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Yazoo, Winona to mark 1st game

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If the rough-and-tumble country boys of Winona and Yazoo City could have looked 100 years ahead in 1905, they surely could not have fathomed the ruckus and commotion they initiated.

They would have seen more than 22,000 Mississippi youths playing high school football this year. Indeed, Friday night football has become almost as much a part of Mississippi culture as Sunday morning prayer service. Mississippi is second only to Texas in per-capita student participation in football.

The 2005 season opened Thursday night, and by the time the final game is played Dec. 3 in Mississippi Veterans Memorial Stadium, more than 1 million fans will have watched high school football in Mississippi this fall.

It started on Dec. 9, 1905, when Yazoo and Winona teams met for Mississippi's first high school football game. Surely, those Winona and Yazoo boys would be pleased to learn they began a tradition that has produced some of the most accomplished and beloved athletes in America — football heroes with names such as Payton, Rice, Manning and Favre.

Yazoo City, playing at home on grounds north of town, prevailed 5-0 in that first game. No, that wasn't a field goal and a safety. A century ago, a touchdown counted five points. Touchdowns will count six points tonight when Yazoo City and Winona meet again as part of a preseason football jamboree. Players will wear 100-year decals on their helmets, setting the tone for a season-long centennial celebration of Mississippi high school

football. Officials also will wear 100-year patches on their striped shirts in games sanctioned by the Mississippi High School Activities Association.

"One hundred years of high school football deserves recognition," said Ennis Proctor, the MHSAA executive director. "Winona and Yazoo City started something that has become a way of life for Mississippians."

Today's football fans would scarcely recognize football as played in 1905. The players, much smaller then, wore no padding, although Yazoo players did wear nose protectors (which can be seen hanging from their necks in the team photo).

There were no passes, perhaps because players could not sufficiently grip the ball. A football then was a much fatter, more round version of today's.

That first game was the brainstorm of H.M. Ivy, the principal of Yazoo City High who also coached the team. Ivy had seen the game played at the University of Mississippi and called Ed Bray, the principal at Winona, to arrange the game.

Bray brought in Ole Miss player Arthur Howze to teach the game to the Winona boys, who were state champions in baseball but strangers to football. Fullback W.C. "Chuck" Trotter's account of Howze's first Winona football practice has been passed down through the generations of Trotters.

Said Ike Trotter, a Greenville financial planner and Chuck Trotter's grandson: "Howze gathered the boys around him out on the field and threw out this big ol', funny-shaped thing that Granddaddy Chuck said looked like a goat's bladder. And then Howze said, 'This, boys, is a football, and I'm gonna show you what to do with it.' "

Chuck Trotter would go on to become captain of the Ole Miss football team in 1909. W.C. Billingsley, his Winona teammate, would become the football captain at Mississippi State.

"What has always amazed me about that first game is how they got there," Ike Trotter said. "You could drive from Winona to Yazoo City in 90 minutes these days, but back then they took the train and had to change trains in Durant and again Tchula. It took several, several hours."

The journey was such that the Winona boys spent the night after the game at the homes of their Yazoo City rivals before returning by train the following day.

Deeks Branch, a Winona player, recalled the train trip 60 years later in a story printed in the Winona Times.

"What a trip it was!" Branch said. "The folks on the train probably thought the Jessie James Gang had been reincarnated."

Ike Trotter said his grandfather told him there were threats to throw the Winona boys off

the train if they didn't calm down.

In that same 1965 newspaper account, Branch said Chuck Trotter, a banker's son, was the only rich kid on the Winona team and sported a new jersey with a genuine felt "W" sewn in.

Said Branch, "The rest of us were just poor boys, so not to be outdone, we took chalk and lettered a big 'W' on our shirts."

The Winona team did not fare well at Yazoo. The Dec. 11, 1905, Yazoo City Sentinel reported: "After three minutes of play, Magruder of Yazoo City circled right end for a touchdown. Cole failed to kick the extra point."

For the record, Penard Magruder scored the first high school touchdown in Mississippi history and the only points of the first game.

Among Magruder's teammates were J.G. Williams, the nephew of U.S. Sen. John Sharp Williams, and Herschel Brickell, who would go on to become editor of the New York Times Book Review.

The Yazoo Sentinel's account of that first game ends thusly: "Yazoo's entire team played a fine game, the line and backs doing good work. Yazoo boys have every reason to be proud of their victory."

Perhaps, but defeat in Mississippi's first high school football game apparently was no cause for heartbreak or depression for the Winona boys. At a 1965 reunion of that first Winona football team, Chuck Trotter declared, "As the years go by I have less trouble convincing myself that we were just about the greatest football team ever. And, practically all those who could dispute me aren't around anymore."

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