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Big Red: Western's Consummate Ambassador

By Jonathan Jeffrey and Donna Parker

A smile will appear on even the grumpiest curmudgeon's face when he sees a six-foot tall, four-foot wide red fur dynamo spreading Hilltopper spirit across Western's campus. If "The Spirit Makes the Master," Western's mascot, Big Red, who turns fifteen years old this month, is the campus' spirit chieftain. Big Red—high spirited, lovable, distinctive, full of color and personality—has entertained athletic event crowds and promoted school spirit at Western since the mascot's debut.

Big Red joined Ed Diddle's red towel as a Western spirit symbol in 1979. Prior to Big Red's creation, WKU administrators and athletics officials and coaches tossed around several ideas for a mascot, including a hillbilly and a Swiss yodeler. Western's first attempt at a mascot was Mr. Hilltopper, who appeared dressed in coattails, bow tie, and top hat, during the 1978-1979 basketball season. Mr. Hilltopper lasted only one year. Administrators agreed the new mascot should be an unknown creature, who would be able to perform a wide array of antics and not be tied to a particular animal's characteristics. Ralph Carey, a public relations major from Cincinnati and a former King's Island Amusement Park employee, helped design and build a suitable character. From plastic tubing, foam rubber, a seven-foot-square piece of red fur, and lots of glue, Carey sculpted a 23-pound phenomenal success, Big Red. Since 1979, Big Red has gone through five generations of costumes.

Prior to Big Red's inaugural appearance, the *College Heights Herald* ran a story about the new creature under the headline, "Big Red: Big-Mouthed Creature to Become Mascot." The paper's editorial cartoon featured two characters discussing the new mascot with one of them mistakenly referring to it as "Big Rug." Despite skeptical omens about Big Red's debut, anticipation grew, when it was announced that the new mascot would appear at the December 1 men's basketball game. Santa Claus greeted basketball coach Gene Keady at center court and presented him with a large, white refrigerator box decked with red ribbon. As the pep band played the fight song, Big Red, portrayed by Ralph Carey, burst from the box, making an unforgettable impression. In its first year, Big Red developed several characteristic feats that

despite fifteen years of repetition continue to amuse fans. Its large mouth can swallow any number of items, including basketballs, footballs, Frisbees, shoes, hats and whistles. Big Red's been known to wrestle with other mascots, to scold referees and to eavesdrop on opposing team strategy sessions. Many will remember the mascot's grand entrances to football games, via waterskies, wagon, helicopter, and train. Perhaps Big Red's most widely recognized stunt is the running slide, where it races to center court and then does a belly slide into cheerleader megaphones configured like bowling pins. Big Red's exaggerated antics are all accomplished without any vocal utterings; the mascot has been mute since its creation. Big Red's message is communicated through the physical prowess and ingenuity of the young men and women who portray it.

Since 1979 over two dozen eager Western students have portrayed Big Red and hundreds more have tried out for the position. During tryouts prospective Big Reds don the crimson costume and breathe life into the mischievous red rascal. Each contestant improvises on cue a wide gamut of emotions, including love, anger, excitement, shyness, fear, and of course the thrill of victory. Mastering the moves Big Red performs is not easy. One tryout participant noted, "You can move your body all over, and Big Red won't even move." Another contestant mentioned the agility necessary to maneuver the creature's hands.

Despite these difficulties, most Big Red portrayers agree that when you put the suit on, you lose all inhibitions; you become Big Red. Contestants are interviewed and asked why they wish to become Western's mascot; each also submits a written application with references and performs a costumed skit. Dependability, creativity, and expressiveness are all necessary traits Big Red must possess. Big Red makes dozens of public appearances annually for the university besides being at most athletic events, so three students are chosen to share the responsibility of being the mascot during an academic year. For their efforts, the students receive a scholarship which helps defray educational expenses.

Although Big Red's fans range from toddlers to octogenarians, the mascot's biggest fans are children. Some speculate this appeal is based on the similarity of its appearance to the Cookie Monster or Barney, but its true attraction is the uninhibited way in which the creature is able to express its emotions, including love for children. Mark Greer, who portrayed Big Red from 1980 to 1983, claimed, "He's just an uninhibited kid...just a cute little guy" and "a hero to little kids." Jessica Rappaport, Big Red (1984) and the first woman to portray the fun loving creature,

agreed, “Big Red is such a child...very innocent of all the bad in the world because all he sees is the good.” Wherever Big Red goes, its younger fans congregate, touching, hugging, giggling and loving the mascot. Skip Cleavinger, *Big Red* (1983), claimed that Big Red’s appeal relies on this “little magical piece” that exists “in every one of us. Big Red is my way of expressing that. Big Red represents that part in everyone.”

Because of Big Red’s appeal and talent, Western’s mascot has received local and national recognition. In 1980, Warren County Fiscal Court made Big Red an honorary sheriff’s deputy. In 1983, the mascot earned the distinction of becoming Bowling Green’s “Volunteer of the Year.” On Big Red’s tenth birthday, government officials proclaimed December 2, 1989, as BIG RED DAY in Warren County. The mascot has won the Universal Cheerleading Association’s “Key to Spirit” Award three times in national competition, and in 1990 it placed third in the mascot Final Four competition in San Antonio, Texas. Deserving of these honors, Big Red always accepts them with a healthy blend of humility and pride.

Big Red is unique among mascots. In 1990 a Big Red look-alike contest was held at Bowling Green’s Greenwood Mall. After a full day, university officials reported that no one even entered the contest. Big Red promotes school spirit and endears the mascot to everyone it meets. This charismatic appeal was demonstrated at the 1988 Sun Belt basketball tournament. A fan from an opposing school wrote the *College Heights Herald* telling of how Big Red was approached by a mentally challenged man who talked with the friendly creature and how Big Red assisted the man back to his seat twice. The observer noted, “You must have a very special person under the red costume, and one who cares a lot about people. And your university must be a fine institution to choose someone with such a caring attitude.” Scoot Vick, *Big Red* (1985), summarized the mascot’s mission as an ambassador “who is known by thousands as the heart and soul of Western Kentucky University.”