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Halftime resembles cult ritual

Nick Collins column

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CHAMPAIGN, Ill.

That was uncomfortable. Really uncomfortable.

No, not the role of sacrificial lambs the Wildcats ended up playing in an 84-48 slaughter -- I'd come to terms with the purple's fate well before we started for Champaign.

But the Assembly Hall halftime show -- it wasn't really a show so much as a cult ritual -- freaked me out pretty thoroughly.

From an awkward baton program to a barbarous Indian hoe-down (performed by some white kid in clown make up), it was a place you really didn't want to be for the 15-minute reprieve from Fighting Illini highlights.

It made me long for the 60 seconds of entertainment brought by the little tykes in the LaSalle Bank Shots in Welsh-Ryan.

First we had a 10-minute twirling show with narration from the Featured Twirler herself.

It was like having to listen to a public reading of a sixth-grade girl's diary. I heard her tell 17,000 people that her mom always will be her best friend. And that her seven years twirling at Illinois -- I guess you take a scaled back class schedule during baton season -- was the greatest opportunity she could imagine.

In the eighth minute she was joined by her father, sporting a sequin-heavy T-shirt reading,

"Featured Twirler Dad." Dad dropped the baton a few too many times, and those bothering to pay attention found it amusing.

But Featured Twirler seemed genuinely distressed. Reliving Father's Day memories had turned awkwardly sour.

To top off the routine, Featured Twirler included a pathetically sappy soundtrack featuring all those dumbass songs about the time of somebody's life from Dirty Dancing and Green Day.

By the end I needed a Kleenex -- to spit up in.

That's when it went from sad to demented.

Now, I'm no crazed politically correct puffball. When my hometown Miami University (Ohio) athletic teams dropped their Redskins label for Redhawks, I was among the hundreds who bought bumper stickers proclaiming "Redskins Forever." But when Chief Illiniwek took the court, my stomach starting turning.

He and the Illinois student section began doing ... something.

I guess it was a cross between Dances with Wolves, something off Country Music Television and a German death rave with hundreds of orange -clad drones bobbing their heads behind rigidly crossed arms.

The headdress flew about the court, the prancing put the students into a frenzy and the outsiders would have felt more comfortable at a briss.

It culminated in a peculiar silence as Illiniwek marched through a tunnel made up of 20 orange-shirted, arms-folded, totem-pole wannabes on either side.

It was quiet. Too quiet.

Then the WASPY Indian stomped his right foot and the entire arena emitted some odd grumbling noise.

When it was over, I was more than ready for the Cats' slaughter to resume, even though on any other night it would've been unbearable to watch.

It was a 15-minute calamity that left me knowing one thing -- if you ever go to a game in Champaign, it's best to spend halftime in the John.

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