

University of Kentucky Alumni Association

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Alumni

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**WILDCAT'S
SECRETS REVEALED**



WHEN IT COMES TO
WILDCAT,
WHAT YOU SEE
ISN'T ALL THERE IS

As a University of Kentucky graduate you may call yourself a Wildcat, but we all know there's only one real Wildcat at UK.

You know him. He's easy to spot and hard to forget. He's the tall, lanky cat with the big paws. Whether on the field, in the community or on campus, he's encouraging Wildcat fans to get fired up.

Wildcat is our treasured mascot and a symbol of the university. He has a swagger in his step and is the special guest at every celebration, sporting competition and awards ceremony. And if you ask him, and thousands of people have, he'll be glad to have his picture taken with you.

But what you see with Wildcat isn't necessarily all there is. The beloved mascot has a life behind the scenes that includes hours of preparation and training, a support staff and some secrets that, until now, have never been revealed.

By Jacalyn Carfagno

Like most of the students who get to be the university's beloved mascot Wildcat, or his silly sidekick, Scratch, Andrew Schmitt '23 ED, said it's hot, exhausting, demanding work and, "the most fun thing I've ever done in my life."

Schmitt, a lifelong Kentucky Wildcats fan, embodied the mascot for his four years as a University of Kentucky undergraduate, from 2019 to 2023. He balanced atop the pyramid of cheerleaders at basketball games, sweated through hot August quarters during football season, and did hundreds of push-ups, some of them one-handed, after the football team scored.

These days Schmitt, now studying physical therapy at UK, can talk freely about his time "in the suit" but during his four years as Wildcat it was different.

"Once you put on that suit, you're a whole different character," he explained. "Wildcat isn't Andrew, Wildcat is Wildcat."

THE SAME PERSONALITY

Wildcat has his own distinctive way of performing regardless of who is inside the four-piece wildcat costume.

"They work so hard at making them a character. They walk the same, squat the same, take pictures the same," said Ryan O'Connor, UK's head cheer coach whose domain includes the mascots. That's why "mascot is very private," she said.

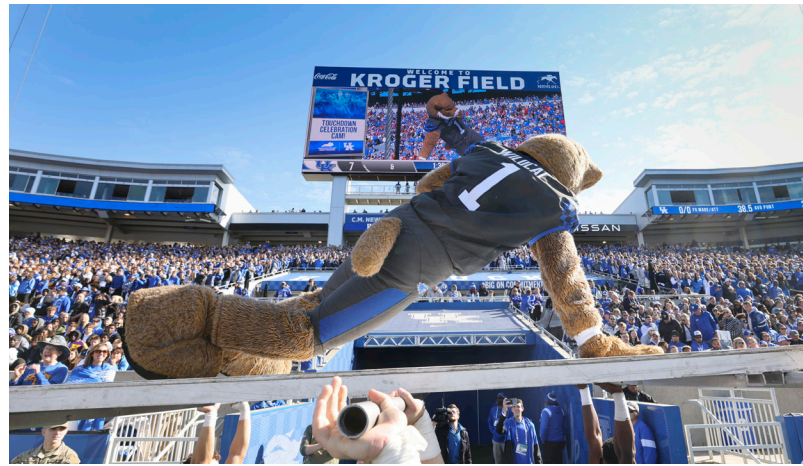
To the public, as Schmitt said, Wildcat is Wildcat and it doesn't matter who is behind that hairy mask.

But losing yourself in the character can be extremely rewarding said Shahrukh Ellahi '21 AS, '22 BE, who played Wildcat's sidekick Scratch from 2017 to 2022.

"It's like being Spiderman," he said. "When you don't have the mask on no one cares who you are, but you put the mask on and everyone loves you."

Sometimes, though, Wildcat and Scratch leak over into the "real" lives of the students who play them.

Ellahi would find himself raising a finger to proclaim, "number one" like Scratch when out of costume and think, "what am I doing?" Schmitt's friends would call him out when, in his early days as Wildcat, he'd walk in the trademark swagger out of costume. "As I matured into that character, I was able to separate the two," he said.



Photos by Chet White, UK Athletics, Britney Howard, and Mark Cornelison, UK Photo

WHERE'D WILDCAT COME FROM?

The Wildcat name began with a win over the University of Illinois in 1909. The story goes that Commandant Philip W. Carbusier, who was head of the military department at UK, told students later that the football team had "fought like wildcats." It stuck.

The modern incarnation of Wildcat in a fur suit first appeared in 1976 when UK student Gary Tanner began prowling the sidelines to cheer on the team and entertain the fans.

Tanner had made the cheer team, according to a 1976 story in the Kentucky Kernel, and accepted the job when asked if he'd like to be the mascot.

Like everyone after him, his main complaint was the heat inside the suit.

"The most weight I've ever lost was 17 pounds but that was a three-hour game," he told a reporter. Tanner recalled "fun times," like tackling the Nittany Lion at a game against Penn State ("I was victorious"). And, he said, donning the suit had improved his social life. "I've swiped cheerleaders from the other teams. The girls always want to hug me because they think I'm so cute."

These days, Wildcat is not likely to fraternize with opposing cheerleaders but many things, in addition to the heat in the suit, are the same.

ATHLETICISM AND HYDRATION ARE KEY

Like Tanner, modern mascots work out three times a week with the rest of the cheer squad.

"Even when you're really tired and really sweaty, to keep going, that takes a pretty good level of fitness," Schmitt said.

"Most people don't get to see the other side of what mascot-ing looks like," said Emalee Johnson '20 ED, '22 HS, a trainer who works with the mascots. Being a mascot takes strength and endurance, she said.

Although modern materials have made the costume a little lighter and more breathable, it's still hot in there. Johnson oversees the hydration routine that Wildcat and Scratch follow to stay healthy during games. Two days before she gives them a "hydration packet" made up of three different Gatorades and some electrolyte solutions. The day of the game they drink at least one Gatorade in the morning and one right before they go out in costume.

Heat sickness is a real danger, especially during the hot, early season football games. The trainers keep an ice tub on standby to immerse a Wildcat and bring down his body temperature if he gets overheated.

"Thank goodness," she said, she's never had to use it. "Hopefully, we can keep it that way."

O'Connor, the cheer coach, said working out with the cheer squad is about more than just fitness.

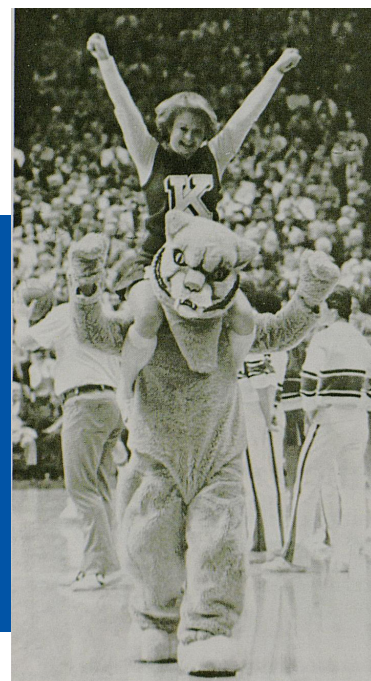
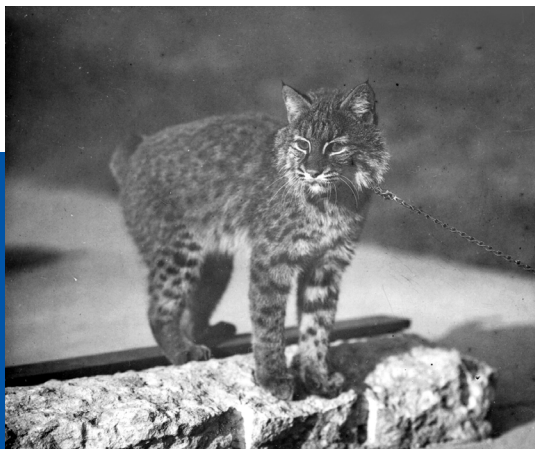
"They have to have physical trust with our cheerleaders" who hold them aloft in the pyramid at basketball games and hoist the board that Wildcat does pushups on to celebrate scores at football games. "They do pushups on a board held by six 18-year-olds," she said, "they have to know those kids."

The mascots "are so busy," O'Connor said, as they juggle classes (they are, after all students), workouts, appearances and their own lives. The mascots attend scores of sports competitions and travel with the football team and for postseason contests in basketball and volleyball. From time to time there's special travel, like when Wildcat went to Los Angeles last year to appear in a Paramount commercial.

They also attend academic functions and community events. Campus organizations can request Wildcat's appearance.

"The month of November is crazy," when all four sports they support – men's and women's basketball, football and volleyball – overlap, O'Connor said.

"They have to be organized," she said, and responsible. "We're trusting them with a \$10,000 suit and to represent the university."



EVOLUTION OF THE MASCOT



“It’s like being Spiderman. When you don’t have the mask on no one cares who you are, but you put the mask on and everyone loves you.”

— Shahrukh Ellahi who was Scratch



AND THEN THERE’S SCRATCH

Wildcat is the mascot with the swagger, the cool cat who might taunt opposing fans while Scratch, who came on the scene about 1995, is “more the goofball, kid-like character...being a big idiot, really” said Matt Hogg ‘04 BE, ‘05 ED who was Scratch during his years at UK.

As the friendlier, more kid-friendly guy, Scratch makes a lot of appearances at UK Children’s Hospital to cheer up both kids being treated and their families.

Hogg made some enduring connections during those visits, including one boy who, “years later, after we graduated, we were still checking in with him.”

Hogg went on to work professionally as a mascot for the Washington Wizards before a torn ACL (it is a very physical job) sidelined him. Ellahi did an internship as the mascot with the Tennessee Titans then with the Cincinnati Reds, where he still appears occasionally, although now he works as a stage manager for the Bengals.

All the former Wildcats and Scratches have stories about favorite times – when they were crowd surfed down a row of stands, when a kid’s eyes lit up in a hospital bed, when a stunt they’d planned didn’t quite work out.

But in the end, each says the real joy of being Wildcat or Scratch is the day-to-day interaction with Big Blue Nation.

“It really is an incredible privilege,” Schmitt said. “I just wish I could do it again one more time.” ■



WILDCAT SECRETS

WHO GETS TO BE WILDCAT OR SCRATCH?

- To be Wildcat a student must be about 6 feet 3 inches tall and thin enough that the cheerleaders can hold them up on a plank to do pushups but strong enough to do the pushups (and at least one with only one arm).
- Scratch can be 5 feet 9 inches to 6 feet tall.
- Students try out. They do improv out of costume while reacting to the fight song and other prompts and then try a "field walk" in the suit.

YOU'VE BEEN CHOSEN. CONGRATULATIONS! NOW WHAT?

- Wildcat and Scratch learn how to do all the mannerisms of the character.
- Mascots attend a four-day summer workshop.
- They attend strength workouts two to three times a week and work with a trainer to assure they hydrate properly (particularly for day football games in August and September).
- They must have the strength and endurance for the job. Wildcat and Scratch don't just cheer on athletes, they are athletes.



Photos by Chet White, UK Athletics

FUN FACTS ABOUT UK'S MASCOTS

ALL DRESSED UP

- There are four parts to the mascot costumes: head, body, hands (or paws) and feet.
- Each Wildcat has its own body costume. The mascots share two heads and there are lots of feet and hands. The heads and feet (that include Timberland boots) are the heaviest parts.
- Wildcat has only four fingers; Scratch has five.
- Don't bother to ask Wildcat or Scratch a question that requires more than a yes or no answer. Neither Wildcat nor Scratch speak.

SUPER-SECRET WILDCAT SECRETS

- Ideally, there are four students who are Wildcat and three who are Scratch at any given time.
- Wildcat often has a "handler" with him, a person who helps intervene when talking is necessary. Often, this is a recruit who is along to watch an experienced Wildcat in action.
- Wildcat and Scratch have their own signatures.
- All mascots receive scholarships, but no one receives a full scholarship. The mascots are not paid, but they receive Nike gear and priority registration, just like the cheer student athletes receive.

WHO'S SCRATCH?

- Scratch came on the scene about 1995, billed as "a more 'hip' character for children."
- The first Scratch was Nate Brown. Scratch was a special guest when Brown announced he was running for student body president in 1998. (He won, leading to the Kernel's headline: "Ex-mascot scratches way to presidency.")



To learn more about the history of Wildcat, check out the photos in Class Notes, pages 42-50.