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# The President's Game

Army Navy, 1890-2005

By Brian Flanagan

The Army-Navy game is truly America's rivalry. Each year seniors on both sidelines compete in their last football game before graduating into military service. Adrenaline and emotions run high from whistle to whistle -- particularly in years of war -- but both teams have exhibited solidarity and the utmost respect for one another time and again throughout the century-long rivalry.

Intertwined in the annals of this struggle between brothers-in-arms is a story of the appreciation and support of their Commanders-in-Chief. Presidents, from the game's beginning, have played a preeminent role in building, preserving, and supporting one of the greatest rivalries in sports.

Army and Navy have combined for 6 national championships, 5 Heisman Trophy-winners, and 49 College Football Hall of Famers.

With 105 games and 7 ties in the record-books, the Army-Navy rivalry is deadlocked at 49 wins each. This Saturday's winner -- the "First to 50" -- will win bragging-rights and the Commander-in-Chief's trophy, awarded annually to the team holding the best record in the Army-Navy-Air Force series. The game will be nationally televised and will excite the passions of alumni and veterans across the country.

But all of this was unwritten history and an unlikely future at the turn of the 20th century.

## TR and the rough, manly sport

The Army-Navy game, indeed the sport of football, faced great challenges in the early days. Players were often severely injured, even killed, and spectators clashed in violent disputes in the stands. One particular game between the service academies was so barbaric that President Grover Cleveland prohibited future matches between the two.



TR the sportsman

If it weren't for a future president who admired "rough, manly sports" and found lessons for life at the heart of the game ("...in life, as in a football game," he once wrote, "the principle to follow is: Hit the line hard; don't foul and don't shirk, but hit the line hard!"), the story may have ended there.

Theodore Roosevelt, then assistant secretary of the Navy, wrote to Secretary of War Russell Alger in 1897 lobbying to reinstate the series:

*I should like very much to revive the football games between Annapolis and West Point. ...it seems to me that if we would let Colonel Ernst and Captain Cooper come to an agreement that the match should be played just as either plays eleven outside teams; that no cadet should be permitted to enter or join the training table if he was unsatisfactory in any study or conduct, and should be removed if during the season he becomes unsatisfactory; if they were marked without regard to their places on the team; if no drills, exercises or recitations were omitted to give opportunities for football practice; and if the authorities of both institutions agreed to take measures to prevent any excesses such as betting and the like, and to prevent any manifestations of an improper character -- if as I say all this were done -- and it certainly could be done without difficulty -- then I don't see why it would not be a good thing to have a game this year.*<sup>[1]</sup>

Roosevelt's letter led to the reestablishment of the rivalry in 1899, but along with the game returned severe injuries and violence that had caused the original controversy. Out of the brutality of the game arose discussion of abolishing intercollegiate football altogether.

But in 1905, President Theodore Roosevelt aimed to clean-up the sport rather than abolish it. "Roosevelt didn't intend to eliminate the occasional broken nose or fractured arm," writes biographer H. W. Brands, "but the head and neck injuries that were literally killing dozens of players every year were hardly improving the physical or moral health of the nation."<sup>[2]</sup> So Roosevelt held a White House conference with leading football figures to get the game "played on a thoroughly clean basis."

Regulations derived from the conference helped reduce the risks endangering the future of the sport and its players, and established the Intercollegiate Athletic Association of the United States (a precursor to the NCAA).

In the following years, new equipment and regulations continued to make the sport safer, less controversial, and more secure.

## Presidential traditions

Thanks to TR the rivalry -- and the sport -- was saved, but the traditions that lent the game its presidential prestige were not yet established.



President Truman on the field at the Army-Navy game

Roosevelt attended the game in 1901, and was the first president to cross the field during halftime.<sup>[3]</sup> The tradition has continued since: presidents sit on the home team's side of the field for the first half of the game before crossing to the away team's side at the midway point.

Some of Roosevelt's actions, however, did not set precedents. At the 1901 game, he became so enthused after a first half Navy touchdown that he ran to the team's sideline congratulating players with a slap on the back. When he attended the game again in 1905, writes Army-Navy historian Jack Clary, TR "roamed up and down the sidelines, urging on each team."<sup>[4]</sup>

His successors managed to watch the action from their presidential box-seats. Woodrow Wilson watched Army's 22-9 victory in 1913. Calvin Coolidge attended in 1922 as vice president, and '26 as president -- when his photograph graced the cover of the game day program. No president attended during the next decade, but Herbert Hoover asked that the 1930 game be played to raise funds for the Salvation Army at a time of national struggle.

The Army-Navy game was particularly popular with President Harry Truman, who attended in 1945, '46, '48, and



## Timeline

**1890:** The Army and Navy football teams faced-off for the first time. Navy won 24-0.

**1893:** After hearing reports of seriously injured players and dangerous brawls in the crowd, President Grover Cleveland prohibited the Army-Navy football game.

**1897:** Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt wrote a letter to Secretary of War Russel A. Alger that ultimately led to the renewal of the Army-Navy rivalry.

**1901:** Theodore Roosevelt becomes the first president to attend the Army-Navy football game. Army won 11-5 at Franklin Field in Philadelphia.

**1902:** President Roosevelt made his second appearance at the Arm-Navy game at Franklin Field. Army won 22-8.

**1905:** Princeton University President and future U. S. President Woodrow Wilson lobbied officials from both schools to host the match-up at Princeton. President Roosevelt attended the 6-6 tie.

**1912:** Dwight D. Eisenhower played for the Army Cadets, losing to Navy 6-0 at Franklin Field. He would be the only future president to play in the rivalry.

'50. (Army was most successful -- posting a 3-0-1 record against Navy -- when Truman was in attendance.) Although Dwight Eisenhower was the only future president ever to participate in the rivalry, starting at halfback and linebacker for Army in their 6-0 1912 loss, he only attended the game once during his 8-year presidency.

1913: President Woodrow Wilson attended the game at the Polo Grounds in New York City. Army won 22-9.

### JFK and the Drive for Five

It was Ike's successor who helped write the greatest chapter in the game's history. Having served in the U.S. Navy during World War II, President John F. Kennedy took great interest in the game, attending in 1961 and '62. He even founded a new presidential tradition when he performed the pre-game coin-toss. After scheduling his 3rd consecutive appearance at the game, in 1963, JFK looked poised to shatter Truman's record 4 games-in-attendance if he won reelection in 1964.



Kennedy took particular interest in that 1963 Navy team, guided by Junior quarterback Roger Staubach. He even visited Navy's pre-season training camp in Rhode Island that year, offering inspirational words to kick-start their season.

And they didn't disappoint. Staubach won the Heisman Trophy leading his team to an 8-1 record and a number 2 national ranking before the Army match-up. "I hope to be on the winning side when the game ends," said President Kennedy knowing he would spend the second half on Navy's side.

Then on November 22, 8 days before the big game, the devastating news came out of Dallas, Texas. The president had been shot and killed riding in his motorcade through the city.

The players were devastated. The game was cancelled.

But while both teams of 18-22-year olds mourned the loss of their commander-in-chief, Jacqueline Kennedy, thinking of Jack's love of the rivalry, stated publicly that playing the game would be good for the nation and a "fitting tribute" to the fallen president.

The game was rescheduled for December 7, at Municipal Stadium in Philadelphia (renamed John F. Kennedy stadium the following year). Navy came out of the locker room wearing gold jerseys with "Drive for Five" printed on them -- having beaten Army four consecutive years. Army came out equally charged-up and emotional. The stage was set for one of the most thrilling football games ever played.

Navy took an early lead and extended it to 21-7 in the third quarter. But with 6 minutes to play in the game, Army scored a touchdown and converted on a two point try, narrowing the Navy lead to 5 points.

Army kicked onsides and recovered the ball. With a minute and a half to play, Army quarterback Rollie Stichweh completed a desperation fourth-down pass to the Navy 7-yard line.

Three plays later he stood behind center on the Navy 1. It was fourth down with seconds remaining. The audience was deafeningly loud as the Army quarterback called his cadence. There was confusion. Stichweh couldn't communicate his audible to the team. He stepped back to signal a time-out, but the clock had already run its course. The game was over: the final play never executed. Navy had won 21-15. [5]

### Traditions Renewed

After Kennedy's death, security concerns prevented his successors from attending the game. Between 1963 and 1995, only one president -- Gerald R. Ford -- attended to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the rivalry.



When President William J. Clinton watched Army defeat Navy 28-24 in 1996, he was the first president in attendance in 22 years.

President George W. Bush watched the game twice in his first term, performing the coin-toss and crossing midfield at halftime. But he also set his own precedent in 2004, visiting both teams' locker rooms before the game and thanking them for deciding to serve their country.

At the time of publication, President Bush had not yet indicated if he would attend this Saturday's game.

President Bush in Army's locker room before the 2004 game

[1] To read Roosevelt's complete letter to Alger, see "Roosevelt may be 'father of the annual Army-Navy football game'" at [http://www.umich.edu/~urecord/0001/Sep11\\_00/11.htm](http://www.umich.edu/~urecord/0001/Sep11_00/11.htm)

[2] H. W. Brands, *TR: The Last Romantic* (New York: Basic Books/Perseus Books, 1997).

[3] Visit [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/papr:@field\(NUMBER+@band\(trmp+4133\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/papr:@field(NUMBER+@band(trmp+4133))) to watch a video clip of Roosevelt crossing the field at halftime of the 1901 game.

[4] Jack Clary is author of *An American Classic: Army vs. Navy, the First 100 Games* and *Army vs. Navy: Seventy Years of Football Rivalry*. See Clary's "Army-Navy Game Tradition" at [http://usna.com/news\\_pubs/publications/shipmate/2003/11/A-NGame.htm](http://usna.com/news_pubs/publications/shipmate/2003/11/A-NGame.htm).

[5] For a clip on the game by Bob Costas, visit <http://media.putfile.com/1963-Army-Navy/320>.

[6] Thanks to James Cheevers, associate director of the United States Naval Academy Museum, for the extremely helpful timeline.

### Additional links

[Army vs. Navy](#)

[GOARMYSPO RTS.COM](http://GOARMYSPO RTS.COM)

[NAVYSPO RTS.COM](http://NAVYSPO RTS.COM)

1922: Vice President Calvin Coolidge watched Army defeat Navy 17-14 from the stands at Franklin Field.

1926: President Calvin Coolidge -- whose picture appeared on the game-day program beside Vice President Charles B. Dawes -- attended a 21-21 tie between the rivals.

1930: In the midst of the Great Depression, President Herbert Hoover asked that the Army-Navy game be played to raise funds for the Salvation Army.

1945: President Harry Truman became the first president since Coolidge to attend the game. Army won 32-13 at Memorial Stadium in Philadelphia.

1946: President Truman attended the 21-18 Army victory.

1948: President Truman attended the 21-21 tie.

1950: President Truman attended the 14-2 Army victory.

1957: President Dwight D. Eisenhower, a West Point graduate, attended the light-weight 150 lb game at Annapolis.

1961: President John F. Kennedy, who served in the U.S. Navy during World War II, attended the 13-7 Navy victory.

1962: President Kennedy attended the 34-14 Navy win.

1963: President Kennedy was assassinated 8 days before his scheduled appearance at the Army-Navy game. The game -- a thriller that was rescheduled and played in honor of the late president on December 7, 1963 -- went down as one of the greatest in the history of the rivalry.

1972: The first

Commander-in-Chief's trophy was awarded to Army.

- 1974:** President Gerald Ford became the first president since Kennedy's assassination to attend the game. Navy won 19-0.
- 1996:** President William J. Clinton became the first president to attend the game in 22 years. Army won 28-24.
- 2001:** President George W. Bush attended the game. Army won 26-17.
- 2004:** President Bush attended with Pakistani President Musharraf. Navy won 42-13.<sup>[6]</sup>