

## WHAT MAKES STUDENTS BLEED ORANGE AND BLUE?: AN INDEPTH LOOK AT BLOCK I

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As a freshman at U of I, the start of school signified a new start in a new community. I was leaving behind my high school community and the things that I had grown accustomed to the past four years like bleeding black and gold, my former school colors, and rooting for the Hinsdale South Hornets. When I came down to Champaign-Urbana I was immediately overwhelmed by the smattering of orange all around campus and couldn't help but wonder, what's the appeal of orange? It's not like orange is an ordinary color one sees people wearing everyday walking in my hometown of Darien, but on the campus of U of I it's a different story. So I started wondering, what makes people bleed orange and blue? It seems that I personally had just got accustomed to wearing black and gold and rooting for the Hornets, actually caring if we won a game or if we lost one. I was never a "Super Fan" at our home football games, but I understood where that school pride came from. So I started to question how that pride had developed throughout the years and then applied that idea to my current indifference to U of I and questioned what makes students bleed orange and blue.

In posing this question I wanted to know what made students so spirited and love U of I. I started off my musings by exploring what it meant to bleed orange and blue and determined that it meant to be a diehard fan of the university and someone who had become so consumed by the university's atmosphere that they felt like they belonged. This included the idea that the campus ignited a certain passion and excitement in those certain individuals that bled orange and blue. So to narrow down my research I started to focus on what specifically about this campus created this enticing atmosphere. I first turned to the university's sports teams since most of the diehard fans of the university result from supporting the ever popular sports teams like football

and basketball, but then I started to incorporate in my thinking about this research project specific things about this campus that would make it unique and lovable, like the Six Pack, or the Quad, or Green St. which are mentioned in some detail in the EUI Link to the Orange Statement. This topic was still too general, so I landed on the topic of exploring the sports fans, specifically those that comprised the Block I since it was them that first drew my attention to this topic of bleeding orange and blue because they are the ones bleeding orange and blue every weekend when the Illini Football team is playing. So I started to question the history and the background of Block I. How did it originate? How is it organized? What's its affiliation with Illini Pride? And so on. It's these questions that powered my research and produced the final product. What is Block I?

I originally started my research by searching for articles on the library website on different student organizations that blatantly and consistently flaunted their school pride like Block I and Orange Krush, this produced many articles on the explanation of the programs and the different school traditions.

I also planned to attend the football games and basketball games through volunteer participation through certain school affiliated organizations such as Colleges Against Cancer and Habitat for Humanity. These opportunities provided a way to observe the school spirit from an unbiased viewpoint. This occurred for the Homecoming football game when I was able to volunteer for CAC and was able to have a neutral standpoint from my volunteer post to observe the sea of orange and the enthusiasm of the student section. I was also allowed to take pictures of the sea of orange and the cheering students from a good angle. This opportunity helped in immersing me into the subculture of the sports fan and the emotions that are tied along with it from a neutral standpoint.

My plan also included going to the Student Life and Culture Archives to see what I can find on the Block I and its history as well as researching more in-depth at the library or through the internet more about Block I and its influence. After going to the Student Life and Culture Archives I found some interesting information to sort through. After asking one of the workers at the archives about the Block I, six boxes of information were presented to contain information on the history of Block I. I then sat down with Box 1 and sifted through its information, which is detailed later on in the paper I also looked over Box 4 for more information on a relevant tangent topic of Block I, the Victory Block.

The original goals of Block I was detailed in a Contract found in Box 1 from the 1980's were "to promote enthusiasm and good sportsmanship" through "high quality card stunts" and to serve "as models of sportsmanlike behavior in the stadium" (Courtesy of Student Life and Culture Archives 41/68/151). All the members of the Block had to follow a set of rules laid out by this contract. Among these rules were the expectations to flash the cards during the stunts, to promote good sportsmanship, and various other regulations to ensure the safety of members within the block such as no objects are to be thrown in the Block besides confetti. Failure to comply with these rules resulted in a revocation of the delinquent's season tickets without refunds, immediate expulsion from the game, and to pay for the damages done.

The Block was internally structured and organized into a hierarchy. This was shown through a packet detailing the different positions and responsibilities of the Block I Committee. There was one advisor who was head of Block I and its organization and one chairperson who coordinated all the members of the Block committee, reported to advisor, conducted business meetings the Sunday night before a home game, was responsible for committee chair people, created a system to replace lost Block I tickets, worked to improve relations with Athletic

Association, and kept the Block I Cabinet clean. There was one Administrative Assistant who coordinated the West Block during games and all distribution committees, acted in lieu of the chairperson, attended all meetings of the Block I committee, reported weekly to the chairperson, and handled all financial matters. One person in charge of Public Relations and Publicity who handled publicity and advertising to boost ticket sales, organized displays in the Illini Union and outside it, promoted awareness of the organization, and recruited a publicity committee. One Historian who researched and archived the past of Block I, kept a current file of past chairmen, and maintained current records of all publicity. There was one Photographer per block who took photographs of the Block at every game and worked with the stunt designer, and four Stunt Designers who took inventory of all the materials such as markers and design sheets, worked on new stunts, worked with the major chairman and band director in organizing band stunts, and completed the stunts the Sunday before each home game. There was one person per block in charge of Cards and Shakers who took inventory of cards, sorted flash cards before game, organized the storage closet, and sorted and passed out cards at the beginning of the second quarter. One person per block was in charge of Capes who was responsible for organizing capes, distributing them during the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> quarter, and collecting them after half time. There was also one person per block responsible for Instructions which entailed handing out the instruction cards which detailed the stunts, distributing them at the game after there cards were handed out, and collecting the instructions after half time, and finally one person per block in charge of attendance who organized contracts, checked ticket numbers against the ticket number list, and stamped hands.

An instruction sheet was also found in Box 1 of the series 41/68/151 in the Student Life and Culture Archives, which detailed the correct way to hold the flash cards and the different

stunts the Block could do. It also detailed the sequence of events that would happen during each home football game. First capes were to be distributed, but could only be put on when instructed. Then the instruction cards were passed out and were to be fastened onto the back of the person's cape sitting in front of them. Flash cards were then distributed. There were five flash cards in total creating the possibility of using 10 colors for the stunts. The instruction sheet also described how to hold the card at a 45° angle and how members of Block I had to find substitutes in case they couldn't make it to a game. There were also six different stunts described by the instruction sheet. There was the regular stunt which consisted of flashing one color, the flip stunt where two colors were flashed, the call number stunt, where numerous colors were flashed depending on which numbers were called out, the 3-D stunt, where there was a command for some members of the Block to stand to create a 3-D effect, the ticker tape stunt, where cards were flashed in rapid succession, and the flutter stunt, where the members' wrists were to move back and forward to create a fluttering movement.

The history of Block I is as follows according to information found in Box 1 in the series 41/68/151 in the Student Life and Culture Archives. Block I started in 1910 and consisted of 150 members sitting on the East Main Stands of Illinois Field. They originally used megaphones and orange and blue capes in support of the Fighting Illini. The capes were blue or orange plastic square sheets with a hole for the head. They covered the area between the shoulders to the torso right above the abdomen. In 1924, after Memorial Stadium was finished, Block I grew to contain 420 members and remained situated at the East side of the stands. Orange and Blue flash cards were first used in the Block in 1926, and in 1937 the R.O.T.C. took control over Block I and changed the colors to khaki and white. During WWII, Block I was discontinued until 1946 when the War Whoops Pep club brought back Block I keeping the original idea, but expanded it to

include 884 members. In 1947 the Illini Union Student Association took control of the Block and modeled the card section after the one at USC and expanded the Block to 1100 members. In 1954 the West Block was added which made Block I the only dual card section in the nation. Computers were first used to coordinate the stunts in 1969 and in 1972 the NCAA named it the best card section. From 1976-1977, Block I became the only traveling card section after taking trips to Purdue and outshowing the Purdue equivalent Block P. At this point there was no more information that I found on the Block until 2007 when the Block moved from the East side of Memorial stadium to the North End zone where it still exists today.

One of the more interesting subjects that I stumbled upon during my research was the Victory Block. The IUSA (Illini Union Student Association) tried starting the Victory Block, the basketball equivalent to Block I, in 1965, but encountered many problems. They wanted to show the score at half time, but the scores differed all the time therefore impossible to plan the stunt ahead of time. The plan was to use the B section of Assembly Hall but its split by a narrow aisle and therefore complicates stunts. It was also too small to conduct the necessary stunts and the group was compromised mostly of freshman who had no idea what they were doing. There was also no loud speakers so the Victory Block would have had to read instructions versus hearing them. They hoped to have two blocks with approximately 286 students located opposite of each other in Assembly Hall. The Victory Block could be the inspiration for the Orange Krush which was founded a decade later in 1975, but it's hard to say for sure without doing more research.

My research on Block I has produced a lot of insightful information and things that I never imagined I would have found. I believe this topic was perfect for me to choose since it was an interesting topic and I felt like I could do the research with no bias since I was in sort of a liminal or transitional phase in my life where I didn't really feel the compelled to support a

specific school's sports team. If I were to do more research I would start by trying to find more history on the Block and how it got started. I would then do research on the present day Block I by interviewing the masterminds behind the current Block I and compare the present organization to that of the past. I'd also like to understand its affiliation with Illini Pride more and the demographic of the members of Block I to see who makes up Block I so as to delve more into the question of what makes students bleed orange and blue? It'd also be interesting to research the origins of the Orange Krush and to see how that group got started. There are so many questions still left unanswered and its my hope that they'll be answered through the same enjoyable research journey that I have gone through, and that by going through this journey more questions will be unearthed and more people will be motivated to answer them.

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