

Clever State University: For aspiring circus artists, this was truly an institution of 'higher learning'

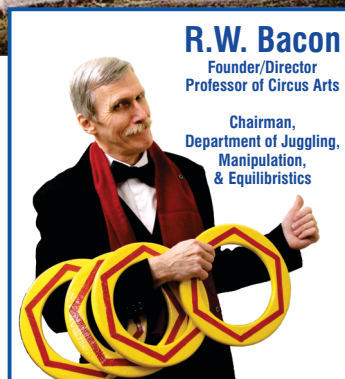
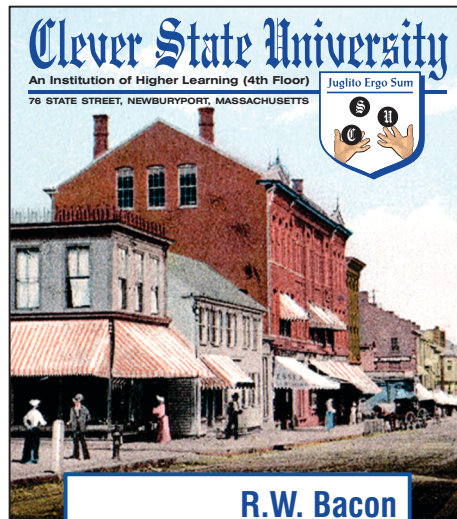
By **R.W. Bacon**

Clever State University (1990s) was an institution of higher learning (4th floor) in Newburyport, Mass., devoted to teaching juggling, balancing, and related circus arts to classes of adult enthusiasts, and to coaching individuals with sights set on professional-level performance.

In the decade previous, single-session juggling workshops and multi-session circus arts courses were presented at schools and colleges near-and-far, often in conjunction with performances during my long career as a touring circus/variety artist. Related to the circus arts courses was the fitness workshop entitled "Rope-Skipping Aerobics: Teaching the Perfect Exercise," for health and physical education professionals.

In the 1990s I rented a premises for the courses and workshops, a cavernous mirror-lined dance studio with a gloriously high ceiling. It was on the fourth floor of a high-Victorian Gothic style building on the main street of old Newburyport, Mass. It was originally designed as a bank by celebrated architect Rufus Sargent (1812-1886), but by this time the building had gone through incarnations as a Masonic Hall and furniture store, and was now a dusty, well-worn firetrap.

Because "graduates" of the eight-week course would depart in a much more clever state than when



they signed up, I placed signs at street level that said "Clever State University – Institution of Higher Learning – 4th Floor (Keep Climbing)." And truly, the climb to the 4th-floor studio was a fine aerobic warm-up.

The course, entitled "Juggling For Fun & Fitness," imparted the basics of juggling to adult students who could go on to enjoy the benefits of the challenging brain-and-body exercise on their own. The income from the courses subsidized our practice/rehearsal space as well as a weekly "open juggling" night for aficionados.

For several years Clever State University welcomed students from the north-of-Boston region, and received the typical feature story newspaper coverage. One highlight was coaching a decidedly unathletic journalist to balance on the top level of my teetering rola-bola apparatus – while she held on for dear life. She now has a lifetime memory of this particular strain of "higher learning."

The space was also well-used for our personal practice and training in the off-season. During practice downtime our young son loved to race his toy cars underfoot and roll juggling rings around the room like barrel hoops. Fortunately he managed to avoid running into the path of flying juggling clubs.

Eventually the increasing rent and a new, improved in-home practice studio brought this incarnation of Clever State University to a close in the late 1990s.

As the Founder, Dean, Professor, and Janitor, I am pleased to know that through the years my books have instructed jugglers around the world, and that individual students have performed on every continent except Antarctica. Closer to home, some juggling friends still have their "PHD" diploma from Clever State University: When they finished the course, they were presented with a certificate noting that their skills were ... drum-roll here ... "Pretty Highly Developed." ■