UMass Football Matters More Than Winning

AMHERST, MA -- — Saturday was a perfect day for football: sunny, clear skies, and temperatures in the low 70s – the ideal tailgating weather. The scene was framed by the vibrant reds, oranges, and yellows of the autumn foliage surrounding McGuirk Alumni Stadium. UMass fans of all ages filed into the venue to watch their Minutemen face the No. 21 Missouri Tigers. While the outcome seemed inevitable, a likely blowout, the excitement was undeniable. It's not too often a team of that caliber takes a visit to Amherst, so everyone was feeling excited.

The Minutemen were 1-5 going into the Mizzou game, and it was clear that going against a Top 25 team would drop them to a staggering 1-6 record on the season. However, despite their recent struggles on the football field, UMass fans still showed up to support. McGuirk Alumni Stadium holds approximately 17,000 people, and the attendance for the game was 16,102, almost at capacity. The UMass student section was packed, the Minuteman Marching Band was in full swing, and the remaining bleachers were filled with those repping maroon, black, and white. Some may call it a phenomenon. How can so many people rally behind a team that is performing so poorly? Isn't the whole point of football to win games?

To Mizzou fans, winning is the expectation. Rachel Grayson, a former Tiger from St. Louis, Missouri, made the trip to support her alma mater. Rachel graduated a few years ago, and she currently lives and works in Boston, only a short two hour drive from Amherst. When I asked her what she wishes for the rest of their season, she responded: "My hope is that they take it all the way and that we're back in the Top 10 at least, bare minimum."

For powerhouse football programs in the SEC, winning is everything. These teams are vying for the national championship every year, and the pressure they're put under is immense. Students and fans of these teams hold them to the highest standard in college football, and if their team falls short it's a huge disappointment. But rooting for teams that are near-NFL caliber is what makes each season fun and worthwhile.

But what's the mentality for an organization like UMass, a tiny football program in the A-10 who isn't even a contender for the national championship, let alone a qualifier for the playoffs? What's in it for UMass fans, who are usually faced with disappointment after each game? The answers to these questions were revealed to me on Saturday, and I was pleasantly surprised to hear what these fans had to say.

Andrew Beckman is from Framingham, Mass., a city just outside of Boston and a little under two hours away from UMass. When I asked him why he continues to attend UMass football games, despite their record, he told me that his son is in the marching band, and his daughter is

also a student here. “It’s still D1 football, so it’s exciting to watch,” he said. “Even though we aren’t winning, it’s still a great level of play.”

Chip Davis, from Nantucket, Mass., is another UMass parent that I had the courtesy of speaking with. What he had to say was particularly moving. When I asked him his reasoning for attending the games, he said, “I think it’s more about the experience of being with my son – and the whole atmosphere: the students, the cheering section. I dont think it’s as much about winning and losing as it is about the experience of being here, at least for me.”

Their simple yet heartfelt responses made me realize that winning isn’t everything. What stays with people isn't the outcome of specific games, but how those moments made them feel. And in that sense, creating meaningful experiences is a victory in itself, and one that UMass has already been able to achieve. So although UMass may not be winning on the scoresheet, they’ve already won by creating lasting memories for their fans.