

# *BYU Super Graduates*

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In 1964, following its success with the Frisbee and the Hula-Hoop, toy manufacturer Wham-O introduced a new toy that also dominated the market for some time—the Super Ball. The Super Ball was a small, dense ball with amazing rebound capacity. Dropped from a height, it would bounce back almost all the way to its original position,<sup>1</sup> thereby extending its bounce time much longer than that of ordinary rubber balls<sup>2</sup> and making it seem to children like it would keep bouncing almost forever. Thrown to the ground “by an average adult, it [could] fly over a three-story building.”<sup>3</sup> Thrown indoors, the ball would careen around a room at great speed, suddenly changing direction in dramatic fashion.

The Super Ball was an enormously popular product. Wham-O produced “170,000 balls per day at the height of the craze.”<sup>4</sup> And “McGeorge Bundy, National Security Advisor to President Lyndon Johnson, purchased super balls for sixty members of his staff, apparently as much to help them reduce stress as for entertainment.”<sup>5</sup>

The rebound ability of the Super Ball—which was the secret to its popularity—was due mainly to the material from which it was made, a “synthetic rubber invented . . . by chemist Norman Stingley,” which he called Zectron.<sup>6</sup> The material gave the ball what scientists call a high coefficient of restitution—the measure of how close to its original position a ball will bounce if merely dropped instead of thrown, a measure some call resilience or resiliency.<sup>7</sup>

However, the compound by itself had its limits. Stingley “first offered his invention to the Bettis Rubber Company, for whom he worked at the time, but they turned it down because the material was not very durable.”<sup>8</sup> Wham-O noted the same problem. Wham-O’s president explained that the new Zectron ball “always had that marvelous springiness. . . . But it had a tendency to fly apart. We’ve licked that [problem] with a very high-pressure technique for forming it.”<sup>9</sup> The Zectron compound was vulcanized with sulfur at a very high temperature and formed under thousands of

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*Kevin J Worthen, president of Brigham Young University, delivered this commencement address on April 22, 2021.*

pounds of pressure per square inch.<sup>10</sup> The introduction of great pressure into the process made the product more long-lasting, making it both resilient and durable.

Many of you graduates may have felt like a Super Ball this last year—thrown around at great speed, changing direction dramatically and feeling like the bouncing would never end. It has been a tumultuous year. But, like the Super Ball, you have been resilient and durable. That resilience and durability is mainly due to the material of which *you* are made—your identity, your character, and the skills and talents you have acquired and refined during your time at BYU. Each of you is a beloved child of God with “a divine nature and destiny.”<sup>11</sup> Each of you came to BYU with talents and character formed in the years before you arrived on campus. And, hopefully, each of you has learned things here that will help you to develop your skills, talents, and character in ways that will enable you to better pursue your eternal, divine destiny.

But, like the Super Ball, part of your resilience and durability is the result of the challenges you have faced, especially this past year. While extreme pressure and temperature are never pleasant, they can be formative and strengthening. At the most recent general conference, President Russell M. Nelson observed, “Difficult trials often provide opportunities to grow that would not have come in any other way.”<sup>12</sup> I trust that many of you will have seen that principle in action this past year and throughout your experience here at BYU.

It is interesting that to differentiate its product from ordinary rubber balls, Wham-O chose a simple adjective in its name: *super*—a word that has a long and broad language-usage history. *Super* is a word that is used in more than fifty languages today.<sup>13</sup> You could say *super* and be understood in Croatian, Dutch, and Norwegian—and in Hmong, Swahili, and Zulu.<sup>14</sup> It is an amazingly universal word. And in English, at least, it seems to be an acceptable modifier of almost anything: super-glue, Super Bowl, superhero, superstar, and, lately, super-spreader. The word comes from the Latin term *super*.<sup>15</sup> And from the beginning, *super* has been defined, among other things, as “above, over,

beyond,” or of the “highest grade.”<sup>16</sup> Its usage in the English language has ebbed and flowed over time, as indicated by an n-gram measuring the number of times the word has appeared in the historical Google Books archive by year and showing how often the word *super* has appeared in the database from 1800 until 2019.<sup>17</sup> Like the Super Ball, the word *super* seems to bounce back into popular usage over and over again. It is a word that is resilient, durable, and very adaptable<sup>18</sup>—therefore, a word that applies fully to today’s graduates.

In a moment, with full authorization and approval from the board of trustees, I will officially bestow academic degrees upon each of you graduates. However, at this time, acting entirely on my own and without authority from anyone else, I hereby confer upon each and every one of you the title of “super graduate.” You have earned this title by being resilient, durable, and adaptable throughout a global pandemic that has affected this university more than any health crisis in our lifetimes.

Now, before you take out your Sharpies and add this title to your formal diploma or update your résumé to add it to the lists of honors you have earned, I should note that the conferral of this title carries with it a threefold responsibility.

**First**, there is one more assignment that you will need to complete. President Nelson recently invited us to make a list of things the Lord wants us to learn from our experience during the pandemic, to consider that list, and then to share it with those we love.<sup>19</sup> In a similar vein, I ask you to make a list of experiences that you have had this past year that have increased your ability to meet challenges in your life. The BYU mission statement declares that, as a result of their experience here, BYU graduates should be “broadly prepared individual[s]” who are “capable of meeting personal challenge and change.”<sup>20</sup> Surely there is at least one thing that has happened in this last unique year that you can identify as contributing to your BYU education in that way. Write it down and share it with others.

**Second**, I invite you to take advantage of future opportunities you will have to fulfill the next phrase in the BYU mission statement. According to the mission statement, the kind of “broadly prepared individual” who graduates from BYU

should “not only be capable of meeting personal challenge and change but will also bring strength to others in the tasks of home and family life, social relationships, civic duty, and service to mankind.”<sup>21</sup>

The Lord has not provided this university and the experiences you have had here merely for your own benefit. If you want to be a true super graduate, you should look for ways you can use the skills, talents, and knowledge you have gained and refined here to benefit others—to “improve”<sup>22</sup> the world, as our mission statement puts it. We are all familiar with the sign on the entrance to campus, exhorting us to “enter to learn” and “go forth to serve.” That injunction is fully applicable—especially applicable—to super graduates.

**Third**, and finally, a genuine super graduate will recognize that true strength, resilience, durability, adaptability, and every other good gift come from God<sup>23</sup> and that our ability to develop and use those gifts is enhanced as we follow the example of His Son, Jesus Christ. As we look unto Christ in every thought, we will find the strength and inspiration to become truly super. I trust that each of you graduates can accomplish each of these three goals, just as you have satisfied each of the requirements for the incredible achievement that we celebrate today.

So, congratulations, class of 2021, super graduates of BYU. May the Lord bless you with super abilities to love and serve others. As you do so, you will live a super life that will extend for all eternity. This is my prayer for you, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

## Notes

1. See Wikipedia, s.v. “Super Ball.”
2. Bounce time was up to sixty seconds. See Edward J. Rielly, “Leisure Activities,” *The 1960s*, American Popular Culture Through History, ed. Ray B. Browne (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2003), 108.
3. Wikipedia, “Super Ball.”
4. Rielly, *The 1960s*, 108.
5. Rielly, *The 1960s*, 108.
6. Wikipedia, “Super Ball”; see also Richard A. Johnson, *American Fads* (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1985), 85.
7. See “A Boom with a Bounce: The U.S. Is Having a Ball,” *Life* 59, no. 23 (3 December 1965): 69–70, 74; see also William Harris, “How SuperBalls Work,” How Stuff Works, [people.howstuffworks.com/superball.htm](http://people.howstuffworks.com/superball.htm).
8. Wikipedia, “Super Ball.”
9. Richard P. Knerr, quoted in Wesley S. Griswold, “Can You Invent a Million-Dollar Fad?” *Popular Science* 188, no. 1 (January 1966): 80; quoted in Wikipedia, “Super Ball.”
10. See Wikipedia, “Super Ball.”
11. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” (23 September 1995).
12. Russell M. Nelson, “What We Are Learning and Will Never Forget,” *Liahona*, May 2021.
13. See “How to Say Super in Different Languages,” In Different Languages, [indifferentlanguages.com/words/super](http://indifferentlanguages.com/words/super).
14. See “How to Say Super.”
15. See *Online Etymology Dictionary*, etymonline.com, s.v. “super,” [etymonline.com/word/super](http://etymonline.com/word/super).
16. *Online Etymology Dictionary*, “super.”
17. See Google Books Ngram Viewer, s.v. “super,” [books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=super&year\\_start=1800&year\\_end=2019&corpus=26&smoothing=3&direct\\_url=t1%3B%2Csuper%3B%2Cc0](http://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=super&year_start=1800&year_end=2019&corpus=26&smoothing=3&direct_url=t1%3B%2Csuper%3B%2Cc0).
18. See Teddy Wayne, “A Certain Word Is Really Getting on My Nerves,” *Future Tense*, *New York Times*, 12 March 2016.
19. See Nelson, “What We Are Learning.”
20. The Mission of Brigham Young University (4 November 1981).
21. Mission of BYU.
22. Mission of BYU.
23. See James 1:17; Ether 4:12; Moroni 7:13.