Capstone 3 – Profile

By Morgan Grenz

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SYRACUSE, N.Y. - Julie Walas stood among a group of college kids in Manley Field House waiting for her turn to try out for Syracuse University’s beloved mascot, Otto the Orange. The only reason she decided to go was because she didn’t know how to say no to a friend, and former Otto, recommending her.

Thirteen years later, Walas celebrates twelve seasons as the first official coach of SU’s mascot program. She doesn’t regret a thing.

“I had zero expectations ever of being involved with athletics, especially with the mascot program, and it just kind of happened. It just showed up in my life one day and it’s been [almost] 15 years with Otto,” Walas said.

Although Syracuse has been known for their bold orange school color since 1890, the school didn’t adopt Otto the Orange as their official mascot until 1995. Versions of the fuzzy orange began to appear in the 1980s, but it wasn’t until it beat out its competitors for the official title that Otto took the spotlight.

“To think, wow if Otto’s been here for 25 years and I’ve been here for 15 of those… that’s pretty nuts,” Walas said. If it weren’t for her friend seeing some characteristic in her, then she would have never thought to try out, she said.

After graduating, Walas was ready to retire wearing the orange suit, but jumped at the opportunity to stay involved. Dena Segbers, who headed SU’s entire spirit program, asked Walas if she could help with the mascot team since she was sticking around Syracuse. The rest is history.

Since Walas tried out in 2006, the process has become much more involved. We are constantly on the lookout for Ottos and it is really a big personality match, she said.

“Anyone can get to be a really big fan of Syracuse…but it takes a certain personality to humbly…put a kind of stinky suit on and, without any name recognition or any glory for themselves, be the provider of cheer and entertainment for so many people,” Walas said.

Students often refer to the mascot program as a sort of secret society, because of the mystery surrounding the students’ identities. According to Walas, this is done to protect the image of Otto in the eyes of fans.

“The idea is that when somebody interacts with Otto, they should never be seeing a person in a suit,” Walas said. Through her twelve seasons as coach, Walas’ goal has been to find students capable of protecting the character that Otto has come to be. Consistency is key.

Senior Emma Lipstone was one of the undercover Ottos recently unveiled to the public, since she will be leaving the school following graduation.

Lipstone worked closely with Walas during her years on the team. She believes the fact that her coach was an Otto herself helps tremendously with her coaching abilities.

“I think it would be different if a professional mascot coach had come in and been like okay this is so much more serious than it is, because Otto is a fun character,” Lipstone said.

**“S**o much of my life is what Otto is doing for other people,” Walas said. “My goal every day is that Otto brings something to other people’s lives.”