

Fifty years ago, Army-Navy captivated and healed a nation



Navy coach Wayne Hardin, center, talks with his star quarterback, Roger Staubach, right, in final workout in Philadelphia Stadium on Dec. 7, 1963, before annual battle against Army, with center Tom Lynch listening in at left. Navy is considered an 11-point favorite over Army and may win a Cotton Bowl bid if victorious. (Bill Achatz/AP)

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In those final, cathartic seconds of 1963's Army-Navy Game, the 102,000 fans in Municipal Stadium, their emotions having oscillated all day between grief and elation, were able to summon one great sustained roar.

"It was bedlam," Army quarterback Rollie Stichweh recalled. "None of us had ever experienced anything like it, before or since."

At that crucial moment, facing a fourth and goal that would be the final play in this 64th meeting of the service academies, Stichweh and underdog Army were within 2 yards of a remarkable upset.

And then, an instant later, it ended in chaos.

Fifty years later, that 1963 game remains unforgettable, not just for its frenzied finish but for its compelling duel of quarterbacks - one a Heisman winner, the other determined to outplay him - for the TV history it made, and for the solace it brought a grieving nation.

Fifteen days after President John F. Kennedy's assassination, when America's psyche was as shaky as the old stadium's wooden benches, pandemonium, pageantry, and pathos collided in South Philadelphia.

"It was one of those games that no one, certainly no one who played in it, will ever forget," said Roger Staubach, Navy's quarterback.

Long before the trauma of Nov. 22, the Army-Navy meeting was destined to be special. Navy's No. 2 ranking and the teams' combined 15-3 record and historic rivalry assured that.

But the death of a president, one of the Army-Navy game's most ardent fans, infused everything with a raw intensity that was evident from the silent pregame march-on to those deafening final seconds

"Seldom," columnist Red Smith summarized, "has a game furnished more captivating entertainment."



On Nov. 22, as Stichweh walked on campus, a fellow Cadet leaned from a window and screamed that JFK had been shot.

In Annapolis, Staubach, already a Time cover boy and scheduled to appear on Life's Nov. 29 front, was leaving a Bancroft Hall thermodynamics class when he heard the news.

"I kept walking to my next class, and as I did the news kept getting worse," Staubach recalled recently from Dallas.

At practice, Navy coach Wayne Hardin told his team Kennedy was dead.

A World War II Navy hero, Kennedy had visited the Midshipmen that summer at their Quonset Point, R.I., training facility. He vowed to attend the Nov. 30 game in Philadelphia and indicated that, despite his presumed nonpartisanship, a fifth straight Navy victory wouldn't disappoint him.

"Kennedy was all Navy," remembered Midshipmen captain Tom Lynch.

Though fans had been anticipating this matchup for months, it almost was canceled. But the late president's family insisted he would have wanted it played. On Nov. 26, the Pentagon announced that following a one-week postponement, Army-Navy would take place on Dec. 7.

Nov. 26 was also the day Staubach was revealed as the runaway Heisman winner.

"I've said this before," he said, "but when I'm gone I want my wife to cut up that trophy and distribute a piece to everyone on that team. I couldn't have won it without them."

Mindful of the tragedy, Army-Navy organizers wanted a respectful event. Traditional pep rallies and bonfires were canceled, and, for once, no mascots were stolen.

At Municipal Stadium, the box Kennedy would have occupied in the first half would be dressed in black rosettes and flag bunting. It was to remain empty as a silent tribute.

That prompted another Kennedy family request: The precious seats - "Army-Navy was the toughest ticket on earth," recalled Navy sports information director Budd Thalman - should go to Philadelphia-area orphans.

Hurried calls were made to four local agencies - St. Joseph's House for Boys, the Association of Jewish Children, the Presbyterian Children's Home, and Zion Baptist Church. Eventually, 15 orphaned youngsters, ages 11 to 17, were selected.

On Saturday, limousines delivered them to a pregame brunch. At the stadium, they received gifts from admirals and generals - including an Army blanket from Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Earl Wheeler. Best of all, their host, Army Secretary Cyrus Vance, informed them they could order all the popcorn, soda, and hot dogs they wanted.

Army-Navy cast a huge shadow in 1963. It was the highlight of the December sports calendar, annually filling Municipal Stadium and attracting enormous television audiences. Players, understanding its significance, especially to servicemen around the globe, bore an enormous burden.

So, in need of a respite from the pregame hype, both teams arrived in Philadelphia Friday afternoon.

"I don't think I ever was as nervous as before my first [Army-Navy] game," Staubach said. "I didn't sleep the night before."

Army, which stayed at Manufacturers Golf and Country Club in Fort Washington, was bused on Friday night to Cheltenham's Yorktown Theater, where it watched the 11-year-old circus film *The Greatest Show on Earth*.

Navy, meanwhile, opted for the Sheraton Motor Inn, 39th and Chestnut, and a first-run film, the safari adventure *Rampage*, at a Center City theater.

"I wish I could say I remember the movie" said Stichweh, 71, from his Long Island home, "but everything leading up to that game was just a fog."

The fact that both teams attended Friday movies was unusual. Normally, Hardin and Army coach Paul Dietzel didn't agree on anything.

After Dietzel got to West Point in 1962, he and Hardin exchanged photos. Dietzel inscribed his with "Best Wishes." The future Temple coach's photo contained two words, "Beat Army!"

"I wouldn't criticize another coach," said Stichweh, "but let's just say Coach Dietzel wasn't the type to get involved in that kind of feistiness."

Early Saturday, 200 buses left Annapolis and West Point. Most of the military brass, concentrated in and around Washington, traveled by rail and were deposited near the 37-year-old horseshoe stadium at the foot of Broad Street.

Already at Municipal Stadium that morning was Tony Verna, a South Philadelphian who was directing CBS-TV's coverage.

He had a surprise in store for the game's 25 million viewers, but because of assassination-related sensitivities, the network had not publicized the breakthrough, a technique Verna dubbed "instant replay."

It was in a cab that morning that the 30-year-old director informed his broadcast team - Lindsey Nelson and Terry Brennan - of the innovation.

"You're going to do what?" Nelson asked.

At 11:45, 90 minutes before kickoff, the masses of Cadets and Midshipmen paraded in to reverent silence. Traumatized by the tragedy, Americans weren't yet sure public displays of joy were appropriate.

"During warm-ups," said Stichweh, "it was a deathly quiet."

The mournful mood deepened during a stirring rendition of "America the Beautiful" by the combined bands, a moment of silence, and the national anthem.

What followed on the field would be no less moving.



Despite a 34-14 drubbing in 1962, Stichweh and Army (7-2) went toe-to-toe with Navy (8-1) and Staubach.

The Navy quarterback was a groundbreaker. "Roger the Dodger" was strong-armed, smart, and quick, but his chief asset was a Houdini-like ability to escape. With him at the helm, Navy was averaging better than 37 points a game.

"He was a special player," Dietzel said. "We'd force him out of the pocket, but then we couldn't catch him."

Still, Army, which two months earlier had upset ninth-ranked Penn State, believed it could compete.

"We were convinced our chances were very good," Stichweh said.

Stichweh scored the game's first touchdown. Then after Navy took a 21-7 lead on three TDs by fullback Pat Donnelly, he scored another in the fourth quarter, adding the two-point conversion that made it 21-15.

Then he recovered the ensuing onside kick.

Following Stichweh's second touchdown, a 1-yard scamper, Verna signaled Nelson that he was going to try instant replay. At least six times earlier, the director had attempted to debut it, but the cumbersome taping equipment failed.

This time it worked.

So novel and jarring was the historic moment that Nelson felt compelled to warn the audience that "This is not live. Army did not score again."

After his onside recovery, on Navy's 49 with 6 minutes, 13 seconds to play, Stichweh moved the Cadets downfield. With the clock winding down, Hardin told Staubach to get ready.

"We couldn't stop Rollie," Staubach, 71, recalled. "I turned to Coach and said, 'Look at the clock. We're not going to get the ball back.' "

With 1:38 left, Army had a first down at Navy's 7. The drama had unleashed the big crowd's pent-up emotions. All across America, for the first time in two weeks, millions forgot about their nightmare.

All 102,000 fans were screaming, happy, it seemed, to have something to scream about at last.

"The stadium shook," Lynch said.

Three runs left the ball at the 2. On fourth down, Stichweh, unable to communicate signals, asked for and received time. The Cadets huddled.

Eleven seconds remained as Stichweh neared center. When linemen shouted, "Can't hear you!" the QB, for at least the third time on the drive, raised his arms to let referee Barney Finn know he couldn't be heard.

Twice before Finn had halted play. But after the last stoppage, on Army's first fourth-down try, the referee restarted the clock after resetting the ball.

Unaware, Army had huddled, assuming time would not resume until the snap.

As they lined up for a last time, none of the Cadets noticed that the stadium's big north-end clock was moving. With no silent audibles, and no means of communication, Stichweh again waved his arms.

As he did, time expired. Finn's whistle preserved Navy's victory, ranking, and Cotton Bowl berth.

Amid confusion and onrushing fans, Stichweh stood momentarily transfixed. Lynch gleefully scooped up the ball and headed toward the sideline bedlam.

"I was thankful it was over," Lynch said.

Staubach, outplayed by his counterpart, sighed.

"If we hadn't won," Staubach said, "we wouldn't have gone to the Cotton Bowl [where Texas prevailed], and nobody would be talking about our '63 team all these years later."

Questioned afterward, Finn insisted he'd followed the rules.

"I called timeout," Finn said. "I went over to the ball and raised my arms. As soon as I left the ball, I had to start the clock running again."

Whatever his reasoning, Finn's decision short-circuited what would have been an unforgettable conclusion to an unforgettable game.

"It would have been nice," Stichweh said, "if they had let the players settle things."



In 2011, when the West Point Sports Hall of Fame inducted Stichweh, there were some unprecedented Navy attendees - Staubach, Lynch, and Skip Orr - from that long-ago Saturday.

Near the ceremony's close, Staubach rose and, before a roomful of Army graduates, praised Stichweh, presenting his former rival and current close friend with a plaque from the 1963 Navy team.

"We don't like each other when we play," Staubach noted of the oddity, "but it's a wonderful respect we have for each other."

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