

# Long Live the Great White Yak

Finding common cause—and lasting community—under an unlikely symbol.

BY MEGAN GAMBINO '06

**D**URING MY FOUR YEARS at Middlebury, I pledged my allegiance to the Panther. I woke up before sunrise on J-term mornings, merging with other bundled figures slinking along the unplowed sidewalks to track practice, ran the workouts and the meets, even captained the team my senior year. I was dedicated. But, deep down, I daresay, my loyalty was with the Great White Yak.

The Great White Yak was a mascot dreamt into being by my sports-happy intramural friends. We rallied behind the yak, of all animals, because it was fearsome and obscure, an animal whose potential for mascotdom was untapped in the realm of professional sports. We chose white yaks to reflect our pure, angelic sportsmanship, and our white yaks were “great” because, well, we were a confident bunch.

To cement the fraternal bonds of our members, we tagged two Greek letters, chosen simply based on their aesthetics, to the team’s name, making us the Xi Omega Great White Yaks. We even designed a logo, the symbols for xi and omega encircled by the outline of a yak, for our uniforms. We wore that insignia like a tattoo, and three years, three Yak jerseys, a hat and a pair of shorts later, we



were a bona fide franchise—some 30 players that, in different permutations, fielded a hockey, soccer, broomball and softball team.

Our players ranged in ability from a kid from India who had never seen ice before, let alone played hockey, to two Minnesotans and a Canadian, retired from the men’s and women’s varsity hockey teams (Division III national champions, mind you), who had ice in their veins.

The energy my friends put into the team was contagious. As a varsity athlete, I was torn between the two levels of play. I thought it was against

my better judgment to play in intramural games, for fear that I could injure myself and jeopardize my track season. But, while I managed to abstain from a few sports (hockey and softball), soccer and broomball were my guilty pleasures. Of course, concealing my closet intramural addiction was tricky, and I, admittedly, didn’t do so well at it. I lined up on the indoor track decorated with bruises from broomball spills. And just as I had feared, I jammed my foot enough in indoor soccer to cause a season- and career-ending (since it was my senior spring) stress fracture that secured me a few

months in a supportive boot.

At the time, I was devastated by the injury (and to this day still have pangs of regret), but I was recently reminded, albeit bittersweetly, of what I had sacrificed my varsity career for—an indelible bond among Yaks. When one of our own lost his father to cancer, a core group of us flew to his hometown in Nebraska for the funeral. Not a second thought was given to what we’d do after the service. We played a game of Wiffle ball in his backyard and reverted right back to our Yak ways, heckling whoever was at bat and never, of course, forgetting the score. As close as we are, it was a sad day, the saddest most of us had ever experienced in our 24 or 25 years, and yet, we found comfort in that game. It was our way of showing our friend that we were there for him. And the simple, Norman Rockwell-esque scene of us playing showed me that I was wrong in ever thinking it was against my better judgment to be a Yak. As ridiculous as the Yak bond can sound, we’ve gone from being teammates to extended family, and being a Yak was the best judgment call I’ve ever made. 🐾

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