

Holy Cross-Jesuit more than a football rivalry

Jesuit-Holy Cross adds fanfare of parade, festival to classic game

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This isn't your typical rivalry.

This is Jesuit and Holy Cross, the rivalry of all rivalries around here.

Alumni who won't attend another game all year will make their way to Tad Gormley Stadium on Friday night at 7:15 to watch the Blue Jays (2-2) and Tigers (3-1) clash for the 96th time in a game that's much more than just a game.

If you don't believe me, just ask Jesuit coach Mark Songy.

"It's like a Mardi Gras type thing," Songy said. "We have a festival. Then there's a parade. And then a football game breaks out."

The series, which started in 1922, is the fifth oldest continuously played rivalry in the country.

And nothing seems to be able to stop it.

Not even Hurricane Katrina 10 years ago.

Barry Wilson was coach at Holy Cross a decade ago when the storm came.

“We were determined to keep the rivalry alive,” Wilson recalled. “It didn’t look like anybody was coming back. But we knew football had to bring kids back, and they needed a reason to come back. We had to keep as many as we could, and it worked out.”

Holy Cross set up school in Baton Rouge, attending classes from about 4 p.m. to 9 p.m. each day before returning to New Orleans after Christmas break.

“Our main concern was just saving the school,” said Wilson, who retired as coach before last season. “You think about the kids, and you do everything you can to keep their lives as normal as possible. We knew football could help do that, and it worked out for us.”

Holy Cross won 20-10 that season but has won just twice since (2007 and 2013).

But for the past year, bragging rights — and the Golden Football Trophy — have resided on the corner of Banks and Carrolton after the Blue Jays rolled to a 56-14 victory to take a 55-38-1 series lead.

Wilson, who won his last game in the series as a coach (2013) and a player (1963 state championship game) would like nothing more than to see his alma mater reclaim the trophy.

“We respect Jesuit and what they do, but hey, we want to beat them more than we want to beat anybody,” said Wilson, who serves as Holy Cross’ athletic director. “A lot of our fans look at our season based on what happens in this one game.”

Songy, in his second season of his second stint at the helm of Jesuit, is looking to continue his mastery in the series. He is 5-1 all-time against Holy Cross as head coach, including a 4-1 record as coach in the ’90s.

He knows also how important this game is.

“In the Catholic League, every game is a rivalry, every game is important,” he said. “But this one has a little bit something special to it. Even if you’re not part of either school, it’s still great to come out and watch how this thing takes place.”

Holy Cross coach Eric Rebaudo, who like Songy attended neither school, knows what it means to the fans.

“Everybody involved wants to uphold their part in the tradition,” Rebaudo said. “This one is special because of all the years and both schools are class acts. Someone compared it to the Army-Navy game, where both schools play hard but are class acts on both sides.”

It begins with the parade, then, as Songy put it, “the football game breaks out.”

And Wilson can guarantee one thing once the ball is kicked off.

“Both teams are going to play their butts off because it means so much to their fans.”