

N.C. A&T renews football rivalry with Winston-Salem State

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GREENSBORO, N.C. --- One of black college football's most unique rivalries will be renewed for the 2006 season. For the fans of North Carolina A&T and Winston-Salem State, the game can't come soon enough.

"The tradition is back," said Dee Todd, N.C. A&T's athletics director. "When these schools get together in football, it's like a big family affair. There's respect on both sides, but it's also very competitive. Really, it's like having a second homecoming on the schedule."

Officials from both schools announced at a press conference on Wednesday that the Aggies will play the Rams next season on Sept. 2 in Greensboro, ending a seven-year hiatus. With the exception of each school's homecoming game, A&T-WSSU is historically the biggest draw at the gate for both schools. During the '90s, the game's average attendance was 18,191.

Bill Clinton occupied the Oval Office the last time these teams played each other. The 42-year series was discontinued in 1999, primarily because the schools played in different competitive levels in the NCAA. But now that this rivalry has been restored, it paves the way for this game to re-establish itself as a marquee event. The revival of this series coincides with Winston-Salem State's move from NCAA Division II to Division I. The Rams are expected to be accepted as members of the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference, the same league that the Aggies compete in.

"Being 25 miles away and not being able to play this game was sad," said Chico Caldwell, WSSU athletics director. "Now we're able to play and we're looking forward to it."

The Aggies-Rams rivalry has special ties that transcend the usual battle for annual bragging rights. It takes about 30-35 minutes of drive time to travel from one school to the other. But proximity is just part of the story. Not only do these schools have a strong alumni base in both Greensboro and Winston-Salem, but there are a substantial number of fans who live in Greensboro and work in Winston-Salem and vice versa. A&T and WSSU frequently go after the same athletes in recruiting and many of the players already know each other as training partners during summer workouts.

These ties that bind also include school administrators and coaches. WSSU Chancellor Harold Martin is an N.C. A&T alumnus; Todd graduated from Winston-Salem State. Coaches George Small of A&T and Kermit Blount of WSSU are graduates of the schools they now coach. They competed against each other in this rivalry in the late '70s.

"As a player, what I remember most about those games is the atmosphere," said Small. "It was electrifying. It was always a game that you had to get up for. For people in the stands, it was a lot of fun just being there to watch."

Blount agrees. "Starting this series again is going to be a good marriage for the long run," said Blount, a former quarterback who led the Rams to wins over the Aggies in '77 and '78. "I've always felt that WSSU-A&T is one of the best things going in black

college football. When I played, we had lots of incentive because we were Division II and we wanted so badly to knock off a Division I-AA team.”

A&T leads the series 33-9. WSSU’s last victory (13-10) in this series came during the ’91 season. At the time, the Aggies were ranked 15th in the Sheridan Black College Poll.

Seven years ago, A&T was forced to drop WSSU from its schedule because of administrative mandates. The NCAA issued an edict limiting all Division I-AA programs (like A&T) to play only one game against Division II competition. To play more than one Division II game would result in a fine of \$25,000. Aside from the Rams, A&T regularly scheduled another Division II school – North Carolina Central -- in the season-opening Aggie-Eagle Classic played at the home stadium of North Carolina State. The Aggie-Eagle Classic attracted larger crowds, as many as 50,000 in some years. As a result, WSSU became the odd team out, and the series ended.

The MEAC in the meantime, strongly urged its membership to upgrade their schedules to play against Division I schools only. The upgrade, conference officials said, would help the league’s overall strength of schedule and put its teams in better position to receive at-large bids for the Division I-AA football playoffs. The MEAC later relaxed the requirement, allowing A&T to keep the Aggie-Eagle Classic because it was one of A&T’s biggest revenue producers.

The Aggie-Eagle Classic is now history. The last game was played last month, which created an opportunity for the renewal of the annual I-40 showdown. With A&T and WSSU alternating as the game’s host, both schools figures to do fairly well financially. Since the game won’t be played at a neutral site, the schools get a bigger portion of the income from parking and concessions and paying stadium rental won’t be as much of a concern.

“It was never a case of *if* this rivalry was going to be renewed,” said Todd. “It was only a matter of *when* it would happen.”