

SIDELINE REPORT: Cornhuskers close the book on historic rivalry's final chapter

Written by Wauneta Breeze
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By Josh Sumner

The Wauneta Breeze

After 118 years of gridiron battles and several months of media attention, the Nebraska-Missouri football rivalry is officially over.

Coming as no surprise to Husker fans and to the dismay of Tigers fans, such as myself, it was Nebraska who got the last laugh in the teams' 104th and final conference meeting.

I was lucky enough to join my dad in Lincoln as we attended the much anticipated final Big 12 showdown between the two foes. It was the first time either of us had stepped foot inside Memorial Stadium, or Lincoln, for that matter.

Even though our team lost, I can't help but feel like something even more important has slipped away.

Unlike other rivalries throughout the history of sports, such as Yankees-Red Sox, Buckeyes-Wolverines or Ali-Frazier, the Nebraska-Missouri rivalry isn't rooted in hatred. It's actually quite the opposite.

Before last weekend, I'd only heard about the high level of amicability exchanged between Huskers and Tigers fans. After witnessing it in person, I can now testify that it's real. The examples of friendliness I witnessed among rival fans were plentiful enough to write a book about, but I'll just mention a couple here.

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Prior to Saturday's game, I tailgated with my Uncle Lefty, who was making his 16th trip to watch the Tigers play in Lincoln. I was more than surprised when I found that the lifelong friend he was partying with was a Nebraska fan.

My uncle introduced me to his friend Gary, who he's been buddies with ever since the two met in optometry school. Gary, a Nebraska native, and Lefty, a Missourian, have been visiting one another every year on the others' rival turf for decades. Sure, they exchanged jabs and good-natured ribbing, but it was obvious that their sense of humor helped them remain close throughout the years.

It wasn't the first time I noticed this unique phenomenon of rival fans enjoying the company of one another. I noticed Nebraska backers intermingling with Missouri folks seemingly everywhere I looked — they walked together down the street and shared dinner from across the same table.

When I was approached outside the stadium by total strangers wearing red asking me if I was enjoying myself and finding my way around, I was stupefied. That's never happened to me as an opposing fan in any away venue I've been to.

But perhaps the story that floored me the most was told to me by my friend Mike, a Mizzou graduate, who had also attended the game.

As Mike and his friends walked the streets of downtown Lincoln in their black and gold attire Saturday night, they bumped into the rare Husker heckler. A verbal bout broke out between the two parties, but the drama was quickly dissolved by an unlikely peacemaker: a Huskers fan. Mike said the mediating fan told his fellow Big Red brother to back off and show some respect to the out-of-state visitor.

Honestly, I'd be surprised to witness that type of chivalry in my own home state.

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I found Cornhuskers fans to be some of the classiest individuals I'd ever encountered — a truly rare breed in today's alpha culture. I could tell by the brief tailgate visit with my uncle that he and his friend were genuinely sad knowing neither would be making a trip to the rival campus next fall.

So as I reflect on a wonderful weekend in eastern Nebraska, I continue to search for the bright side of Saturday's two tough losses — one following the game as it relates to Missouri's season and, more importantly, one focusing on the loss of a century-old rival.

I still have high expectations for the Mizzou football season. As pumped up as the sea of red was at Memorial Stadium, the game could have gotten out of control and turned into the type of shellacking Tiger fans feared. Fortunately for me, Missouri came back and at least made the game interesting. I would definitely consider the game a "quality loss" to a quality opponent. The Tigers remain ranked in the top 15 in the major polls, and with the help of someone like Iowa State, could still get a crack at the Big 12 North division title.

With Nebraska (and Colorado, for that matter), out of the picture, the Big 12 becomes a powerhouse of a basketball conference. Missouri will no longer have to play the two teams that are arguably the weakest in the conference after this season. Missouri will also get to face Oklahoma, Texas, Oklahoma State and Texas Tech every season in football following the abolishment of the North and South divisions.

Still, I think I'd be happier if Nebraska stuck around in the Big 12.

As hard as it was for me to watch the Cornhuskers hoist the Victory Bell last Saturday, it's even harder knowing the comradery shared between these two universities might be lost forever.

Good luck in the Big Ten, Nebraska. With you leaving to fight in a new conference, perhaps now it will be possible for me to pull for Big Red.