

## It's A Beautiful Fall Day & We Want To Crush You

Byline: **JOHN JEASONNE** [john.jeasonne@newsday.com](mailto:john.jeasonne@newsday.com)

November 18, 2007

To thoughtfully discuss the cacophonous madness of college football rivalries may well be counterintuitive. No more so, though, than academia's obsequious applause in its enormous gridiron shrines on fall afternoons throughout the land.

So smack in the midst of these annual quarrels - Michigan-Ohio State, Harvard-Yale, LSU-Ole Miss yesterday; Texas-Texas A&M, Auburn-Alabama, Southern Cal-UCLA, Army-Navy just ahead - it's worth a stab. Does the scope of such ritualistic, adversarial events (more pervasive, probably, than anything else in American sports) really go any deeper than the shirtless scholars with painted faces, coarsely articulating their superiority over the competing institution of higher learning?

In accordance with the sports cliché that greater passion somehow legitimizes the true fan - that enmity is a virtue - there not only exists a clear element of denigrating the traditional rival but also an insistence that each specific rivalry is older and bigger and meaner than all others.

HBO's special on Michigan-Ohio State last week documented the feverish casting of aspersions between those two neighbors, just as the 2002 book "Backyard Brawl" insisted that Texas-Texas A&M is a "blood feud . . . brother against brother . . . cousin against cousin . . . wife against husband . . . friend against friend."

A recent AOL sports blog meanwhile crowed that the "entire nation" is about to be "exposed to what is possibly the most bitter and hateful rivalry in the country" when Kansas plays Missouri.

To back such a claim, blogger Nathan Fowler didn't merely reach back to 1891 and the first Kansas-Missouri game - only Minnesota-Wisconsin, starting in 1890, is a longer-running rivalry between Division I schools - but cited notorious Missouri bushwacker William Quantrill's 1863 attack that burned Lawrence, Kan., to the ground in one of several violent Civil War clashes between pro-slave and abolitionist vigilante groups.

Speaking from the eye of his particular rivalry storm, Ohio State University sports sociologist Timothy Curry acknowledged, "This is not rational. But what drives humans isn't rational; it's emotion."

Why football, as opposed to other non-rational sports nuttiness? Because it has been around the longest as a major entertainment associated with U.S. colleges. And its rhythms - fewer games, thus more focus on the "big" game - facilitate a special buildup (and letdown).

Why college? Because unlike some professional sports franchises, "Michigan won't move to Kansas," said SUNY-Oswego sociology professor Tim Delaney.

More than that, said Ron Rappoport, journalist, author and current sports commentator on National Public Radio's Weekend Edition, "You go to college and you're always a Hofstra grad or Michigan grad or USC grad; for the rest of your life,

you're connected.

"There are certain rivalries in other sports. But you graduate, you change jobs, maybe you change wives, your children go out in the world, you move to a different town, but the college thing is always there. And you're never more mindful, never more involved in being an alum of your school, than on the day of the big game."

Curry pointed to the rituals of college football rivalries - fight songs, colors, past successes - "which tend to intensify emotions"; to the "moral communities" surrounding the big games, in which coaching decisions take on "a kind of moral question of right and wrong"; to "ancestor worship. In our case, Woody Hayes, though he died in 1987, is ever present; his spirit lingers."

At work between rivals, Delaney said, is the matter of "identity. We all need, all like, to identify with some sort of group that reflects our values or, more simply, is close to home."

And the next step, he said, "is this concept of Us versus Them. This comes into play in a lot of circles of life, some more playful than others, and we thankfully haven't gone to war over this kind of tribalism, even though that terminology is used sometimes."

Delaney's components for making a "great rivalry" are geographic proximity, "the idea of a regular meeting," a "long history and, with that, significant past events," plus the two sides "having strong feelings toward each other."

Personal insults appear to be a standard; the Detroit Free Press last week quoted an Ohio State backer hopeful of "bombing Michigan back to the Stone Age, which for [Michigan] Neanderthals is only about 10 years." Yet the dichotomy is that rivals typically are strikingly alike.

"The best rivalries," Curry said, "are among siblings, like brothers who enjoy competing against each other for a status within the family."

Full disclosure: Here sits a Missouri grad, connected for life, never more mindful of being an alum than with the hope of a victory over Kansas in the big game.

But even if this is more about football than education, the closest anyone ought to be getting to the murderous arsonist William Quantrill is a tailgate grill.

**####**