

Classic showcase

While the gridiron scrum is the focus, there has always been more to it than football

By David Williams

Contact

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Forget about blurring the line between sports and entertainment.

As Southern Heritage Classic founder Fred Jones might say: What line?

"When we started the Classic in 1990, I remember getting a lot of grief from people because the game was perceived to be more entertainment (than sporting event)," he said.

"Well, lo and behold, the NBA and the NFL started billing themselves as entertainment outlets. We were doing that long before. Everybody thinks of sports now as entertainment."

So, while "the game is foremost" with the Sept. 14-16 Classic, there is, as always, more to it than Tennessee State and Jackson State playing football.

There are the old faves and new twists to a local institution that mixes sports and entertainment -- and ties it all together, a la its corporate partners, with business.

And so, this year, there's a third-quarter field-goal kicking/car giveaway contest -- a first for the Classic -- sponsored by Ford Motor Co.

There will be postgame fireworks sponsored by Tyson Foods.

There will be Fred Smith, founder of FedEx, SHC's "presenting sponsor," as guest speaker for the Nike Classic Coaches Luncheon.

And, in a new deal, the game will be televised by Fox Sports Net South.

"The good thing that I like about the Classic is that if I as a sponsor have an idea, I don't have to go through a board of directors. I go directly to Fred and get a decision," said Willie Gregory, Nike's Memphis-based director of community and business relations.



Courtesy Southern Heritage Classic

The 16th Southern Heritage Classic drew 48,300 fans to Liberty Bowl Memorial Stadium. A touchdown by Tennessee State's Fred Burnette (82, right) tied the score at 7 in the third quarter. Tennessee State eventually beat Jackson State in overtime, 20-14.

It's a sentiment that's heard from sponsors outside Memphis, also.

"We do Classics all around the country, and I enjoy working with (Jones and the SHC) the most, because they're so thorough and they're so on-point -- very easy to talk to and to get things done," said Nicole Sebree, manager of sponsorship and events for UniWorld Group, a New York-based marketing firm that specializes in the African-American market and works with Ford Motor Co.

Said Jones, "We run the Classic like a business, so we can attract other businesses.

"They have criteria for why they get involved, and we have to live up to that.

"That's something we're most proud of. Because if you're going to do an event today, especially the size of event the Classic has become, you have to have corporate partners or corporate involvement."

The Classic's close relationship with its sponsors enabled Jones to take advantage of the chance to be televised by FSN South.

Jones said it was a virtual last-minute opportunity that required quick commitments from top sponsors to advertise on the telecast. AutoZone, FedEx, Ford and Allstate Insurance promptly came through, he said.

"They committed on the first day I called them," Jones said. "Without them, we couldn't make it happen."

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Southern Heritage Classic highlights

Sept. 14: Classic VIP Kickoff Reception, Memphis Marriott Downtown; Classic Concert featuring Chris Brown and Ne-Yo, FedExForum.

Sept. 15: Tom Joyner Sky Show, Cannon Center; Nike Classic Coaches Luncheon, Marriott Downtown; Classic R&B Concert with Maze featuring Frankie Beverly and The O'Jays, Mid-South Coliseum.

Sept. 16: Ed 'Too Tall' Jones Golf Classic, Grand Casino Tunica/Cottonwoods Golf Club; Classic Fashions & Brunch, The Peabody; Classic High School Battle of the Bands, Whitehaven High School; Jackson State-Tennessee State football game, Liberty Bowl Memorial Stadium.

For ticket and other information: southernheritageclassic.com

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