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The LSU tiger is dying, but his legacy won't

BRAD ALMQUIST Oct 1, 2016



LIV PAGGIARINO

LSU's mascot Mike has been diagnosed with a rare form of terminal mouth cancer. It is uncertain how much longer he has to live.

BATON ROUGE, Louisiana — It's 4:15 p.m., and Mike is nowhere to be seen. LSU fans have grown used to this.

Hundreds of people clad in purple and gold visit Mike's estate before Louisiana State plays Missouri. Mike lives across from Tiger Stadium, and though he is only 11 years old, his legacy has been rooted in the university's identity since 1936.

Mike is a tiger, the LSU Tiger, but the LSU faithful sees him as much more. Ask an LSU student or fan about Mike, and they will respond as if they are talking about an old friend, rather than a wild animal.

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"Well, you know, the thing with Mike is ..."

"Oh man, good old Mike."

"Well, Mike loves to showboat."

On this Saturday, Mike's absence is felt more than ever. It's homecoming. LSU fans approach Mike's enclosure with their children, the new generation of Tigers. They giddily run toward the glass and look around curiously, only to find emptiness.

Three hours from now, fans will flood the 102,321-seat Tiger Stadium. Mike won't be there either.

He normally sits inside an LSU trailer on the field before kickoff. A white truck pulls along the trailer, and LSU fans roar in approval as a strategy to intimidate opponents.

But Mike hasn't been on the field since the first game of last season.

Last year, he stopped going because the crowd was too noisy. This year, he was diagnosed with a terminal form of cancer.

Veterinarians noticed swelling on his face, and they diagnosed him with a cancerous tumor near his nose.

David Baker, the head veterinarian at LSU, who studies old forms of cancers in tigers, said he had never seen anything like Mike's condition.

It called for serious treatment. Mike was sent to Mary Bird Perkins Cancer Center, where doctors treat human patients.

Doctors anesthetized Mike, conducted computed tomography scans and discovered that Mike's illness was terminal. It is uncertain how much longer he has to live.

"The fact that he has developed cancer does affect all of us," Baker said. "He is not that old, (and) he has got the best personality of any tiger we have ever had. (It's) not like we would have wanted any of our tigers to have developed a tumor like this, but this one in particular is a really, really great animal."

Most wild tigers live only 10 to 15 years. There have been six 'Mikes' since LSU brought its first live tiger to campus 80 years ago, and four of them lived for at least 14 years.

"It has been tough on us," freshman Frederick Bell said. "But we are continually praying and hoping that he gets better."

LSU and Missouri fans stop by Mike's enclosure. They see lush green grass and a massive waterfall that leads into a green-colored pool. Wood logs and boulders are on the ground. A big blue ball for Mike to play with floats in the pool, but he doesn't feel like playing today.

"Where is he?" one toddler dressed in purple asks her dad.

"I don't know, sweetheart," he responds.

Hours pass, and there are no signs of Mike.

"He's still not out?" one Missouri fan says aloud.

Wayne Estay has attended LSU games since he was in the second grade.

"We have always had a live mascot," Estay said. "It's a tradition of LSU."

On Saturday, Estay sat on a nearby bench and smiled as he watched kids run toward the enclosure's glass. The tiger's days are numbered, but the legacy of Mike the Tiger will never leave Baton Rouge.

"I am pretty sure they are going to get another one," Estay said. "We are all going to die."

Supervising editor is Greg Bowers.

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