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FELINE MASCOTS

In The Wide World Of Sports

by Eric Minton



If you're looking for cat-inspired fashions, look no further than your local athletic-wear store where you'll find the jerseys, caps and T-shirts of many professional and collegiate teams that feature felines in their logos. Last winter the National Football League launched two new franchises, the Carolina Panthers and the Jacksonville Jaguars (who joined a league that already included the Detroit Lions and the Cincinnati Bengals), and the National Hockey League's Florida Panthers started playing last season.

Cats figure more prominently in athletic nicknames than any other species of animal or natural phenomenon. Professional baseball has tigers in the major leagues and at every level of the minor leagues,

along with the Ottawa Lynx and Kane County Cougars (the minor leagues also have polecats and mudcats, but these are, respectively, skunks and fish). Though there are no teams named after cats in the National Basketball Association, two teams, the Denver Nuggets and the Indiana Pacers have feline mascots — a mountain lion and a panther, respectively.

The greatest number of feline mascots can be found in collegiate sports, where nearly 300 four-year and junior colleges have chosen various members of the cat family to symbolize their teams. (Birds were favored at 250 schools, and dogs won out in 100.) At last count, there are 70 tigers, 55 cougars, 43 panthers, 31 wildcats, 16 bobcats, and 45 lions.

Among the lions there are three catamounts, one mountain cat, two mountain lions and one mountain lion (a species found only in Norton, Massachusetts). There are also eight jaguars, four leopards, two lynx, a puma, an ocelot, a black cat, a tomcat, a "Kougar" (an alliterative spelling of cougar used by the Kougars of Kishwaukee College in Malta, Illinois) and a "Kat." (The nickname used by the Erie Community College North Campus in Buffalo, New York. The school's cat logo is named after its first athletic director, Larry Katzman.) The college ranks also include 10 bearcats, a conglomerate critter usually more



Felines are the subject of more athletic logos than any other species of animal.

representative of cats than bears.

Only humankind — in various occupations and ethnic backgrounds — has more representatives among mascots than the feline family, and many team nicknames representing people are losing out to sensitivity issues. Cats, however, have been politically correct since the dawn of society. Eagles are the top choice among individual animals for college mascots — out of patriotic fervor — with 72 such nicknamed teams. But at the top college level, the National Collegiate Athletic Association's Division I, tigers prevail over eagles by one. Then there are the Auburn University Tigers who have a live eagle, named Tiger as their mascot.

Blame It On Princeton

Tigers would seem to be so popular because of their prowess, tenacity, intelligence, swiftness and proud demeanor, attributes all coaches look for in their athletes. In reality, the tiger owes its popularity to Princeton University. Its football team was tagged "tigers" in 1880 because the players wore orange-and-black-striped uniforms. As Princeton alumni became presidents and deans of schools further south and west, those schools began to adopt tigers as their team mascots and orange and black for their colors. Under the direction of a Princeton-bred athletic director, Idaho State called its teams the Bengals. Even Penn State's Nittany Lions were inspired by Princeton after a Penn State student saw the Princeton Tiger at a 1906 baseball game. In the spirit of "our cat's fiercer than yours," Penn State students adopted a big cat once indigenous to the Nittany Valley, where the campus is located.

Another factor in the popularity

of tigers was Princeton's status as college sports' first powerhouse. "Popular teams and teams that do well inspire a number of copy-cat names," says Bernard Beck, associate professor of sociology at Northwestern University, whose team is known as the Wildcats.

When college athletic teams



Cat mascots are widely used by sports teams because they symbolize prowess, cunning, swiftness, strength and agility.

began adopting official nicknames early on in this century, feline species names were among the first to be picked. And perhaps that should come as no surprise. Many ancient societies treated cats as deities. Tigers in Asia and jaguars and pumas in Central and South America achieved a cult following among the Chinese, Indians, Mayans and Aztecs respectively, much as the Clemson University Tigers have today among South Carolinians.

"There's an anthropological pattern throughout world cultures," Beck says. "Groups of people need an identifying label or image, and they often pick a label or image that

will stand for something abstract that is the essence of the group. The animal or natural phenomenon is supposed to demonstrate that virtue, and the virtues of the hunting animal are attributes noted in sports: speed, strength and ferocity. Cats are further noted for agility and gracefulness."

A Distinguished Heritage

Big cats were also popular figures in medieval Europe's heraldry — the insignia for royal and noble houses — and from that heritage come some current college nicknames. Columbia University adopted the lion as a mascot in 1910 after the school received a banner bearing a lion rampant and the motto "*Leo Columbiae*." That image, in turn, was adapted by MGM movie studios for its own purposes. When the University of Pittsburgh chose the panther as its mascot in 1909, it cited five reasons: the panther was once indigenous to the region; it had "ancient, heraldic standing as a noble animal;" its color matched the school's gold hue; it alliterated with Pittsburgh and no other school had selected the panther. Now, of course, the panther is a popular mascot, in hues of purple, crimson and blue, as well as gold.

Louisiana State University named its teams after a Confederate Army unit known as the Tigers. Instead of dressing someone in Civil War garb to stalk the sidelines, however, LSU has one of the nation's most famous mascots, Mike, a real tiger who can be seen pacing his cage during football games.

What's In A Name?

Other colleges inherited their cat mascots from non-feline sources. Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts, christened its Mountain Lyon in honor of alumna Mary Lyon, founder of Mount

Holyoke College. Georgia's Augusta College Jaguars are the result of a *portmanteau* (a blend of two or more words in which the roots are generally recognizable) derived from the school's first incarnation, the Junior College of Augusta. Then there's Auburn, which pulled its team nickname from an obscure 1770 poem by Oliver Goldsmith, "The Deserted Village," which includes the lines: "Sweet Auburn, loveliest village on the plains... where crouching tigers wait their helpless prey." (The team had been called the Plainsmen. Then apparently someone realized the plainsmen

were the prey in the poem.)

For the most part, it is the athletic skill, courage and beauty of cats that make them such attractive mascots. In the early 20th century, sportswriters and coaches liked to use the term "wildcat" to describe an underdog team that had mauled a heavily favored foe. Honored, many teams adopted the nickname. That's how Northwestern switched from the Fighting Methodists to the Wildcats.

A similar description was used for the football team of tiny Thiel College in Greenville, Pennsylvania, after it lost to mighty Carnegie Tech in 1924. Thiel's coach was Tommy Holleran, so the team became known as Tom's Cats and, later, the Tomcats.

Bates College in Lewiston,

The Cat Classic

Charles "Jake" Jacobson had just begun a program of intercollegiate women's gymnastics at the University of Missouri in 1979 and wanted something to promote the sport. Ideally, it would be a competition featuring not only his Missouri Tigers, but also national powers such as the Penn State Nittany Lions, Louisiana State Tigers and Arizona Wildcats.

"It just hit me like a light," he says. "Gymnastics is a catlike sport anyway, so why not have a Cat Classic?"

In February, Missouri hosted its 15th Annual Cat Classic women's gymnastics tournament, open only to colleges with feline mascots. Despite this restriction, the event has become the leading invitational in the country, attracting 10,000 fans each year. For the 1995 tournament, Missouri will meet Penn State, Arizona, Auburn (Tigers), Pittsburgh (Panthers) and Kentucky (Wildcats), which has college's all-around champion on its team.

"There's a bunch of mean cats," Jacobson says of the lineup. Past participants have included LSU, Brigham Young (Cougars), Montana State (Bobcats), Memphis State (Tigers), New Hampshire (Wildcats) and Vermont (Catamounts). Most of these teams are ranked in the top 20 or even top five in any given year. Missouri, in fact, has won its own tournament only twice. "We try to bring in the best cats we can," Jacobson says. "We don't bring in any kittens."



The mascots from Pittsburgh, Penn State, Missouri and Auburn prowl around at the Cat Classic.

So prestigious is the event that some schools try to sneak in. One year Wisconsin argued that its badger was a cat. "I found out it's a rodent," says Jacobson. Michigan claimed wolverines were distant relatives of the cat family, but after asking Missouri's biology department, Jacobson denied that school's entry as well. He even had trepidations about Vermont, but a quick check of the dictionary assured him that catamounts were legitimate.

Jacobson has also withstood pressure from his own administrators to allow a "stray cat" into the tournament, an attempt to include the University of Florida team. "I thought it would look kind of bad if a Gator won the Cat Classic," he says, so it remains a purebred show.

Participating schools are also encouraged to bring their mascots. These men and women dressed in feline costumes perform their own acrobatic routines. "We usually have four to six mascots running around, going through the stands, doing crazy things," Jacobson says. "They put on a great show, too."

LSU's Mike, the real tiger, has yet to make an appearance. "They haven't brought him," Jacobson reports, "but they've brought gymnasts who scratch like crazy."

Courtesy UIM Sports Information/Doug DeLee



Since the beginning of college sports competition, cats have been favored as mascots.

Maine, was first in collegiate circles with a team of Bobcats. The student body voted for the nickname in a chapel meeting in 1925. The bobcat had been suggested three years earlier by a 1911 alum who noted that his alma mater's football teams usually played much bigger teams. "Has anyone considered the bobcat of well-known fighting fame?" he wrote. "It is a native of the Maine woods. It is small, but Oh! how it can fight."

Money Talks

Nowadays, self-image isn't the overriding factor in picking team nicknames. Merchandising is. New professional franchises pick monikers that will make for attractive logos for international sportswear sales. Two fish started this trend: the NHL's San Jose Sharks and minor league baseball's Mudcats.

"When the Sharks came out, it was a great logo and everybody bought products bearing the logo before the team even hit the ice," says Miles Koenigsberg, co-owner of a sportswear mail-order house in Palm City, Florida.

For the past six years, income from sports league licensing has

grown by 15 to 25 percent each year, says Ray Swan, editor of *Sports Industry News*. Licensing now accounts for about \$2 billion in income for both the NFL and major league baseball, \$1.8 billion for the NBA and almost \$1 billion for the NHL.

"The new logos have a big part in it," Koenigsberg says. "That's why teams are changing logos, changing color schemes. And the new logos are so animated. It's helped drive our business."

While fashion is becoming more of a factor in pro sports merchandising, team, state and alma mater loyalty — not to mention winning national championships — remains college sports' primary sales draw. Even so, some schools see the merits in logo licensing.

Georgia State University in Atlanta introduced a new panther named Pounce last October, replacing the stylized roaring cat of the previous years. "He didn't have a strong enough image," says Sandra Carnet, Georgia State director of public information, of the old logo. "We wanted to reposition him as a very cunning, streetwise, savvy, big-city cat." With an eye toward merchandising,

"We wanted to have a character that would look good on T-shirts and sweat shirts and coffee mugs," Carnet says — the college also thought the new mascot would better represent the diverse makeup of the student body, many of whom attend evening classes.

"So much of people's linkage with athletic teams is because they like the mascot," she says. "And also because teams win a lot, but we are not a sports powerhouse." Indeed, Georgia State sits in the shadows of Georgia Tech a few blocks away and cross-state University of Georgia, both national powers in several sports. Yet Pounce is already earning recognition for the 24,000-student school.

People bestow their devotion on a certain team for many different reasons. For some it is their alma mater, the local team or the team they hear most often on radio or see on television. If you are loyal to cats, you may decide to extend that loyalty to a sports team. You can then wear your allegiance on your sleeve, your hat, your front and back. So pick a sport, pick a cat. There are plenty to choose from. **C**