

WVU fans show their true colors

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Over the past three years, I, like any other self-respecting UConn undergrad, have grown to hate the West Virginia Mountaineers.

Whether it was the 66-21 drubbing the UConn football team received in Morgantown the year they were crowned Co-Big East champions or Joe Alexander and the Mountaineers knocking the Huskies out in the 2008 Big East basketball tournament, I developed a deep and undying hatred for everything West Virginian.

But Saturday changed all that.

With the football team playing the hardest game that they have ever played, the Mountaineers - and more importantly their fans - welcomed the Huskies with open arms. As the Huskies raced out of the tunnel, the first time in two and a half years without Jasper Howard at their side, and into a packed Milan Puskar Stadium, nobody, the team included, could have expected what they were met with.

A large banner read "Today we are all Huskies: No. 6 Jasper Howard" and was littered with the signatures of thousands of West Virginia students. Students who had even less exposure to Howard than UConn undergrads took the time out of their day to sign a banner commemorating his life. Furthermore, Mountaineer fans in the crowd held signs that read "RIP Jasper Howard" among other tributes to his accolades both on and off the field. They welcomed UConn out of the tunnel with cheers, not jeers. The Huskies may have expected an olive branch, but the Mountaineers forked over nearly the entire tree.

While my column last week reminded us that Howard was a student first and a football player second, the Mountaineer fans took this one step further. Undoubtedly, none of the students who signed that banner or held signs in the crowd had ever met Howard, and yet they felt compelled to show they cared. They boiled the situation down to the bare essentials; that a fellow human, regardless of his university affiliation and regardless of the fact that he was a

football player, had been murdered.

I would like to take this time to congratulate each and every West Virginia fan for their kindness and understanding on Saturday. I've been to my fair share of sporting events and seen the bad blood that can exist between rivals, especially at the college level. But the Mountaineers, at least for that one game, put the rivalry aside and realized there was more at stake than just a football game.

When all is said and done I hope that the football team walks away from the game not remembering the missed field goals, or the long touchdown run that secured the win for West Virginia, but for the way that they were greeted, as friends rather than enemies, despite playing in what is normally such a hostile environment.

Though the pre-game moment of silence, players shaking hands and UConn coach Randy Edsall embracing West Virginia coach Bill Stewart were all well and good, those were things that were planned far in advance and enforced by administrators on both sides. Nobody forced those students to sign that banner, nobody asked them to go out of their way to bring signs to commemorate Howard. It was pure, unadulterated human compassion, the likes of which I've rarely seen at a sporting event before and will likely not see again in the near future.

So for those of you who are still moping about the loss and what could have been, take a step back and realize what did happen on Saturday. Taking a look in the stands made one realize that there's more to life than Xs and Os, wins and losses, bowl berths and Big East championships.

And for the Mountaineers and their fans, I commend you. Regardless of the rivalry, the wins and losses, you put all that aside and reached out to a team that was visibly hurt. This is the kind of compassion you simply don't see every day.

On Saturday, as your banner read, we were all Huskies. For the rest of the season, at least until West Virginia travels to The Rent in 2010, I would like to extend an olive branch of my own.

Mountaineer fans, given the compassion and tenacity you showed on Saturday, you will always be Huskies to me.

