‘ANONYMOUS’ BIG RED MASCOTS SPREAD THE SPIRIT

By Randy York

On an autumn Saturday in October of 1992, Nebraska had a home football game at Memorial Stadium, a volleyball game at the NU Coliseum and a basketball game at the Bob Devaney Sports Center. Call it a Husker fan’s version of the trifecta, but a logistical nightmare for Herbie Husker, who was needed, wanted and scheduled to appear at all three events.

Let the record show that Herbie could perform that day only for football and basketball.

Sadly, volleyball went Herbie-less that day because the Husker match went head-to-head with football, the sport that generates nearly all the revenue to support Nebraska’s 22 other intercollegiate athletic activities.

That’s the bad news. The good news is the unfortunate conflict produced a solution that not only solved Nebraska volleyball’s mascot problem, but also led to another mascot, thanks to Dr. Barbara Hibner, the late Nebraska senior woman administrator who had the vision to help Herbie out with a unique mascot that not only appeals to volleyball, but all young Husker fans who watch him perform across the board.

The Last Year NU Volleyball Did Not Have a Mascot

The student who wore that first mascot uniform to complement Herbie remembers how diligently Hibner worked and how creative she was willing to be just to make sure that Nebraska volleyball never went mascot-less again. The first NU student who slipped inside that first inflatable walk-around mascot remains publicly anonymous to this day. He doesn’t mind explaining, how exciting it was to portray an eight-year-old boy wearing red overalls, a white shirt and a baseball cap that tilted sideways when Nebraska hosted its first home volleyball match in 1993.

“The younger kids were fascinated by this character, but the older folks didn’t really know what to think,” our mystery man recalled. “To them, the new mascot was just this inflatable Pillsbury doughboy look-alike. It took a few matches for fans to warm up to the new mascot and once we knew they liked it, our Marketing Department set up a contest, in a hallway, out of costume and waiting for traffic to clear after a three-hour game and the ultimate satisfaction comes from Nebraska fans,” he said. “I will never forget sitting over the years. “I’ve put a lot of sweat, blood and even tears inside those costumes but our mystery man loves trading stories with fellow entertainers and helping teach their camps so they can spread the spirit like he has over the years. “I’ve put a lot of sweat, blood and even tears inside those costumes but the ultimate satisfaction comes from Nebraska fans,” he said. “I will never forget sitting in a hallway, out of costume and waiting for traffic to clear after a three-hour game and then heading home only to hear a little girl walk on by singing: ‘Lil’ Red, Lil’ Red, Lil’ Red.’”

Lil’ Red Needed Some Personality to Be Successful

When we opened it, we just looked at each other wondering: ‘What have we gotten ourselves into?’ the original Lil’ Red recalled. “We tried on the suit, and we realized the things that needed to be done if we were ever going to make this character come alive. We knew we couldn’t just walk around, wave and give fans a high-five. We needed to give ‘Lil Red a little individuality and have Lil’ Red to have. “I have a split personality,” Lil’ Red 1 admitted. “Once I get in costume, I don’t just become that character. I am that character. To me, part of being a great mascot is making sure that not many people know who’s inside the costume. I have family members that do not believe me when I tell them that I am Herbie Husker and I was Lil’ Red. I guess I was so good at keeping it a secret that they still refuse to believe me.”

For that reason, our mystery man remains behind the curtain instead of in front it.

Herbie Brought Smiles, Kids Wanted Pictures

There’s another reason why he jumped at the chance of being Lil’ Red, and that reason revolves around working with young fans and kids. “The first time I saw Herbie Husker at a football game, I noticed how many kids wanted to have their picture taken with him,” he said. “I will never forget the smiles he put on the faces of those young fans just shaking their hand or giving them a high five. It was an instant attraction. I decided then I wanted to be a mascot.”

With no mascot experience but armed with a great deal of enthusiasm, a brave-hearted student decided to try out for the role. “I think I put a lot of sugar on my cereal that morning because I showed quite of bit of energy to be an alternate mascot who would assist the main student who was Herbie at that time,” he remembered. “As an alternate, I used to go to every game and event that Herbie was at and mimic every action, every move and every pose. I did whatever Herbie did.”

Herbie’s understudy got his first big break to perform at women’s basketball games, and he capitalized on the opportunity. Every game day became a chance for him to brainstorm ideas and experiment while he was buried deep inside his costume.

Split Personality Mascots Spread the Good Cheer

By his second year, Herbie’s “fillin” attended his first mascot camp and did well enough to be part of the All-America Mascot Team. By his third year, the experiments felt more spontaneous, more natural and more like an extension of the character he wanted Herbie Husker and Lil’ Red to have. “I have a split personality.” Lil’ Red 1 admitted. “Once I get in costume, I don’t just become that character. I am that character. To me, part of being a great mascot is making sure that not many people know who’s inside the costume. I have family members that do not believe me when I tell them that I was Herbie Husker and I was Lil’ Red. I guess I was so good at keeping it a secret that they still refuse to believe me.”

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When Dr. Hibner decided 1993 was the right time to introduce Lil’ Red to Nebraska, our third-year mascot couldn’t wait to help launch it, and the spirit has never left him. He continues to help mascots and the Nebraska Spirit Squad in different areas of daily operations.

More Than Winning

Following years of volunteer work and tours, our mystery man loves trading stories with fellow entertainers and helping teach their camps so they can spread the spirit like he has over the years. “I’ve put a lot of sweat, blood and even tears inside those costumes but the ultimate satisfaction comes from Nebraska fans,” he said. “I will never forget sitting in a hallway, out of costume and waiting for traffic to clear after a three-hour game and then heading home only to hear a little girl walk on by singing: ‘Lil’ Red, Lil’ Red, Lil’ Red.”

“That’s when I knew that young little fan didn’t care if Nebraska won or if we lost,” he said. “For that particular game, Lil’ Red’s performance was the only thing that seemed to matter to her.”