

## **Opinion: The rise, fall, and dwindling hope of a SU v. Georgetown rivalry resurgence**

Basketball comes in many forms. Enter any Central New York middle school gym on a Saturday in the winter, and you'll find children of all ages just starting or new to the game. Some of whom have learned how to maintain a dribble – and some who haven't quite gotten there. There will be parents in those uncomfortable wooden bleachers, supporting their kids, taking pictures, or maybe just gossiping amongst themselves. That's the game at its most basic level.

If those kids continue to the next levels, slowly but surely things get complicated, as does life. Competition intensifies. Eventually, some of those same parents might be up on their feet, screaming at the ref. When those kids reach varsity and are playing their neighboring town with a sectional trip on the line, for many, that will be the final form they experience.

Only a fraction of young athletes make it to the next level– and an even smaller fraction play Division I. It is there that I would argue you find the purest form of the sport.

If you make it to the top level of college sports, it's a great personal feat. But with it, also comes the expectation that you will continue on the foundations built by the generations of teams before you.

Each school has its own unique and rich sports history, including Syracuse, and its men's basketball program. A rich history that can not be successfully discussed without an entire section dedicated to Georgetown.

On Dec. 9, Syracuse traveled to Washington D.C. for the 99th meeting between the two teams.

Headlines called it an "old-school classic." I wonder what Jim Boeheim and John Thompson would think of that classification.

There are several reasons I will argue (to anyone that listens), that college basketball is the level where the game is played in its purest form. Those who disagree would likely point to the implementation of NIL and the newly defined idea of amateurism in the NCAA. In response, I argue that student-athletes are now making the money they have deserved all along. In any program with noteworthy culture and pride, the recruits they bring in are still primarily motivated by the name across their chest and the generations that have worked to bring meaning to it.

There is perhaps no greater example of what “playing for the name on your chest” means than within a rivalry.

Rivalries unite a team. Rivalries are forces that drive the competitive spirits of entire fan bases and communities. But perhaps most importantly, rivalries intrigue sporting fans nationwide. They put eyes and ears on a program that otherwise would never have reason to watch or listen.



*SYRACUSE, NY - FEBRUARY 23: A general view of the Carrier Dome during the game between the Syracuse Orange and the Georgetown Hoyas with record breaking attendance of 35,012 fans on February 23, 2013 in Syracuse, New York. (Photo by Nate Shron/Getty Images)*

This is the primary reason for the success of the Big East in the 1980s. The newly founded ESPN spotlighted basketball in the northeast, something that had yet to be done. The company profited off the bruising way the games played out, and its supporting characters. Perhaps none more important than the whiney guy on the Syracuse bench, and the imposing figure that led Georgetown. The rivalry ignited through teams assembled by Boeheim and Thompson had the nation in a trance.

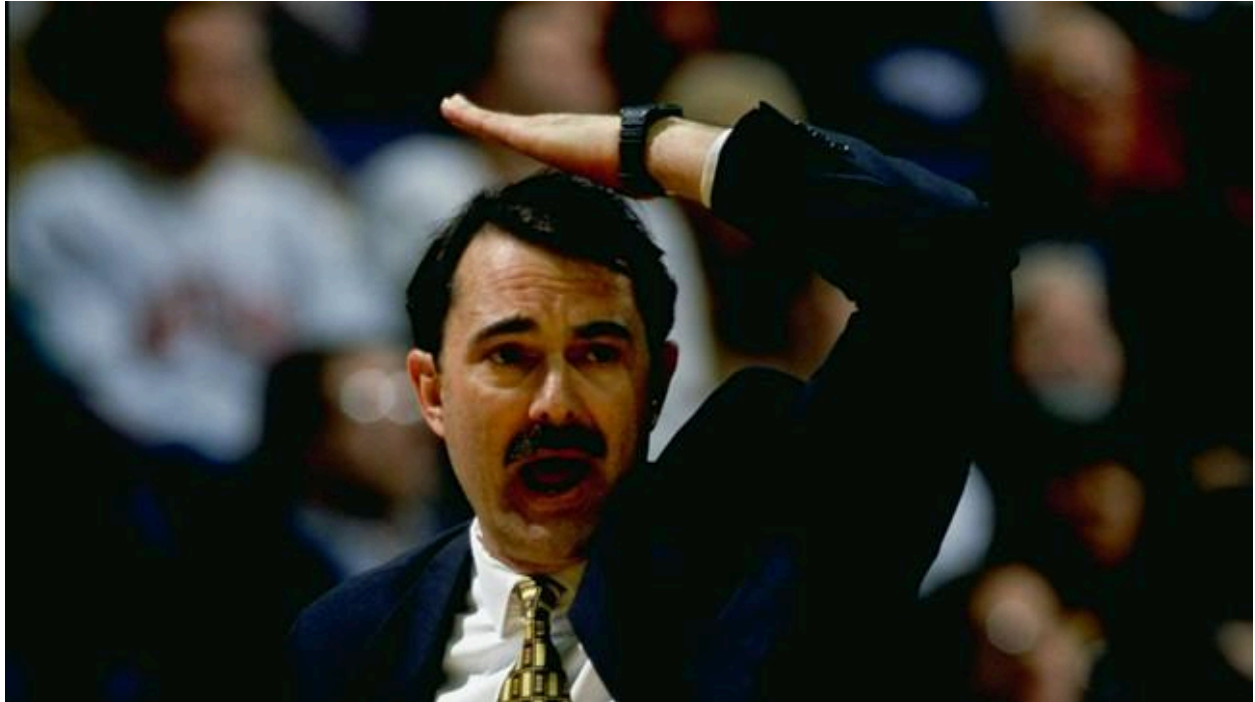


*30 Jan 1995: Georgetown Hoyas head coach John Thompson paces the sidelines during a game against the Syracuse Orangemen at the USAir Arena in Washington, D.C. Syracuse won the game, 76-75. Mandatory Credit: Scott Wacater /Allsport*



*30 JAN 1995: A PORTRAIT OF SYRACUSE HEAD COACH JIM BOEHEIM DURING HIS TEAM'S 76-75 WIN OVER GEORGETOWN AT THE CAPITAL CENTRE IN LANDOVER, MARYLAND. Mandatory Credit: SCOTT WACHTER/ALLSPORT*

For 34 years, the teams met twice a year. Some of the greatest players to grace college basketball added chapters to the novel in each matchup. Thompson retired in 1999, with a 26-21 record against Syracuse, and played an imperative role in the closure of Manley Field House. Boheim got the best of his former assistant coach– Craig Esherick when he took the helm– winning seven of the 11 games played. John Thompson III later stepped into his father's role, and it was during his tenure that Syracuse left the Big East– joining the ACC in 2013. The reasons for this are complex and frankly, I'm trying to hold myself to a word count limitation, but it all boiled down to football.



*16 Jan 1999: Head coach Craig Esherick of the Georgetown Hoyas yells during the game against the Syracuse Orangemen at the MCI Center in Washington, D.C. The Orangemen defeated the Hoyas 81-79. Mandatory Credit: Jamie Squire /Allsport*

This was the turning point in the rivalry. The teams now only met once a year, and when they did, it was hard not to view the matchups as an ode to days past. A forced encounter, organized only to preserve a relationship irreplaceably fractured.

History is history for a reason. We can look back on it and admire it all we want, but traditions are born, traditions develop, and sometimes traditions die off.

With less frequent and meaningful meetings, alongside what many would consider a diminished quality of basketball on both sides, a rivalry can't grow. While the roots remain and can never be forgotten, the only option is for it to stagnantly exist.

Historically, Syracuse v. Georgetown is one of the best rivalries to ever exist, No one can question that. But when looking forward, there's no reason for it to bring much attention outside of the respective fan bases.

This year marked the first time the teams met without Boeheim on the bench, and with no one directly tied to the late great Thompson on the other side. The game that used to draw national primetime attention, was broadcast at 11:30 am, with rosters made up of players who weren't even born in the 1980s, or 1990s. Syracuse won 80-68, making their overall record against the Hoyas 55-44.

Despite the sentiment relayed by Adrian Autry in the postgame presser, I think I speak for many fans on both sides when I say that I can't help but think about what could have been.

Going forward, it's hard to imagine Syracuse developing a genuine rivalry with anyone in the ACC. It's a top-heavy conference, dominated by the names most closely associated with it. Duke and UNC have a long-running rivalry, comparable to that of Cowboys v. Eagles, and even Yankees v. Red Sox. As much as many SU fans might like to think of Duke as a rivalry, every team in the ACC holds the same perspective. It is completely unrequited by the Blue Devils.





SYRACUSE, NY - FEBRUARY 01: Syracuse Orange fans holds up a signs during ESPN College GameDay prior to the game between the Duke Blue Devils and the Syracuse Orange at the Carrier Dome on February 1, 2014 in Syracuse, New York. (Photo by Rich Barnes/Getty Images)

Fourteen of the 15 teams in the ACC have played one conference game this season. Projected to finish in the middle of the road, Syracuse has work to do to even hold a torch to the former glory it had in the Big East's prime. Work that I feel Autry is fully prepared to do. So as much joy as there is looking to the past, there is also joy in the potential of the future. Maybe the future even holds a new, refreshing rivalry, to entice not only fan bases but all fans of basketball in its purest form.

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