WHERE IN THE WORLD

DID OUR CAYENNE GO?

By Megan Wyatt | mbwyatt@theadvertiser.com

The University of Louisiana at Lafayette's spiciest fan has been missing from the Ragin' Cajuns sporting events lately. Cayenne, the nontraditional mascot national sportscasters love to talk about, has quietly faded from the sidelines at games.

That's because Cayenne's costumes, which cost about $8,000 apiece, have become faded and worn over time, according to Charlie Bier, spokesman for UL, and nobody has been appointed to assume the role of Cayenne.

Bier said two costumes are needed to ensure that one is always available for any last-minute public appearances.

"The university has decided not to spend $16,000 or more for a pair of new costumes until discussions can be held about aspects of mascot, spirit leader and fan traditions at the university," Bier said.

A group will be formed at some point during the academic year to review the mascot and spirit leader traditions, but no timeline has been established for naming the group members,
UL President E. Joseph Savoie didn’t realize Cayenne’s absence until Monday, when it was pointed out to him at a student leadership meeting, he said.

Savoie was involved in a task force in the 1980s to try to capture the university’s spirit through a spirit leader or mascot.

This time around, Savoie said he has not been a part of the conversation.

“Our spirit leader — that’s been a challenge for 30 years,” Savoie said. “What’s the right representative?”

Cayenne, who is not an official mascot but a “spirit leader,” has become a memorable part of the university, making it on many best and worst mascot lists through the years.

Yahoo! Sports named Cayenne in its “Top 25 Great College Football Mascots” in 2012, saying that Cayenne is “unquestionably college football’s hottest mascot.”

But TopTenz.net listed Cayenne in its “Top 10 Bad College Mascots” listing in 2010, saying that “food mascots definitely aren’t the scariest.”

UL does not have an official mascot, but Cayenne was introduced in 2000 after students chose the hot pepper as spirit leader to embody the unique way of life in south Louisiana.

“Instead of being a physical representation of Ragan’ Cajun, like most mascots are, Cayenne is the embodiment of the Ragin’ Cajun spirit of Acadiana,” the UL website says.

The personified pepper changed his uniform depending on what sporting event he attended.

Throughout the university’s history, there have been many mascots, including live bulldogs, an animated Ragan’ Cajun and the Fabulous Cajun Chicken.

The university has also gone through a host of name changes before becoming UL. Most recently known as the University of Southwestern Louisiana, the university has also been the Southwestern Louisiana Institute of Liberal and Technical Learning and Southwestern Louisiana Industrial Institute.

Replacing Cayenne is something that Jaci Russo, a branding expert and alumna of the university, says would hurt how people see UL and its athletic programs.

“He puts us on a national radar,” Russo said. “We’re not a tiger, a lion, a ram. Having a pepper as our mascot is unique, and I think it well represents our university and its uniqueness. Branding is about standing out.”

Russo, who is CEO of The Russo Group, realized Cayenne’s absence during the first home game when she heard children asking where the pepper was.

“It was interesting for me to find out that he’s made an impact on the youngest of fans,” Russo said. “I think they regard him as a cool part of the game, and when you’ve got fans asking for something, you need to give them what they want.”

UL freshman Morgan Ramsey immediately noticed Cayenne’s absence from the first home game, he said.

“I was like, ‘Awww, where’s Cayenne?’” Ramsey said.

Although it’s Ramsey’s first year at UL, he has attended many Ragan’ Cajuns games through the years and is familiar with the university’s spirit leader.

“He represents the university very well,” Ramsey said. “I would prefer that the university keep Cayenne. He’s become familiar and is very affiliated with the school.”

But Hailey Rue, a senior finance major, feels differently about Cayenne.

Although Rue said Cayenne was introduced in 2000 after students chose Cayenne as a swamp person, she doesn’t find him intimidating.

“Totell you the truth, no one really misses Cayenne,” she said. “He’s not really the mascot. He does pump up the crowds, but he’s more for the little kids.”

Ragan’ Cajuns Head Football Coach Mark Hudspeth said he had no idea that Cayenne was absent.

Hudspeth said he is “for whatever our administration is for.”

“There’s a lot of people who go way back tradition-wise that have been part of this university for a long time,” he said. “And I would be very adamant about getting the advice of the alumni and people who have been at this university for a long time to sort of see what we could come up with.”

Will university administrations revert to the bulldog, animated Ragan’ Cajun or Fabulous Cajun Chicken again? Will they decide on a new spirit leader or mascot that still represents the Acadiana and university spirit? Or will Cayenne stick around but get a new costume?

Russo hopes to see the university reinvest money into Cayenne’s costumes and make him the official mascot instead of spirit leader of the university’s athletic programs.

“How do you characterize a Ragan’ Cajun?” Russo asks. “It’s not some awkward swamp person. Let Cayenne stand for what it was made to stand for, which is the culture of this community.”