

## The Mascot

Against my better judgment, I'd let Bonnie talk me into doing it.

I had a hard time saying 'no' to Bonnie. Like that time we'd been organizing a 'Beach Day', and Bonnie asked me if we could spread sand all over the gym floor and buy some palm trees.

Well, OK, I said no that time. But usually I didn't.

Bonnie had found the money somewhere to purchase one of those large furry mascot suits that you see at sporting events. This one was a giant wildcat. Not precisely like the one on our gym wall, but close enough.

It sort of looked like a giant red tiger. Uhh... wildcat. Its head was huge, but Bonnie assured us that whoever wore it wouldn't have any trouble seeing out of it. We had a pep rally coming in a few days, and she was excited.

"It's just what we need to boost school spirit!"

I couldn't argue with her. The problem was finding someone to wear it.

Bonnie was trying to talk me into it.

"Come on, Bill ... it will be easy! All you have to do is dance around and do a few stunts. You know, stand on your head, some 'jumping jacks', a few pratfalls ..."

The last time I'd stood on my head was in tenth grade gym class. It hadn't been a soft landing.

Darren joined us. He was keen to see me do this too. I think he wanted some payback for all those stories I'd been writing about him.

"I think you should do it, Bill. Look, the suit is really well padded. You could probably jump off the stage and land on your stomach and you wouldn't get hurt!"

That was easy for him to say. It was my stomach!

"Besides, Laurie will be here, won't she? If you *do* get hurt, there'll be a nurse right there ..."

"I don't find that in any way amusing!" I told him. Although I suppose it was a comforting thought.

Laurie was a former student and a nurse, who'd agreed to come up on her day off to make a presentation to our students about careers in nursing. Melanie had come with her to talk to our students about the education program she was enrolled in.

I'd asked Melanie how she had managed to arrange to escape from her college courses for a day.

"It's my day off!"

I hadn't known that college students had days off.

Anyway, Darren assured me, Laurie would be there in case I accidentally broke a bone or something. I wasn't planning on breaking anything. In fact, I wasn't even sure I wanted to do this.

"You know the students will love it!" Bonnie again. I was looking for some way to say no.

"If you do it ... I'll find someone else to take over as Recycling Supervisor!"

Darren knew what buttons to push. But I think he was just afraid that *he'd* have to do it if I said no.

"OK, I guess ..." I relented. "Let me try it on. But I have one condition if I'm going to do this. Nobody knows it's me in here!"

I pulled on the suit, and stuck my head into the huge headpiece. It was stuffy, but everything seemed to fit. And it *was* really well padded.

I didn't want anyone to know it was me in here because I'm ... shy. I'd be doing some silly things while wearing this suit, and I was pretty sure I couldn't do them if people knew it was me.

Shy people are funny that way.

Darren and Bonnie agreed to help me into the suit just before the pep rally, and they promised that no-one else would find out it was me.

The plan was that I'd rehearse some silly stuff at the pep rally, and then put in an appearance at the Zones tournament the next day.

As Bonnie was helping me with the suit on the day of the pep rally, Darren handed me a large ice pack. "It will probably get pretty hot in there" he told me. "Tape this to your chest. It will help you keep cool!"

It was a good idea. There was a lot of padding on the suit, and I was already starting to sweat, even though I was just wearing a T-shirt and light track pants.

With the headpiece in place, I found that I could see pretty well through the black semi-transparent material lining the inside of the mouth. And I could move my arms and legs easily.

That didn't stop me from bumping into the doorframe as I left the office.

The last team was just making its entrance from the stage as I walked up the stairs. The announcer was saying "Let's hear it for the Wildcats!!"

That was my cue to enter. I burst through what was left of the paper doorway, waving my arms, and leapt into the air.

My plan was to land on the gym floor on my knees. They were well padded. It would have worked. I know it would have.

Unfortunately Melanie was standing in the spot that I'd chosen for my landing.

We both went down in a tumble of arms and furry legs. At least, my legs were furry. I didn't know about Melanie's.

Everyone screamed. A bunch of grade one and two kids ran up to me and started hitting me. I think they thought that a big furry tiger was attacking Melanie. They were so cute!

Ouch! One of the little ruffians could really throw a punch!

Laurie came running over. "Melanie! Are you hurt??" She pushed me out of the way and helped Melanie to her feet.

So much for my stand-by nurse.

I staggered to my feet, and looked at Melanie. She looked back at me with wide eyes.

"What on earth ...?"

"Shhh! Melanie. It's me. Play along!"

I wasn't sure if she realized who 'me' was, but she caught on pretty quick. And her limp didn't seem to be too serious.

I bowed to her. The kids laughed. Then I fell on my face. I hadn't realized how heavy the headpiece really was.

It was Laurie who helped me up. OK, I forgave her.

She pretended to scratch behind my ears. The audience loved it.

Well, I guess it was time to put on a show. I started to dance towards the team members, who were standing at the side of the gym with their mouths open. Apparently they'd never seen a giant furry wildcat waving its arms around and attempting to dance to the music.

I should mention that I don't dance too well. OK, at all. I'd had to have a quick lesson before I danced with Emily at her graduation. And I'd still broken her little toe.

It was at this point that things got a little exciting.

The freezer pack that Darren had taped to my chest had come loose, and it had slipped.

It lodged itself inside the suit, right up against my track pants. In a very sensitive area.

That freezer pack was *cold!*

I think I might have yelled. I don't really remember. But people told me afterwards that they'd never seen such energetic dancing!

The other stunts I had planned would have to wait until tomorrow. I had to get that cold pack out of there before something froze and fell off.

I hadn't realized you could run so fast in one of these suits. In twenty seconds I was out of the gym, back in the office, and frantically pawing around inside the suit looking for the source of my agony.

Bonnie came in behind me, and when she saw the cold pack she laughed. "That really worked well! You really came alive there, for a few minutes. You should do that again tomorrow!"

I resisted the impulse to stuff the cold pack down the back of her blouse. I'm not that kind of person.

The next day I arrived at the school where Zones were being held. Darren had arranged for a room for me to get ready in, where I would be out of sight. Bonnie was there to help.

"OK, Bill, we've rehearsed what you're going to do. Are you going to remember all of it?"

The plan was that I'd make my entrance with our team. Then I'd lead a few cheers from the audience, wander over to taunt the opposing coach, make some rude gestures to the referees, and leave. The whole thing would be repeated after half-time.

But when I entered the gym behind our team, I discovered that the audience was at the far end. I'd have to reverse the order of my planned shenanigans.

I walked up to one of the referees on all fours. I looked up at him. He looked down at me in disdain. Apparently he wasn't a fan of team mascots.

So I lifted a rear leg and pretended to pee on him.

That went over pretty well with the audience. In fact, they were howling with laughter.

Maybe I was going to be pretty good at this!

And then I saw the other team's mascot.

It was a large cat too. But not a wildcat. Actually, I wasn't sure what it was ... it looked kind of mangy to me. And the guy in it wasn't doing anything. Just standing there.

I think at that point I may have let the crowd's approval go to my head. I got a crafty look in my eye. Not that anyone could see it ... the headpiece sort of got in the way. But it was there.

I decided to liven things up a little bit. I'd sneak up on the other team's mascot and pounce on him!

Oh, I didn't plan to hurt him. Just shake him up a little. Show him what a *real* mascot could do.

I think it might have been funny if it had worked. I'm sure it would have been funny.

Someone should have told that to the other mascot.

I did a masterful job of sneaking up. I hugged the wall. I hid behind chairs, poking my huge head up once in a while to check out the location of my adversary.

He had no idea I was there. Not even the laughter from the crowd alerted him. Maybe he just couldn't see anything out of that mangy looking head.

I climbed onto a chair, and pounced on him.

As we were rolling around on the floor, I could hear the guy inside the suit yelling. He had no idea what was happening. He sounded angry.

"Hey ... pssst! Listen in there. Play along, OK? It's just for fun".

He obviously didn't hear me. The next thing I knew I was flat on my back, and he was trying to strangle me.

It was when he started hitting me with his big furry paws that I knew he meant business.

“Hey ... hold it! I was just ...”

I didn't get a chance to finish. He slugged me in the eye socket. The only unpadded spot on the suit.

I yelled. That had hurt. I threw him off my chest, and started to hit him back.

I like to think that I was just defending myself. At least, that's what I told the nice officer who'd politely escorted both of us out of the gym. Apparently he'd been in the audience watching his daughter, before going on shift. He wasn't sure what to do with us.

“What a sorry spectacle you two are! What am I going to do with you?”

Both of us hung our giant cat heads in shame.

The officer was being pretty stern with us, but I think I detected a faint hint of a smile. I knew he couldn't arrest us. We'd never fit in his cruiser.

“It's a good thing the audience thinks it was all planned beforehand. I don't think anyone will press charges. Besides, I'd be laughed out of the office if I showed up with you two in cuffs!”

We both tried to look remorseful. At least, I did. I couldn't tell about the other guy in the cat costume. Remarkably, the officer hadn't asked us to remove our headpieces.

“Go on, get out of here. And stay away from each other!” He was smiling now.

We both beat a hasty retreat. I didn't know where he was headed, but I was going back to the room to get rid of this costume as quickly as I could, before someone discovered it was me in here.

No-one ever found out who had been in the wildcat costume. Bonnie and Darren were closemouthed when people tried to get them to talk. That was pretty decent of them. I was pretty sure I'd have to pay for it.

And the pictures in the Post of the 'Great Mascot Fight' were spectacular.