, or developed a bond of loyalty with fans.

The factors that encouraged the University of Pittsburgh to choose the panther as their team mascot in 1909 illustrate this: panthers had once lived in the region and were known as fierce and noble animals; the golden color of panther fur aligned closely with the university colors of blue and old gold; no other competing institution used the panther as its mascot at the time; and the alliterative sound of Pitt Panthers had a nice ring to it!

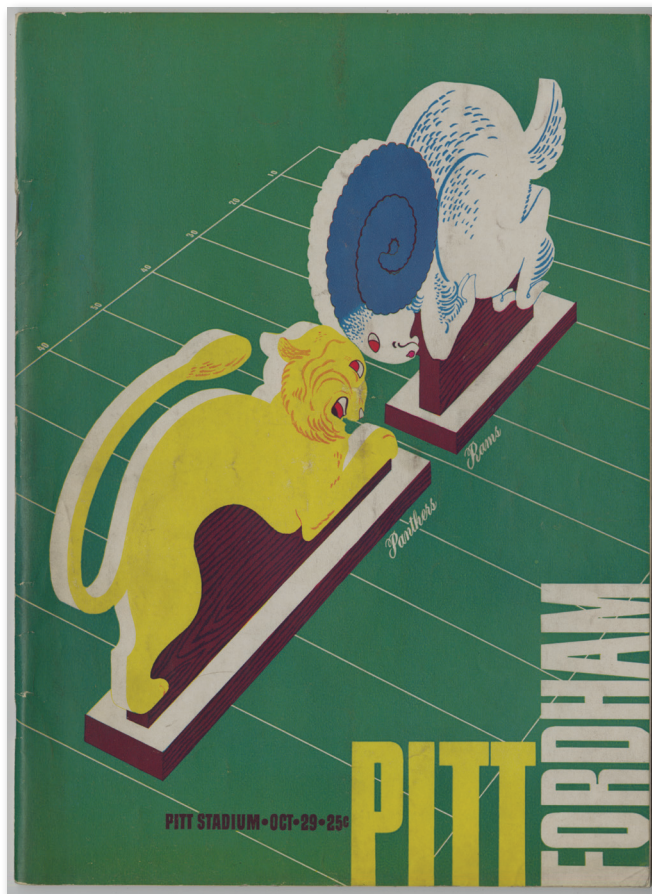
Pittsburgh's professional sports teams have also used animals to enliven their brand, engage fans, and sell merchandise. The Buccos, who used a pirate as part of their logo from

1934 until 2013, introduced a “pirate parrot” as their mascot in 1979. The previous year their cross-state rival, the Philadelphia Phillies, unleashed the Phillie Phanatic at games, so not to be outdone, the Pirates “hatched” the parrot. This oversized, costumed mascot has entertained fans in the stands and at events ever since.

With a team aptly named for a bird that can survive the cold of Antarctica, the Penguins have traded on their name from their inception. The Pens used the spectacle of a live animal on ice in their first season in 1967. A Humboldt Penguin nicknamed “Pete” led the team onto the ice at the start of each home game beginning in February 1968. Unfortunately, Pete succumbed to pneumonia in November of that year and died. The Pens

replaced him with “Re-Pete” for the 1971–72 season, but he failed to catch on with fans. During the 1992–93 season, the Penguins introduced their own costumed mascot, Iceburgh, who has interacted with fans on and off the ice ever since.

This relationship is not one-sided—in the early 1970s as the Steelers began to build a winning record, fan groups allied themselves with particular players. The most famous is probably Franco's Italian Army, a group of Italian Americans who began dressing in army helmets in support of rookie Franco Harris in 1972. A different club, Gerela's Gorillas, predates the Army by a year. A group of fans led by Bob Bubanic of Port Vue, PA, took a liking to the Canadian-born kicker Roy Gerela. Each Sunday they would show up, Bob dressed



Program for University of Pittsburgh vs. Fordham University, October 29, 1938.  
HHC Detre L&A, Sports Program Collection, gift of Faye Bradwick and Donald Lancaster.



**Penguin Pete, 1968.**

HHC Detre L&A.



**Iceburgh posing on the ice of PPG Paints Arena.**

Heinz History Center.



**Pudgie Wudgie in Steelers costume, c. 1990. Few cats had the patience of Pudgie, who posed in his Steelers uniform and glasses.**

HHC Detre L&A, gift of Frank Furko.

in a rented gorilla costume, hang signs, and beat their chests with pride whenever Gerela split the uprights.

Perhaps the most unusual four-legged fan did his best work from the parking lot. Plum resident Frank Furko adopted Pudgie Wudgie, an orange, male tabby kitten from the Animal Rescue League in 1986. He taught Pudgie tricks such as jumping through hoops, kicking a ball, and answering a small phone, that the cat loved to perform. Pudgie traveled everywhere

with Furko, riding on his own little platform in the front seat of Frank's truck and happily visited with people at schools, hospitals, and community fundraisers.

Furko, who lived on his family farm next to Oakmont Country Club, was an ardent sports fan, supporting his alma mater Plum High School and the professional teams in Pittsburgh. He took Pudgie Wudgie with him to tailgate at Steeler games. Pudgie happily wore his black and gold fan gear and visited

with the faithful in the parking lots outside Three Rivers Stadium. He attracted attention everywhere he went, often wearing one of the more than 250 costumes and hats from his collection at home. Though he passed away in 2001, Pudgie's story lives on in the Western Pennsylvania Sports Museum and in a giant mural visible from the Pennsylvania Turnpike. He is a reminder of the intersection of "fanimals" and sport and the long relationship between the natural world and athletics. 🌀