

Chris Velardi:

It is the 'Cuse Conversations podcast, celebrating the 150th anniversary of the Orange. Syracuse University's iconic mascot is a member of the Mascot Hall of Fame's class of 2023.

Julie Walas:

You don't do mascot stuff, like mascot life for any person or. It's for the enjoyment of other people and it's just every once in a while where you take a breath and you say, "Wow, this is cool." Like, "Wow, I was a part of doing something really cool." So many people's lives now, almost a hundred of us that have been Otto and worn the suit and brought Otto to life for other people.

Chris Velardi:

That's Julie Walas, Otto's coach for the last 16 years, and as you heard her mention one of nearly 100 Syracuse University's student athletes who've brought Otto the Orange to life. I'm Chris Velardi from Syracuse University's Office of Alumni Engagement. Thanks for listening to this special edition of the 'Cuse Conversations podcast.

Here's the thing if you want to talk about Otto, you've got to talk with Julie, so we did. She shares some great stories that really highlight what Otto means to the university, Syracuse fans, the Central Hall of Fame, and the Orange.

invited Otto to come as they do every year, but they surprised Otto and all of the kids made congratulatory cards and posters for Otto Mascot Hall of Fame and they were telling Otto and us like, "It's so cool that we won a national championship and you're in the Hall of Fame at the same time."

I think it was humbling to me and the students that the Men's National Championship soccer team would take a moment to bring their kids' community together and honor Otto that way and invite Otto in in that way. We were at a 4th of July party, 30 minutes outside of Syracuse at Tuscarora, past Tuscarora, and it was so fun. It was just like picnic party, fireworks, boat parade, the 4th of July weekend, and we decided to take the golf cart that was provided and just hop a little bit to some more parties on the way back to Otto's changing area.

Chris Velardi:

So Otto showed up uninvited?

Julie Walas:

Kind of, yes.

Chris Velardi:

But has Otto ever really uninvited? Yeah.

Julie Walas:

Yeah. Everyone is thrilled. And the weird part was no one asked like, "Otto, why are you here? Why are you out here?" They immediately went to, "Hall of Fame mascot." It was strange to be somewhere where you weren't expected or invited and people knew that Otto was receiving his recognition. So I'm really grateful to the whole community for the publicity and for the excitement from [syracuse.com](http://syracuse.com), the university crew here and everybody just kind of getting the word out. But yeah, it's meant so much I think to everyone to know that Otto means so much to all of us and Otto is a part of all our lives in so many ways that on a global scale, on a national level, Otto is recognized by the Mascot Hall of Fame.

Chris Velardi:

Let's take it from the global national level to the very personal level. What does this mean for you?

Julie Walas:

This is a big one. This is a big one. I don't think I realized that it was going to mean so much to me, and I think it's on many fronts that the alumni that I've gotten to know coaching this team for 16 years and then the alumni that I've coached for 16 years alumni have come before me. It's a piece of all of them and all of their efforts that have gotten us to this place and this point. So to hear all of them celebrate together and be the one that got to deliver that message to them and that all of them we did it together has really brought our community together in such a beautifully humbling way.

And then to know the kids that do this after all of us are going to be a part of a program that is honored in the likes of any of the best mascots in the world that we've built something together that really does mean something, not just to me or just to the community. That reflection back has just really honored me to hear everyone be so excited for Otto to know that the excitement is for Otto, but the honor I am taking personally, like, "Wow, people really are excited about something that we've created over time, that is so much a part of people's lives." All the day-to-day effort, everything of the scheduling, the coordinating, the training the kids, the picking, all of that came to this moment.

You don't do mascot stuff, like mascot life for any person. It's for the enjoyment of other people. And it's just every once in a while where you take a breath and you say, "Wow, this is cool." Like, wow, I was a part of doing something really cool that has benefited so many people's lives who interact with Otto, but so many people's lives now, almost a hundred of us that have been Otto and worn the suit and brought Otto to life for other people.

Chris Velardi:

There are so much there that I want to unpack and all that, but go back to your first experiences and how this 16 years as a coach, but how this journey began?

Julie Walas:

Yeah, I can't even imagine it. I remember telling my mom and dad, "I think I might be a mascot now. I think I might be Otto." And they were like, "What?"

Chris Velardi:

So you didn't come into this with that plan?

Julie Walas:

No. And some of the students now come in telling me from their freshman semester, "I want to be an Otto." They're emailing before they get here. It's a way bigger deal and a way bigger program. But at that time, there were just a few of us, less than a handful. And I was not a typical mascot that was coming to tryouts. My friend Laura Brietnall, Laura Hollands now, were RAs together and she was an Otto and she was the one who said, "I think you need to go tryouts." And just last year, they were all over at my house and her family, we were having dinner together and I was able to thank her because she was talking about, "Do you remember like we were Ottos and like now this is your whole life?"

And I was like, "It wouldn't be that without you saying you should go to tryouts, Laura. I remember sitting on the quad and you saying it and me laughing off, like I would never be a mascot. I've never considered that in my life. And then you telling me to go and I showed up." I actually don't even remember how many people were there, but there were a couple of people coming in. It was in Manley Field House and we did this tryout. The cheer coach was there, Dena Segbers at that time, and it was silly. Everything about it was silly and mascoty and well outside of my normal comfort zone of a few housekid, RA, U100 and I guess for many students mascots fit, but I didn't have that silliness to me.

Chris Velardi:

You were out of your comfort zone and sometimes the best things happen when you get out of your comfort zone, but you never realize it at that moment.

Julie Walas:

No. Yes, exactly. And I think the whole time that I was Otto, I felt a little bit, now looking back, like I know this is significant, but I can't figure out why it's cool. It's so cool. I'm getting all sorts of crazy experiences that I wouldn't have gotten otherwise. And I feel a lot like an imposter. I'm not really sure, but I had no idea it was drawing me into a career in coaching that would lead me down this path of probably the most fulfilling professional thing I've ever done is coaching college students and now generations of these college students.

I felt throughout my short time as Otto that I had so much more to offer. I had just kind of gotten involved in this and comfortable. And so Otto was a different program at a different time than too, and so there was a lot of things that were advocating for and it was hard to be coming of age with social media and trying to have these conversations about what do we do with video social and nationals and who are we as a mascot program. And it's taken a ton of time to figure that out. But from there, every year, I think we've gotten more and more sure of ourselves and our identity and we've built off each year and now have come to this magical place where there's a ring coming, a national Hall of Fame ring coming home this time.

Chris Velardi:

Yeah. And that recognition obviously has got to be so fulfilling, but looking back at your, you said brief time as Otto, is there any particular moment that stood out?

Julie Walas:

Yeah, I always come back to a couple. I think it's going to be the big moments where you run out onto the field in front of all the fans at a big football game, that is cool and the crowd feels so loud and echoing in the suit and you're just all you hear in your head though are your own thoughts about what's coming next and what you're doing.

Chris Velardi:

Hard to enjoy that moment because of all the things that you've got to focus on.

Julie Walas:

Yeah, you're just taking it all in and thinking about so much that it's like deafening silence at the same time, but it's the small moments, the ones where you went to a little birthday party of a kid that gives you a card that they spent time creating for you, or a high five that then lights up their whole face where you just know this is the reason that we're here, this is the difference. And the parents are then crying, capturing their photo of their little kid and they went to Syracuse. It's a whole moment for them that you are pausing in their life and spending that deliberate time to see someone connect with them in that way really matters. Those are the moments that I kind of remember. And now I think sometimes those little kids are grown up adults, are college students themselves now and that's pretty neat that it's been that, maybe that moment was the moment you created a fan in Syracuse and for all of us.

Chris Velardi:

You mentioned neighborhood of a hundred students now, alumni who have been Otto, but one of

and kind of learning about things like that, creating a consistent character, defining your character's signature moves, how your character's different from other characters. And at some point Otto evolved to past the basics and I started having our own Otto camp and retreat, so students still come back for Otto retreat early, and we coach our own camp here.

Chris Velardi:

Yeah.

Julie Walas:

We've now created some partnerships and a network... it's a small network, but there's a network of mascot coaches mostly on the collegiate level that bounce off ideas off each other. Or we might do team Zooms and do some ideas back and forth. And



really great about encouraging that engagement for a multitude of reasons. I have multiple generations of friends from WJPZ and multiple generations of friends from the Otto program which is pretty nifty.

Chris Velardi:

That's the best of alumni engagement is where it's multi-generational. It's not just the people you were in school with, but it's the people who were before you or came after you and are part of some affinity, some type of thing that connects you all.

Final thing, is there a special Otto memory, a moment that stands out for you? And I know having talked to other people who have been Otto for a period of time, it's hard to pick just one, but is there kind of a thing or a common theme among the moments that stands out?

Brian Lapis:

Yeah, there are three that stand out for me. The first one is the fact that I had the opportunity to go to the Aloha Bowl as a senior and what that involved was a week long trip with some of my best friends. The time, Otto was closely attached to the cheerleading squad, so I had several friends on the cheerleading squad before I became Otto, and then when I became the mascot, we became even closer. So it was this magnificent trip to Honolulu for a week over Christmas of our senior year of college. I mean, it doesn't get any better than that. Then there was the time that I was mascotting, I was Otto the BC, the Boston College football game at Boston College, and the BC Eagle comes up to me and says, "Hey, listen, there's this thing that the band likes to do. They like to pick up the visiting team's mascot and carry it off the field. Are you up for that?" I go, "Yeah, sure." I got carried off the field by the Boston College Marching Band. That was pretty fun.

And then there was this annoying time, and this day, I'm annoyed by Villanova because there was a time when Villanova was playing us at the dome. There was some music and the Villanova Wildcat decided to go dancing on the court, and the mascot protocol is that you don't do that. The mascot comes out and dances for 30 seconds, 45 seconds, then the home mascot comes and chases the visiting mascot off the court. So there was the Villanova Wildcat on our court dancing around. So Otto comes waddling out and tries to shoo the Villanova wildcat off the court and the wildcat wouldn't leave. So I had to engage my cheerleading friends and it was more like a gang repellent. Well, by the way, when I was in Otto, it wasn't a secret. So everybody knew that I was the mascot because I was really fired up and really proud of the fact that I was the mascot. Otto is a treasured experience for me at Syracuse University.

Chris Velardi:

And a Hall of Famer.

Brian Lapis:

And a Hall of Famer. I'm proud to be a Hall of Famer.

Jeff Kurkjian:

Hi, I'm Jeff Kurkjian, class of 2015, and was Otto the Orange from 2011 to 2015 and proud to call Otto a Hall of Famer.

Chris Velardi:

What does that mean to you?

Jeff Kurkjian:

Being a part of the mascot program at Syracuse, I quickly realized that it's about so much more than you. It's about what it represents and what Otto represents. Being a part of that, I didn't really feel selfish that Otto became a Hall of Famer and I can't explain. Because everybody I was on the team with and most people I meet who were Otto at one point, they understand the gravity of what it means to do the job. So it's almost like you disconnect from it in a way where I'm just so proud of Otto of the hard work and the accumulation of all of this great work from all of these people who have served and Julie Walas, who's absolutely incredible as a coach and has grown this program massively and she



into the program and the mascot itself is unique, hilarious, and represents a university that is the greatest quite frankly.

Chris Velardi:

Before I let you go, share an Otto experience that has stayed with you,

Jeff Kurkjian:

I'll tell you quickly my favorite Otto story, and I want you to understand that this has nothing to do with me. This has everything to do with Otto, I just happened to be there for it.

Chris Velardi:

That's the key.

Jeff Kurkjian:

It was Syracuse's first ACC tournament and Otto was down for the ACC, and nobody knew who Otto was, right? We're new guys. People were thinking Otto was the mascot for the ACC tournament because he looks like a basketball and nobody called Otto. Nobody cared about Syracuse when we were sitting in Tar Heel Country and Blue Devil Country in North Carolina.

Chris Velardi:

This is Greensboro, right?

Jeff Kurkjian:

Exactly. Nobody cares about upstate New York down there. Let me tell you that much. And they think we know nothing about basketball, which is absolutely not true, but I digress. In between tournament days, Otto and the rest of the mascots had an opportunity to go to a children's hospital in Greensboro and we met all of these kids who have been going through some really difficult times. A lot of them, cancer diagnosis, leukemia. Some of them unfortunately were terminal. Some of them were going through to trying to get through some of the hardest times they will ever face and that anybody will face. Otto was there and all of the kids loved Rameses and the Blue Devil and the Deacon and all that because they know those. A lot of people knew Otto until Not 01 Tw5 Tdna Tw135.485 0 en (had )Tj 0 Tw75.48

Chris Velardi:

Wow.

Jeff Kurkjian:

And the impact that Otto the Orange can have on this community is amazing and it stretches far and wide, and that is why Otto the Orange is and always will be a Hall of fame.

Zannah Bailey:

Hi, I'm Zannah Bailey, class of 2014. I was Otto from 2009 until I graduated in 2014. When I first visited



Exactly. And it's really fun and to have the privilege to listen in to those experiences over time and to watch. There are some excitement right now around the current group of Ottos, and of course they're still a secret.

Chris Velardi:

Right.

Julie Walas:

As you are a part of this, your life is about giving to Otto, and so until you graduate, we don't know, but there are some really special pieces of this group that tie them to the groups before that I just can't wait to have play out over time. I think the generation idea is really to watch the Otto family kind of grow and change and to now have Ottos from the early '80s, halfway through. Now, we have 40 years of Ottos.

Chris Velardi:

Before Otto was even officially Otto, right?

Julie Walas:

Yeah. Honestly, yes. And Otto wasn't even named Otto until really 1990 and became our official mascot in '95. So it's cool between all of them to share these milestones with each other and to learn like, "I was the Otto at the national championship and I was the Otto that named the Otto costume, and I was the Otto who was in Japan for this event, or I was the military based veteran Otto that I know. I was the first female Otto." There's all these significant moments when you have a group that's so small but also spans this kind of time.

Chris Velardi:

Otto is so inclusive. Everyone can relate to that experience and can connect through their shared experiences with Otto. It doesn't matter how old they are, as long as they're rooting for Syracuse. And even if they're not, sometimes they can't help it, but kind of love Otto.

Julie Walas:

I think you're really right on that. We've experienced a few times where we've been on a commercial shoot for Nissan or at an ACC tournament where multiple teams and mascots together from all across.

Chris Velardi:

ESPN.

Julie Walas:

Right. And people show up to take pictures with Otto like, "I've been wanting to meet you. You're a [inaudible00:36:56] mascot." And they may be intimidated in some other team's gear but Otto does have this inclusivity about Otto and really isn't intimidating, scary like, we're not going to like you kind of teasing mascot, which brings people in. I think the Hall of Fame recognized that and they're pretty thrilled about the support that the Syracuse community is giving Otto because it means so much

to the Hall of Fame to induct a mascot who's got a fan base that's showing up and is excited and voting from all around the world. And so they were thrilled to invite us in.

Chris Velardi:

Yeah. That was one of the things that they pointed out after tallying the votes from around the world that the support for Otto was overwhelming.

Julie Walas:

Yeah. And when you think about it, a lot of the fan bases for professional sports are kind of localized. They might be really big and really deep, but it's often for the team and the mascot is the side character to a team. And not to diminish the work of some of these really incredibly talented performers in

And that should really be a pride point ~~fall~~ of us. Otto will be inducted into the Mascot Hall of Fame in Whiting, Indiana during ceremony and family friendly ~~fest~~ on Saturday, August 12th. There's more information in this episode's description. You ~~also~~ can make a gift to support Otto through the Otto the Orange Mascot Fund. You'll find that link in the description. Thanks to Julie Valas, Brian Lapis, Jeff Kurkjian and Zanna Bailey for being a part of this celebration of the Hall of Famer, Otto the Orange. And thanks to you for listening. I'm Chris Velardi. Go Orange!