

Chris Velardi:

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

Julie Walas:

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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 have 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 New York community, and really everyone who has been part of the Orange Legacy. Speaking of that legacy, you'll also hear from alumni, Brian Lapis, Jeff Kurkjian, and Zannah Bailey, Otto alumni who will offer their own unique perspectives on being Otto and this Hall of Fame honor. We'll start though with Julie and what Otto's induction into the Hall of Fame means.

Julie Walas:

Well, it kind of means like a lifetime achievement award for Otto. I think the recognition by a professional, a compilation of a professional mascot community that Otto has a huge impact on our fan base, on our alumni, on our community, and has a uniqueness to themselves that just gives so much to our population. And so it's really cool that this outside well-respected entity said this honor should be bestowed on Otto and the Otto community that brings it to life.

Chris Velardi:

Otto and Syracuse University are obviously synonymous, right?

Julie Walas:

Yeah.

Chris Velardi:

People go places, they see Otto, they know it's Syracuse. They see Syracuse, and they want to know where Otto is. For the larger university, what do you think this means and what have you heard since this announcement?

Julie Walas:

Yeah, it's been incredible. Since Otto has been out, the amount of people in the greater community that know about the Hall of Fame award and have been doing things to honor Otto in their own way has been just so special. Last week there was a soccer camp, a kid's community soccer camp, and they

invited Otto to come as they do every year, but they surprised Otto and all of the kids had 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 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 in 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 this 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 so strange to be somewhere where you weren't expected or invited and people knew that Otto was receiving this recognition. So I'm really grateful to the whole community for the publicity and for the excitement from 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 of 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 in coaching this team for 16 years and then the alumni that I've coached for 16 years, alums 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 tell 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. I 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 personal honor. 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 it's enhanced 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 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 into it 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. So my friend Laura Brietnall, Laura Hollands now, we were RAs together and she was an Otto and she was the one who said, "I think you need to go to tryouts." And just last year, they were all over at my house, her 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 tryout, Laura. I remember sitting on the quad and you saying it and me laughing it off, like I would never be a mascot. I've never considered that in my life. And then you telling me 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 new house kid, 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 in 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 also 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 and 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 an 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 then too, and so there was a lot of things that we 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 and 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 of each year and now have come to this magical place where there's a ring coming, a national, a 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. You 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 of 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 and 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 the things that strikes me about Otto is Otto's consistency, and I know that's an important part of it. How do you focus on that? How is Otto Otto, whether it's 2009, 2015, 2023?

Julie Walas:

Yeah. That's a brilliant question and we've had a lot of help along the way, but there are kind of professional entities that help develop characters, and one of them honestly are some of the founding people of the Mascot Hall of Fame. So Dave Raymond Entertainment is someone who creates characters for different people and was the one who initially created the Phillie Phanatic, one of the most iconic mascots in the world. But the UCA, Universal or United Cheer Association has mascot camps every year. So early on, well, I guess not super early on, but the early 2000s, we were going to these mascot camps

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 then 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 of... 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 so we pull from the best of other programs, but a lot of that coaching is about that consistent delivery, and they're remembering that it may be our 100th appearance of the month, but it's that person's only time they're going to see Otto this year. And so we talk a lot about the moments that make Otto special and the moments that we felt that connection to help keep that motivation and we'll take a bunch of time together to just practice and, "Hey, I tried this thing out and it went really well, and if you turn the suit this way, then the effect of when you can pop out of your turn was really cool or impactful. Or if you take a photo this way, you may see a new expression of Otto." And so we try to pull new things from each other as well as we [inaudible 00:14:45].

Chris Velardi:

Yeah, Otto grows, right?

Julie Walas:

Yeah.

Chris Velardi:

Otto grows.

Julie Walas:

Just like anything.

Chris Velardi:

Yeah, and I think that idea, when you're in a whatever type of performance, athletic performance, stage performance, whatever type of performance you're doing, that memory and that mindset of, well, this might be the first and only time that this audience member is seeing me. It's an important thing to keep in mind, to force yourself to keep it fresh.

Julie Walas:

Yeah, definitely. And I think part of it being multiple people over time. Professional mascots are different where you're hired to do this, and you may have a couple of you, but a lot of times it's one person and you do this again and again and again, but right now there's a dozen of them and they change out and they help each other and they spend four or five, six semesters doing this, but they move on and pass the torch to someone else who is excited and keeps it fresh again, and immediately they have this whole thing where they're exhausted and then three weeks later, they miss it. It happens. And then a year

later, you think, "Wow, I can't believe that was a part of my life that feels so different and removed, but I'm so grateful for what it's bringing me."

My hope is that for everyone who's a part of this program, it brings them a deeper sense of belonging to our Syracuse community and a bigger network, a more connected network. This is a very strong affinity group and I just can't imagine it being any other way, but it has so much meaning to everyone because it impacted all of our experiences so deeply that it's fun to watch people share them together and 30 years after you've worn the suit, still feel like I can identify with this new fresh 19-year-old who's wearing it now.

Chris Velardi:

And there's no doubt that that family atmosphere exists among the Ottos out in the world. What do you have Ottos out in the world doing these days?

Julie Walas:

They're everywhere. It's really fun, but they are, they're everywhere and they're doing everything. They're engineers, they're architects, they're in media, they're in medicine, they're in Australia, they're in Alaska. They're a really cool group.

Brian Lapis:

Hi there. I'm Brian Lapis, class of 1991, one of the original Ottos. There were six of us at the time that were new mascots, and we went to mascot camp at Eastern Tennessee State University in August of 1990 and we decided that we wanted to name the mascot. We all got together, the five or six of us that were there, got together in a dorm room and we hashed out a few names, and Otto was the name that came to the top and a star was born.

Chris Velardi:

A Hall of Famer was born. What does that mean to somebody who was there those decades ago when Otto had not yet even had a name? What does it mean to have this recognition now from the Mascot Hall of Fame?

Brian Lapis:

I think it's really fantastic. I'm honored because I am part of that group, that foundational group that kind of got this whole thing going, but I'm really happy for the students and for Julie Walas who has really made this program what it is because they work really hard. I'm really proud that we've turned Otto from being kind of an accessory at games to being this iconic symbol of Syracuse University.

Chris Velardi:

And I know you show that pride off because you continue to visit with those students, you continue to make this program a part of your life.

Brian Lapis:

Yeah. So in the fall at Orange Central, usually there's some sort of opportunity for us to visit with the current students, and then when I come back in March for the WJPZ Alumni Birthday Banquet, I also try to carve out some time to visit with the mascots. And if the mascots are say, in our area, in Connecticut or Western Massachusetts, I try to carve out some time to visit with them there too. Julie has been

really great about encouraging that engagement for a multitude of reasons. Now 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 then maybe came 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. At 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 for 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 to 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, and 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 damn wildcat wouldn't leave. So I had to engage my cheerleading friends and it was more like a gang repellent if you would. Back when I was in Otto, it wasn't a secret. So I let everybody know 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 I 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, you quickly realize 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 at all selfish that Otto became a Hall of Famer and I'll 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. It's all of the hard work and the accumulation of all of this great work from all of these people who have served and coach Julie Walas, who's absolutely incredible as a coach and has grown this program massively and she deserves a huge amount of the credit, but it really does represent back onto the university.

And I have to add Chris, that how the alumni association has embraced Otto and made them such a big part of what they're doing really in the last six years. For perspective, I graduated eight years ago and we very much felt like we floated in between this world of the university, the alumni association and athletics, and we're never really tapped into the way we thought we could have been and the way we thought Otto deserved to be. And it's no surprise to me that Otto is getting this honor in the time that he is because athletics has really embraced Otto and is using Otto in ways that Otto's never been used before. But more importantly, the alumni association has been really tapping into what Otto can do.

I'm seeing Otto all over the website, all over social media, all over videos and photos. It feels like a healthy rebrand for Otto and it's just fitting. I don't know if Otto deserved to be in the Hall of Fame when I was there, and I mean that because it wasn't quite a perfect marriage yet as to where it is today, and that's a credit to the alumni association, that's a credit to Julie, that's a credit to athletics for really leaning in and saying, "We've got something great here, we need to use it more."

Chris Velardi:

I love what you say about when you're part of this program, when you are putting on that costume, you're part of something bigger. What is always so amazing to me is the consistency, and I know it's something that you strive for, but the consistency, it's always just Otto and Otto is the same, and Otto has that energy and Otto has those moves and that consistency is a big part of the identity.

Jeff Kurkjian:

Yeah, that was something that was a big shift when I started coming around and our team, that became a big emphasis is not only height and build similarities between Ottos on the team, but more importantly the training aspect of things and the bonding aspect of things. I think training is super important. I had the opportunity to be trained by a couple great Ottos, and I trained quite a few team members as well in my day and finding the isms and the moments that Otto can make to be across the board and represent the university as a whole in a safe and fun and goofy manner the way Otto does. Most importantly, I think the bonding between the team is what really makes that cohesiveness slide because you go on events with team members, you talk to team members, you work out with team members, you hang out with team members, and you talk about things you do as you're working to help improve the program.

"Oh, I had this cool idea. Hey, did you know that we could do this with the suit? Hey, did you know that when you meet a kid, here's a funny joke." We all used to work on Otto signature together at Julie's house. These are the little things that when the program really started to take steam, we would earn something like this. I'm not surprised that Otto's a Hall of Famer now because the work that's been put

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 tourney, 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 cared. 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, I'll 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 ever face. Otto was there and all of the kids loved Rameses and the Blue Devil and the Demon Deacon and all that because they know those. Not a lot of people knew Otto until the very end when Otto was getting ready to leave to go back to get ready for the tournament games, one of the nurses stopped Otto and said, "Wait, we have your biggest Syracuse fan ever. He's coming down and he wants to come hang out with you."

Otto's handler was kind of like, "No, we got to go. We got to go." And Otto was like, adamant, nobody has talked to me this entire time I'm staying. Little boy comes down, gets out of his wheelchair, and is just elated to see Otto the Orange. He sees Otto on TV for all of these games, but he lives in North Carolina and never gets to go into any of them. Then he proceeds to give the entire starting lineup of that 2013 or 2014 team as if he was an announcer. Otto pulls out all of the t-shirts and all the little basketballs bouncing around and gave him basically everything, including things from Otto's own bag because finally met a Syracuse fan in North Carolina. Then the little boy asked, "Otto, can you watch the game with me?" And unfortunately, Otto had to go and go be at the game, but said he would point his finger at the camera and make sure he knows that they are best friends now.

What really is amazing about what Otto can do is one of his parents told Otto that that was the first time they've seen him smile in weeks.

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 Syracuse as a senior in high school, I asked, "How does one become the mascot?" So I was ready.

Chris Velardi:

When you heard this news that Otto is going to be inducted into the Mascot Hall of Fame, what was your initial reaction?

Zannah Bailey:

First of all, I was surprised that it had taken this long. I feel like Otto is so plugged in not just to the university, but also to the broader Syracuse community and even beyond that. You look at when people say, "Hey, how do you pick your March Madness bracket? Let's look at the mascots." And Otto is always high up there, so I was thrilled. I thought it was well deserved and I thought it really speaks to everything that Otto has done in the past and is getting set up to do in the future.

Chris Velardi:

Yeah, that's one of the I think one of the coolest parts about this is it really solidifies what has already been a strong connection between Otto's past, Otto's present and Otto's future. What has that connection meant to you?

Zannah Bailey:

It really is indescribable in terms of the connection that alumni Ottos have with the current team and with each other. My best friends from school were all the Ottos, and I think that that really shows in terms of the network then that we have also post-graduation, whether it's asking for career advice or how excited folks are when we get back to campus. And even you mentioned Brian Lapis and Brian and I didn't overlap, but we know each other because of Otto and that kind of sense of community carries forward even after we've graduated.

Chris Velardi:

Are there any particular Otto moments that stand out?

Zannah Bailey:

Too many to name. The one that I always go back to is Otto was asked, and again, this speaks to how involved Otto was in the community, not just at the university. Otto was asked to do a medical fundraiser, and as we were getting closer to the date, the individuals who had coordinated it reached out and said, "We are so sorry, but it's no longer a medical fundraiser. It's now a funeral fundraiser." And they said, "We would still really appreciate if Otto could be there." And it was just the way that Otto

was just seen as this public figure who could just come in and offer comfort. That just really struck me and is something that I've remembered to this day, just to think about how do you embody Otto but still not be excited running around, but be there to really be a figure of comfort and support to this grieving family. And that was just something that will never leave me.

Chris Velardi:

Wow. Yeah, that is, I'm going to be honest, not the kind of answer I would expect, but it does very much speak to what Otto represents and how Otto can represent a lot of different things to a lot of different people at a lot of different times.

Zannah Bailey:

Yeah. Yeah. There are so many, I guess, exciting memories, but like I said, that one, just the recognition of what Otto means to the broader community was just unbelievable.

Chris Velardi:

I know Brian and Jeff who I spoke to are both broadcasters. What do you do now?

Zannah Bailey:

Yeah, so at Syracuse, I was in a five-year program. I got two bachelor's in aerospace engineering and international relations, and now I work for a self-driving car company as a safety engineer.

Chris Velardi:

That's phenomenal. And that also speaks to the different people who have embodied Otto over the years is it really is such a diverse cross section of Syracuse University students.

Zannah Bailey:

Yes. Diverse cross section who all share a love for the university, and we all shared this secret for however many years we were all helping bring Otto's voice to the community.

Chris Velardi:

What I love is you have that diverse cross section of human beings embodying Otto, but Otto is so consistent. And it's consistent, but grows, right? You are a team and everyone kind of brings something that Otto can take wherever Otto goes.

Zannah Bailey:

Yes. Yeah. And again, it's that what we spoke about at the beginning, right? The continuity between what Otto did in the past and then to what Otto's doing in the future. Every team is subtly different, but as you said, they're all still Otto.

Chris Velardi:

You said it at the very beginning, this is an honor for everyone who's been associated with this program through the years because it wouldn't be without every piece of that giant puzzle.

Julie Walas:

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 fun to watch the Otto family kind of grow and change and to now have Ottos from the early '80s, all the way 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 only 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 are 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 [inaudible 00:36:56] mascot." And they may be decked out in some other team's gear, but Otto does have this inclusivity about Otto and really isn't an 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 too. 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 is 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 mascots in any way, but just to give credit to our passionate fan and alumni base that just really supports the university. And like you said before, this symbolism of the university and our experiences comes out alive in Otto.

Chris Velardi:

Hall of Fame is kind of like the reward at the end of the line, but Otto is going to continue to wear that Hall of Fame honor everywhere they go from now on. Does that add any extra pressure to you, to the program?

Julie Walas:

I don't know. We'll see when it happens, but right now it just feels like this is a pause moment where we stop for a second and think about all that has happened to bring us here and all that we've worked for and say, "Whoa! Hold on everybody, let's celebrate. Let's just raise a glass. Let's give a high five. This is a moment where we say we are doing something amazing together." And then Monday morning we get right back to it and we bring amazing back.

Chris Velardi:

The fall season's right around the corner.

Julie Walas:

I think it will bring new opportunities for Otto. It's connecting us on a national level to people and places and as part of a greater mascot community that we haven't been a part of before. It will draw us to new appearances and new opportunities, and we'll just have to figure out which directions we pick to go and what fits for Otto.

Chris Velardi:

But from now on, Otto is a Hall of Famer.

Julie Walas:

Forever,

Chris Velardi:

And that should really be a pride point for all of us. Otto will be inducted into the Mascot Hall of Fame in Whiting, Indiana during a ceremony and family friendly fan fest on Saturday, August 12th. There's more information in this episode's description. You can also make a gift to support Otto through the Otto the Orange Mascot Fund. You'll find that link in the description. Thanks to Julie Walas, Brian Lapis, Jeff Kurkjian and Zannah 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!