You Can’t Choo Nittany

Nickname Origins

By Stuart Kantor

Nicknames are an integral part of the lexicon of sports. Often, a nickname transcends the given name, and we, the fan, associate a particular player by his clever and descriptive moniker.

We know Walter Payton as *Sweetness*, Ed Jones as *Too Tall* and Willie Anderson as *Flipper*. We remember Franco scooping up a ricochet from Bradshaw to Fuqua off the Three Rivers' turf as the *Immaculate Reception*, and we decided, that like disco, there is no gray area when it comes to liking a franchise who bills itself as *America's Team*.

Yet, few of us know the stores behind the nicknames. How players, teams, plays, games and stadiums received their more colorful alternatives. So let's explore a few of the more interesting and appreciate not only the nickname, but how the name came into being.

How about Charlie *Choo-Choo* Justice?

In the North Carolina media guide, it states: "Charlie Justice was more than just a great football player. He was a bona fide superstar, a hero, a legend in his own time. He had an impact on his home state as no other athlete has ever had before … or since."

After a successful high school career in which Justice averaged 10 yards per carry, he entered the Navy in 1943. He played for a Bainbridge, MD. Team made up largely of pro players. It was here, not in college, that his famous moniker was bestowed upon him.

"We were playing in a game," Justice remembered, "and an officer was sitting in the stands with Paul Minton, the editor of the *Baltimore Sun*. The officer said, 'Look at that guy run. He looks like a runaway train. We ought to call him *Choo Choo*.' Minton picked it up and used it in the paper.

"That probably meant more to me, publicity-wise, than anything," Justice said in a story by Bob Gillespie that appeared in the September 3, 1988 issue of *Touchdown Illustrated*.

He entered UNC at 170 pounds. He also entered UNC at the right time, post-war, when the American public was starving for sports entertainment. From the get-go, Justice was a star. In his first start, he gained 102 yards rushing in a 14-14 tie with Virginia Tech. By the end of his freshman season, he had amassed 943 yards while passing for 274.

By the end of his senior season, his total offense amounted to 4,883 yards. He also averaged 42.6 yards per punt, and he led the Tar Hells to a 32-7-2 record, including three major bowls. "North Carolina had never been a winning team or a national power," he said. "They had never been to a bowl, and we went to three. Here I was, a native son, a mountain boy from Asheville, going to the state university and making good.

"And yeah, the nickname. Everybody seemed to like that."

Except the opposition and the Heisman voters.

In 1947, he was the runner-up to Johnny Lujack of Notre Dame, and in 1948, he was second-fiddle to SMU's Doak Walker. Yet he did have something none of the other college stars had: a song named after him. It was entitled *All The Way, Choo Choo*. Of the song, he said, "I thought the words were silly, but the tune was good."

And then there's William Alexander, *The Old Man* or *Captain of the Scrubs*.

Replacing a legend is never easy. You're scrutinized with endless comparisons so great the pressure would crack just about any man. Bill Alexander replaced the immortal John Heisman as the coach of Georgia Tech in 1920 at the tender age of 30.

A disciplinarian on the field, Alexander rooted loudly for the underdog; he believed "that the man was more important than the game." For this, his players affectionately called him *The Old Man*. For his undenying loyalty to players who simply tried, he influenced countless coaches who knew him and knew of him.

In response to his assistant coaches wanting to remove a player off the scholarship list for failing the varsity test, Alexander said, "Everyone of us coaches overestimated this boy's ability as a player. He never will be anything but a B-team man, but he does his best on the field and in the books. He never whines. He never quits. I want him tutored like he was a first-string player. I want him given an extra summer school course, if necessary, for him to graduate."

The role of underdog was nothing new to Alexander. He arrived on the Tech campus from Mud River, KY in 1906 ready to play for Coach Heisman. He never made the varsity, but he never quit trying. Out of respect, Heisman nicknamed him *Captain of the Scrubs*.

Alexander compiled a 134-95-15 record at Tech, in the process becoming the first coach to take his teams to the Rose, Sugar, Orange and Cotton Bowls, the then-equivalent of the "bowl grand-slam."

Said Bobby Dodd: "William Anderson Alexander was the finest man I have ever known. He taught me to treat athletes as men not boys, to never use their failings as an alibi for a loss."

Speaking of never quitting or letting an alibi stand in his way of success, we come to Robert Patrick Bleier, better known as *Rocky*. The son of an Appleton, Wisconsin bar owner, Bleier describes how he got his nickname in his autobiography, *Fighting Back*.

"Our living quarters were in the back section of the ground floor, just off the dining room … In my first few weeks, Dad would bring some of his customers back to the bedroom to take a peek at his son …

'" … Son of a bitch looks like a little rock,' my dad would whisper proudly.

"Then, about five o'clock in the afternoon, these same people would return to the bar for another couple boiler-makers, and they'd ask my dad, 'Hey, Bob, how was your kid today? You know, that little rock.'

"So I was *Rocky* before I ever departed the crib. And it stuck like epoxy."

Bleier was the 417th player drafted in the 1968 draft out of Notre Dame. Full of heart and the intangibles that make average football players stars, Bleier was the Steelers' inspirational leader throughout a career interrupted by a two-year call of service to Vietnam where he suffered injuries to his feet so severe his doctors worried about his being able to walk normally again, let alone play football.

Bleier fought back. U. S. #52861914 teamed with Franco Harris in the Steelers' offensive backfield on the road to four Super Bowl Championships. In those games, he carried the ball 44 times for 144 yards. For his career, he scored 23 touchdowns, rushed for 3,864 yards, and paved the way for Franco Harris with punishing blocks.

One of my favorite player nicknames belongs to Frank Hinkey, a.k.a. *The Disembodied Spirit*. I just love this nickname! Pure poetry in motion, albeit a touch macabre. To Walter Camp, who selected Hinkey as a four-time All-American end from Yale, he was poetry in motion; he "drifted through the interference like a disembodied spirit," said Camp.

Why such high praise?

Hinkey, who wore his hair long in the style of the day and was often likened to Hamlet, is often considered the greatest football player of his era. At only 157 pounds, when Hinkey tackled, he didn't just trip up a

runner at the ankles. No. When Hinkey tackled, he seemed to explode into the ball carrier. He became famous for seizing the ball carrier by the legs, lifting him up high above the earth and then slamming him to the ground in one punishingly fluid moment.

Hinkey personally destroyed Harvard's flying wedge. It was he, who in the 1892 matchup with Harvard, refused to let the wedge past the Yale 25-yard line. Said teammate Dr. Fred Murphy: "He could sift through any interference -- no matter how compact it was -- and get his man."

The origin behind team nicknames is fascinating as well. For years I knew Penn State was the *Nittany Lions*, but I never knew what *Nittany* meant. The only time I ever heard the word was in association with Penn State. So, how did Penn State become the *Nittany Lions*?

The *Nittany Lion*, as a symbol for PSU's athletic program, was the "idea of Harrison D. Mason '07. At Princeton in 1904, he and other members of Penn State's varsity baseball team were shown two Bengal tigers as an indication of the merciless treatment they would encounter in the game. Mason replied with an instant fabrication of the Penn State Nittany Mountain Lion -- the king of beasts -- who would overcome even the Tiger." PSU won and the *Nittany Lion* roared into the hearts of Penn State faithful.

Yet, what is a *Nittany Lion*?

Regional folklore attaches the name Nittany with two Indian maidens. From the PSU website, we learn that "the mythological Nita-Nee was a princess whose people reveres her for leading them into the fertile central Pennsylvania valley, safe from enemy tribes. When she died, the mountain miraculously arose overnight at the burial site, and the name thus was given to the geographical landmarks.

"Nita-Nee became a favored name for Indian girls, one of whom figures in another popular legend. She fell in love with a white trader who was forced to flee by her seven brothers. They drove him into a nearby cavern (Penn's Cave), where he died, crying out for his lost Nita-Nee."

Both legends are actually the creations of author / publisher Henry W. Shoemaker. His story of Nita-Nee and her lover Malachi Boyer, appeared in print in 1903. As well, he admitted the Indian names were "purely fictitious."

The cat used in PSU's logos is the North American mountain lion, a.k.a. a cougar or puma or panther. Brainy types know it as the *felis concolor*, a large "tawny-colored cat" that became extinct in the Happy Valley region around 1880.

A professional team with an interesting history is the New York Jets. From page 4 of the New York Jets' 1996 media guide: "On March 28, 1963, a five-man syndicate composed of David A. (Sonny) Werblin, Leon Hess, Townsend B. Martin, Donald C. Lillis and Philip H. Iselin purchased the New York *Titans* of the AFL for $1.

"Less than a month later, April 15th, Werblin, the team's president and CEO renamed the team the *Jets*. The reasons were two-fold. At the time, the U. S. was entering the 'space' or 'Jet Age.' Commercial airlines were filling the air and soon there would be men walking on the moon. Also, the Jets' new stadium, Shea Stadium, would be located in Flushing Meadows, NY between LaGuardia and Idlewild (later renamed JFK Airport) Airports."

So let's clear up one popular misconception: the *Jets* were not named to rhyme with the other local professional sports franchises, the baseball Mets and the basketball Nets.

As for the *Titans*, owner Harry Wismer's logic was, "What's bigger than a giant? A titan, that's what." Competing with the New York Football Giants would not prove easy. Crowds of 3,000 came to the see *Titans* play. Wismer announced the crowds as 12-18,000.

Titan linebacker Larry Grantham was a little more realistic about the crowd size. "They used to introduce the players over the loudspeaker, but you had the feeling that it was a waste of time and that you ought to run up into the stands and shake everyone's hand individually. The place (the Polo Grounds) was so empty that the players used to holler back and forth with their wives who were sitting in the upper stands."

Just how big was the *Titan's* front office? The entire operation was run from Wismer's apartment. "His living room was his business office. The coaches used the dining room and Ted Emory, the team's first publicist, used the butler's pantry. Unfortunately, his working area was so small that the mimeograph machine obstructed the bathroom door. Every time somebody needed a comfort break, Emory had to move everything. A single case of intestinal flu could have shut down the publicity department for a week."

Well, we all know *The Catch*, *The Drive*, the infamous *Hail Mary* and the *Immaculate Reception*. But how many of us remember *The Kick*? Since it happened in 1899, hopefully none of us would claim to having witnessed it in person.

But I must ask: Would you trust a man to kick the game-winning field goal if he'd never kicked a field goal in his life, not even in practice?

This is the decision Princeton Captain Bill Edwards wrestled with in 1899 as his Tigers trailed the Yale Bulldogs 10-6. A field goal would win the game -- they were worth five points in those days -- but all the Princeton kickers had been injured.

To the rescue, Arthur Poe, one of the *Six Little Poes of Baltimore* and one of the six football-playing great-nephews of the American poet / short-story great Edgar Allen Poe.

Poe tapped Edwards on the shoulder and said calmly, "I'll kick it." Edwards, understandably astonished, felt confident, for this was the same Poe who, in 1898, scored the winning touchdown against Yale by stealing the ball from the arms of a Bulldog back and returning it 98 yards.

"Poe's toe met the ball with a solid thud. The pigskin sailed straight between the goalposts." What Princetonians refer to as *The Kick* was Arthur Poe's second straight year of stealing victory from the jaws of defeat to rival Yale.

Quoth the Bulldogs, "Nevermore!" Arthur graduated in 1900.

Players, team names, plays … what about where the game is played? Specifically *Death Valley*, otherwise known as Clemson University's Memorial Stadium? Unless you're a Clemson fan, you might not have realized that *Death Valley* wasn't the real name!

Lonnie McMillian, a former coach at Presbyterian, dubbed the stadium *Death Valley*. He did so because his Presbyterian teams rarely scored against the mighty Tigers, let alone dream of victory.

"Once he told the writers he was going to play Clemson up at *Death Valley*. It stuck somewhat, but when Frank Howard started calling it that in the fifties, the term really caught on."

Since we're in the South, let's head down to Georgia and visit *The Flats*, the sobriquet for Georgia Tech's Grant Field. According to the sports information staff at Tech, references to the nickname *The Flats* date back as early as the 1920s. Why *The Flats*? Because in comparison to Tech Tower, which stands upon a hill, Grant Field lays on the flat part of the Tech campus. Sometimes it's that simple.

You know, before you play an actual game, you've gotta train. In the Falcons' infancy, 1966, the team trained at a Baptist retreat and camp in Black Mountain, N. C. Remote? Undoubtedly. Rustic? Without question. This is part of the reason why players called it *Camp Run Amuck*.

"Training camp was torturous and lasted two months." The food was so horrendous that, as *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* writer Jack Wilkinson wrote, "tackle Errol Linden gave his steak to his dog, Brutus, who wouldn't eat it. When camp finally broke, some players set fire to a wooden bridge at Blue Ridge."

Camp Run Amuck also described the Falcons' inaugural year. They started off 1-9 yet finished 3-11, tying Minnesota for the most wins by an expansion team to that point. As tight end Taz Anderson said, "Nobody expected anything, and we didn't disappoint 'em."

Our final stop on the nickname exploration trail is a term that's now part of the sports vernacular -- *taxi squad*. Art McBride, original owner of the Cleveland Browns, made his money through the ownership of several Cleveland-area taxicab companies in the 1940s. At this time, the NFL roster limit was 33 players.

Those players cut by the Browns were given jobs by McBride as taxi drivers. This allowed McBride to replace injured players immediately with well-skilled taxi drivers, thus an injured player was replaced with someone on the *taxi squad*. The term has since become synonymous with those on a reserve list.