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The Rivalry of the Jays and Tigers

50 years ago they battled for a state title

George Gurtner

Tackaberry tackles Holy Cross ball carrier Glenn Smith.">



Jesuit defender Ray Tackaberry tackles Holy Cross ball carrier Glenn Smith.

Photograph courtesy Jesuit High School

Their gait may be a little slower these days. Most are grandfathers. Their hair is thinner and whiter, but there's nothing wrong with their memories; the memories stored away by these guys who were there slugging it out in the frozen trenches 50 years ago on a frigid December Tuesday night in 1963 when Holy Cross defeated Jesuit 14-6 to win the Louisiana State high school football championship before some 27,000 of their followers at Tulane Stadium.

"Fifty years ago," says Barry Wilson, the All-State center for Holy Cross who went on to star for LSU. "Fifty years ago." He repeats the words as though by merely saying them will bring that long ago game back into a present day reality. "That was a game for the ages. One that most people who

were involved with won't forget."

Across town, Keefe Hecker sits in his comfortable living room, thinking about retirement after 37 years of teaching and coaching Isidore Newman School to two state track championships.

But it's October and Hecker's mind, like Wilson's, can't stray far from his glory days as a defensive halfback and sometime wingback for the Jesuit Blue Jays in "THE" game.

"I'd be lying if I said (losing the state title to Holy Cross) didn't still gnaw at me after all these years," Hecker says. "We played a good game ... but we lost! Still, that was a great time and the memories are still there."

To be sure, through the glory of victory and the lingering pain of defeat, the annual Holy Cross-Jesuit game has been played out each autumn, without interruption, since 1922 and is recognized as one of the oldest continuing high school rivalries in the country. Several years ago, one organization, "Great American Rivalries" sponsored by the U.S. Marine Corps, added the Holy Cross-Jesuit game to its list of 80 or so ongoing American prep classics. That organization presents \$500 scholarships each to a Jesuit and Holy Cross player in the contest each year.

"Regardless of which school you went to," says one Jesuit alumni. "This game has long been a yearly tradition in New Orleans. It's big a part of the city's history as anything you can think of ... just below jazz and Mardi Gras."

Sometimes that game, whether both teams were powerhouses or also-rans during a particular season, has grown to reach mythical proportions, the kind associated with some college frenzies: parades, tailgating, newspaper advertising, high-powered speakers at pep rallies, pre- and post-game parties ... The marketing of this game and its attendant celebration is culled together and polished at a half-dozen or so meetings of representatives of both schools throughout the year. All of which would do a Madison Avenue advertising and public relations firm proud. There are "almost generic" T-shirts available for students; except, that is, one set of shirts ballyhoos the "Jesuit-Holy Cross" classic while another set promotes the "Holy Cross-Jesuit" game. And then there's the chin up contest and the travelling "golden football" trophy that's taken home and held for a year by the winning team. Madison Avenue? Forget it! This is circus maximus caliber hype.

"It just seems to get bigger every year," says Dave Moreau, the athletic director of Jesuit. The game is first, of course, and that's what the coaches focus on. But they also realize that this game goes way beyond just what happens on the field. It is a celebration of respect, "the respect that everyone on either side has for their opponent. Both teams play hard on the field, but on that field and in the stands and after the game throughout the year, we all respect one another. That's the driving force that keeps this game going from year to year."

And that continuation hasn't been without grave threats. Through a national depression and hurricanes and tough economic times, everybody has pitched in to make sure the annual game has

continued uninterrupted. Even the assassination of a president occurring between the regular-season 1963 meeting between the two schools (won by Holy Cross 6-0) and the rematch for the state title couldn't derail the historic meeting.

Hurricane Katrina was just such a challenge. After the storm destroyed the Holy Cross 9th Ward campus, for one brief second somebody at a meeting with the Holy Cross Brothers from the governing regional office threw up a white flag and suggested an option might be to end Holy Cross School. A coup de grace. Just as quickly that white flag was ripped to shreds and tossed onto the floor.

"Closing Holy Cross forever was off the table immediately" almost before that option was whispered by somebody at the table, says Holy Cross headmaster Charles DiGange, who was a backup running back on the 1963 state championship team. DiGange has spent the past 46 years at Holy Cross ("Not counting my four years as a student here").

On one wall of his office on the spectacular "new" Holy Cross campus on Paris Avenue, hangs a shadow box containing an "HC" football letter, patch and DiGange's name patch, all mementoes from his football playing days at Holy Cross.

DiGange may have been a backup running back in the 1963 game, but went in to play three quarters when starter Alan Rappold went down early in the second quarter. DiGange carried the ball twice for six yards, but "... I was also on the kickoff and punt teams ... and made some tackles."

DiGange points to the shadow box: "Hurricane Betsy (1965) wiped us out," he says. "We had 10 feet of water in our home. When we finally were able to get back into it, my jacket had disintegrated. All that was left were those three items – my letter, patch and name. My wife saved them for me in that shadow box.

"As for the school itself, after Katrina we were determined to rebuild," DiGange says. "The Dunham School (small private Christian school in Baton Rouge) let us use their classroom space to hold classes from 4 to 9 p.m., free of charge. I had 170 boys. I told all of our faculty that if they went to Baton Rouge, I would give them a job teaching."

Under those dire circumstances football may have seemed like luxury, but not so to then athletic director DiGange, Greg Battistella and Wilson.

The trio pulled together a schedule; the Baton Rouge YMCA allowed the players to use its showers and the team used a U-Haul truck as a locker room.

"Think we don't have a determined group of people here?" Wilson says with a wink. "That's Holy Cross spirit ... and it's the same at Jesuit. We play hard, but we know in the end we respect one another and we're dedicated to that."

Wilson once made the statement that if he were to coach on the high school level, Jesuit and Holy Cross were the only two jobs he would consider.

When he finished his career as an All-SEC center playing, and later coaching, for Charlie McClendon at LSU, Wilson went on a coaching odyssey that over the next 32 years took him to coaching stops at USL (now the University of Louisiana Lafayette), Iowa State, Mississippi State, Oregon State (twice), Wyoming and Arkansas State before jumping at an offer made to him from his old Holy Cross teammate, Vic Eumont, to join him on the Jesuit staff. The next year, Wilson returned to where it all began when he took a coaching position at his alma mater: Holy Cross. He had finally come home.

"I tell everybody I wish I had returned to high school coaching 10 years earlier," Wilson says. "After 32 years of coaching I felt (moving to the high school level) was the thing to do. It was really a lifelong dream. And with my mother getting older and to be able to come home to New Orleans ... there was no question about it. It was wonderful. It was like heaven!"

Tommy Morel, a wide receiver for Jesuit during that championship year, lets loose with a wry smile. He knows what his old friend and adversary is talking about. It is New Orleans, Jesuit and Holy Cross; could anything be better?

"We all grew up in Gentilly," Morel says. "Many of us carpooled. Just from St. Raphael Parish Jesuit we had nine guys who played in that (1963) game, Holy Cross had another six. All from St. Raphael."

Morel went on to become LSU's Most Valuable Player during the '67 season and later played for the Saints for a year. "We were a real long shot to win that game against Holy Cross on that Friday night.

Well, eight of us went to Mass the morning of the game to get an edge. Right before Mass starts, a bunch of guys from Holy Cross come in. They wanted an edge, too. I thought we outnumbered them, so that was all right. Well, it rained and the game was postponed to Saturday. So Saturday morning, all of us from Jesuit go back to Mass to get that edge. And don't you know it, the door opens and here comes the Holy Cross guys looking for their edge."

The Holy Cross guys must've been praying a little harder because after the game was cancelled again due to the quagmire Tulane Stadium had become after an all-day rain Saturday, it was finally played on Tuesday: Holy Cross 14, Jesuit 6.

And if it's Holy Cross-Jesuit/Jesuit-Holy Cross month, the stories continue to fly and the anecdotes continue to grow to mythical proportions with each passing year.

Barry Wilson says, "Hey do you remember ...?"

Charles DiGange adds a little known tidbit about a player he knew. Jesuit athletic director Dave Moreau tells about the late sportscaster Hap Glaudi, a lifelong resident of the 9th Ward and a proud Jesuit alumni, once telling a Holy Cross assembly about why he didn't attend their school: "Because when I came here to register, the bridge was up."

Morel lets on that one of his proudest non-football memories was after his short-lived Saints career, he was a songwriter and wrote the popular jingle: "Luuuuuv that chicken from Popeyes."

And that's why Jesuit-Holy Cross (or Holy Cross-Jesuit) is about much more than just what happens on the field.

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