

Rivalry still a big hit

## Passion remains high for Fitchburg-Leominster football clash

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FITCHBURG -- Some say the rivalry between football foes Fitchburg High and Leominster High has cooled. Others say don't let those people fool you.

That's according to several fans who on a sunny, chilled morning Thursday wore blue or red and packed local bars and tailgates, readying themselves for the annual Thanksgiving football game.

"The tradition lives, and it's been in our lives for forever," said former Fitchburg High School defensive tackle Larry Bizzotto.

Before kickoff, Bizzotto, Fitchburg High School class of '74 and hall-of-fame inductee, tailgated with classmates and others at Amriott Field, where revelers gathered for a pre-game celebration starting at 6:30 a.m.

Bizzotto recalls like it happened last week when his team beat the Blue Devils two times during his three-year tenure playing football for Fitchburg High.

Players of his generation, Bizzotto explains, were raised to "have the feelings deep inside that we must win this game."

"I don't know if it's like that anymore," Bizzotto said prior to Fitchburg's 34-21 win over Leominster.

Then, he glanced over at Nicholas Fadden, who attended the overwhelmingly red-tinged tailgate dressed head-to-tow in the cobalt colors of his rival.

Bizzotto showed that some old habits die hard.

"We don't talk to people who're dressed in blue," he says, chuckling.

Queuing up across the street, outside Crocker Field, the site where one of the first Fitchburg/Leominster Thanksgiving games was played in 1898, was former Leominster High School defensive tackle Jamie Rogers, 37.

Rogers, LHS class of 1998, wore his high-school letterman jacket. He explained how electric it felt to crush Fitchburg decades ago.

"The atmosphere, I can't explain it, it's just so intense," he said. "You hear stories about the crowds down in Texas, but I'd put this rivalry up against any other rivalry in the country."

Rogers easily rattles off the final score of that fateful Thanksgiving game -- 28-6. While his team would go on to win the MIAA state championship in its division that year, he says the win meant little compared to his rivalry win.

"Even though we won the Super Bowl, I honestly couldn't tell you what the score was," he said.

By 10 a.m., the streets around Crocker Field began to fill. People young and old walked to the field. Most smiled, and some carried drinks -- after all, the bars opened Thursday at 7 a.m.

At one such bar, The Boulder on Main Street, Jeremy Kimber, 27, was one of dozens reminiscing about games gone by.

Kimber, of Fitchburg, watched his first Thanksgiving game at age 7.

He dreamed of making the high school football team and taking down Leominster from that day on.

He went on to become Red Raiders' quarterback for three years before graduating in 2008 and playing ball for Fitchburg State University.

Having never bested the Blue Devils still weighs on Kimber's mind.

"I never beat Leominster, and I had to live with that for the rest of my life," he said.

Kimber chatted with Mickey Meza, Kimber's former youth football coach who wore a baseball hat colored blue.

The two men talked about how the spirit of the rivalry changed after public access television stations in Fitchburg and Leominster both began broadcasting the game.

Fans would "rather sit at home and watch it," said Kimber.

But a core group of "hardcore" Thanksgiving game fans keep the rivalry alive, he said.

Fitchburg Police Chief Ernest Martineau might count himself among those fans. For Martineau, a Fitchburg High School graduate, the rivalry exists between more than just football teams.

"It will never be dead," he said. "It's changed ... but it will never be dead. There's something to be said about Fitchburg versus Leominster, it's Fitchburg police versus Leominster police, Fitchburg fire versus Leominster fire. The rivalry's not dead, and it's evident here today."

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