

March 4, 2001

Dear Mr. Elsberry:

There are many items you mentioned in your column, "Rutgers teams have yet to earn Huskies' respect," the after our last visit to Storrs several weeks ago. Instead of the many assumptions and generalizations you made regarding our program, our players, myself and my staff, I would like to supply you with just some of the facts that you failed to mention.

First of all, you are correct that we want respect. The way I see it, every team and every individual playing this game all across the country wants to be respected and every single person deserves that respect. The amount of work and sacrifice needed to compete at this or any level is substantial and that effort deserves to be acknowledged. Winning does create its own level of respect, though. Our record since the beginning of the 1995-96 season has continued to improve, most evident in our ascension from the Sweet Sixteen to the Elite Eight to last year's Final Four. Rutgers has become a program that the BIG EAST Conference can count as one of its shining jewels, bringing national attention to one of the country's most powerful and influential leagues. When one member of the BIG EAST succeeds we all succeed because we are all working towards the same goal – to make the BIG EAST *the* preeminent women's basketball league in the country.

Rival aren't born – they are created. When Coach Auriemma was in his early at Connecticut I'm sure that he very much wanted to establish a rivalry with Tennessee. After all, the Lady Vols were the most successful and well-established program in the country. A rivalry with Tennessee would mean the UConn had arrived on the national scene. That rivalry took time to develop into what you now see as a "true" rivalry – competitive games between two of the best teams in the country. We are also trying to develop that kind of lasting rivalry at Rutgers with some of the nation's top teams – Tennessee, Notre Dame, Georgia and Connecticut, to just name a few – but just with the Huskies, it takes time for a program to not only grow enough to initially reach that level but also to have the foundation in place so that program may flourish during the long term. If you remember, Coach Auriemma's fourth and fifth years at Connecticut ended with trips to the first and second rounds of the NCAA Tournament. Our fourth and fifth seasons at Rutgers ended with trips to the Elite Eight and Final Four. I am confident that we will not only continue to improve but that we will be able to establish the kind of expectations of success that are a fixture here at Connecticut.

Sometimes I think that those outside of our program who do not regularly spend time with our team mistake confidence for arrogance. Our players, and most particularly our current seniors who were instrumental in building our current level of success, are very confident in their abilities. I would not have asked them to join our program if they weren't, just as I would not recruit players who did not think that they could beat the best teams in the country. If you do not have confidence in your ultimate success then you will never reach that level. Yet, even with our performance the last time we played at Gampell Pavilion, we still had enough confidence in our abilities to go out and beat the top-ranked and only undefeated team in the country just 72 hours later. I think that is a testament to the difference between confidence and arrogance. Arrogance is an empty emotion with no backing. It crumbles the first time it is challenged. Confidence is having the ability to move past a disappointing setback and still believing that you have the ability to do what no else thinks you are capable of. Our reaction in that Notre Dame game should have shown everyone that one thing this team does not lack is confidence. Arrogance or cockiness has nothing to do with it.

That is what is in my team's head. Not all of the "tattoos, black uniforms and the headbands" as you said your article. Those are all superficial things that have nothing to do with who we are as people. Those who know us know that our team is filled with some very special people. We attend church together regularly, we are involved in our community and we care very much about each other and those who care about us. I'll be that you didn't know that Dana Boonen often shows up at local hospitals unannounced and on her own to visit with some of our youngest fans, or that Tasha Pointer mentors as many children as she can in her fleeting spare time because she believes that she can help steer these kids onto a better path. I'll be you don't know about the visits our team makes to local schools to talk about the importance of academics, or our "RU Reading into the Game" program that rewards kids for reading and doing well in school with tickets to our games. *These* are our student-athletes, not the ones you think you know because you see them play once or twice a year. I believe in not judging a book by its cover. I hope that you feel the same way.

Sincerely,

C. Vivian Stringer