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^College FB Focus<

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MIAMI (AP) _ Army-Navy is older, Michigan-Ohio State draws more fans, Auburn-Alabama triggers more tempers and Nebraska-Oklahoma has had more Heisman Trophy winners.

In the last five years, however, no rivalry in college football has been better than Miami-Florida State.

Every game during that span has helped determine the eventual national champion. Two have been decided in the closing seconds, including last year's battle of unbeaten between the No. 1 Seminoles and No. 2 Hurricanes. And no rivalry in recent years has featured as many All-Americans, from Florida State's Deion Sanders and Terrell Buckley to Miami's Steve Walsh and Russell Maryland.

This year is no different.

When No. 2 Miami meets No. 3 Florida State at the Orange Bowl Saturday, the national title could be at stake once again.

"I'll tell you how big it is," says FSU senior linebacker Reggie Freeman. "When I step on the field against Miami, I actually feel the ground shaking. It goes from the tip of my toes to the top of my head."

Miami tight end Coleman Bell also has strong feelings about the intrastate series.

"For us to win the national championship, every year we have to go through Florida State," he says. "If we don't beat Florida State, that's really the end of our year."

In four of the past five years, the game has marked the end of Florida State's title hopes. The Seminoles did win in 1989, but Miami bounced back to win the third of its four national titles.

Of all the Florida State losses, none was more painful than last year's 17-16 defeat in Tallahassee. After blowing a 16-7 fourth-quarter lead, the Seminoles still had a chance to win in the final minute. But Gerry Thomas' 34-yard field goal attempt missed by inches, snapping the Seminoles' 16-game winning streak and knocking them out of the No. 1 spot for the first time all season.

"That was devastating," says offensive lineman Robert Stevenson. "We wanted the game so bad, and we had them. But we tried to sit on the lead, and you can't do that against Miami. You have to score points because they can always come back."

The defeat brought back memories of the 1987 game, which Florida State lost 26-25 after failing on a 2-point conversion with 42 seconds left. It was the Seminoles' only defeat that season.

Bobby Bowden is second among active coaches in career victories, but his Florida State teams are only 5-11 against Miami.

"They don't usually beat us by much, but they usually beat us," he says.

While Freeman calls Miami-Florida State "a little Civil War," the competition is downright friendly compared to other intrastate rivalries like Auburn-Alabama and Florida State-Florida.

"We respect them, and they respect us," Freeman says. "I hate Florida; I just want to beat Miami."

Which doesn't mean the games are polite. According to both sides, there will be plenty of trash-talking Saturday at the Orange Bowl.

"It's personal," says Miami linebacker Micheal Barrow, who has known many of the Florida State players since high school. "You try to intimidate them. I'm going up against a freshman center. I want to intimidate him the first couple of plays, to take his heart away."

Miami receiver Lamar Thomas, who had a friendly rivalry with Buckley, says he doesn't know any of the current Seminoles.

"I like it better like this," he says. "That way I won't feel sorry for them. To me, it's like two pro teams going at each other."

Thomas has particular disdain for one of Florida State's most cherished traditions.

"That stupid war chant _ I hate it," he says. "I love it when we win, though, because I like to do an imitation of it."

Although the series dates back to 1951 (Miami leads 21-14), it wasn't always a great rivalry.

"At one time, it had no significance at all," Bowden says. "When I first came here (in 1976), both teams were down. ... But then we both got it rolling at the same time, and we played a lot of great ballgames _ 17-16, 10-9, 26-25. It's a game that usually lives up to its billing."

Ryan McNeil didn't play in Miami's 1988 opener against Florida State because he was a redshirt. But the Hurricanes' 31-0 victory at the Orange Bowl remains his most memorable game.

"They were ranked No. 1 and we were the defending national champions," says McNeil, now a senior defensive back. "That game had more impact on me than anything in my life. Everybody was in a frenzy around here."

Tamarick Vanover, a highly recruited freshman receiver who chose Florida State over Miami, hasn't caught the fever _ yet.

"It doesn't have any meaning to me because I'm a freshman and I haven't been involved with the rivalry," he says. "But after this game I'll feel the way the other players feel."

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