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02/02/1988 - Panther Mascot

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PANTHER PRIDE

A top attraction at Eastern Illinois University football and basketball games is the Eastern "Panther" mascot (Christy Stranz). Although most spectators don't know who the "Panther" is, they're all aware of her key role in generating Eastern's famous school spirit.

Her "official" career as the panther mascot started at a summer cheerleading camp she attended in Memphis, Tenn., last August. Stranz, along with 68 other mascots, including tigers, bears and lions attended the week-long camp for school mascots.

Stranz said it was great having 68 people with the same fun personality in one room together.

Although she had to walk around in the August heat completely covered in the black panther suit, she said camp is her favorite memory about being the Eastern mascot.

"All I did was play," said Stranz. "We spent most of the day learning how to be funny."

At camp, they asked Stranz if she smiled inside the panther suit when her picture was being taken. She said yes because it "totally takes over. You are the panther."

Stranz said she likes being the panther because the "panther can do anything." At games, she tries to focus the crowd's attention on the panther. "It's really hard to get the crowd going."

She works closely with Eastern's cheerleaders to motivate the crowd. At some of the football games, the male cheerleaders "steal" the opponents mascot and bring it back to Eastern's crowd. The panther then acts like it's beating up the other team's mascot.

"I love to make people smile and laugh," said Stranz. Sometimes the football players get mad at her when she tries to get them to smile at the games, she said.

Stranz said it's hard to see everything that is going on around her. Both eyes of the panther are screens, but she can only look out of one screen at a time.

One time she tripped over a megaphone because she couldn't see it, but she just acted like she meant to do it. She said that's what's great about being the panther. No one knows when she makes a mistake.

Stranz said she likes the little children at the games, but some bother her. They try to pull the panther's head off and pull its tail.

One time a child put a plastic cup on the panther's ear, and she walked around for most of the game with it on.

Stranz appears at every home football and basketball game and practices with the cheerleading squad, although it's not required.

She also appears at the Special Olympics held every year at Eastern. She said if someone asks her to do a special event as the panther, she'll do it.

Stranz, a 1986 graduate of Limestone High School, is the daughter of Larry and Pat Stranz of Bartonville, Ill.