

Southern Heritage, SportSouth see mutual benefits

Commercial Appeal: By David Williams
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It's no secret that the Southern Heritage Classic is big doings locally.

Crowds for the annual football game routinely top 50,000 and the spending by out-of-town visitors is estimated at \$11.5 million.

But as the first word in the name suggests, it's a regional event, too.

"We really believe this is kind of an untapped pearl," said Jeffrey Genthner, senior vice president and general manager of SportSouth, which televises the game, and of FSN South.

Genthner was among the speakers at Southern Heritage Classic founder and producer Fred Jones' annual sponsors' conference, hosted this year by SHC presenting sponsor FedEx.

Other speakers were Kevin Demsky, director of sponsorship marketing for FedEx Services, and Joe Pepe, president and publisher of The Commercial Appeal.

The event was attended by representatives of sponsors of the Classic, which along with the Tennessee State-Jackson State football game also includes parties, concerts, a luncheon and more over the course of a week -- Sept. 6-8, this year.

Jones urged the sponsors to promote the Classic within their companies and in the community, and to maximize their sponsorships through hosting and other opportunities.

"Your business is first," he said, but added, "Take us along for that big ride."

Atlanta-based SportSouth buys into that concept. Genthner said the regional sports network wants to grow the Southern Heritage Classic -- and its own viewership -- by becoming the go-to place for historically black college football classics. The network also broadcasts the Bank of America Atlanta Football Classic, and wants to add more such games.

"We're very interested in seeing how we can grow that portfolio," Genthner said.

SportSouth -- formerly Turner South -- reaches 8.8 million households across the Southeast, making it the sixth-largest regional sports network in the country, he said.

"These are schools that have a significant following in the region," he said. "They have a significant tradition in the region. It's a real chance to showcase them. There's clearly a niche out there."

Along with reaching viewers in TSU's home of Nashville and JSU's home of Jackson, Miss., he said SportSouth takes the game to other markets such as Atlanta.

"By us supporting this event and raising the profile, it in turn becomes a bigger property for us to have," Genthner said.

-- David Williams: 529-2310

Southern Heritage Classic football game

Who: Jackson State vs. Tennessee State

When: 6 p.m., Sept. 8

Where: Liberty Bowl Memorial Stadium

Web site: For more information about the game and other Classic events, see southernheritageclassic.com.



Matthew Craig/The
Commercial Appeal

*SportSouth executive
Jeffrey Genthner wants to
boost the Southern
Heritage Classic and his
network by expanding
coverage of black college
football classics.*