

# A Good View

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By Tim Volkmann

There is a small couch sitting in Room 217 in the Merritt Athletic Center at SUNY Geneseo. When I moved into that office two summers ago, its slight steel frame and Kermit the Frog-green cushions showed the typical wear-and-tear common with furniture that has called a 44-year-old state-school athletics building home.

The couch still had some life in it but, as any good sports information director like myself would probably agree, the green had to go. Especially on a campus where navy blue is the primary color of the hooded sweatshirts draped over its students and the caps they pull down over their faces as they brave icy Western New York morning marches to class.

While it isn't perfect, I stretched \$16.89 worth of fabric I found on sale around the cushions. With my trusty staple gun, I clacked enough staples into each one to the point that, if you were walking down the hallway as I cobbled everything back together, you might have mistaken the opening scene of "Saving Private Ryan" was being re-filmed in my office.

In a short amount of time, quite a few people sat on my "new" blue couch. Be it a quick two-minute conversation, a weekly staff meeting or an extended save-the-world pow-wow, it came in handy for sure.

A fair share of student-athletes also passed through my office during the typical hustle-and-bustle of a semester. And, if you ask me, getting to know them and what makes them tick, especially at a Division III school like Geneseo, is the best perk of being a sports information professional. It is tough to meet them all, but I've had the privilege of getting to know some incredible young men and women during my nearly 20 years working in intercollegiate athletics.

I had heard along the way that one of the members of the men's ice hockey team was also a volunteer fireman. Always on the prowl for a good feature story to include in our monthly departmental e-newsletter, I thought his tale would make for a pretty good yarn to spin.

Quick side note: 23 has always been my lucky number. Its superstitious roots go back to the poster I grew up with on my bedroom door of New York Yankees' first baseman Don Mattingly and his pinstriped 23 jersey, as well as the stack of his baseball cards I owned that was only limited by what my paper route could fund. Fast-forward to my SID career where I've always tried to at least strike up a conversation with anyone who wears number 23 while getting to know them a bit before they graduate.

About 15 months ago, I had a two-birds/one-stone opportunity. When number 23 Matt Hutchinson knocked on my office door that fall afternoon, I soon found myself in the grip of the firmest hand-shake I had ever felt. I'll never forget the steely blue eyes looking back at me, or the enormously sly grin that immediately put a smile on my face as well. There was only one thing, literally, that could have topped that smile: One of the sweetest, most perfectly gnarly mustaches in the history of facial hair was growing on Matt's upper lip. Donnie Baseball himself would have tipped his cap.

I can still see Matt sitting on my blue couch. I can still hear him talking about the parallels between two uniforms he wore. About the time he got home late on a Saturday after playing a tough hockey game, only to forego a well-deserved night on the town for a fire call that lasted into the early morning hours. About how he had spent the previous summer working as a wilderness fireman in a remote area of the Canadian Rockies about 10 hours from his home in North Vancouver. About how being a good hockey player made him a better fireman and how passionate he was about being the best teammate he could be for the guys on the fire line as well as Geneseo's Wilson Ice Arena blue line.

I wrote the story hoping I did him justice. He was doing remarkable things, even though they were no big deal to him. But I also simply wanted to show how plain cool it was to talk to him.

That is what made the phone call I got a year ago today one of the worst moments of my life. Had the call come two minutes later, my wife and I would have been sitting in church with my phone turned off. Instead, I heard something that Sunday morning that still gives me chills as I sit here typing it.

*Tim, you need to get here as soon as possible. Two of our students were murdered last night and they were both athletes.*

*Who was it?*

*Kelsey Annese from the women's basketball team and Matt Hutchinson from the hockey team.*

To be perfectly honest, I hadn't known Kelsey. In the immediate cloud of confusion, it took me a minute to realize who she was. While my heart broke for Kelsey's shattered teammates as I learned about her amazing a spirit and how loved she was, I regrettably hadn't had much of a chance to get to know her. But I knew Matt.

In the following days, plenty of people sat on my blue couch. Plans had to be made. A memorial had to be organized. Finding an appropriate way for a community to mourn the passing of two remarkable people had to be sorted out. Not to mention trying to make sense of how such an extraordinarily evil act could have happened. Not here. Not at Geneseo.

Oh, and don't forget the media. Hours after learning about the unthinkable, the media came calling. Texts were coming through. Reporters I had never spoken with, much less heard of, were asking me to set up interviews for them. Interviews with our women's basketball coach, who was called to the scene to identify his player's lifeless body. The same body he had watched the night before running up and down a basketball court playing a game. Asking if I "could do them a solid" and set up an interview with Matt's teammates. You know, the ones that had skated with him the night before and were left to come to grips with the fact their teammate had been taken from them in the middle of the night.

"C'mon, Tim. Help me out here."

Vultures.

All the good that comes from our department on a regular basis. All the winning. All the accomplishments and awards that we publicize. Emails to reporters. Follow-up phone calls. Pleading with editors. Nothing. Getting a single score to show up seems like a triumph.

"Sorry, our metrics show that stories about local colleges don't sell newspapers."

But sprinkle in some tragedy? Line up the television vans and get out the media backdrop because those same reporters are going to be on our doorstep with their cameras rolling, jockeying for an exclusive before the wind can blow the yellow police tape out of the trees at the scene.

When we felt the bite of disaster again last month after another one of our women's basketball players was killed, this time in a car accident, some familiar numbers popped up on my caller ID. Ones I hadn't seen them in almost exactly 11 months. Weird.

In the days that followed Matt and Kelsey's deaths, our women's basketball coach, Scott Hemer, and men's ice hockey coach, Chris Schultz, both sat on my blue couch. Most of the time not to talk. But just sit.

How they conducted themselves was nothing short of astonishing. The two of them responded to every interview request and answered every question that was asked, no matter how inane or absurd. They were gracious and patient, taking every opportunity to talk about how Matt and Kelsey were the types of people everyone should want their kids to grow up to be like.

The day of the campus memorial service, two things sat on my blue couch. One was Kelsey's number 32 basketball jersey. The other was Matt's number 23 hockey jersey.

They would hang at the front of the ceremony for all to see. Kelsey would later be buried in her uniform while Matt's was given to his parents. It was surreal holding something they wore a few days earlier. Luckily, tears don't stain.

In the days, weeks and months that followed, I've come to realize how lucky I am to work with so many amazing people. Countless hands and minds from every corner of campus came together to pick up the pieces and start the long road back. Administrators and SIDs from other schools reached out in droves, many of whom I had never even met before, just say they were thinking about us and everything was going to be OK.

It was incredible to witness how good people are and how much they truly care for one another in the face of such circumstances. We all need to make it a point to not only recognize, but celebrate the good that surrounds us on a regular basis and not save it for when tragedy strikes. These days especially, we all need to realize the amount of good that exists in the world, instead of always focusing on the bad. Stories about firefighting hockey players don't come along that often, but they are there. You just have to look.

If anyone wants to come sit on my blue couch, I've got a pretty good view.

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