

INSIDE THE SUIT: LIFE AS WILDCAT WILLY



I called home my freshman year to tell my mother that I had been chosen to be “Wildcat Willy” for the NMU hockey team. She paused and said, “Great, so now I have the only son at Northern majoring in Halloween.”

Being Willy may very well have warranted such comments, but I considered it a privilege.

I lived in Payne Hall that year (1984-85). It was a 24-hour quiet hall and hockey players were required to live there. Ron Chyzowski and Kory Wright played hockey at Northern and lived in the dorm room next to mine. As I got to know them, they learned that I grew up playing hockey in Midland and I had a love for comedy and making people laugh.

Ron and Kory called me from the locker room one afternoon saying they had a job for me. Coach Rick Comley had asked the players if they knew of anyone who could be Wildcat Willy, and Ron and Kory immediately thought of me. I initially didn’t take them seriously and hung up. They called back and insisted that I grab my skates and come down to the rink. They fol-

lowed with, “Coach Comley wants to see you skate.” I thought to myself, “Coach Comley? OK, I’ll play along.”

I walked into Lakeview Arena still not knowing if this was a joke or a real “audition” of sorts. The equipment manager met me in the locker room and handed me the Willy outfit.

Not a whole lot to this outfit, I thought as I stepped into the one-piece, furry bodysuit with “paws” connected to the sleeves. I tied my skates and tucked Willy’s head under my arm.

As I walked out of the locker room, Coach Comley, Ron and Kory were waiting in the hallway. Ron and Kory laughed. And I waited for Comley to say, “Who are you and what do you think you’re doing?” Instead, he simply said, “Let



McQuillan (as Willy), with instigators Ron Chyzowski and Kory Wright.

me see you take a couple of laps.” Being comfortable on the ice I hammed it up a little bit with some arm waving and fancy footwork. I stepped off the ice, took the head off and Coach Comley said, “OK, we’ll see you at the game on Friday night.” That was it.

Before my first game I was handed an official NMU hockey



A drawing from “The World of Wildcat Wisdom” student handbook of 1966.

jersey with the number one on the back and no name. The next night I was handed one with the number 16. Understandably, there is only one number one in hockey, and that’s the goalie. After a few more games I asked Coach Comley if it was possible to have a special jersey made. He asked me what number I planned to use and I suggested double zero. I also suggested that Willy be spelled W-I-L-L-Y and not W-I-L-L-I-E. He agreed to both.

My first few games were uncomfortable to say the least. It took a while to get over the fact that people were watching the character and not me. The more I stood around and did nothing, the worse I looked. The more animated and active I was, the better the response.

I would hang out at games with the pep band, directed by Kody Birdwell. It developed over time that I would go up to the mezzanine level, stand in front of the band and dance to all the songs. Over the years, we made a different dance or cheer for each of the regular songs.

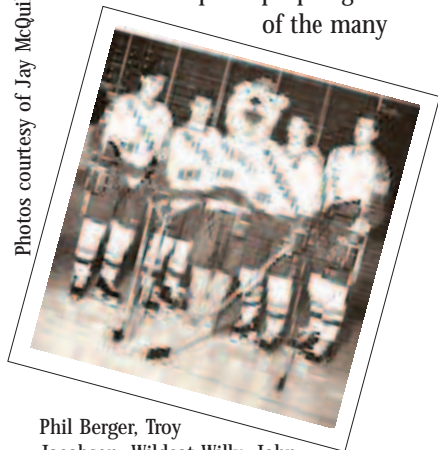
During the game, the band would take what they called “road trips.” A couple of members from the horn and drum section would go to various parts of the arena and

play for different sections. I would go along and take advantage of the opportunity to mingle and goof off with the fans. Maybe also dance to the music, put Willy's arm around a pretty girl, slap high five with the kids, or eat someone's popcorn by grabbing a handful and throwing it into my furry mouth, much to the laughter of the fans.

I became pretty familiar with the band members' faces and what instruments they played. The funny thing was, though, they never saw my face. I would walk through campus and say hello to a band member and he or she would look at me like, "Who are you?"

Hockey fans in Marquette and at Northern are some of the nation's best, if not the most passionate. Being Willy gave me an opportunity to express myself on behalf of the fans and get away with things they wanted to do or say, but maybe weren't allowed to. Over the years I developed a prop bag. One of the many

Photos courtesy of Jay McQuillan



Phil Berger, Troy Jacobsen, Wildcat Willy, John Goode and Daryl Olsen were not only teammates, they also lived in the same house together.

items that became a fan favorite was the eye chart I made from a queen-sized bed sheet that I'd use with a pair of oversized sunglasses when the fans weren't happy with a call.

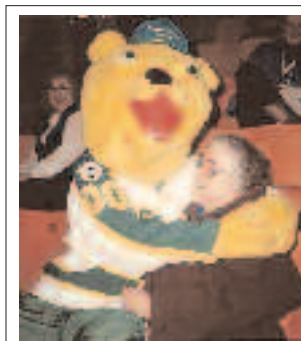
Throwing a nerf football into the stands and having the fans throw it back on the ice between periods became a regular event at every game.

The all-time favorite had to be when I would spray pictures on the glass with bathroom cleaner. I would make a face with two eyes, a nose and a sad mouth. Next to that I would write R E F, for referee. I would step back to show what was written and the fans would boo. As soon as I would wipe only the eyes from the face, the booing would change to loud cheers.

I was able to help Willy develop into being fully clothed. I took an old shell from some hockey pants, cut a hole in the back for Willy's tail and he became the only one to wear shorts yearround in Marquette. After two years of wearing skates and tennis shoes, paws for his feet were made to match his fur. Also an NMU baseball hat was safety pinned to his head as a joke, and ended up being a good look and a permanent fixture.

After two years as Willy, the Golden Wildcat Club started to market him like never before. They had buttons and 8 x 10 photos of the players but never of Willy—until I borrowed then-goalie John Corrigan's pads and posed in goal as "Wildcat Goalie!"

When I was a freshman there were three different Wildcat Willys—hockey, football and basketball each had their own outfits and own people to wear them. None of the outfits looked alike.



At every home game, Willy sat on the lap of Mary Nault, longtime English department secretary.

As outfits got old and Willys graduated, there became a need to replace Willy in football and basketball. Eventually I ended up being

the full-time Willy for football, part-time for men's and women's basketball and can even add a gymnastics meet to Willy's resumé.

Being Willy for football was awesome! Football fans at Northern had to endure the Marquette Dome didn't exist and

all games were played outside—rain, snow, sleet or hail. NMU football fans are real football fans!

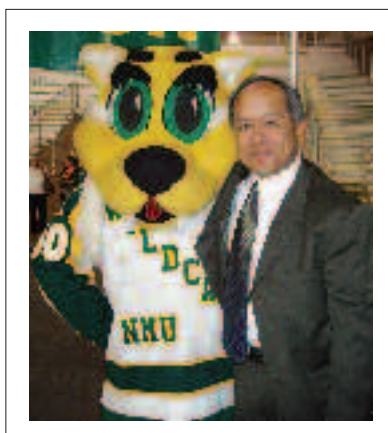
I was able to dress in a Northern football jersey and football pants. Having the furry jump suit on underneath was just as good, if not better, than any thermal underwear you could find. I always looked forward to home games and football Saturdays. Marching with the band from Hedgcock Fieldhouse to the football stadium was always a thrill. Some Saturdays I would have a football game in the afternoon and a hockey game that night.

Another rewarding part of being Willy was public appearances. Reading to children, visiting a hospital, helping with fundraisers, Special Olympics or judging the WGLQ Cardboard Classics were all a part of representing Northern.

Senior Night is always a big night for NMU hockey. It's usually one of the last home games of the regular season and each senior player gets to skate to center ice under the spotlight and give one last salute to the fans.

In my senior year as Willy I was included in the ceremony. To say the least, I was humbled and honored. After the introduction, I skated to center ice, stood there for a moment and took the Willy head off. I waved to the generous and wonderful Marquette/NMU crowd and knew that I was a part of something special.

My experience as Willy led me to being the mascot for the NHL Tampa Bay Lightning and the IHL Orlando Solar Bears.



Modern-day Wildcat Willy with buddy NMU President Les Wong.

Something very valuable that I got out of the experience is that you don't have to play to be involved with or contribute to the sport. Whether it's as a coach, referee, scorekeeper, announcer, fan, band member, mascot, or whatever, a positive contribution can be made to a school or sport just by being involved.

I still keep in touch with many of the great friends that I made at Northern. Most, if not all, of those friends I met one way or another due to my experience as Willy. To this day it's not uncommon for any one of those friends to call, and the first words said are, "Hi Willy!" Not bad for a guy majoring in Halloween.

—Jay McQuillan '89 BS

A BRIEF HISTORY OF WILLY

NMU's mascot, Wildcat Willy, has not always been the campus charmer and our teams have not always been the Wildcats. At Northern's first football game on Oct. 15, 1904, versus Hancock High, the Normal School was known as the "Teachers." In 1923, we were the "Normalites," in 1931, the "Northerners," and later the "Upstarters."

At the start of the basketball season in 1935, Coach C. B. Hedgcock bestowed his defensive units with names. His man-to-man defense was named the "Cubs" and the zone defense was dubbed the "Cats."

Hedgcock justified his nomenclature in a letter in 1937, in which he said, "In man-to-man you have to be quicker and because the cubs are the natural offspring of wildcats, bobcats, any kind of cat when they're younger, the man-to-man unit will be known as a Cub, while members of the older, more methodical zone defense groups will be known as the Cats... the Wildcats."

The mascot came to life in 1970, when a 38-pound female bobcat—semi-domesticated and declawed—was purchased from a Toronto resident by then-Gant Hall director John Gardner. She was named Bobby. Bobby lived with Gardner in Gant (and in the tunnels beneath) until a cage was constructed near the old steam plant behind Spooner Hall. She was fed raw meat and garbage from Dining Services. The cat would go on the road with teams, taking her first road trip to a football game at Central Michigan University in 1971.

One wintry night she escaped from her cage, and a local radio station set up a hotline. Ore boat workers reported seeing a bobcat on the dock. Gardner and fellow Hall Director Tom Manson grabbed a gunny sack and went to investigate. They cornered the snarling cat at the end of the dock, and as Gardner grabbed its nape and stuffed it in the sack, they noticed it was covered in porcupine quills. They called a veterinarian and met at his office. The vet asked how they came about having this bobcat, and they explained it was their declawed mascot. The vet then informed them that this cat had all its claws. They had captured a wild cat! They set it free in the woods. The real Bobby was never found, and that was the end of NMU's live mascot era.

Wildcat Willy's current image was developed by former student Jay McQuillan (see accompanying story). The art and design department forged the Willy costume under Hockey Coach Rick Comley's direction. Comley used Wildcat Willy to infuse both the team and their games with spirit. Today, a new Willy costume costs about \$1,600.

Since 1995, the NMU mascot has qualified to compete in a national mascot championship in Orlando, Fla., but has been unable to attend due to a lack of funding.

Wildcat Willy not only pumps up athletic spirit—he lends his paws to many campus events and charitable causes. Dozens of students have followed the creed of masking their own identity when in the suit, taking on Willy's persona and spreading his spirit.



—Elizabeth Kramer

Cheryl Hemmla