

The 1953 Byrd-Springhill game had everything except a winner

Written by Jerry Byrd

Tuesday, 30 October 2012 16:14 -

For one generation of North Louisiana football fans, the greatest high school game ever played was a Thursday night contest between Byrd's Yellow Jackets and the Springhill Lumberjacks at Shreveport's State Fair Stadium on November 12, 1953.

The final score was 20-20 (that was long before overtime periods eliminated ties in high school football games).

I didn't see the game, as I had more important business to take care of as a freshman at Northwestern State. But I heard plenty about it when I launched my sports writing career four years later.

Two participants in that game were later teammates on Texas A&M teams coached by Paul "Bear" Bryant: Springhill's John David Crow (the only player coached by Bryant at any school who won the Heisman Trophy) and Byrd's Richard Gay.

Crow was an All-Stater in Class A (then the second highest classification) in 1952 and 1953. Gay didn't make All-State in football, which at that time consisted of only 11 players in each class, but he and Bastrop's Ronnie Johnston were the first two Louisiana athletes in any class to break 50 seconds in the 440-yard dash – and Gay was considered the state's best linebacker by many college coaches.

One of the most memorable plays in the 1953 Byrd-Springhill game was Gay tackling Crow on the sideline – a jarring collision that knocked both players to the turf.

"I looked up and saw a man from Springhill coming over the rail with a bottle in his hand," Crow recalled years later, "so I jumped up and ran back on the field before he could start something."

Coming into the mid-November Byrd game, Crow was averaging 22 yards per carry in his senior season. The Yellow Jackets' defense, built around Gay, held him to four yards per carry, but that only dropped his season average to 16.

The 1953 Byrd-Springhill game had everything except a winner

Written by Jerry Byrd

Tuesday, 30 October 2012 16:14 -

“Crow had so much pride,” Bryant recalled years later, “that he would never let you have a bad practice.”

Bryant’s first Texas A&M team had plenty of bad practices – and bad games – in a 1-9 season. The Aggies scored more than one touchdown in only three of the 10 games. But Crow was having a great season with the Texas A&M freshmen, averaging more than 10 yards per carry, and a year later his first varsity touchdown was a 77-yard run against LSU for the first score in the Aggies’ 28-0 victory over Tigers at Dallas. Bryant would always call that play “the greatest run I ever saw.”

A week before that game, LSU opened the Paul Dietzel Era with a 19-7 victory over Kentucky. But the Tigers were no match for Crow and his Aggie teammates.

When he got to the sideline after the 77-yard run against LSU, Crow gave the credit to the blocking of his teammates. But the game film showed the Aggies’ guards pulling and running into each other behind the center, knocking each other down.

Bryant knew Crow was a great one before the Springhill star showed up at College Station. Watching him in game films, he often said, “was like watching a grown man play against boys.”

But he may not have seen film of the 1953 Byrd-Springhill game. That one would’ve been more like watching a grown man play against another grown man.

After winning the state championship in 1952, Springhill didn’t qualify for the state playoffs in 1953 because of a Thanksgiving Day loss to old rival Minden. Byrd, coached by Jack Rowan, reached the Class 2A state finals before falling to Jesuit (New Orleans) 7-6 in the Crescent City. The Yellow Jackets won six state titles in the first 12 years of the school’s existence, but their only championship since 1937 was claimed by Rowan’s 1949 team – which included halfback Willard Rachal, fullback Dan Barr and All-State linemen Dickie Murray, M.K. Woolbert and John Trigg.

Jerry Byrd is the former sports editor of the Bossier Press-Tribune and an award-winning

The 1953 Byrd-Springhill game had everything except a winner

Written by Jerry Byrd

Tuesday, 30 October 2012 16:14 -

columnist. You can contact him by E-mail at jbsportswriter@comcast.net