

What's It Like

## EVERYBODY LOVED DINGER

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*This is the seventh in a year-long series we call "What's It Like?" giving readers a first-hand look at some interesting activities in the region.*

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Being a mascot is a lot like being Jennifer Aniston.

The world loves you. Adoring crowds scream out your name. Everyone wants to take their picture with you, hug you, be with you.

And a few fans pinch your butt.

Well, in my case it was a tail, but you get the picture.

Such is the life of a superstar.

My introduction to the world of sports mascots took place last week at the Triple-A All-Star Game and Fan Fest. Numerous teams sent their mascot outfits for the festivities, but not someone to fill the inside.

That's where I came in.

I volunteered, along with other locals, and requested Dinger, the feline mascot for the Sacramento River Cats. He looked soft and friendly and he had an on-line bio to help me get into character (favorite song: "Three Blind Mice"; college major: claw enforcement).

Like any star, I had a dressing room. Only at the All-Star Game I had to share it with a red bird on steroids, a parrot in yellow tights, a green dragon, tubby bear, pirate seal, and an alien from Nevada.

### MULTIMEDIA

[What's it like to be a mascot? Ryan Smith is Dinger for a day.](#)



Ryan Smith as Dinger, the feline mascot for the Sacramento River Cats. (THE BLADE)

There were some seats, high-powered fans, some water, and — sitting there like an ominous warning — two bottles of the odor-fighter, Febreze.

Waiting for me in the hall — already apparently facing some odor issues — was Dinger's giant,

happy head, furry torso, and oversized, foam-padded shoes.

I had to confront a couple of things as I zipped up my new body. First, I had only four fingers now. And a long tail. And a hula hoop for a waist.

But for the moment, I still felt like me, just bigger. To complete my transformation into Dinger, I picked up his enormous head and carefully lowered it onto mine.

Inside, it was hot.

Very, very hot.

Rainforest hot.

Sauna hot.

I could instantly feel beads of sweat dripping all over my body. My glasses slid precariously along my nose.

A bigger challenge was seeing things. That's what happens when you have to look through somebody else's

mouth.

Peering through Dinger's gaping jaws (and his four pointy teeth), I had no peripheral vision and could only see down and in front of me for a few feet. So I wasn't in danger of tripping, but I also couldn't see some of the people walking by waving.

My solution was to awkwardly crane my head back as I strolled along so I could see more. That, and I was guided by the excited sounds of my fans calling for my love and attention.

For a mascot who wasn't Muddy, I was still pretty popular.

There were choruses of "Dinger!" from all corners. (My name was on the back of my uniform.) Everyone, even adults, eagerly came to me for high-fives.

My job was to manufacture smiles, and I was actually good at it. Kids ran to me with outstretched arms for hugs and kisses. Teens flexed muscles with me for pictures. I held a baby, danced with tots, and joked with staff.

All without talking, of course. Mascots don't talk.

Good thing I was a mime in junior high. (True, but that's another story.)

I found nonverbal ways to interact with others and spread the fun. I strutted, danced, pranced, pointed and waved. I jiggled, wiggled, thumbs-upped, and high-fived.

I sneaked up on people. I begged for food. (Well, mostly beer — it is hot in there.)

The best times were the improvised ones.

Like at the game when one of the mascots spontaneously decided to make a "We (Heart) ESPN" sign on a cardboard box and we all danced beneath the press box.

Or at the Fan Fest earlier in the week when I strolled over to the gift shop and tried on shirts and hats. (They don't make much to fit a 7-foot-tall cat.)

Or when I stepped on an artificial mound and — with a high leg kick — threw a few pitches that were clocked by a speed gun while the kids in line cheered me on.

When a local sports anchor at the Fan Fest asked me about my signature move, I wasn't sure what to do. A simple hand gesture didn't seem like enough. So I did a little dance, wiggling and twisting for all I was worth — something I would normally never think of doing in public.

It's a phenomenon Dave Raymond likes to call "the dance of the crazies."

Mr. Raymond, now 50, was a college intern for the Philadelphia Phillies in 1978 when he started as the original Phillie Phanatic. This kicked off a career highlighted (well, depending on your perspective) when then-Dodgers manager Tommy Lasorda came out on the field and beat him up.

Now Mr. Raymond is "emperor of fun and games" for a company involved with character branding that came up with the redesigned Muddy and Mudonna costumes. He led a mini-boot camp in Toledo earlier this month for the mascot volunteers. I was unable to attend, but he gave me a few tips over the phone.

Some were basic. He encouraged me to practice in front of a mirror, and to be careful where I place my paws when hugging or posing for pictures. Mascots are here to spread joy, not lawsuits.

Most of all, he told me to get crazy — dance like nobody's watching, let it all hang out — but not too crazy.

"Setting yourself on fire and leaping into a crowd of fans, we discourage that," he said.

It was so cool to join this mascot fraternity. I got to chat it up with the current Muddy as well as a past one, Wade Kapszukiewicz, now the Lucas County treasurer. We were all buds; no mascot fighting here.

During the All-Star Game, I bopped around the ballpark for more than three hours, taking breaks when my aching neck and dehydrated body needed them. (Amazingly, I drank more than seven glasses of water during those rests and never needed to use the bathroom. Too much information? You know you were wondering.)

The bulk of my time was spent slowly wading through the sea of people around the main concourse, but I made it up to the big wigs in the suites and down into the stands too.

I didn't always succeed in my quest to make people happy. Some kids didn't see the cuteness in a giant cat and would hide or cry. Others refused to play along and tried to peer through Dinger's mouth to see the person inside.

And, of course, there were those who tugged at my tail. Since Dinger doesn't do anything fast, I never managed to turn around quickly enough to catch the perpetrator.

When it was over, I shuffled back to the dressing room wondering how someone could possibly do this for a whole season. I was smiling but completely spent as I popped off Dinger's head and greedily drank in cool, fresh air.

Then I plopped down on a seat, my now-slimy suit sitting on the floor, sweat trickling off my hair, and thought: We're gonna need more Febreze.

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