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Rocker supporters cheer symbol of their own racial, ethnic biases

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John Rocker has become a human Confederate flag. Whenever the now-demoted closer entered a home game and raced to the mound, Turner Field's friendly, laid-back atmosphere was abruptly transformed into one of belligerent hostility. Thousands of fans stood and roared in a manner reminiscent of a George Wallace campaign rally or the infamous 1962 Ole Miss football game where tens of thousands of Confederate flag-waving fans cheered Mississippi Gov. Ross Barnett's defiance of a federal court desegregation order. Both then and now, America generated scenes that called to mind the old newsreel footage of 1930s rallies in Nuremberg, Germany.

For the smaller portion of Braves fans who remained silently in their seats or booed while those around them whooped and hollered at Rocker's arrival, the angry passion in the stands --- particularly intense during this past Saturday and Sunday's games against the New York Yankees --- made one so morally uncomfortable that thoughts of Wallace, Barnett and Nazis were impossible to avoid.

As Rocker entered Saturday's game in the top of the ninth, one screaming fan personified the sentiments of Rocker enthusiasts. "Send 'em back to Harlem, John. Send 'em back to Harlem." The man's geography was all wrong --- the Yankees hail from the Bronx, not Harlem, which is across the river in Manhattan --- but his top-of-the-lungs cry made crystal clear how fan support for Rocker is much more about racial antipathy and ethnic xenophobia than it is about the Braves or the Yankees.

So far this season, much of metro Atlanta has willingly allowed itself to be deceived into believing that these vituperatively enthusiastic cheers for John Rocker are simply a warmly contrarian embrace of someone who "stands up for what he believes in" and symbolizes a rejection of "political correctness."

Wrong. As Saturday's memorable cry revealed, Rocker supporters are not First Amendment free speech absolutists; they're people for whom Rocker is indeed a living symbol of emotions evoked by the Confederate flag. If Braves management succumbs to their call and ever brings Rocker back to Atlanta, Turner Field can become the new Stone Mountain of the 21st century: a rallying ground where hateful sentiments can be symbolically yet openly expressed.

Eighty years ago, the Klansmen who made Stone Mountain their symbolic home utilized white robes and fiery crosses. Nowadays the symbols of defiance and hate are more veiled --- a flag, a venom-spewing athlete. But let us make no mistake about the sentiments that are being expressed. Atlanta's problem is not John Rocker; Atlanta's problem is how tens of thousands of citizens have leapt at the opportunity to cheer Rocker's sentiments as expressions of their own.

For the Braves management to blindly deny what Roker now symbolizes represents a growing moral stain upon all of Atlanta. Braves executives resolutely if unconvincingly insist that Monday's demotion of Roker to the Braves' Richmond farm team had everything to do with his out-of-control pitching and nothing to do with his out-of-control human hatreds.

The question Braves executives need to ask themselves is not whether Roker can regain his pitching control or whether his return would be a harmful distraction for his teammates. Instead, the question they must confront concerns their own moral culpability for the extensive damage Roker's presence, and the threat of his return, already has allowed Roker's supporters to do to Atlanta's image and reputation.

Do Braves executives have the moral clarity and fortitude to declare that a human flag who symbolizes racial antipathy and ethnic hatred will never again be a part of the Braves? If they don't, then Atlantans' own moral challenge is clear: to warn the Braves that the transformation of Turner Field into a new Stone Mountain will not be allowed. Never again can John Roker represent Atlanta in a Braves uniform.

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