



Off the ice onto the route

To the delight of his customers, Phillip Timmerman delivered mail on a short loop in costume in April as the COVID-19 pandemic forced many to stay at home.



The carrier with his family

Phillip Timmerman doesn't like to be caught without his head on.

The Dubuque, IA Branch 257 member, who began as a rural carrier in 2014 and switched to city delivery the following year, was a fan and season ticket holder of the local junior hockey team, known as the Dubuque Fighting Saints. In 2016, "they were in need of a mascot," he said.

Timmerman had never been a mascot before. However, he had done some acting in his high school days as a hobby, so "it was kind of in my wheelhouse," he said.

On a whim, he filled out an application. As it turned out, he was the only applicant, so he soon got the call that he would be Bernie the Saint Bernard.

He was excited. But first, Timmerman said, "I had to learn how to ice skate."

To do so, the carrier went to the rink once a week and practiced. Eventually, he was able to gain enough skating skills to begin as Bernie.

His first game, in February 2017, was "scary" and "awkward," Timmerman said. He went out on center ice and waved the team's flag to begin the

game—then made a beeline off the ice and out of the limelight. After the game, a few fans pointed out his "low energy."

The carrier says that becoming a mascot requires practice. "I watched a lot of YouTube videos on professional mascots," he said, adding that the old cliché "fake it till you make it" is apt. "I wing it a lot."

Just moving around in the suit requires effort. "I see through Bernie's mouth and have no peripheral vision," Timmerman says. "It takes a lot of getting used to. Kids will sneak up behind you. You have to use your other senses."

Although there now are a few others who play the role, Timmerman is the primary Bernie the Saint Bernard, and tries to make it to each of the 30 games per season. The doors open at 6 p.m.; he is expected to be in costume by then, and he performs throughout the game until it ends around 9:30 p.m.

There also are a number of community and charity events that Bernie is expected to attend; Timmerman goes whenever his schedule allows. "If I can help out, I'll help out however I can," he said.

One charity event, "Over the Edge," took place last summer at a hotel in downtown Dubuque. Timmerman, dressed as Bernie, went to the top of the building, got harnessed up and rappelled down the side. "I was terrified," he said, adding that it took a lot of trust, but that he was happy to support a good cause.

The job entails a lot of fan interaction: posing for photos with fans, doing pranks (for which he gets permission), and making big gestures to garner smiles and laughs from the crowd. When boys and girls see Bernie, they don't know what to expect from him.

"I try to do things a dog would do—wag my tail, run laps around a person," Timmerman said. "I watch my dog and see what he does."

Right and below: Timmerman performs at Dubuque Fighting Saints hockey games as the Bernie the Saint Bernard mascot.



Timmerman says the job is fun but exhausting, adding that it's important to take breaks.

He tries to be in the costume for only 20 minutes at a time, as it can be uncomfortable. "The suit has a lot of fur on it, and it doesn't vent heat very well," the carrier said.

And, as most people know, it's a big no-no to be seen in costume without the head on. Timmerman says there's a large pathway under the ice arena's bleachers that is sort of a "safe haven" for him, but he has to stay aware, because the area gets some fan activity when the players skate out onto the ice.

He was once taking a break there, sans Bernie's head, during a birthday party of 11- and 12-year-olds, who saw him. "They were pretty cool about it," he said. He put himself back together and danced around for the group.

The first season, Timmerman kept his secret identity as Bernie under wraps until he got good at it. Now, he says with a laugh, "everyone knows who I am. I openly flaunt it."

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the remainder of the 2019-2020 hockey season was canceled. The Saints had been in second place in the league when the season was suspended, so a lot of excitement had built up, Timmerman said.

Between delivering mail and performing as Bernie, it's a lot of time away from family, so although the cancellation was sad, Timmerman was grateful to have more time with his wife and two young sons. Timmerman currently has the costume at home and "will bust it out" from time to time to entertain his children—as well as fans through online videos.

That got him thinking that people on his mail route could use some cheering up from Bernie while they were stuck at home, as the Fighting Saints have a lot of fans both in the post office and in the community.

"Right about when the season ended, a lot of people were bummed out," he said. "I wanted to bring some positive news and something fun to the customers of Dubuque."

In early April, the carrier got approval from the Saints and approached his branch president, **Chad Olson**, who liked the idea of Bernie delivering mail to patrons. It was then brought to the local postmaster, who kicked it up to the post office operations manager, who was all for it.

On April 9, the carrier, who was a T-6 at the time, delivered a loop in costume.

He kept it to a small distance because of the terrain. "I knew on concrete it wasn't a big deal," he said, but he wasn't sure about divots in people's yards. "You have to think it through," he added.

Customers and kids came to their front porches to greet their local mascot. "Mommy, look! It's Bernie!" is something he heard quite frequently.

"We were all able to have Bernie the Saint Bernard be an honorary letter carrier for Dubuque," Timmerman said, adding that it was an enjoyable experience that boosted customer morale that day.

Keeping the mood elevated is what it's all about for Timmerman, who says the best part about being Bernie is seeing big smiles on youngsters' faces.

"I'm out there trying to make it fun for kids and adults at the same time," he said. "I try to be a positive influence on the game of hockey and the community." **PR**

