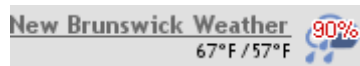


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## It's not about the game

**Diana Kelly**

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One hundred and thirty four years ago, Rutgers University started a tradition. The first game of intercollegiate football was played on Nov. 6, 1869, on the ground where the College Avenue Gymnasium now resides. Rutgers won that game against Princeton University, 6-4.

Now it's 2003, Thursday, and buzz about the Homecoming game this Saturday has been circulating for at least a week. Let's be honest here, your thoughts are probably not even about football. Sports fan or not, you're wondering what you're doing the night before, where you're tailgating on Saturday morning and what's happening after the game.

As members of the Rutgers family, we bond slightly differently than other Division I schools when it comes to football. Our team may not win, but we've got heart (and a reason to party).

Homecoming is about celebrating college football. It's about toasting a pastime that started the art of tailgating. It's cursing and cheering for four quarters. It's drinking and eating on the fields two hours before game time. Most importantly, it's about returning to your roots.

While it's true that many fans don't ever make it inside the stadium, they're having a great time in the parking lots and catching up with friends they haven't seen in "too long."

No matter how badass the undergraduates think that their homecoming tailgate is going to be this year, the alumni can be sure to show them up. The older Knights have got their tents pitched, kegs tapped and chairs set up before the students have even pulled on their free Rutgers T-shirt and brushed their teeth in the morning. The smells of roasting chicken, burgers, hotdogs and sausages are already wafting down as University students make the uphill trek to the stadium.

However, it's not the most recent University graduates who are throwing the best parking lot parties. It's the generations of our parents and grandparents' age who return to the banks in the wee hours of the day in order to claim their tailgate territory.

There are competitions among alumni association tents where the winner for the best tent takes home a victory cup.

I went to my first college Homecoming game as a second-year student and watched the day unfold with disbelieving eyes. A friend's older brother graduated from the University a few years ago and came back that fall of 2001 to relive his days as an undergrad, from the back of a truck on the Busch fields.

Wait ... so you mean that everyone can hang out here right on these fields and no one cares? I was in amazement at the craftsmanship of tailgating.

Then we walked to the stadium where a sea of scarlet was cheering and singing our fight song. I had been to quite a few football games before this, but the energy and enthusiasm in the crowd was different.

The older fans were reminiscing about the days of Rutgers football when they were in college and passing along stories to their little ones. Dads might even go so far as to reflect on their glory days of high school football, and tell what it was like to be an unsung hero back then.

The fans I remember watching the most intensely were the children. Adorned in miniature Rutgers gear, they waved pom-poms and watched everything in awe. They tossed soft Nerf footballs and tackled one another to the ground.

I can only imagine that Homecoming is like a huge birthday party to them, without knowing the guest of honor. There are balloons, clowns, cakes and friends. A sharply dressed live band probably captures their attention more than the game itself. There's a knight on a horse and a mascot who will hug you if you let him.

I'm jealous that I didn't grow up experiencing college football as a child. Whether these kids are following the game or not, their excitement is infectious and it reminds me that you don't even have to like sports that much to be a fan.

Homecoming is better than a three-ring circus. If you can't follow the game, or have given up on watching, spend the time watching those kids in the band rock out. Guess the probability on the amount of times a baton twirler will actually catch her baton. Observe the guys around you ogling the dance team, or watch the cheerleaders as both the guy and girl wonder if this lift will be the one when he drops her.

Whatever you do, at least take the time to enjoy the fans. There's probably some scrawny little pledge being hoisted up and down by his fraternity brothers once the cannon goes off. You're sure to have that group of girls behind you completely decked out in Rutgers apparel, ribbons and face paint that don't have a clue as to what's going on in the game. A couple of kids in your section may try to start the wave while others get an R-U cheer going.

The past two years I went to Homecoming and had an amazing time, we won both games! I hope that this time next year, I can prioritize my schedule and return home to the banks for the big game. Who knows, maybe 10, 20 or 30 years from now, I'll return with my kegs, tents and some kids.

*Diana Kelly is a Rutgers College senior majoring in journalism and mass media. Her column "Framed Finale" appears on alternating Thursdays.*

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