**NEBRASKA MASCOTS (by Jim Gross) (long version)**

Does your high school mascot strike fear in the hearts of your opponents, or does it merely give your team luck, as the French origin of the word ‘mascot’ suggests. I’m not sure about the luck, but I’m fairly confident that my high school mascot, Bunnies (Omaha Benson), didn’t strike fear in very many of our adversaries.

Nebraskan’s supports 303 high schools which represent 96 different mascots. Of the 96 mascots, 47 are unique, the other 49 being used multiple times.

Just for fun, I’ve attempted to categorize these mascots, a task I found to be more of a challenge than I originally thought. Where do you put Chargers? Is this a bolt of electricity or a stallion? Are Monarchs heads of state or butterflies? I’ve also thrown in a few of my thoughts on mascots, a much easier endeavor. My sources of information for this review include the Nebraska State Activities Association’s website (May 2017) and numerous high school websites. I hope I’ve done your mascot justice.

I realize that most of us attended a school where the mascot was previously selected and established, therefore it was our duty to learn to like, if not love, being a Bluejay or Mustang or Viking.

My favorite mascots are ones that are exclusive, shared by no other school. I think we should strive to be unique in the universe, or, at least in Nebraska. I had a chance to visit with Mike Meyerle, superintendent at Diller-Odell. He said that when the two schools merged, one of the coaches “floated the idea” that they could merge the mascots also. The mythical griffin had the head of an eagle and the body of a cat, actually a lion. Diller was the Eagles and Odell the Tigers, so they “stretched” it a little and put the two mascots together to become Griffins. Mike said since there were already several Tigers in their conference, this allowed them to have their own identity. Also, according to Business Manager Jody Dostal and Principal Mike Speirs, when Howells and Dodge were consolidating, the students wanted a mascot that had speed, was aggressive and nobody in the state was using. The students submitted their top three choices to the new school board and their top choice, Jaguars, was adopted.

 And, if your mascot is unique and also somehow fits with the name of the school or town it represents, all the better! The Lexington Minutemen/Minutemaids are a great example of this. Also, Cadets of West Point, Antlers of Elkhorn and Centurions of Centura all fit well with the town or school name. If you can’t find a good match between the town name and mascot, maybe alliteration is the answer. It appears the Blair Bears, Bloomfield Bees, Deshler Dragons, Elgin Eagles, Franklin Flyers, Twin River Titans along with many others may have employed this tactic.

Animal names, my first broad category, are the most popular source of inspiration for mascots. One hundred and seventy-six schools in Nebraska have elected to use an animal name, of some sort, to represent their mascot. There are 27 different mammal names used, ten birds, followed by what I prefer to call fictional animals at four, three insects and only one reptile**,** the Gators of Wisner-Pilger. The four fictional animals are Dragons, which are used by three schools, Thunderbirds used by two schools, but Griffins and Pendragons are each exclusive. Way to go Diller-Odell and Pender. And, just to refresh your memory, Griffins have the head and wings of an eagle and the body of a lion, a Pendragon is the “top” dragon, and a Thunderbird is a mythical bird of power and strength to some Native Americans.

Of the three insects chosen by schools, all three are exclusive, Bees, Hornets and Red Hornets. Evidently no school wanted to follow in the 1892 footsteps of the University of Nebraska Bugeaters.

Within the 10 birds chosen to represent schools, five fly solo. (Sorry, I couldn’t resist). Bluehawks, Silver Hawks, Sky Hawks, Chanticleers and Junior Jays are exclusive. The first three being somewhat contrived names, and the fourth borrowed from fables or fairy tales and the last, the unfledged version of Creighton University. Within the remaining five bird mascots, Eagles rule the roost, being the most popular mascot in the state. If your school mascot is the Eagles, you are not alone as eighteen different schools are represented by Eagles. Also, nicely represented are Cardinals at 12 schools, Bluejays, eight schools, and Falcons, five schools. Two schools are represented by Hawks. All are fine mascots, but definitely not unique.

Moving on to mascots represented by mammals. Of the roughly 80 species of mammals native to Nebraska, nearly half are rodents. So why is it only one rodent serves as a mascot, Beavers (Sorry, Bunnies are not rodents)? But, I will have to give St. Edwards credit for choosing the largest, and historically most valuable of the state’s rodents, as their mascot. I guess nobody wanted to be the “Flying Squirrels” or “Fighting Chipmunks”. There is a tie for the most popular mammal chosen as a mascot. Bulldogs and Tigers are each employed by 14 schools. There is also a tie for second place with Mustangs and Wildcats each denoting 10 schools but third place stands alone with nine schools choosing to be labeled Cougars. Of the 27 different mammal mascots, representing 116 schools, eight are unique. Way to go Antlers (I’m calling this a mammal.), Beavers, Bunnies, Chargers, Jaguars, Timberwolves, Whippets and Wolverines. As previously noted, Jaguars is one of the most recent additions to this category, the result of consolidation of Howells and Dodge. Good job selecting a mascot that is unique! Badgers, Bearcats, Bison, Bobcats, Buffaloes, Lions and Rams each represent two schools. To finish off the category, Coyotes represent three schools, Bears four schools, Panthers and Wolves five schools, Huskies six schools, Broncos and Longhorns seven schools.

 I’m a little surprised in the mammal category, only three come from dog breeds: Bulldogs, Huskies and Whippets. But, with multiple schools choosing Bulldogs and Huskies, it does bring the total to 21 schools. Nobody wanted to be the speedy Greyhounds or loveable Labs? Wolves are technically ancestors of all our modern dogs and Coyotes, “cousins” of the wolf. So, adding Coyotes, Wolves and Timberwolves to man’s best friends, the canines do represent an impressive 30 schools.

Moving from animals to plants, the herbaceous mascots are very poorly represented. I’m only counting one mascot using a botanical term, the Shamrocks. However, this symbol of Ireland it is shared by two schools, Columbus Scotus and Spalding Academy.

Venturing away from living organisms to what I’m classifying as inanimate objects. I count four mascots: Clippers, Jets, Links and Rockets, representing five schools. Rockets represent two different schools, while the Clippers, Jets and Links are unique to Malcolm, Sterling and Lincoln High respectively.

My next category is weather related mascots. I’m assigning four mascots to this category. Cyclones, Dusters, Storm and Thunderbolts. Storm represents three different schools, while the others are unique. Congratulations to Clearwater-Orchard, Holdrege and Lincoln Pius X.

Similar to plants, mascots represented by astronomy terms are somewhat slighted with just a single entry, the Kearney Catholic Stars. Personally, I think Asteroids, Comets and Supernovas would all be fine mascots and no school in the state is using them. Here’s your chance to be unique!

Before I get to the people related mascots, I have a miscellaneous category with two unique mascots. The Crimson Pride of Omaha Roncalli Catholic and Islanders of Grand Island. I apologize for my lack of imagination, but I just didn’t know where else to put these mascots. My favorite between these is the Islanders. Grand Island is the third largest city in the state, and to my knowledge, is the only city/town in Nebraska built on an Island.

My last few categories involve people/humanoid mascots. There is a total of 39 mascots that have human, real or contrived, connections.

People are often proud of their heritage and six mascots reference nationalities or heritage. The Swedes of Gothenburg and the Irish of two catholic schools, Falls City Sacred Heart and North Platte St. Patrick’s are certainly celebrating their heritage. I’m not as sure the seven schools represented by Vikings are celebrating a Scandinavian heritage but rather enjoy being represented by hardy pirates. Also, I would be very impressed if the patrons of the six schools represented by Trojans, the five schools represented by Titans and the four schools represented by Spartans have been able to trace their lineages back to ancient Troy, Greece and Sparta. But, Trojans, Titans and Spartans all invoke images of strong and spirited foes, and meeting one of these is sure to match you with a formidable opponent.

Five mascots have a Native American theme. Braves of Battle Creek and Chiefs of Omaha Nation each being unique, but Chieftains represent two schools, Indians seven schools and twelve schools are represented by Warriors.

The remaining 28 mascots I would loosely put into a broad category entitled occupations. Yes, I realize I am referring to Blue Devils, Crusaders, Monarchs, Patriots, Raiders and Rebels as job titles.

 Under occupations, a western theme persists in Nebraska schools. Unique to five schools are Haymakers, Packers, Plainsmen, Roughriders and Scouts. Representing two schools each are Cowboys and Pioneers. All of these certainly promote Nebraska’s hardy frontiersmen/frontierswomen heritage.

The next group of somewhat unsavory “occupations” includes only one unique mascot, the Rebels of Arcadia. Blue Devils, Pirates and Red Raiders each represent four, three and two schools respectively, but Raiders lead the way, representing a half-dozen schools.

A somewhat strong showing involves mascots portraying a military/monarchy theme. I’m putting 11 mascots into this category. Over half of this group’s mascots are unique. They include Blue Knights, Cadets, Cavaliers, Centurians, Dukes, Minutemen/Minutemaids and Orangemen. Cadets, Centurians and Minutemen/Minutemaids fit especially well with the name of the town they represent. The rest of this group of mascots are used multiple times. Patriots represent five, Crusaders four, and Monarchs three schools, but Knights lead the way denoting 14 schools. This creates a three-way tie, along with Bulldogs and Tigers, in all mascots, for the second most popular

My last, but certainly no less important category involves exploring/traveling. Five schools use this motif with Discovers, Jeffs (He just looks like a traveler.), Navigators and Sailors being unique and Flyers representing two schools. Columbus Discovers and Lincoln North Star Navigators are among my favorites for matching mascots to school or town names.

In the last decade, we’ve lost Bobcats and Panthers, but gained Jaguars and Patriots. The system is dynamic and will continue to adjust and adapt as school districts merge and consolidate. My advice is, if you are in a situation where you get to help choose a mascot to promote the identity of a school, be bold, go where no other school has gone, be unique!

Thank you for bearing with me in my comments and my attempt to categorize Nebraska mascots. Enjoy your mascot as it will/has become your life-long identity. Maybe you found out your mascot is exclusive, or maybe you found out your mascot is not as unique as you once thought. Again, most of us didn’t have any say in choosing our high school mascot, but just learned to accept and embrace it. If, in conversation it comes up that I graduated from Omaha Benson, sometimes someone might announce, “So you were a Bunny.”. I proudly say “Yep.”, but I might also add, “Beware of the Hare”.