

When Army Battles Navy

by John Feinstein

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This coming Friday night, on the eve of the 110th football game between Army and Navy, Anthony Noto, 41, will walk into a bar in Philadelphia wearing a black Army letterman's sweater.

He will be greeted by David Lilleflore, 40, and they will hug each other, order drinks, and toast.

The men became friends off the field after three years of battling each other on the field--as Army and Navy players often do. They still argue--every year--about whether Lilleflore, an offensive lineman who graduated from Navy one year after Noto graduated from Army, sent Noto flying on the opening drive of the 1990 game.

"I pancaked you," Lilleflore will say, using a football term for knocking someone flat while blocking.

"Not me," Noto will answer. "It was our other linebacker. I'll show you the tape."

"I remember it. I got you," Lilleflore will respond.

"Who won the game, Dave?"

"Who has won the last seven games, Anthony?"

And so it will go all night.

For years now, they have had a friendly bet on the game. Their latest is that the loser has to wear his letterman's sweater the night before the next year's game--whether it fits or not.

On Friday, Noto, who has lost the bet seven straight years, will be wearing his Army sweater.

While Lilleflore and Noto are teasing and toasting, this year's teams will be getting ready to play in the only rivalry in college football where the opponents truly feel bonded to one another.

Army cornerback Mario Hill will go to bed knowing he has one final chance to beat Navy.

"My last game in high school, we finally beat our archrivals for the first time," Hill says. "I've spent this whole year thinking my college career will end the way my high school career did.

"There's no one you respect more but no one you want to beat more," he says. "Every year, I get chills when we run onto the field. But I want to hear our alma mater played second--just once--before I'm through."

One of the great traditions in sports is the playing of the alma maters at the end of the Army-Navy game. The players, coaches, and students (the entire corps of cadets and the entire brigade of midshipmen attend the game) stand together. The losers always go first. Then the players cross the field together to hear the winner's song.

"The greatest feeling you can have in the world is crossing that field to hear 'Blue and Gold' [Navy's alma mater] after they've played Army's song," says Ram Vela, who at 5 feet 9 and 193 pounds may be the smallest linebacker playing major college

football. "When we stand there and I know the Army guys are standing right behind us, or sometimes even with us, it's like nothing else we experience. It sounds corny, but they are our brothers."

In many ways, Vela is a poster boy for those who play for Army and Navy. Since every graduate of both academies must serve five years in the military, almost no one with serious NFL ambitions considers either school. That means the coaches seek players like Vela who may be overlooked because they lack size or speed but who make up for it with smarts, toughness, and desire.

As a high school senior in San Antonio, Tex., Vela jumped at the chance to go to the Naval Academy. He not only became a starter, he made the key defensive play of Navy's stunning triple-overtime upset of Notre Dame in 2007, jumping over a Notre Dame blocker for a fourth-down sack late in the game. It was the first time in 43 years that Navy had beaten the Irish.

"We all like the idea that what we do here is overcome odds, do things we aren't supposed to be able to do," Vela said. "Most of us have been told that we aren't good enough to play big-time football. There's nothing we love more than proving those people wrong."

When they play the alma maters after the game on Saturday, regardless of who wins, Lt. Cmdr. Damon Myers will no doubt feel waves of emotion. He will be in Kabul, Afghanistan, where he is currently deployed, meaning the game will begin shortly after midnight. But he will find a way to watch it or listen to it one way or the other.

In 1997, while a junior at Navy, Myers was diagnosed with cancer of the lymph nodes seven days before the Army-Navy game. He was admitted to Bethesda Naval hospital for treatment and watched the game that Saturday from the hospital, choking up when he saw that not only were his teammates wearing the letters "DM" on their helmets, the entire brigade was wearing them.

Navy won the game that day, breaking a five-game losing streak to Army, and his teammates dedicated the game to him. Two days later, Myers was resting in his room when a nurse told him the superintendent had come to visit him. Myers was delighted that Adm. Charles Larson, superintendent of the Naval Academy, was coming to see him.

But when the door opened, Larson wasn't there. Gen. Daniel Christman, the Army superintendent, was, and he was carrying a football. He introduced himself to Myers and said, "Damon, our football team wanted me to bring this to you."

It was a game ball, signed by every member of the Army team. "They all want you back on the field next year," Christman said, smiling. "They want a chance to whip you and your teammates."

A year later, Myers was on the field as a Navy senior. Army won the game late 34-30, and as he crossed the field to hear Army's alma mater, Myers was emotional, thrilled to be healthy and playing but sad to have lost his final college football game.

As the song and his tears started, he felt an arm around his shoulder. He looked up and saw General Christman. Without a word, he buried his head on Christman's shoulder and cried.

"There was no need to say anything," Christman said later. "At that moment every year, Army and Navy are one team. And everyone on that field knows it."

As does everyone watching. Regardless of who has to wear the letterman's sweater a year from now.

PARADE Contributing Editor John Feinstein is the best-selling author of 25 books, including "Cover-up: Mystery at the Super Bowl."