

# The **MAYOR** of **TERRIER NATION**



Elliot Driben is a BU booster in more ways than one. Each year, he gives several thousand dollars to the University's sports teams—every one of them.

Elliot Driben has cheered at more than 5,000 Terrier games. And there's more action to come.

BY  
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AMONG BU ATHLETES, coaches, referees, and spectators, he's achieved single-name status, like Prince or Slash. On game night, at Walter Brown Arena or Agganis, he can't take five steps without someone clapping him on the back or clasping his hand. He's equal parts mascot, rabbit's foot, and historian—and all parts passion. He is, simply, Elliot. The Terriers' ultimate, hands-down, number-one ultra-fan.

But Elliot Driben doesn't paint his face, dress up like a meat product, or dance beneath a rainbow wig. He has merely shown up, game after game, year after year, decade after decade. And not just for marquee action like hockey or hoops. The 66-year-old can be found, wrapped in scarlet and white, high-fiving at diving competitions, clapping from the bleachers at wrestling matches, and cheering on rowers from the banks of the Charles, kicking out good vibes no matter the weather, no matter the score.

"I think I've seen 5,000 BU athletic events, maybe more," Driben says.

A heroic achievement by any measure. But considering Driben has had cerebral palsy since childhood and struggles with hearing, speech, and muscle control, his Terrier pride is elevated to another realm. A curved spine forces him to walk with a limp and lean on a walker, but he is quick to laugh, the lines on his forehead and around his mouth grooved by

an obvious capacity for joy. Beneath a gray crew cut and behind square glasses, his brown eyes, cast with a bit of mischief, are always smiling.

"You can look around at any arena—hockey, basketball, field hockey, soccer, and you'll see him," says Erica Baumgartner (SHA'11), who played women's lacrosse. "As an athlete, you think, this man came all the way here to see me, to see us, to support us. So you kinda don't want to let him down."

On a February weekend last winter, Driben boarded the team bus with the women's hockey squad for a trip north

to square off against the University of New Hampshire. Until recently, traveling hasn't been an obstacle for Driben, whether it involved hopping up Comm Ave to Boston College or flying across the country to Colorado for an NCAA Frozen Four tournament. Lately, however, increasing pain has forced him to cut back on his radius.

"It was pretty special when he came with us," says Catie Tilton (COM'11), last year's women's lacrosse team captain. "He was like a good luck charm. It's hard being away from your home field. You're in a different atmosphere. When Elliot was with us, he brought that tradition, that bit of BU. He made it easier to play on an away field."

Driben's relationship with BU dates back to 1955. His parents enrolled the bright but mentally imprisoned 10-year-old in speech class with the late Albert Murphy, a School of Education psychology professor and Sargent College speech and language pathology professor. Murphy took a shine to his determined young pupil and scored him tickets to a BU-Syracuse football game. The Terriers took a beating. "It was either 24 or 34 to nothing," Driben recalls.

His speech, and confidence, improving, Driben was able to attend Brookline High School. His special education teacher was also the hockey coach, and he saw that Driben, who'd started keeping box scores after seeing his first Red Sox game, had a mind for statistics. By the time he graduated, in 1968, the

23-year-old Driben had compiled numbers for most of the high school's athletic teams, including hockey, soccer, baseball, and basketball, and served as squad manager.

Diploma in hand, Driben took a clerical job at John Hancock, making the three-mile trek by foot and cane most days, and stopping by Fenway Park after work when the Red Sox were in town. He also continued his speech work with Murphy on Bay State Road. One day, a new face showed up at the therapy group: freshman phenom goalie and future Olympian hockey silver medalist Tim Regan (SED'72).

"They'd picked up something in my voice and wanted me to go see someone at the speech program," Regan recalls. "It was then that I met Elliot, and we just hit it off. Hockey was the big sport at BU, so I left tickets for him at the box office. He liked the speed of the game and got hooked. Through me, he met the other guys on the team and got autographs."

Before long, Driben was the team statistician—and a fixture in the stands.

"Elliot has never let his obvious disabilities stop him from being totally

positive about everything," says Regan, who went on to play pro hockey with the Buffalo Sabres. "He hasn't let what we might consider a personal setback stand in his way. I'm sure he's experienced in his own way that it's a pain in the neck to have to operate with a cane or a walker, but that's not going to stop him from going to a men's hockey game and cheering on BU."

Or getting out on the Charles. Driben has watched regattas from the boathouse, even road-tripped to away competitions, but had never taken in a water's-eye view of the sport. Until last year, when women's crew coach Stacey Rippetoe invited him on her launch. She bundled him up in Coast Guard survival gear and a life jacket. "He looked like the kid brother from the movie *A Christmas Story*," Rippetoe says with a chuckle. "We had a great time."

"The loyalty and support Elliot has shown all the teams at BU is incredible," she says. "I've never seen anything like it. He's decided how he wants to live his life, and so he spends every day accordingly and spreads positivity around the department."

Now retired, Driben lives just up the street from

Case Gymnasium and the BU athletics department. Terrier sweatshirts and T-shirts are draped over chairs in his apartment, and framed pictures with athletes and teams line the bookshelves. Autographed posters hang on the walls, and the refrigerator door is plastered with magnetized game schedules. Tables are covered with envelopes, folders, NCAA rule booklets, and notebooks. But ask for women's basketball stats from 2005, and he knows exactly which pile that piece of paper is in. His closet is lined with windbreakers and letter jackets from different teams, different eras, like rings in a tree.

Driben puts his money where his mouth is. Each year, he gives several thousand dollars to BU's sports teams—every last one of them, from dance and pep squad to tennis and softball. He's donated Xerox machines for the press boxes at Walter Brown and Agganis Arenas, and without fail sets aside money for the Academic Support Center.

"He was always interested in the academic side of my life," says Baumgartner. "I switched my major twice, and he was always asking, 'You still getting those good grades? You liking your major now? You're not gonna switch on me again, are you?'"

Being a lifelong Boston-area resident, of course, also means membership in Red Sox Nation, a passionate and loyal bunch if ever there was one. And if he had to choose? Before the question is even finished, Driben's lips are parted: "BU," he says. "Always." ■

