
DOUBLE THE HUSKIES, DOUBLE THE FUN

Contributed by Richard M. Walton
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UConn men's and women's basketball teams share the spotlight as Midnight Madness and the Super Show give way to First Night.

Photos by Brian Pohorylo

In the past, the unofficial start of the official basketball season has been Midnight Madness for the men's team and the Super Show for the Women's, but this year at Gampel Pavilion, it was both teams together, sharing the spotlight of First Night. In an effort to be more fan friendly, the festivities started at 6:00, with a Fan Fest, featuring outdoor games for the families, and an autograph session featuring players from both teams. The fun was then directed to Alumni Court, and although both teams were sharing the evening, there were two very different attitudes on display.

Noah Finz, of WTNH television sports, served as emcee, and the women's team was the first to be introduced. The players were obviously jovial and outgoing, starting with freshman Lorin Dixon's dance moves, juniors Cassie Kerns blowing kisses to the fans and Renee Montgomery performing a handstand, and senior Charde Houston doing a split. The introductions ended with a team hug around Coach Geno Auriemma.

Auriemma spoke briefly to the fans, stating that sometimes you could get a feel for a team very early on and that "this year was going to be something special."

There was then a Two Ball contest, where a UConn player was teamed with a student and alternated shots, won by senior Mel Thomas and student Mike Amaranti of Middlefield. The entire team, less oft-injured senior Brittany Hunter, then split into four teams and, joined by some students, had an exceptionally silly relay race, featuring running with a balloon between the legs, skipping rope, bouncy balls, a three-legged race, a peanut hunt, and then the ever popular spin around the bat and running in random directions. Kerns, freshman Maya Moore, junior Kalana Greene, and students Elana Garcia of Wallingford and Kristen Kottum of Storrs won the relay race.

A 10-minute scrimmage followed, during which the depth and talent of this year's team was apparent. The addition of Player of the Year Moore at forward and Dixon at guard to an already talented squad should have UConn fans anticipating a visit to Tampa Bay come springtime.

Men "On a Mission"

The men's team was much more reserved during introductions, quite possibly because of last season's disappointing ending, with only sophomore Stanley Robinson waving a white towel over his head. It was then coach Jim Calhoun's turn to address the fans, declaring that the men's team was "on a mission -- you and us -- to get back where we belong, in the NCAAs and to fight for the Big East championship."

Junior guard Craig Austrie won the three-point shooting contest, and Robinson won the dunk contest, beating fellow junior Marcus Johnson when Johnson was unable to complete a dunk in the final round.

The team then played a short scrimmage against a team of UConn Intramural All-Stars, who surprisingly held their own and even tied the score at seven, at which point the varsity team got serious and outscored the Intramural All-Stars by 30-3 the rest of the way, for a final score of 37-10. The men's team then split and scrimmaged against themselves.

After the game, Calhoun, the master motivator, contended that, "As far as the basketball, the only kid that played well was [freshman guard] Donnell [Beverly]. He played point guard and had seven assists."

As far as sharing the stage with the women's team, "We'd be more than happy to do it another year, but they'd have to start at 11:00 p.m. or something," said Calhoun. College kids don't go out at 10 o'clock. [At midnight] the atmosphere's entirely different."

Calhoun tried to find the logic in the 10 o'clock start time, but just couldn't..

"Normally we go at 12:00 [midnight], and it's a little bit wilder," he said. "This year we decided, because of the women's team, to go at this time. And we're competing against the Red Sox. If we're going to have it, we should have it at 12:01, when the kids (fans) are crazy. The kids are great here and when we play Georgetown and Syracuse, we know they'll be here for us."

About the dunk contest, he said: "I'm always worried. They often try something that they can't do - Marcus almost killed himself. It could be that he hurt his shoulder on that dunk. That smile on my face is actually me gritting my teeth." And Calhoun joked that he personally stopped dunking at age 52 or 53.

Notable in his absence was East Hartford's Doug Wiggins, who was not announced and was not in uniform. Calhoun would later announce that he had violated team rules, but only team rules. Calhoun emphasized, "It has nothing to do with University policy or academics. He will practice with us tomorrow. He's been out of our locker room for three weeks."