

DiGeronimo, Palazzi know importance of the game

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FITCHBURG -- Playing and coaching in the annual Thanksgiving Day football clash between Fitchburg and Leominster are two different perspectives.

Luckily for Fitchburg coach Tom DiGeronimo and Leominster coach Dave Palazzi, they both have experienced the highs and lows of playing and coaching for their alma mater in the biggest game of the year.

"When you played, you looked forward to that game every year," said DiGeronimo, who graduated from Fitchburg High in 1982. "Unfortunately we didn't have much success on that day, but we still went out and played hard and represented our school.

"Now, as a coach, it's about the kids that are playing. It has nothing to do with me. I'll continue to stress that it's their day. Our job is to get them prepared to play, but I'm excited for them."

DiGeronimo, 53, played quarterback on the varsity for two seasons with the Red and Gray. He played defensive back at the University of Maine.

"It was a great crowd, great excitement and great energy," he said. "I remember that."

The 51-year-old Palazzi graduated from Leominster in 1984 and was the star quarterback. He later went on to play football at UMass Amherst, graduating in 1989.

He still has a pretty good memory of those Blue vs. Red battles on the gridiron.

"Junior year was up there and it was cold," he said. "I remember seeing everyone's breath, the fan's breath, the coats, the scarfs and the coffees. Everyone saying good luck and the passion within the fans and the 'we're-going-to-get-you type of attitude' from the other side. It's all been in good fun, 'We're going to kill you Leominster.' The rivalry is just great. There's tension between the two cities when you come to this game and the game is important to the community. Everybody wants to know if you're going to beat Fitchburg on Thanksgiving.

"All those sounds you remember. There's a different buzz in the air on Thanksgiving morning."

Palazzi's senior year was the 100th meeting between the storied programs.

"It was home here," he said. "It was good to win those games, but it was long ago. We have to get ready for this one."

Is the fire and drive the same now as a coach as it was as a high school athlete?

"It gets more and more intense because I can't do anything about it," Palazzi said. "The only thing I can do is call plays. I want to be out there playing. I think that's why we coach, the emotions of the game and just getting ready to play. It's quite an experience to coach and watch, but the passion will never die against Fitchburg. That will always remain."

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