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Passing the Torch

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Passing the Torch

As a new look for IWU's mascot debuted, past Tommy Titans recalled the joyful and occasionally wild times spent playing the role.

Story by **KIM HILL**

One of the most endearing symbols of IWU is Tommy Titan. The beloved mascot can be found at football games, orientation, Parents Weekend and even weddings — posing for photos, high-fiving admirers and, in general, spreading that distinctive Tommy Titan green over everything.

For the students inside the costume, portraying Tommy can be among the most indelible memories of their IWU experiences. Josie Linman '15 describes wearing the suit as the most extreme version of people-watching she can imagine.

“When you're inside the suit, you can see every expression people make and hear what they say, but of course they can't see my face to know what I'm feeling or thinking,” Linman said of her time as Tommy. “People assume because we aren't supposed to talk, we can't hear either. Most of the time when I was Tommy, I was dying laughing at what other people were doing.”

During her years portraying Tommy, Linman said the Homecoming gig was among her favorites. “These middle-aged alumni men would punch me on the arm, thinking I was a

guy, and yell, ‘Hey, are you a Teke in there? Maybe a FIJI?’ They had no idea I was a tiny girl.”

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Linman's Tommy suit was the same one that served the University for more than a decade. That get-up — seven and a half feet tall from Tommy's Sasquatch-sized feet to the top of the helmet — often made it hard for the wearer to fit through doorways. The head itself measured almost three feet in height and was so top-heavy, it usually fell off when the wearer bent over to talk to a child. A fan hooked up inside the suit stopped working a few years ago, making it so hot for the human inside it was nearly unbearable. Clearly, Tommy needed an upgrade.



Tommy Titan welcomed the young and young-at-heart at Homecoming 2015. The new Tommy outfit is designed to be easier for the wearer to maneuver.

The new Tommy debuted in September 2015. The suit was designed to be much easier for the wearer to maneuver. An iconic moment occurred at Homecoming when two University leaders — retiring President Dick Wilson and incoming President Eric Jensen — were flanked by two Tommys, with Linman wearing the new Tommy suit and Shirley Alonzo '10 inside the old one. The Illinois Wesleyan Alumni Relations office recorded the moment with a tweet dubbed, “Seeing double!”

Former Tommy Dave Moravec '84 watched the twin Tommys from nearby, choosing not to adorn himself in the attire he'd worn as mascot. In Moravec's day, Tommy wore a gladiator outfit. Involved in a cheering group in high school, Moravec raised his hand to volunteer when, as an IWU freshman, he heard there was an opening for Tommy.

“There wasn't a tryout or anything,” Moravec recalled in an oral history recorded in the University Archives. Then, as now, Tommy's primary responsibility at football games was to light the torch at the start of the game. “They gave me the gear and not a lot of instructions.” So Moravec decided to improvise.

At his first football game as Tommy, Moravec lit the torch and then joined the cheerleaders on the sidelines, rather than leaving the field as Tommy had done for decades. “I led cheers,” he recalled. “Give me a ‘T.’ Give me an ‘I,’ give me a ‘T’ and so on. I ran up and down the sidelines high-fiving and cheering. I had a sword I whipped in the air. The crowd went wild because Tommy Titan had never done anything like that before. They had no idea what I was doing or why.”



Seeing double presidents and Tommys at Homecoming 2015.

The next Monday, Moravec went to fall baseball practice under Coach Jack Horenberger '36, who also served as athletic director.

Horenberger had learned it was Moravec who'd gone rogue at the previous Saturday's football game and took him aside to discuss the budding mascot's behavior.

“I told Coach, ‘Wasn't it a great time?’ talking about what I'd done on Saturday,” Moravec recalled 35 years later. Horenberger would have none of it. “That's not what Tommy Titan does,” the coach explained. Yet, buoyed by the crowd's exuberance

and his own defiance as an 18-year-old, Moravec led cheers at the next home game as well. The following Monday's baseball practice brought a repeat meeting with Horenberger; this time, the legendary coach suggested a new Tommy would be found if the antics continued. At the next home game, a properly chastened Moravec ran out on the field, lit the torch and retreated to the field house. No swashbuckling, no cheerleading, no silliness. It was a practice he maintained at every home football game for the next four years.

Still, portraying Tommy was not always serious business for Moravec. How could it be, when the torch to light the flame consisted of several tampons wrapped together and bundled into a tin cup on top of a stick, with the material doused in oil? “Apparently they had used cloth rags at some point, but there was a concern about those burning,” Moravec explained. “The material in the tampons held the flame for the time it took to light the torch.

“I even had to go out to buy the tampons, which was kind of weird.”

Other Tommys share similar stories of torch-lighting challenges through the years. In a 1997 *IWU Magazine* story, Randy Stuckey ’75 recounted his first experience in the Tommy costume when he didn’t have a torch, so he soaked a towel overnight in kerosene and put it on the end of a broomstick he’d cut in half. “When I ran onto the field the next day, the kerosene was dripping everywhere. It was practically an inferno and I lost all the hair on my arm. I thought I was going to catch the helmet on fire, too.”

In the same story, William Cooper ’97 confessed he forgot to appear at a Homecoming game and was replaced by a staffer from Physical Plant. Replacement Tommy that day might have been 30-year employee Robert Frank, who has portrayed Tommy on at least two occasions for the same reason, or it might have been longtime Assistant Supervisor of Labor Services George Fish, who’s also been Tommy in a pinch.

Physical Plant workers also saved the day for Shirley Alonzo, who never forgot to show up, never caught anything on fire and never had to buy her own supplies — yet she, too, nearly had a mishap at a critical moment in her first appearance as Tommy.

Every Titan knows the tradition: the Titan Band begins playing the Wesleyan fight song as soon as Tommy lights the torch. That day, Alonzo says the band waited... and waited ... and waited. “I’m on my tiptoes and I can’t reach it,” recalls Alonzo, who is just shy of five feet tall. “I also can’t see because of the big Tommy head. The stadium is in complete silence just waiting for the fight song to start. It probably took three or four of the longest minutes of my life, and some Physical Plant guys ended up lifting me up to reach the torch. After that, they built a little step for me to stand on so I could reach up and light it.”

Alonzo says her height, or lack thereof, did have one advantage. She thinks she is one of the very few Tommys in the old costume who could actually fit through doorways without ducking.

Perhaps as a foreshadow of her current career as an elementary schoolteacher, Alonzo most enjoyed Tommy’s gigs meeting children at



One of Tommy's favorite tasks is delivering hugs to young fans.

local schools, parades and other community events. “It was just a lot of fun,” she recalls of her two and a half years as Tommy. “I always wanted to be at everything. It’s so fun to see people excited about giving Tommy a high five or a hug, and coming up to you to get their pictures taken.”

Such enthusiasm is a required trait for those deemed worthy to don the Tommy suit. Students are selected for the role based on their ability to motivate others. There aren’t a lot of rules for portraying Tommy, but those rules are firm: No talking. Don’t reveal your identity. Those portraying Tommy should keep their identities a closely guarded secret (although revealing themselves after graduation is fine). Once, Linman, the captain of the women’s tennis team, and her teammates had lunch with a recruit. Almost like Superman, she left to change into the suit, feeling it was important for the recruit to receive a full Titan welcome. The recruit never guessed her team captain and Tommy were one and the same.

Perhaps part of that mystery is what makes humans do some bizarre things when encountering a mascot. Linman recalls people making a game out of getting Tommy to talk, like trying to get a reaction from a member of the Queen’s Guard at Buckingham Palace. “People don’t realize that, when I’m in the suit, I’m taking in everything they’re saying and doing, and eventually the weird stuff they’re doing becomes a story I’m going to tell my best friend,” she laughed. “At the same time, I think it shows that people, no matter what their ages, are pretty goofy. Remembering the weird stuff that happened when I was Tommy still makes my soul smile.”

- [Read more about Tommy Titan's fiery origins.](#)
- [Learn more about Illinois Wesleyan's many traditions.](#)