

[return to article](#)

Fur real: 'Being Bucky' shows what it takes to wear the suit

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'Being Bucky' tracks the lives of the seven guys who play Bucky Badger. -

Everybody knows Bucky Badger. Then again, nobody knows Bucky Badger.

That's why the documentary "Being Bucky" will likely open a few eyes as to what it's like -- and what it takes -- to be the live version of the state's most visible symbol.

The film, which played to a sold-out theater at the Wisconsin Film Festival and will return Friday, April 10, to Point Cinemas, tracks the lives of the seven guys who play Bucky. It begins with the tryouts and continues throughout a busy, busy year.

"People just think we'll send out the suit to anyone," said Josette Scheer, UW spirit squad director. "People want to rent the suit so they can wear it at their own party. They don't understand there is a tryout process. We train these kids to be Bucky, to act and do things in a certain way."

It's tough enough to be a full-time student, and it's tough to have all the Bucky duties added to it. Throw in having a camera crew following you, too, and it's a lot for a guy to deal with.

"Someone would always point out the camera people," said Jeff Thiel, a Bucky in the film and now a UW-Madison senior who still is a Bucky. "They tried to blend in but couldn't be ignored."

Filmmakers John Fromstein and Scott Smith followed the Buckys over the course of a year and a half. Fromstein got the idea from his son, then a UW-Madison student who knew someone who had tried out. He and Smith, who grew up in Madison, had no idea of the rigmarole involved in being Bucky.

"We wanted to shoot the tryouts because we thought they'd be funny," Fromstein said. "They are funny, but there's so much more, like the relationship between these guys and what their backgrounds are, and how it actually affects their lives."

It's a tough gig, and always has been. The tryouts have been the same over the years, but the big change has come in the number of Buckys. There have been seven for the past six or seven years, Scheer said, up from four before that.

When Mike Koval was Bucky from 1977-79, there were supposed to be two of them, but his partner dropped out. That left Koval, now a Madison police officer, alone to do games (sometimes football and hockey in the same day), hospital visits, parades and alumni events.

"It's neat. I'd often get asked, 'How much are they paying you?'" Koval said. "I'd say, 'Are you kidding? This is a privilege.'"

As a journalism major, Koval considered it a practicum in public relations. Being Bucky is also what led to him meeting his wife, who was a Badgers cheerleader.

"I always tell people three of the best years of my life were spent under papier mache," Koval said.

Koval plans to see the film and is glad others will get a chance to see how life is for the guy in the Bucky suit.

Those involved with the film -- the Buckys, the spirit squad, their parents and others -- got a special screening last week, because the film sold out too quickly for any of them to get tickets during the festival. That kind of interest came as a bit of a surprise to those for whom being, or being around, Bucky is no big deal.

"I was surprised that anybody cared -- that they wanted to know our story," said Scheer. "We just kind of go about our business, chug along and we're happy doing what we do. It was cool to see that people cared and wanted to know what Bucky was about."