

# letter from storrs, connecticut

UConn basketball is big in central Connecticut, and not just for the university. *By Owen Canfield*

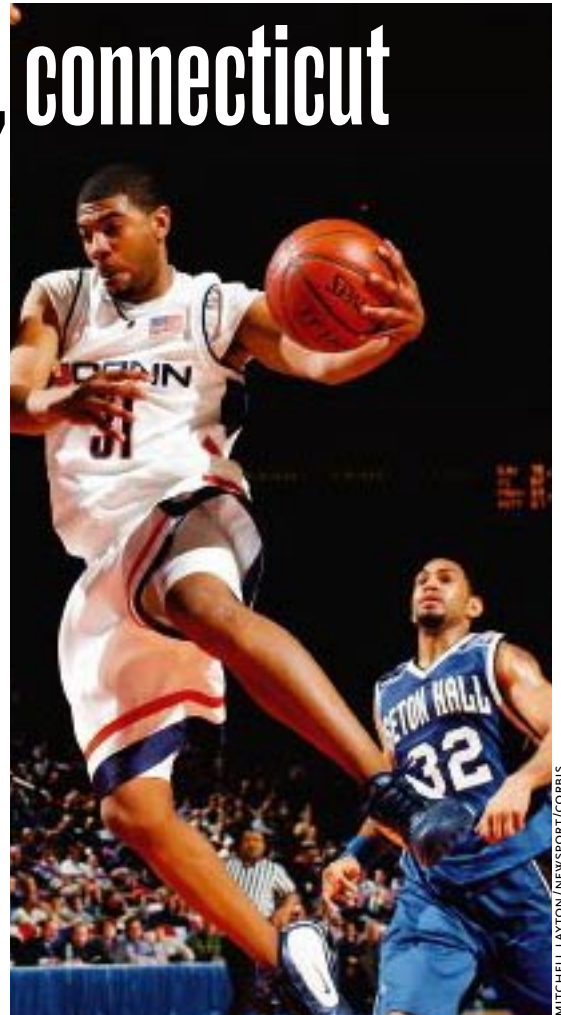
**UConn basketball** is never completely dormant in Connecticut. Even through the hot summer, blue and white Husky dog posters adorn front windows, and one doesn't have to drive very far to find a Husky flag flying outside a fan's home. Travelers and vacationers from Nantucket to Normandy routinely catch sight of strangers with shirts or hats sporting symbols of the school. "Go UConn!" they call to each other as each goes his way.

But in early September, Husky fever starts to spike. Department and apparel stores move their UConn displays to the front and lay in new supplies and designs. Shirts, workout suits, jackets, sweaters, socks, scarves, hats, and blankets bearing all manner of UConn signs, stamps, and symbols are hot items. Rows of large white foam "helmets" made in the image of a Husky dog's head sit on shelves at every Wal-Mart. The Husky spirit runs so deep that many Connecticut residents have gotten in the habit of planning Christmas parties and winter birthday celebrations around the UConn basketball schedule. When the men's and women's teams are simultaneous national champions, who can blame them?

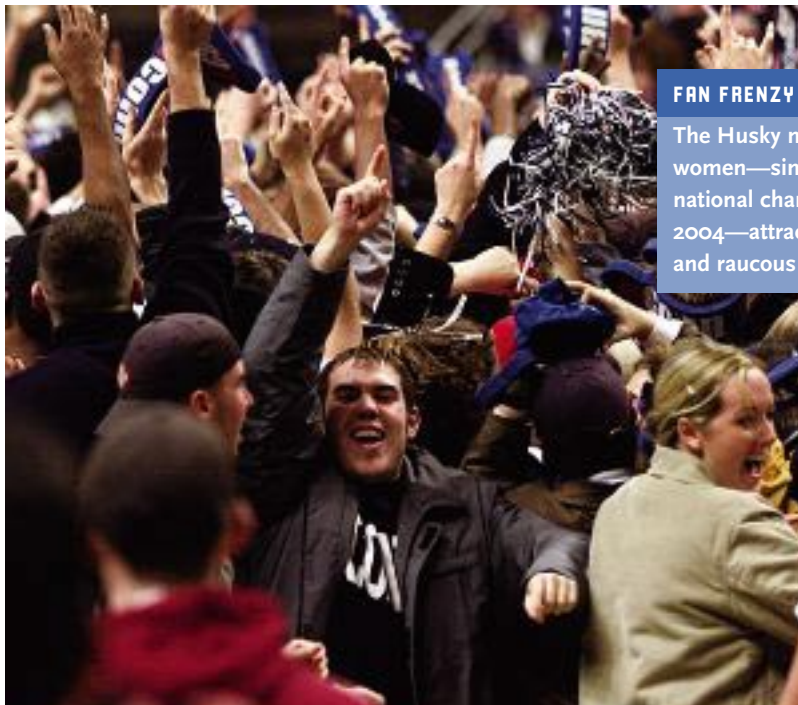
UConn alums have been devoted to their Huskies for decades, but the teams began to attract national attention when UConn left the Yankee Conference to help form the Big East Conference in 1979. With basketball powerhouses like Seton Hall and Villanova in the new conference, television networks clamored to broadcast the Big East's games. By the mid-1980s, the Husky men were already playing some of their games at the 15,000-seat Hart-



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## FAN FRENZY

The Husky men and women—simultaneous national champions in 2004—attract a loyal and raucous following.

ford Civic Center, but attendance began to surge when coach Jim Calhoun was hired in 1986. Large, modern Gampel Pavilion opened on campus in January 1990. And the women's basketball program under coach Geno Auriemma grew more successful as well.

But it wasn't until the 1994-1995 season that the Husky men and women captured the region's, and the nation's, attention. "That's when [Capt.] Rebecca Lobo and the Husky women beat Tennessee during a regular season game," says Tim Tolokan, associate director of athletics for licensing and athletic tradition. "It was a sensational win, and that team went on to finish 35-0 and win the national

championship. At the same time, the UConn men were sent west in the NCAA tournament. They lost to UCLA, 102-96, in the Round of Eight, but most observers felt that UConn-UCLA game was the true national championship game."

Connecticut's state legislature sat up and took notice. "Three weeks later the legislature approved UConn 2000," notes Tolokan.

This \$2.3 billion, 20-year university infrastructure and facilities improvement project has helped transform UConn. "The state, including members of the legislature, was euphoric over these two teams," says Tolokan. "People were saying these kids, these 25 or 30 kids in shorts, had made Connecticut people feel good about themselves." The university has also benefited from a nine-fold increase in alumni donations to the school over the last decade, growth which many attribute to the teams' success.

But the impact of UConn basketball goes well beyond the university or even the legislature. After all, nearly 10,000 people show up each season just to see the teams' first practices—and these people need to eat. The roads into and out of Storrs are dotted with restaurants and stores benefiting from the game-day traffic, and the University book-

store does brisk business when the teams are in town. Some 30 miles west, when games are played at the Hartford Civic Center, the state's capital city leaps to life. "The impact is huge," says R. Nelson Griebel, president and CEO of MetroHartford Alliance. "It's a very different city on those 20 dates." Restaurants flourish. Bars are crowded, especially after men's games. Downtown retail stores are busy. Business in nearby malls picks up, too, as ticket-holders stop to do some shopping.

Even those who don't go to games still end up supporting the team by watching the games on television. The UConn men are consistently featured on the networks, including ESPN and CBS. The women appear mostly on Connecticut Public Television (CPTV). Larry Rifkin, executive vice president of CPTV, says his station "will take every game we can get." He notes that while "production costs are often quite heavy," the games pay for themselves. Corporate sponsorships and individual donations—appeals for pledges take place before and after each game as well as during halftime and timeouts—more than cover the costs. Indeed, the station recently raised more than \$30,000 in one night by broadcasting an eight-hour UConn women's basketball feature, offering shirts, caps, banners, and media guides in exchange for pledges.

When the end of basketball season is at hand, Husky fever will die down, but it won't die away. Fans will find themselves searching the newspapers for news about next year's team members, post-season honors, or personal appearances. Husky flags and posters will still be in evidence, though not quite as prominently; displays will be moved to the back of the stores. Life will return to what regions that don't live and breathe basketball might think of as normal.

But after years of Husky fever, it's the infectious, agreeable ambience of basketball season that makes the people of central Connecticut feel most at home. \*

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