

'The Rivalry': A Thanksgiving football tradition like no other

By Mark Bodanza, Special to the Sentinel & Enterprise
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If you live in Fitchburg or Leominster and have even the slightest interest in football, you're likely to claim a fair amount of knowledge about what the locals refer to as "The Rivalry."

Fitchburg and Leominster have been competing on the high school gridiron since Oct. 20, 1894. Age is chief among the notable characteristics of this cherished football tradition. For longer than anyone can remember, many fans have claimed the Fitchburg/Leominster game is the oldest schoolboy rivalry in the country. A more refined version of the legend ranks The Rivalry second only to the Boston English/Boston Latin football tradition. Neither are true.

There are at least 13 high school football rivalries older than Fitchburg/Leominster in New England. By most accounts, Boston Latin/Boston English isn't second in the country either. The high schools of Needham and Wellesley have been facing each other on the gridiron since 1882 and lay claim to New England's oldest schoolboy rivalry.

Nonetheless the pecking order should not diminish the many special qualities that make the Fitchburg/Leominster rivalry a magical thing. A rivalry that has spanned five generations, three centuries and 22 presidents is bound to be special, but Fitchburg/Leominster is unique.

Streaky results dominate

There have been streaks when one team dominated the other and times when each team has suffered several years without a single victory. In the span between 1913 and 1924, Leominster and Fitchburg played 15 games. (In some of the early years the teams played twice per season). Leominster didn't win one of those 15 contests and scored a mere 20 points in all of those games combined.

Leominster dominated with 11 straight wins between 1973 and 1990. Fitchburg returned the favor prevailing in 12 out of 13 games played between 1991 and 2003. Remarkably, however, when the two teams met in 2010, the 116 year-old series was tied 58-58-10.

The last time Fitchburg and Leominster ended a game with a tie was in 1960 when each team scored 14 points. Interestingly, the 1959 Thanksgiving classic ended in a scoreless tie. It is the only time in the rivalry's history that the teams played in back-to-back tie games.

By 2010 the notion of a tie game was a thing of the past. Modern rules provide for tie-breakers that permit each team four tries from the opponent's 10-yard line until the tie is broken. In 2010, the first round of tie-breakers resulted in another tie when each team scored six points. The teams lined up for a novel second round of tie-breakers. This time Leominster scored a touchdown on a three-yard run and then held the Red and Gray from scoring when a Fitchburg ball carrier fumbled at the four-yard line ending the game. After 116 years and 126 games, with the series knotted even, it took not one, but two tie-breakers for a team to claim ascendancy. It seems a shame that the pivotal game couldn't have just ended with the teams even -- it's as if the football gods wanted it that way.

Legendary quirks, details

The Rivalry reveals a host of other quirks that contribute to making the cherished tradition special. In 1898, the teams played their second game of the season on Fitchburg Circle Street grounds, the present day site of Crocker Field. The game was scoreless until the last two minutes when Fitchburg scored on a punt return. The apparent winning touchdown was nullified by the referee because the Fitchburg runner was aided by the hometown crowd who had come onto the field and obscured him from any would-be Leominster tackler. The Fitchburg contingent would have none of the referee's ruling and in frustration the referee blew his whistle ending the games as a scoreless tie.

All of that description appeared in the Fitchburg Sentinel the following day with a headline that read, "Fitchburg wins 5-0." When the series' standing were carried in the Sentinel each Thanksgiving Eve, Fitchburg was credited with a win for that 1898 contest. That changed in 2010 when I was able to convince the Sentinel's editor of the accuracy of their long-ago reporting and the game was officially changed to a tie.

For a time, the two cities and their newspapers couldn't agree on the starting date of their sacred football series. Fitchburg claimed the rivalry began in 1895 and the Comb City cited 1894 as the inaugural year. Not surprisingly, Leominster won the 1894 contest 40-0. But the Fitchburg faithful had a good point. It is pretty clear that the 1894 Leominster team was a "veteran squad," highly practiced and most likely stocked in part with non-high school athletes. The Oct. 22 1894 edition of the Sentinel summed

up the problem: "Much more credit is due the FHS team who, instead of challenging players and refusing to play unless they were withdrawn, displayed their genuine sportsmanshiplike spirit by going in and playing for all they were worth ..."

And so the debate went on until 1969 when the Sentinel accepted the 1894 game as the first in the series on what was then the 75th anniversary of the rivalry. With that long debate apparently settled, a throng of 10,000 fans witnessed one of the greatest upsets in the rivalry's history when the Blue Devils beat highly favored and undefeated Fitchburg 40-18 at Doyle Field.

Showdown of unbeatens

Each city has fielded a number of undefeated squads on Thanksgiving, but never at the same time -- that is with the exception of 1933 when the Thanksgiving Day classic featured two powerful squads who showed up at Doyle Field unbeaten.

It was the worst year of the Great Depression and the pride each community felt for their football team was a healing elixir for Depression-weary souls. As if they came from central casting, each team featured a star, Bill Mackie for the Red and Gray, and Ronnie Cahill for Leominster.

Both players were as humble as they were talented. Mackie held the scoring record at Fitchburg High School for 62 years without knowing it. When a Sentinel reporter asked him what he thought about the fact that Rick Morales might break it on Thanksgiving Day 1995, Mackie quipped, "I hope he breaks it and enjoys it longer than I did."

At the end of his college career at Holy Cross, Cahill led the Eastern College All Stars to a win over the NFL champion New York Giants in a charity game completing 11 of 11 passes as quarterback. He never mentioned it, even to family. In 1933, someone had to win and that year it was Fitchburg 20-12. Mackie scored two touchdowns, threw for a third and kicked an extra point.

The 1933 Thanksgiving contest was only the second played at Doyle Field. The opening of the Leominster venue in 1931 was a significant mark in the history of the rivalry. Every Thanksgiving game between 1918 and 1930 was played at Crocker Field. Fitchburg wouldn't play on Leominster's Field, then located behind the old high school on West Street, once Crocker Field opened in 1918. Hailed as an architectural gem, the facility at Crocker Field had no comparison. Until Leominster and Bernard Doyle could match the achievement of Alvah Crocker in Fitchburg, Leominster would not have a home field advantage.

Enhancing the tradition

Competition on the gridiron has spilled over in other ways through the decades. Each city has pushed the achievements of the other and the football field has been no small arena for the demonstration of civic pride. During the early years when Bernard Doyle was hiring Ray Comerford, Leominster's first professional coach to match the highly successful Fitchburg Coach Clarence Amriott, a Leominster industrialist donated an impressive trophy to be awarded the winner of the Thanksgiving Game.

The Nicholson Cup, named for its donor Haldie Nicholson, was first awarded to Fitchburg for their 20-0 win over Leominster in 1926. The Cup is still awarded to the Thanksgiving Day winner to this day. Nicholson cherished the Leominster-Fitchburg football tradition and when Leominster won the game in 1925, for the first time since 1912, he wanted to keep the Leominster boys motivated. Nicholson died on October 20, 1934 -- the 40th anniversary of the first Fitchburg/Leominster game. The entire Leominster team attended his wake.

The rivalry is replete with remarkable stories like that of Haldie Nicholson. In 1930, the teams played the last contest to be played exclusively at Crocker Field since 1918. Doyle Field was slated to open in 1931 and the 1930 game drew a record crowd of 8,000 supervised by 65 police officers.

Mark O'Toole, who played in that very first game between the two cities, watched his two sons compete in a hard-fought contest that resulted in a thrilling Fitchburg 6-0 win. One can only imagine the pride O'Toole felt as he watched his son David, a captain, catch a long pass that nearly resulted in a Leominster score and his son Richard, a sophomore, ably fill in at quarterback for an injured starter. O'Toole must have thought back to the October afternoon in 1894 when he played for Leominster. Tragically, O'Toole would die later that evening as he returned from driving his daughter back to Wellesley College.

A history like no other

While Fitchburg/Leominster may not be the oldest high school football rivalry in the country, it is singular. Early in 2014, Sports Illustrated held a 100-word essay contest to convince the periodical why they should cover your high school football rivalry.

It was a formidable task to squeeze 118 years into so few words. The closeness of the competition over such a long period of time seemed to be the best chance at selling the Fitchburg/Leominster tradition apart from so many others. I compressed all of my thoughts as follows:

"Although it began in 1894, 12 years before the advent of the forward pass and the neutral zone, the Thanksgiving football rivalry between Leominster and Fitchburg, Massachusetts is not the oldest in the country.

Nevertheless, it may be the most remarkable football tradition in all of America. On Thanksgiving morning 2009, Fitchburg and Leominster high schools met for the 126th time (in the early years the teams met twice per year). Leominster prevailed by a score of 21-6. After the game, the standings were even, 58 wins each and 10 ties. It would be hard to find another Thanksgiving football rivalry as old as Leominster and Fitchburg with such even results. The following year, the teams met at Leominster's historic Doyle Field and played to a tie.

Unfortunately, the folks who oversee high school football today decry ties. The teams played a tie breaker, roughly equivalent to the NCAA rule. Again, the contest ended even. Not until the conclusion of a second tie-breaker, was the contest decided in Leominster's favor. One might suspect that football purists of yesteryear might have believed it more proper that the 2010 contest end as they intended, in a tie."

National spotlight

On Nov. 24, 2014, an email arrived from an editor at Sports Illustrated -- our rivalry won. The magazine was sending a reporter to cover the Fitchburg/Leominster Thanksgiving Game. A few days later I met the reporter at the Leominster pep rally held at City Hall on the day before Thanksgiving. As we chatted about football heritage we wondered what the accumulating snowfall meant for the next day's game. Unfortunately, we soon learned that, for only the third time in 120 years, the game was being postponed to Saturday. Peter King reassigned the reporter and Needham/Wellesley got the story.

The quality that attracted a national publication to cover our ancient football tradition has begun to shift a bit again. Since the series' tie was broken in 2010, Leominster has taken the lead in games won. Last year, the Blue Devils eclipsed the Red Raiders in total series' points scored for the first time since 1899. But knowing what I've learned about football in these two cities tells me that this will someday change. No matter how partisan you can be about your home team, one must begrudgingly admit that the quality of the opponent and their drive to compete against your team with everything they got is what makes the rivalry special. It's the way it's always been. Regardless of the age of the Fitchburg/Leominster football tradition, it's what will always set it apart from all others.

Leominster's Mark Bodanza is the author of three books on the Fitchburg-Leominster football rivalry: "A Game That Forged Rivals," "1933: Football at the Depth of the Great Depression" and "Rivals."

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