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Homespun mascot

Deborah Snellen recalls her role as Lil Tiger

Story by Stephanie Detillier

Judges at the 1976 Tiger mascot tryouts told Deborah Durk Snellen that she wasn't involved enough at Mizzou to wear the costume. Rejected yet determined, the MU freshman vowed that would be the last time someone told her that.

The Kappa Alpha Theta member participated in enough campus events to earn the Lil Tiger mascot role her junior and senior years. As an alumna, Snellen, BS Ed '79, MA '80, served as president of the Mizzou Alumni Association in 2003–04.

Snellen, a Columbia native and Hickman High School Kewpie mascot, recalls the Lil Tiger costume: a fur suit and a heavy head made of plaster and chicken wire.

“The head wasn't secure, so when I ran across the field, it bounced against my face,” says Snellen, who often left games with scratches on her face.



Deborah Snellen sports her Lil Tiger costume, along with Big Tiger. Photo courtesy of Deborah Snellen

“Unlike today’s Truman, we were allowed to take our heads off because on really hot days, we couldn’t breathe. And because the costume was homemade, when kids pulled on the tail — which happened frequently — sometimes the pants would rip. You had to wear clothes underneath the suit to avoid embarrassment.”

Previous Lil Tigers had worn white aprons over the striped suit, and Snellen sewed her own both years. The aprons with embroidered bibs once caused a stir.

“My senior year, Athletic Director Dave Hart called me to his seat and asked me to take the apron off because he had been receiving messages that it was sexist. I only had one or two games left and was tied to the image of Lil Tiger, so I declined to take the apron off.”

Snellen, of Whitefish, Mont., will return for Homecoming. “Now that I don’t live in Columbia, the University of Missouri means more to me than ever. It’s important for me to stay involved, and during Homecoming I have to be back.”

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Snellen's apron, an iconic part of the Lil Tiger costume, caused a stir her senior year. Photo courtesy of Deborah Snellen

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