

The tradition and roots of the Naval Academy's relationship with Notre Dame

Father Walsh of Notre Dame wrote in 1927 that, “Notre Dame, Army, and Navy make an ideal group for a football triangle... their students live on campus, they draw their student body from all parts of the country.” It is somewhat counter-intuitive that Navy Notre Dame is the stronger rivalry. The Notre Dame Army game has produced some important history on the gridiron: the first use of the forward pass from Gus Dorais to Knute Rockne in 1913, the 1924 Four Horsemen game, the 1928 “win one for the Gipper” speech, and the game of the century in 1946 Yankee stadium. However, if you talk to anyone in South Bend or anyone here on the yard, Notre Dame Army is entirely eclipsed by Navy Notre Dame. I think Father Hesburgh, the president of Notre Dame for 35 years and one of the most prominent college presidents in American history, when talking about Navy said it best, **“They’re the best friends we’ve got”**.

Over the last century both schools have sacrificed for the other. The tradition between us is more than one of rivals because it is rooted in mutual support during periods of vulnerability and shared values. Both schools have molded thousands of young men and women who have gone off to war for their country. Notre Dame, a landlocked Midwestern University, is second only to the Naval Academy in the number of Naval Officers it has commissioned.

2. The two schools began playing in 1927-and had a good relationship, but the relationship was redefined in the wake of World War II

In the spring of 1943, Notre Dame’s enrollment fell dramatically to only 2,623. It was a 20% drop from 1940. They needed more students to keep faculty on staff, to keep facilities open, to keep the school afloat. The University wrote to the Department of War (the Army) and the Navy Department hoping to house and train officer candidates for the war effort. The Army declined and Notre Dame came very close to maybe not being here today, certainly not as the same school we know today. But the Navy Department agreed. The Navy sent Notre Dame 1,851 officer candidates and nearly a half million dollars for heat, light, and facility maintenance to South Bend in a contract between “The United States of America and University of Notre Dame Du Lac”. Throughout the war thousands more trainees, “90-day wonders”, flowed through the collegiate quadrangles with \$9,000 a month to help pay for them, creating almost a second Academy.

Even when Notre Dame stopped playing Army from 1948-56, they continued to feel indebted to Navy.

There is a brotherhood between the two schools epitomized in the two football programs. Navy Coach Rip Miller, was previously one of Notre Dame’s “Seven Mules” the frontline that blocked for the famed ‘Four Horsemen’ against Army. But more than just people, both programs have sacrificed to continue playing each other out of a sense of loyalty.

In the early 1960’s a lot of people advised “Barnacle” Bill Busik the Navy Athletic Director to stop playing Notre Dame because Navy kept losing. He responded, **“There was a time when people said they [Notre Dame] shouldn’t play us. Notre Dame appreciated the fact that we kept them on our schedule in those days. They weren’t that good, but we understood”**. And

when Navy considered de-emphasizing its football program in the 1990's Superintendent Thomas Lynch (the captain of the 1963 Navy team) spoke to Notre Dame's President Fr. Joyce: **"He gave me comfort and confidence that we could do this, that it is possible to play (at that level)"**.

The influence of Father Hesburgh

Father Hesburgh was a larger than life figure. For decades, he was the most prominent Catholic Priest in America, he counseled Presidents, marched for Civil Rights, and flew in the SR-71 before we acknowledged its existence. But his dream was for the church to make him a Navy Chaplain. Every year until his death he confided in the newly commissioned officers coming out of Notre Dame; that every night he prayed with them, that in their darkest hours no matter where they were he would be praying with them.

Father Hesburgh wasn't just a figure in South Bend, or even in Washington. He was directly involved with the Naval Academy as well, even serving as the chairman of our Board of Visitors. Many times, he stayed in my residence, Buchanan House. He would watch the Brigade form up in Tee Court and march by. He would smile and wave while they chanted at him "Go Navy! Beat Notre Dame!" It was all "in good sport" as he would say.

During the Vietnam Era, many top schools started getting rid of their ROTC programs. Father Hesburgh wouldn't even hear of it. He firmly stated that Notre Dame was the midshipmen's home just as much as any other student.

One winter night the senior Midshipman at Notre Dame told Father Hesburgh of a threat that some of "the crazies" were going to set fire to the ROTC building. Farther Hesburgh asked simply, "doesn't the navy train you to deal with difficult situations?" The midshipman said they did, so father Hesburgh told him to deal with it and report back in the morning, and he went to bed. When he woke up, he was relieved to see that the ROTC building was still standing. Four or so of the would-be arsonists had showed up with fire and gasoline to torch the building. But, most of the Naval ROTC Battalion was waiting for them in the trees. They overwhelmed the small group of "crazies" and, deciding they needed to cool off, threw them in the lake.

The values that both schools stand for: Tradition, Honor, sportsmanship, academics...why these are still so important in today's landscape of college football

We have our core values Honor, Courage, and Commitment. Walk through the Notre Dame's campus and you will see "God, Country, Notre Dame" over arches, chapels, war memorials, and on every other student T-shirt. Both schools are dedicated to developing students to live for something greater than themselves, to be "forces for good" in the world.

That philosophy informs everything we do in athletics and on the football field. Here at the Naval Academy we are extremely proud that our midshipmen are true student athletes. They are completely integrated with the student body and we are ranked 13th in student athlete graduation rate among Division I FBS programs. But more than that, virtually every one of our players is going to commission and serve his or her country.

Notre Dame also fully embraces the student-athlete philosophy, ranked 1st on the graduation list. If you watch their home games you will see small parts of the student section erupt on a seemingly innocuous play. That is because the football players live in the dorms with every other student and that loud section is cheering on their hall-mate who just made the tackle on special teams.

The recent rivalry

Because of our similar values and education system, we actually compete with Notre Dame for a lot of the same prospective students. But I don't think they begrudge us for any student who chooses us over them or vice versa. Because in how we educate, train, and imbue our students with a sense of a moral mission, we are playing for the same team.

On the football field however, we play for the Rip Miller Trophy. As you know Navy snapped a record 43 game Notre Dame streak in 2007 in triple overtime. Since 2007 Navy has won 4 of the last 11 including 2016's thriller 28-27. I've become very fond of seeing the Rip Miller Trophy on campus and I hope to continue that trend.

