

There's school pride, and then there's UConn Pride. There's school spirit, and then there's UConn Spirit.

Husky devotees, especially those who rally around our men's and women's basketball teams, have been called “rabid,” “obnoxious as sh-t on social,” “one of the most knowledgeable and passionate fan bases out there,” “illogical [and] delusional” — and some of that comes from our own coaches. Among a seemingly endless tide of blue-bleeders, fans who cheer from around the world and those who show up game after game, season after season (even when we're not looking so hot on the hardwood), there are some Husky Faithful who take their fandom to still another level.

These are the superfans, the fervent, the ones you recognize from the jumbotron and some you might remember from your first game back in '92. There's no NIL for these folks — they're there on their own dime, rallying the crowd and buoying the team. And with 2024's second consecutive men's basketball national title and an unexpected women's Final Four appearance, there's no stopping them now.

By Julie (Stagis) Bartucca '10 (BUS, CIAS), '19 MBA
Photos by Peter Morenus



@MisterHotBalls | Location: The Internet | Occupation: Pot Stirrer

When he started a burner account on X, then Twitter, to “be a moron” about UConn basketball, the luchador-masked Mr. Hot Balls never knew he'd end up here. Leaking an inside scoop on a buzzworthy recruit (Richie Springs in 2019) drove his follower count through the roof, and now this anonymous king of what's known as UConn Twitter co-hosts with @HurleyMania a fan call-in radio-style show on X that brings in major sponsor dollars and up to 10,000 listeners per episode — including government bigwigs and our own athletic director.

“I just think there's something special about being able to let your freak flag fly and be yourself. There's real value to giving into urges on the things you're passionate about,” he says of the voracious community of Husky fans on and off the internet. “When you give yourself to it, it's amazing the crazy sh-t that's going to happen. I'm just a grown adult with a basketball problem. What it's turned into is all a little surreal.

“The best part of this era of UConn basketball is that the online community has become a weird extension of the program — a unique fan culture that people pay attention to.”

Front-Row Faithful

Location: Storrs

Occupation: UConn Students

There are few places more electrified than the front of the student section during televised NCAA basketball. All season, UConn students start lining up in the wee hours to guarantee a prime spot for big matches. Some get so hooked they wait, and wait, and wait for every game. “I just think front row is the best way to do it. You almost become a part of the game,” says **Samantha Perrottelli ’23 (ED), ’24 MS**, reliably behind the hoop for women’s basketball. “It’s just so fun. Some people think I’m crazy for what I do, but I don’t care.” Her max time in line: 10 hours.

The Future

Location: Willimantic

Occupation: Elementary School

In Connecticut, youngsters are practically handed UConn fandom alongside their first pacifiers. Women’s basketball season ticket holders and Junior Husky Club members **Hayden, 9**, and **Emeri Patterson, 5**, eat up everything they can about their favorite players. Hayden treasures a “Happy Birthday” video message from **Nika Mühl**. The girls take turns pretending to be **Aaliyah Edwards** as they shoot hoops in the driveway and ask mom **Courtney** to style their hair in “Qadence puffs” or braids a la **Paige, Azzi**, or **Ashlynn**. “Because of UConn women’s basketball, my daughters have developed a love for the game and an understanding of the importance of being a good student and teammate,” **Courtney Patterson** says. That team “is a perfect example of perseverance and never giving up.”



Top, from left: ’23-’24 student section staples **Michael Marques ’27 (BUS)**; **Samantha Perrottelli ’23 (ED), ’24 MS**; **Noah Hill ’27 (ACES)**; **Daniel Barberi ’27 (BUS)**; **Anthony Laporta ’27 (BUS)**; **Coleman Hill ’23 (ED)**; **Kyle Garab ’24 (CAHNR)**; and **Matthew Brodeur ’27 (ENG)**. Bottom, from left: **Hayden and Emeri Patterson**



The Crochet Queen | Location: Morris | Occupation: Home Health Aide

A decade ago, **Angel Earle** was working as a live-in caregiver for an 86-year-old woman named **Katie** who loved to watch UConn women’s basketball. Earle decided to take her to a game in person and, not owning any UConn gear, turned to her crocheting hobby to create her own UConn poncho. They continued going to games, and though **Katie** died in 2019, Earle’s collection of custom-crocheted UConn outfits for games at **Gampel** — and the attention she gets for them — has only grown. “I have more than 20 now,” she says of her sets, which include ponchos, leg warmers, and hats boasting the names and sometimes photos of Huskies past and present, adorned with tiny basketballs and **Jonathan** graphics. Earle brings a smile to the faces of many in the crowd — “I love when little kids come up to me,” she says — but the players give her more than that. “It’s so amazing to see them, watching them do what they love to do. They lay all their blood, sweat, and tears on that hardwood. I could be down and out and I go to the game and whatever happened before the game just never happened. It’s like they wash away all my sadness.”

The Puppet Lady | Location: Simsbury

Occupation: Retired IT Professional

At women's basketball games, Carol McKenzie's longtime best friend finds she has to remind people, "You're talking to a hand." That's how real it feels to interact with JJ, or Jonathan Jr., McKenzie's custom-made white husky puppet (which she's not selling, thanks for asking). Donning a size 2T UConn shirt, JJ has cheered alongside McKenzie at games since 2002, after she had him made by a vendor she met at a craft fair following a game at what was then the Hartford Civic Center. She wasn't sure exactly what she was going to do with him but remembered associate head coach Chris Dailey talking about the influence of another fan who led the crowd in cheers. "That was in the back of my head: 'Oh, I can help. I can spread the Husky love and get people to smile,'" says McKenzie, whose favorite moment she witnessed in person was when Sue Bird sunk a buzzer beater to win a dramatic Big East Championship against Notre Dame in 2001. "I don't do what I do to get on the jumbotron; I do it because I'm excited."



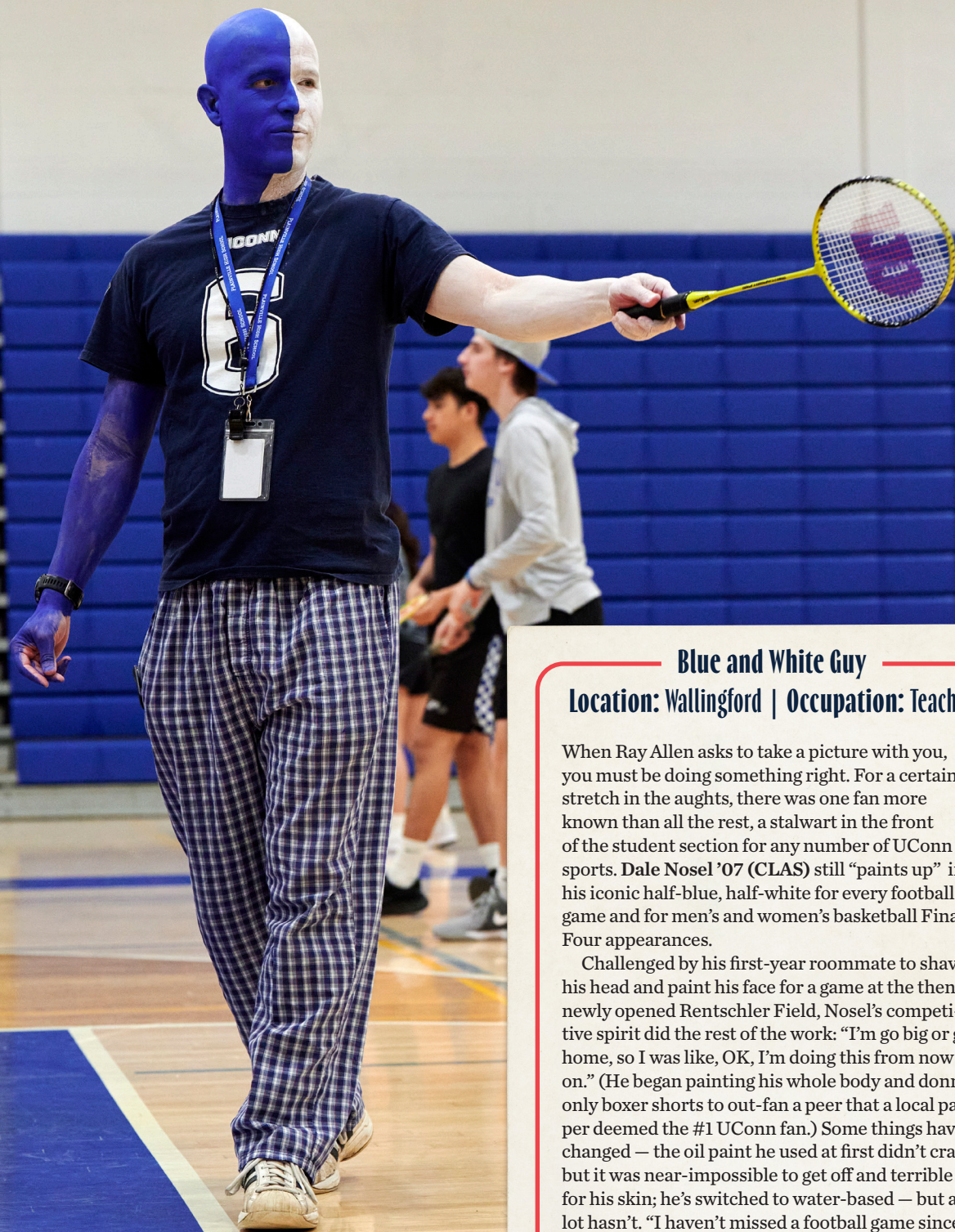
White Suit Dynasty | Location: Higganum | Occupations: Consultant, Rising 7th Grader

During the college basketball season, Prem Aithal '01 MS starts his day by entering NCAA Division I men's basketball data into his custom-built algorithm on premdawg.com to update his PPI, or Premdawg Performance Index, rankings. "That's like my morning yoga to get in the swing of things for the day," says the longtime UConn basketball obsessive and former finance director. Among the prolific contributors to the constant social media conversation surrounding UConn hoops, @Premdawg describes himself as the "Ted Lasso of UConn Twitter," aiming to make fellow fans laugh and feel good.

He serves his mission in part through goofy videos, such as a recent off-key rendition of the famous Folgers jingle with tweaked lyrics to reflect his new men's championship coffee mug and the dramatic reveal of his 11-year-old daughter, Asha, in her own version of Aithal's signature white suit, which he wears to big games. Passing his UConn love on to his daughter is perhaps his favorite part of all this: "It's one of those things that's such a pleasant, rewarding surprise of fatherhood." Says his wife, Becky, "It's like I'm living with two Prem's now."



HOME



Blue and White Guy

Location: Wallingford | **Occupation:** Teacher

When Ray Allen asks to take a picture with you, you must be doing something right. For a certain stretch in the aughts, there was one fan more known than all the rest, a stalwart in the front of the student section for any number of UConn sports. Dale Nosel '07 (CLAS) still “paints up” in his iconic half-blue, half-white for every football game and for men’s and women’s basketball Final Four appearances.

Challenged by his first-year roommate to shave his head and paint his face for a game at the then newly opened Rentschler Field, Nosel’s competitive spirit did the rest of the work: “I’m go big or go home, so I was like, OK, I’m doing this from now on.” (He began painting his whole body and donned only boxer shorts to out-fan a peer that a local paper deemed the #1 UConn fan.) Some things have changed — the oil paint he used at first didn’t crack, but it was near-impossible to get off and terrible for his skin; he’s switched to water-based — but a lot hasn’t. “I haven’t missed a football game since 2009,” he says — and that’s home or away. Although he wore his signature look to his UConn graduation, he won’t be doing so for his wedding later this summer, though his fiancée “is very supportive.”



Big Red | Location: Meriden | Occupation: Sales Rep

It all started because he felt sorry for the cheerleaders. At a men’s basketball game in the early ’80s, Tom Emery, aka Big Red, took it upon himself to rally a quiet crowd meeting the spirit squad’s prompts with silence. Despite almost being thrown out during that first game for blocking the aisles, Big Red is now an icon, the one the entire arena still looks to for his “YMCA”-style U-C-O-N-N arm movements anytime the Huskies go on a big scoring run.

“I want that atmosphere at all times. You have to have some kind of excitement from the players to get the fans excited, and then you build on it,” says the legend among legends.

“Years ago when I was a high school athlete, we didn’t have a lot of fans in the stands. I know what it is to not get cheered for. I want everybody to feel that they can cheer as loud as I can. They’re just like I am. There’s nothing special about me other than me being an igniter for the fire.”