A good game for UST; a great day for SJU

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A Good Game for UST; A Great Day for SJU

Let’s start with what probably goes without saying. It would have been nice to win the game. We take our football seriously, have an unrivaled tradition and a very good team. Gary Fasching, his coaches and players all worked extremely hard to prepare for a strong University of St. Thomas team. It would have been very nice to see their efforts rewarded. As close as the score was and as well as the defense played, I am certain that these facts offer absolutely no consolation.

But the final score should not distract us from acknowledging that this past weekend was great for Saint John’s University and our community.

The game was a celebration of all that is great about D3 athletics: an intense but friendly rivalry, two schools from a conference where the players are truly student-athletes, deeply committed alumni, student and parent fans, a fantastic venue that recognized the importance of the two schools in the economic and cultural life of the Minnesota, and publicity that went national for these very reasons.

The game at Target Field was technically a home game for the Tommies, but you would never have known it by the overwhelmingly red crowd. The game obliterated the previous D3 attendance record of 17,535 when 37,355 fans filled Target Field. Of those fans, easily two-thirds were wearing red but some thought it looked more like 75 or 80%. (You judge—here is a nice panoramic view) Suffice it to say it was an impressive showing.
Pictured above—the National Anthem and presentation of the American flag was done jointly by the Air Force ROTC program at UST and the Fighting Saints Army ROTC program at CSB, SJU and St. Cloud State.

The game garnered tremendous local coverage in the print media and on the airwaves (here and here). We also managed some highly sought after national attention with a story in the New York Times and a prominent Johnnie fan from Florida who happened to be giving the McCarthy Lecture at SJU a couple days before the game.
But what was most impressive was that at least 25,000 Johnnie fans showed up for the game and each other.

We have a total of about 26,000 alumni (College and School of Theology) across all years. About 30% of those live outside Minnesota, and I did meet alumni who came back from IL, AZ, CA, GA and MA. Of course those alumni have spouses, children, siblings and friends, and we also have Bennie fans and Johnnie parents, but the University of St. Thomas has over three times as many undergraduates as Saint John’s (I am assuming that most grad students are not so likely to be football fans) with a proportionate alumni base, with their own spouses, children etc.

So the outpouring of support for Saint John’s and the evident pleasure we took in being together, in community, was truly stunning.

It was a combination of pride, respect and joy that Johnnie fans brought to downtown Minneapolis and Target Field. From early in the morning, red clad visitors filled venues around the stadium. Fulton Brewery, a place with some Johnnie connections, was so full they had to close the doors. Yet we did not have a single incident with the law, according to our VP for
Student Development. A Minneapolis police officer told him that “the Red fans were very well-behaved.” A group of monks (sadly without Fr. Wilfred) came down to be part of the crowd. Past parents from California and Illinois, among other places, traveled to watch a game in which their now alumni sons would not be playing—just to be back in the Saint John’s atmosphere. An SJU staff person working at the game was told by three separate Twins employees that the Saint John’s fans were exceptionally polite and respectful. Long after the game was over, Johnnies were fist bumping with other random Johnnies they had just met in bars and restaurants throughout downtown. And the smiles continue into the workweek.

It was simply a great day to be a fan of Saint John’s University.

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] PrezHemesath.