

CAMPUS LIFE

Imminent Collapse

Hello, Halloween

By Bill Andrews

CAMPUS LIFE EDITOR

Happy Halloween! For many people here@mit.edu, Halloween is a great time, and not just because it's the one day many of us look normal. And no, it's more than just seeing girls in skirts for probably the last time till April (alas). I'm sure I speak for all of us Tech men and women when I say that Halloween rocks because of its rich, historical traditions. I mean, how can history not rock? (I know the geologists are with me on this).

Indeed, this is a holiday roughly 9.6615 times as old as the United States. And that's just the official "Catholics started doing it" date; when Pope Gregory III established Nov. 1 as All Saints day in the eighth century, the Celtic ritual of Samhain had already been going strong for untold centuries. Untold, at least, in the Wikipedia article where I read all this.

Thus for (non-integer values of) millennia, Halloween (coming from the much-too-long "All Hallow's Even") has been a time of spooky scares, of the dead coming into contact with the living, and of mourning the passage of summer (and mini-skirts) and the inevitable coming of winter. A few centuries ago (one, to be specific), the tradition of begging for candy became especially popular on this continent, since kids needed something to take their mind off all the doom and gloom. Things were different back then, as kids weren't really into "goth" or being "dark," just like women back then weren't allowed to "vote." Talk about scary.

But, after much suffering and suffrage, Hal-

loween emerged in the 1950s to become what it is today: a crazily over-commercialized stop between back-to-school sales and Thanksgiving. I'd be angry about a serious, spiritual holiday turning into an excuse to buy stuff, except that by now it's a tradition for me, and you know how we all like traditions. For as long as I can remember, all of October was merely a buildup to Halloween; I'd go shopping for candy with my mom and carve a pumpkin (recently bought, of course) with my dad. That's what the day's all about for me, none of that goofy spiritual stuff.

Nowadays, of course, the kids are taking it too far (as always). I see costumes on racks for such seminal figures as Spongebob Squarepants, or George W. Bush, for kids who just want to be cute or terrifying (respectively). Where's the originality in that? Where's the creativity? Now, if I see a Spongebob W. Bush walking around, that'd be something; knowing kids today, though, I'm not holding my breath.

Worse yet, youngsters nowadays, in an effort to look tough despite owning two cell-phones and an iPod, smash all the pumpkins in sight, turning a once-respectable neighborhood into an orgy of orange entrails. Now, when I was a kid, you'd smash one, maybe two pumpkins, and call it a night; these kids just get carried away, and don't know when to stop. It's no wonder they're all coke-fiends and pregnant, at least according to certain political parties.

Anyway, we're @mit.edu, and thus pretty far removed from society in general, and youth

culture in particular. My first year here (admittedly, when Massachusetts was still a colony) I wasn't expecting to make much of Halloween. That's kid stuff, after all, and here was I, a bright, young-yet-mature college student. By the time Halloween actually rolled around, though, I realized the error of my ways, and threw together an "American tourist" costume, thus enabling me not only to gain easy access to all the parties on campus (and thus the few remaining skirted legs), but also to continue a tradition which, even now, has remained unbroken. Every Halloween, since I was in kindergarten, I've dressed up as something unique and different, and though she's never said it, I suspect that's part of why my fiancée fell in love with me.

But worry not! If you've let your own tradition lapse, or perhaps if you're from another country and unfamiliar with this goofiness we call Halloween, or if maybe you're just lame, there's still hope! You could always run to the Garment District real quick, grab a hat and coat or something, and bam! you're a pimp. Or, if you're really strapped for time, just rifle through your roommate's things and become someone else. If you're one of those uber-clever people who doesn't dress up but still expects to be taken seriously because you're "an undercover agent" or you're "a college kid," that just won't cut it. Do whatever it takes not only to feel good about yourself on this auspicious occasion, but to keep me entertained in class today. And ladies, you know what to do: wear short skirts, and vote!

Hail to the Queen

Sport in the UK

By Matt Zedler

For our first few months in the UK, many of us from MIT found it somewhat difficult to sustain conversation with random English people. Instead of exuding that American warmth and extroverted appeal, the stereotypical English tend to wear a tougher exterior. Typical conversations would be short and dry, leaving one in an awkward silence within a few minutes. Then many of us started to discover a subject which would instantly build a rapport with the English — "sport."

The English are raised in a culture where sports are as important, if not more so, as religion (Many see the founding of the Anglican Church as the result of Henry VIII's womanizing pastime rather than the birth of a legitimate religious body.) From an early age, they can be found kicking the football ("Football" refers to soccer), learning how to bat or bowl in cricket, or tackling each other in a muddy rugby match. Ask any Englishman about his favorite sports team, especially in a pub, and expect to be engaged in conversation for longer than you probably would have desired. Every Saturday, be ready to watch replays of the latest and greatest football moves and goals on "Match of the Week," and don't even dare think of turning the television to some other channel. Imagine the level of passion shown by Red Sox fans multiplied over the entire country rather than just one lonely state.

One of the favorite activities of many students at Cambridge University is sport, and there is more unstructured time to encourage the pursuit of such activities. A strong inter-collegiate competition system helps foster this sporting culture. Think of it as a glorified intramural system, with people actually caring whether one living group beats another and coming out to support their team. There are university-level sports as well, and a few MIT students were skilled enough to play for

the "Light Blues." (Cambridge has light blue as its color, while the rival Oxford has dark blue. Why the English couldn't widen their color selection to make it easier to distinguish the teams still eludes me ...) The range of sports is large, with fencing, polo (water and actual horse), netball, and badminton in addition to many of the more typical ones familiar to Americans.

The MIT bunch quickly dove into this sport-obsessed culture, with some students racking up more sports practices than lectures in the first few weeks. I started with a sport I knew, moving later into the painful, confusing, and exciting world of rugby. While I had hoped to end the year by learning cricket, I instead got caught up in exam stress and World Cup fever.

When I came to MIT, I decided to try rowing. Learning the sadistic pleasure of erging, how to balance a boat with all eight members rowing, and how to get into a Spandex one-piece took up many pleasant hours during my freshman year, but other activities took precedence during my second year. I figured that getting back into rowing would be a good physical and social introduction to Churchill College. The biggest problem I had was in deciding at what level to participate, as rowing for the first college team would mean sacrificing much time and sleep. The rowing teams in Cambridge row early in the morning on the small creek that is the River Cam, going out in the rain, snow, and sleet during the Michaelmas term to build up for the all-important Lent Bumps. Because of the small size of the river, passing other boats is not an easy option, so boats that "bump" other boats are considered to have beaten the boat they bump. It's somewhat confusing to explain, but makes more sense when one is out on the river. To be fair, I never actually made it to bumps, as I found the time commitment of rowing in the first boat

was a little more than expected. Instead of becoming a serious "boatie," I dropped the sport at the end of the Michaelmas term, taking up rugby instead.

Whereas football is described as a gentleman's game played by ruffians, rugby is often called a ruffian's game played by gentlemen. It is somewhat similar to American football, but there are definite differences in the pace and rules. There are fifteen players on each side, with forwards who do most of the tackling and heavy work and backs who do the running and often score the "tries" (touchdowns). While I had played some pick-up American football back home, I was unprepared for the intensity and number of rules involved in rugby. I had to learn to tackle, to support the scrum, to spin the ball when throwing it, to "ruck," to support the "pill" at all costs, and to execute several different plays, all while several large English blokes were doing their best to take me out. Needless to say, the learning curve was steeper than expected, but luckily my worst injuries were black eyes and bruised muscles.

As spring came around, the cricket nets started to come out, and it was common to see batsmen and bowlers in their sweaters on the grounds behind Churchill College. Still a little confused about how one could play sports in a sweater, I instead became swept up in World Cup fever, learning more about football in a few short weeks than in the entire rest of my life. After the USA was knocked out by the Czech Republic, I became an avid England supporter, even going so far as leaving the library during exam term to watch the England-Paraguay game on a large video screen in the middle of the field where football is purported to have been invented. While England may have lost in the semi-finals, my ability to talk with the English grew exponentially after I involved myself in the great tradition of sport.

Poker and Random Bunching

By Yossi Sheffi

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In his Oct. 17 Campus Life column, Tech Editor Bill Andrews was "T'd Off" about the service of MBTA Bus #1 (the Harvard — Dudley route).

He couldn't understand why he waits a long time (rain-soaked and all) only to see two #1 buses arriving together, the first one fully loaded and the second virtually empty. This being MIT, it may be time for a good theory or an underlying model of the phenomenon.

There are two possible explanations for this observable fact. The first is known as the "poker table" theory. It surmises that the drivers on Route 1 are a friendly bunch. They like each other's company and prefer the thrills of Texas Hold 'Em to leaving the station one at a time, driving alone along Massachusetts Avenue, collecting rain-soaked editors on time. The result is a convoy of two and three buses coming together to pick up and deliver hurried students to and from MIT.

The other theory is known as "random bunching" (aka "bus pairing"). It assumes that drivers leave the first station exactly on schedule — in, say, ten-minute intervals. But due to some random event — such as missing a green light or waiting for an old passenger who takes a long time to alight — one bus falls slightly behind schedule.

The chances are, then, that when it arrives a little late at the next station, the number of people waiting for the bus will be larger than average. The bus will therefore spend more time than average picking those passengers up, and fall further behind its schedule, finding an even larger number of passengers at the next station, and falling still further behind.

To add insult to injury, the bus behind it starts finding fewer and fewer people at the stations and gets further and further ahead of its schedule. Pretty soon the two buses start moving in a kind of convoy with the first bus full and the second one empty.

Observations suggest that random bunching is always at play, but the first theory is hard to rule out since poker games of drivers while on shift are difficult to observe without resorting to HP methods.

Supporting evidence for the random bunching theory (aside from its scientific-sounding name) can be found by observing automatic systems that exhibit similar characteristics. For example, elevator systems tend to bunch just like buses — you can wait a long time for an elevator, then two or more will arrive together. This phenomenon is even stronger in Boston than in New York.

The random bunching explanation in the elevator case is similar to the buses. When polite people hold the elevator door for a latecomer, the elevator falls behind and there is a higher chance that it will get stopped at the next floor. Meanwhile, the other elevators in the group speed up and arrive, in many cases, simultaneously. The problem is less severe in New York, since Yankee fans are less inclined than genteel Red Sox fans to hold the door for latecomers.

The moral of the story is that holding the elevator door is actually anti-social behavior. The considerate driver who waits for a late passenger at a bus station is actually harming the system, while the driver of an early bus who waits at a station as you (already on board) urge him to leave is actually doing the right thing from a system point of view. The other lesson is that you've got to know when to hold them and when to fold them.

An unlocked gun could be the death of your family.
Please lock up your gun.



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