

Garner: Think the rivalry is dead? Think again.

By Chad Garner, cgarner@sentinelandenterprise.com
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Is the annual Fitchburg-Leominster Thanksgiving Day football rivalry dead?

While it may not be as heated as it was in the past -- long before I was even born -- I have a hard time believing this rivalry means nothing in 2017.

Granted, Leominster has reigned supreme over the last eight years on Turkey Day, but if this series has proven anything over time, it's that either Fitchburg or Leominster dominate for several years and then the roles eventually are reversed.

Is it Fitchburg's time to take over in this year's 136th meeting overall?

I needed to see for sure if this rivalry is indeed dead like some keep saying.

Before the big game, I ventured out with staff photographer Ashley Green to both cities and both team practices on Tuesday.

I wanted to get a pulse on each city, each fan base and each team.

Here's what I uncovered in my travels to Leominster and Fitchburg.

Talk about having that "all eyes are on you feeling" when I walked to the top of the bleachers at Doyle Field and looked down on the Leominster football team practicing.

I saw several coaches glare up at me with evil eyes, and then after instructions from Leominster coach Dave Palazzi, several Blue Devils rushed over to me and started chirping "Get out of here," "That's ugly," and "Go back to Fitchburg."

I can only imagine what everyone thought when they glanced up and saw a random guy decked in Red and Gray watching their practice. Spying on the opponent before the big game? Those are grounds for a beatdown!

At Fitchburg's practice, the players definitely didn't like my attire.

The Red Raiders definitely see red of anger when they see the color blue.

Kids weren't joking around, either. They didn't like my Leominster hoodie and the stares said it all.

I heard phrases like "I want to drop kick you," "get that (crap) off," and "I want to spit on that."

I even got a friendly throat-slashing gesture from one player during my photo with the team.

I also ran into three FHS alumni -- Anthony Divito, Mike Beaulieu and Mark Jackson -- who were baffled as to why I was allowed to wear Leominster colors while watching the practice. They all said they were there to support the team and let the players know that the city is behind them. Beaulieu added, "We still have the fire inside for the rivalry."

I appreciated the passion when I went to Fitchburg's practice. It reconfirmed that this game is still important. The old-timers in this series should also respect that this annual tradition is still going long after they have graduated.

Thankfully, the players were all good sports after they knew it was me wearing enemy colors.

Leominster quarterback Pat Gallagher -- a kid as classy as they come -- even had the guts to shake my hand while I wore red on his field.

The Leominster players even gave me friendly advice on who to pick in the game.

But when I walked around downtown Leominster with my Red Raiders hat and Fitchburg football sweatshirt on, I was geared up to receive some "colorful" comments and hand gestures that I'm number one.

But nothing like that whatsoever. Maybe everyone traveling in the downtown were all focused too heavily on the mayoral ballot recount race and not Thanksgiving football?

Besides some thumbs-downs from clear Leominster fans rocking their Blue Devils gear in their vehicles, I was surprisingly greeted to many thumbs-up hand gestures and "Go Fitchburg" words of support from others, including a bus driver and her

assistant.

I even ran into former Leominster quarterback Shaun Jordan (he scored a rushing TD in 1997 as Leominster beat Fitchburg, 26-8), who was baffled that I was wearing Fitchburg red in Leominster.

His first question when I told him that we were trying to see if the rivalry was dead was "why?" Of course he said this rivalry isn't dead.

I agree.

One pedestrian thought it was "dangerous" for me to cheer for Fitchburg right in the heart of downtown Leominster.

I definitely could see his point.

When I was roaming downtown Fitchburg in the late afternoon, the passion for Red Raider football really hit me like a ton of bricks.

A Fitchburg police officer, who thought I needed help while waving to him from across the street, stopped in the road with his blue lights flashing and said "good luck, though" after I explained to him what I was doing with Leominster garb on in Red Raider country. It was later confirmed that the officer was a FHS grad. Thank you for trying to protect me, officer.

One Fitchburg fan rolled down his window and said, "Shouldn't be here" when I asked what he thought of me wearing blue.

He added: "Blue does not belong in Fitchburg."

Another driver chimed in, "Takes a lot of gall."

I heard chants of "Let's go Red Raiders" with the car windows rolled down and I even got blasted with a middle finger -- twice -- from clear Red Raider fans donning red and gray. I respect that passion, I really do.

The colors red and blue still spark emotion -- good and bad -- depending on which side of the rivalry you are on.

Red versus Blue. Hated rivals. Just like the Red Sox and Yankees.

Happy Thanksgiving everyone.

Go Red.

Go Blue.

This rivalry isn't dead. Not even close.

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