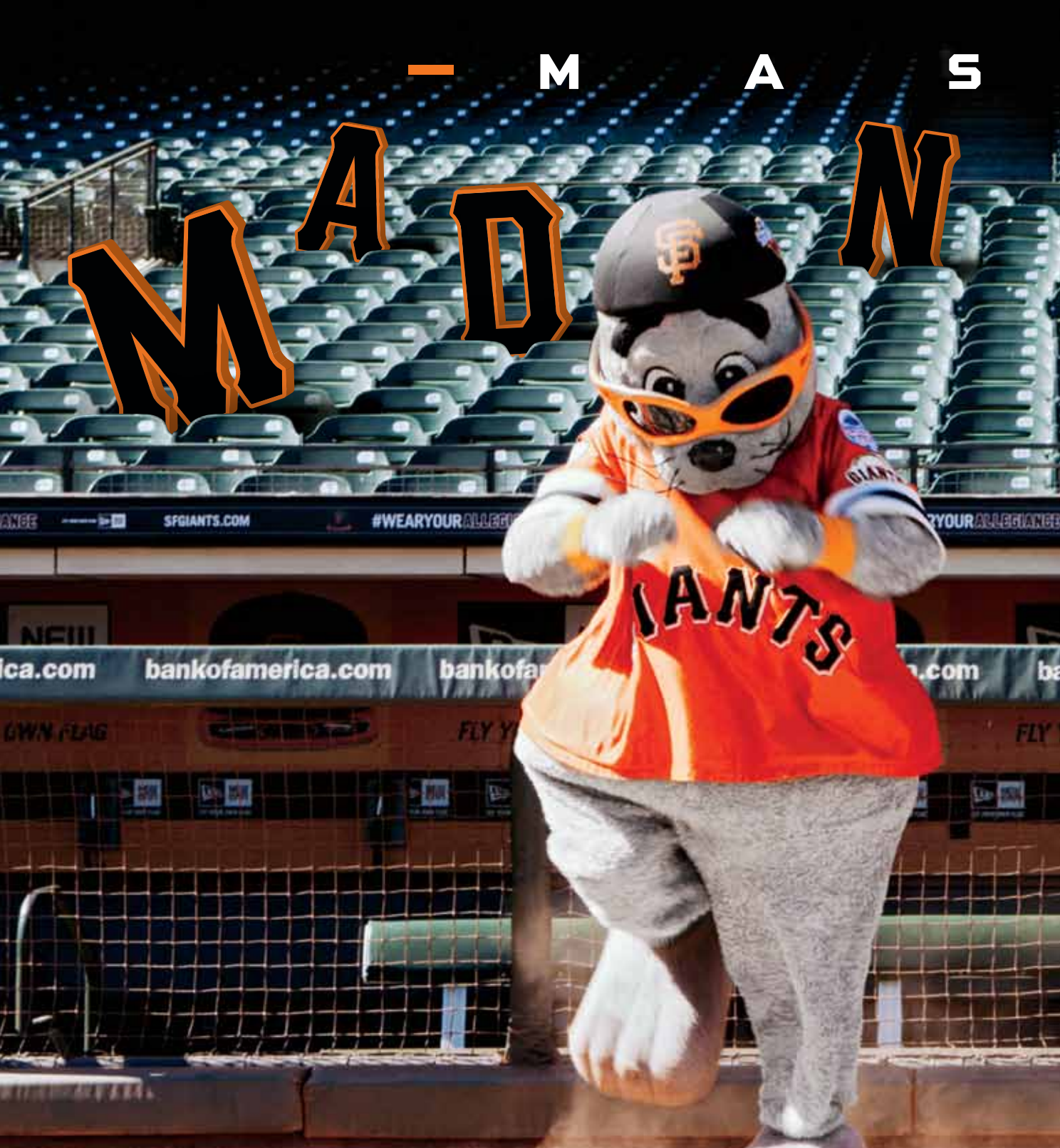


MADON



CROTCH-PUNCHING KIDS! INFERNO-LIKE COSTUMES! DEATH-DEFYING STUNTS! SURE, BEING A MAJOR-LEAGUE MASCOT GETS YOU FREE HOT DOGS, BUT IT'S SERIOUS WORK. JOEL ZIMEI, A.K.A. LOU SEAL OF THE SAN FRANCISCO GIANTS, TOOK US UNDER HIS FLIPPER AND TAUGHT US WHAT IT TAKES TO BE A SULTAN OF SILLY.

by STEVEN LECKART photographs by JON SNYDER

C O T -

ESSAYS



Lou Seal shows the author how to do the Running Man properly while wearing 30 pounds of carpet.



he first rule of mascoting is obvious: Don't take off your head in public (kids will freak out).

The second rule doesn't hit me until I'm sitting beside a 6'2" anthropomorphic seal on public transit: Don't forget people expect ham, lots of it, at all times.

Today I'm escorting Lou Seal, a fuzzy gray manimal in king-size sunglasses and a San Francisco Giants jersey, to a charity drive, and we're running late—our train is stalled underground near AT&T Park. As commuters grumble, Lou does the Running Man, pops 'n' locks, and knocks out a few pull-ups on the train's overhead bar. When an off-duty Muni driver approaches holding up his cell phone like Lloyd Dobler and blasting "Gangnam Style," Lou puts one fist over the other, rocks his shoulders, and hops on each leg, mimicking Psy's signature move.

"Thank you for making my day!" the train's female driver squeals over the loudspeaker before we exit and scurry up an escalator onto the street. In the span of three blocks, Lou gives no fewer than 16 high-fives, five fist bumps, and one hug.

I'm already convinced this guy wearing 30 pounds of carpet has the best job in baseball. He rubs elbows with Hall of Famers, qualifies for the MLB pension plan, and earns a diamond-studded ring whenever the Giants take the pennant. In 2010 and '12, Lou rode on the lead car in the Giants' World Series victory parades.

Nevertheless the guy inside the Seal is mostly anonymous. Few fans know his name, let alone what he looks like.

Such is the nature of the beast. Most clubs like it that way—except the Yankees, Angels, and Dodgers, who don't have mascots. Many teams won't even let you talk to their performers out of costume,

preferring to maintain the illusion there aren't sweaty grown men inside. (Actually, I'm told two MLB mascots are played by women, but I can't reveal which.)

It's a tight community. After 10 years in the league, a mascot receives a commemorative patch at All-Star weekend. Lou Seal even moderates a private Facebook group for current MLB mascots. They talk smack daily, sharing links and screen grabs of their coverage. Whenever someone from their "furternity" makes it onto a televised broadcast or highlight reel, it's kind of a big deal.

The more the world of mascots starts sounding like a secret brotherhood—like Yale's Skull & Bones—the more I want in.

When we first met over lunch, I asked Lou Seal (a.k.a. Joel Zimei, a 41-year-old from Long Island, New York) whether I might give mascoting a try.

"I've gotta think about it," explained Zimei. "Just because I'm doing something that looks fun to you doesn't mean it's not a lot of work. A lot of fans will treat you like you're a wild animal. If something goes wrong..."



LOU SEAL DOESN'T

have a locker. Zimei dresses in an unmarked utility closet at AT&T Park that's crammed with a menagerie of Seal gear: Four spare heads sit on a shelf beside a rack of assorted 5XL jerseys, T-shirts, and one oversize orange wet suit. There are props galore, including a four-foot wooden bat and a two-foot

pink ice cream cone. Lou even has his own Darth Vader helmet and cape.

"I never planned this," Zimei says of his career. "It's just the way my life has unfolded." Unlike many pros, Zimei wasn't a high school mascot. He never attended clown school. And he didn't go through Dave Raymond's Mascot Boot Camp, which was created 21 years ago by the original Phillie Phanatic.

As a kid Zimei was a redheaded class clown. While his Uncle Manny, a mulleted disco DJ, fed Zimei VHS tapes of *The Three Stooges*, his dad kept urging him to become a lawyer. By 1993 Zimei had dropped out of college in Scranton, Pennsylvania, getting by with odd jobs like telemarketing and assembling pool tables. At night, though, he'd tear up dance floors performing in a hip-hop troupe. (Watching MTV helped him perfect the moves of MC Hammer, Bobby Brown, and Big Daddy Kane.)

Everything changed one day in 1997





at a Scranton-Wilkes Barre Red Barons minor-league game. Zimei spent all nine innings armchair-quarterbacking the club's lackluster mascot, an Oscar the Grouch look-alike named the Grump.

"He's not dancing! He's not doing anything!" Zimei groaned to his friend. "How does *that* guy get *this* job?!"

After the game Zimei's friend introduced him to the Red Barons' GM, who gave him a shot at manning the Grump. "I didn't realize how physical the job was," Zimei says of his first time performing while wearing the Grump's 30-pound head. "Your body needs to adjust."

Zimei spent the season earning \$50 a game, stuffing his face with free hot dogs, and eventually performing alongside the Phillie Phanatic, who offered Zimei a job. The following season, after running the Phillies' pep squad, Zimei wrote letters to every other MLB team inquiring about their mascot positions.

He was invited to audition in San Francisco by the Giants, who'd whittled their list of 100 applicants down to 10.

LEFT
Lou Seal flashes his moneymaker (or lack thereof) at AT&T Park in San Francisco.

BELOW
The author catching air before catching balls.

At Candlestick Park, Zimei waited his turn with a hoodie pulled low, headphones blaring his routine music, and his head bobbing like Eminem's in *8 Mile*. "Mentally,"

he recalls, "I was like, This is mine."

Zimei nailed his 45-minute interview and 15-minute set in front of a panel of judges including S.J. Sharkie from the San Jose Sharks, Sourdough Sam from the 49ers, and Stomper from the Oakland A's.

Two weeks later Zimei got the call. He was going to the Show.



B

BEING A MASCOT CAN be physically brutal. In a widely publicized survey conducted in 2001 at Johns Hopkins University, researchers

polled 48 pro mascots, who reported a litany of injuries to their knees, ankles, wrists, fingers, and ribs. Forty-four percent of the mascots had experienced chronic lower back pain. The most common ailment? "Heat-related illness." Half the mascots had been treated with intravenous fluids, including one who was hospitalized for dehydration.

A mascot costume is basically a fuzzy portable sauna. Inside, the heat can



climb 40 degrees above the outside temperature. Thus, the average mascot loses about 8.6 pounds per game. That's roughly a gallon of sweat.

"You sweat out a lot of toxins," he says. "This job is literally like the fountain of youth." Zimei hydrates religiously and lays off alcohol before games. The Bay Area climate also helps. The average high/low in June: 68°F/53°F. "The East Coast is the worst place to be a mascot," he says. "I have no idea how those guys do it."

That's not to say Zimei's gig is a cakewalk. During his first season, he nearly died. Rehearsing alone in his parents' backyard by their pool, he zipped up his suit, pressed record on a video camera, and waddled onto the diving board. His plan: Flip into the pool!

As soon as he hit the water, he knew he was in trouble.

"I'm kicking and swinging my arms, gaining water and starting to choke," he says. "Every ounce of energy in my entire body got me to the edge of the pool. In the video it sounds like I'm dying."

That didn't deter Zimei from taking more risks. After his mom sewed him a Lou-size Spider-Man outfit, he developed a bit where he dangled from a nylon rope. Eventually the front office nixed the rappelling: "God forbid something happens to you!" That's why a few teams actually use multiple performers to play one mascot in a single game. According to Zimei, up to

five different guys will share a costume.

Fans—and managers—also add to the danger. In 1988 Dodgers skipper Tommy Lasorda pummeled the Phillie Phanatic after the mascot abused an effigy in a Lasorda jersey. In 1999 Baltimore's Oriole Bird spent 40 days in a wheelchair after being pushed off the right-field bleachers in Camden Yards. And that's just baseball.

ABOVE

As Lou looks on, Papa Seal and Mama Seal (the author) get ready for the Kiss Cam.

RIGHT

Your eyes don't deceive you: This is a man, dressed as a seal, wearing a panda mask.

OPPOSITE

The not-so-sweet smell of success.

other pro sports and colleges and the number of incidents and injuries multiplies.

Now consider this: Zimei has never missed a day of work. By his count he's been Lou Seal in 1,226 straight games, which appears to be the longest

streak in pro baseball. He's the Cal Ripken of mascots. What's his secret?

When we get back to AT&T Park, I ask Zimei to walk me through his strength-and-conditioning regimen. Get this: He doesn't have one! "The job itself is a total workout," he explains.

Zimei humors me. The Giants are on the road right now, so we hit the weight room for light cardio and iron pumping before taking the field. Then we step



onto the dirt, where Zimei demos a proper Running Man and Roger Rabbit.

I'm panting, but I hide it. I want Zimei to see I'm serious. I ask him for more ground rules, aside from the no-head-off-in-public policy. Zimei breaks it down:

- 1) Be nice to all kids.
- 2) Bust every dude's chops.
- 3) Flirt with all women.

Admirable words to live by, even if you're not wearing a furry costume.

THE AVERAGE MASCOT LOSES ABOUT 8.6 POUNDS PER GAME. THAT'S ROUGHLY A GALLON OF SWEAT.



'M STANDING IN
my underwear in
the players' parking
garage. To my left is
a tricked-out Audi R8
that costs more than

my last three cars combined. To my right is Maureen, a blonde twentysomething wearing an orange jacket with SEALCURITY stitched on the back. Maureen is one of Zimei's three assistants.

"Your ass is kind of big, so I'm gonna help," she says as I straddle a pile of gray fur and an immense flowered dress.

Tonight, as the Giants battle the Arizona Diamondbacks, I'll be appearing in three skits as Lou Seal's mom!

I pull on a wife-beater with big PVC rings, which create a crucial part of my mother seal's anatomy: the belly. Once I finish zipping the thing up, while still headless, I attempt my first "belly bump." I thrust my hips forward while simultaneously flinging my hands under the PVC rings. Boom!

Piece of cake—until I put on my head. It weighs 10 pounds. It smells funky. And I can barely see through the eyeholes.

"Think: Nutty Professor's mom," Zimei says as we leave the garage.

At the bottom of the first, Maureen carts me over to McCovey Cove, a jetty behind the right-field wall where Lou

Seal competes in a paddleboard race with other manimals, including a panda, a shark, and a giraffe. I post up on the rocks, and Zimei's assistant Anthony passes me semi-deflated handballs, which I awkwardly launch 45 feet towards the water. I manage to peg Lou, who falls in (just as planned!). I clap my hands, pantomiming my best "Hercules! Hercules! Hercules!"

During the third, after Zimei has changed out of his wet suit, I ride shotgun as we race a bullpen cart around the field. I fling souvenir hats. It feels *amazing* to hear thousands of people going bananas for me, even if that me is a big-boned lady seal.

In the bottom of the sixth inning, I star in a Kiss Cam gag with Lou Seal's dad, who is played by Zimei's third assistant, a hulking dude who is also losing his mascot virginity this evening. Zimei seats us at a café behind the outfield bleachers. While we await our cue, I wave, blow kisses, bob my head, and pose for photos. I decide that Zimei's rule about flirting with women doesn't apply to my character.

When the time comes for my on-screen kiss, Lou Seal's dad grabs me, leans in, and plants one on me hard—so hard, in fact, that he pinches a nerve in my shoulder.

By the middle of the seventh, while Lou Seal, my hubby, and I are swaying to "Take Me Out to the Ball Game", I'm spent, my neck is killing me, and the Giants are losing.

After the game Zimei and I sit together on the beat-up couch in his utility closet. We're in our underwear, drenched in sweat, chuckling about the two grown men dressed as seals who smooched.

Later that night I'm back home sipping a beer, fast-forwarding through the game on TiVo. Our first-, third-, and sixth-inning skits don't make the broadcast. I fast-forward to the seventh, hoping the producers cut to the three Seals at least for a second. Nope!

Deflated, I skip ahead to the postgame wrap-up. After the broadcasters finish bagging on the Giants and they throw to commercial, finally, there she is: a quick slow-motion closeup of a lady seal hurling hats! I pause TiVo, snap a photo with my phone, and text it to Zimei.

I may not be a full-fledged member of the furternity, but it's a start. ♡

FUR REAL? THE MASCOT HALL OF SHAME



BOLTMAN
If Jack Nicholson, Max Headroom, and Jim Carrey in *The Mask* spawned a son, it'd still be less creepy than Mr. San Diego Charger.



CHIEF NOC-A-HOMA
The Atlanta Braves former mascot pulled off the rare double feat of being both racially insensitive and a horrible pun.



WUSHOCK
Hey, Wichita State: If the point of a mascot is to intimidate opponents, maybe go with something other than a bundle of wheat.



BILLIKEN
All together now: Raise your hand if you know what a Billiken is and *don't* go to St. Louis University. OK. You're a liar.



WENLOCK AND MANDEVILLE
Why the London Olympics went with weird one-eyed trouser snakes as mascots remains a mystery.



CLARK THE CUB
When Chicago unveiled its pantsless mascot this year, fans quickly offered up more anatomically correct versions.