

# A Precarious Perch

In 1952, Delta Tau Delta buddies hoisted Paul Ferber atop a Column. The question is: Would he repeat the stunt?

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The lure of fame can seduce people into situations they'd never consider in more rational moments. That's why Paul Ferber, BS BA '57, found himself dressed as Cyrano de Bergerac and perched on top of one of the Columns on Francis Quadrangle one chilly October morning in 1952. A hand-lettered banner fluttering below him spelled out the quest that brought him to this precarious limestone ledge: "Perchin' Paul Ferber for Knight Owl."

Forty-five feet below, groups of students making their way to the first class of the day stared up in wonder at the apparition atop Mizzou's most sacred icon. Campus security guards paced back and forth and wondered what to do. Dean of Students "Black Jack" Matthews appeared on the scene, mad as a hornet, yelling at Ferber to get down.

"It was a silly thing to do, but it was a fun thing," says Ferber, now an attorney in St. Louis. The prank was part of his campaign to win the title of Knight Owl, an annual contest in which MU coeds voted for a new big man on campus at the Skirt Swing dance.

For weeks before the dance, Knight Owl candidates wooed the female electorate with elaborate stunts and shameless bribes: free taxi service, free shoe shines, free coffee at Gaebler's Black and Gold Inn. Knight Owl wannabes serenaded at sorority houses and women's dorms or

raced through campus in convoys of cars plastered with campaign posters.

Ferber and his buddies at the Delta Tau Delta house decided to go for maximum impact. More than 50 years after the fact, he doesn't remember exactly who came up with the idea, but he does remember that a cadre of Delts who were Navy ROTC cadets drafted a battle plan. If the legendary Tiger quarterback "Pitchin' Paul" Christman could wow the girls before World War II, why not Perchin' Paul Ferber?

First, they "borrowed" a bosun's chair and a block and tackle from the ROTC storeroom. Then they scouted the nighttime campus security patrols and found a window of opportunity — a little after 3 a.m. After an aborted first attempt, everything came together on the second try.

"In the dark of the night, someone tied a fishing line to a weight and threw it over the top of a column," Ferber says. "Then they kept pulling up bigger and bigger ropes until they got one that was adequate for my weight — or at least they assured me it was."

It took half a dozen guys to hoist Ferber aloft. To help out, they had recruited some Delt football players, he says. "We had to have some heavyweights to hold the other end of the rope." Once at the top, Ferber scrambled over the edge and waited for daylight and his taste of glory.

Instead, he got an enraged Dean

Matthews, who ordered the pranksters to execute an about-face. They lowered Ferber to the ground, and he still remembers a red-faced Black Jack poking him in the chest and saying, "Don't you ever do that again."

A few days later, Ferber lost the Knight Owl election. To top it off, a wire service picked up the Perchin' Paul story, and photos of Ferber atop the Columns ran in newspapers around the country — including one in his hometown of Kirkwood, Mo. "My mom found out about it right away, and she told me what a silly thing it was to do," he says.

The old Delta Tau Delta gang still gets together most summers for float trips down different Ozark streams. At one campfire bull session in 2005, they started ribbing Ferber about his Perchin' Paul exploits, he recalls: "One frat brother, Don Kauffman, told me, 'You know, Ferb, if it hadn't been for you sitting on the Columns, you wouldn't be anything today.'"

Of course, it all could have played out differently, too. Those beefy football players might have dropped the rope, or Ferber could have taken a plunge off the top. "You don't think about that stuff when you're that age," he says. "You just do it." Would he do it again? "You better believe I wouldn't." ■

