



Staff photo by Mike Spencer

Sixty-four-year-old Herb Neubauer is a fixture at Duke games and has earned the nickname, 'Crazy Towel Guy.'

# Towel guy stirs Crazies

An anxious din reverberated through Cameron Indoor Stadium when he decided it was time.

No. 2 Duke was struggling to fight off Florida State, time was running out and the arena needed an injection of spirit.

So coming out of a timeout, the man with Duke on his chest and Duke in his heart stood up, looked around at the Cameron crowd and shouted.

"Come on! Get up!" he begged flapping his arms like a hurried hawk.

With each gesticulation, the noise amplified.

Only a handful of icons have ever held this power at Cameron Indoor — Mike Krzyzewski, Steve Wojciechowski, Shane Battier. Now J.J. Redick.

But you probably don't know the name Herb Neubauer. Nope, Neubauer won't show up anywhere in the Duke media guide. He's simply a 64-year-old retired Food Lion supervisor who's crazy for Duke, operates under the handle of "Crazy Towel Guy" and by his own admission tries to be a little "like a Lee Melchionni in the stands."

That's music to at least one Devil's ears.

"I've never met the man," says Melchionni, the Duke senior who happens to have a commemorative Crazy Towel Guy water bottle in his locker. "But if he says that's what he tries to do, that's a good thing. It means he's nuts."

## Sweat and wild

The seeds for this legend were planted all the way back in December 1984 with Neubauer following Duke to Los Angeles, where they were playing in the two-day Trojan Bud Light Classic at Southern California.

After the Blue Devils pounded Alabama-Birmingham 76-62 in their first game, Neubauer and several others took a school-sponsored bus trip south of the border.

Already a die-hard Dukie, Neubauer found just the souvenir he needed to complement his routine.

"I was on a backstreet in Tijuana when I found this blue leather Mexican hat," he said. "I remember thinking, 'This is one of a kind.'"

A one-of-a-kind hat plus a one-of-a-kind fan quickly translated into the perfect one-of-a-kind novelty act.

Each and every game, Neubauer would show up at Cameron with the sombrero on his noggin and the Devils' blood pumping through his veins and spend his night emphatically rooting for Duke.

Neubauer's leather hat gimmick had one little drawback. His head sweat too much.

"It killed me for years," he says. "And if I was smarter and I had more common sense I probably would have realized what was causing it."

Instead the 1963 Duke grad began bringing a towel to each game to avoid overheating.

"The towel would get wet," Neubauer says. "And what's better to swing than a wet towel?"

## From the ashes

For years, Guy with the Crazy Mexican Hat planted himself at Duke games, cheering, sweating and staking a claim to the title of Duke's No. 1 fan, an honor he eventually etched onto his cards.

"People got upset with me saying that," Neubauer says. "But I didn't have any doubt. No one else saw every home and away basketball game, every home and away football game. I went everywhere.

"Finally I just said, 'I'm not going to argue with people. I just am (the No. 1 fan) whether you think it or not.'"

But Neubauer's fanatical flame flickered in 1994 when a fire destroyed his Durham residence. Lost in the blaze were hundreds of Duke buttons, ticket stubs to every one of the Blue Devils' Final Four games, basketballs signed by the 1991 and '92 national championship teams and that one-of-a-kind leather hat.

"I had \$1,500 just in frames that I lost in the fire — not counting the stuff in them," Neubauer says. "I'm alive, so you're happy. But I've heard people say, 'Well, I lost this in a fire.' And I'd think, 'Yeah, go ahead lady. I lost 295 T-shirts with Duke on them.'"

Still, Neubauer never lost his passion for the Blue Devils and continued to make his presence felt, always armed at Cameron with the towel that kept his head cool and the crowd lively.

In 1996, several Cameron Crazies approached Neubauer, so invigorated by

his energy they wanted to start a chant to honor him.

The calls surfaced most when the arena was lifeless. The Crazies would look up toward Section 7, Row G, Seat 8 and chant Neubauer's new nickname — "Crazy Towel Guy!" Neubauer would respond by rising and swinging his towel like a mad man, a Cameron ritual that's been a staple for more than 10 years now.

Neubauer has since polished his routine, often teasing the Crazies and pretending not to hear their chants until the crowd gets louder.

"The whole point of it, I want the place to be jumping," he says. "To me that's what it's for, right?"

## Signature move

In 1997, Neubauer teamed with the Crazies and Krzyzewski to sell commemorative towels autographed by the legendary coach and the Crazy Towel Guy himself. The promotion raised more than \$25,000 for the North Carolina Food Bank, elevating Neubauer's status as something of a Devilish cult hero.

Neubauer proudly boasts that he's missed only two Duke home games in the last 20 years and has been in person for every one of Duke's Final Four games — men's and women's.

"There's only eight of us alive yet," he said, "and the number is thinning."

This year, Neubauer has dreams of attending two more Duke Final Fours, joining the Devils men in Indianapolis and the women in Boston.

Never mind that the games are on the same weekend. Crazy Towel Guy hopes to fly back and forth so he can be there to lend energy.

"I've met a lot of great people over the years being the Crazy Towel Guy," he says. "It keeps me young. But whatever you want to say, it's become fact. It's not fiction, it's not a legend.

"I have a good time with it and I'm doing what I love to do: rooting for Duke."

Crazy as it may sound, the energetic Towel Guy has swung his way into Duke lore forever.

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