

# THE MERCER COUNTY CUP

The Mercer County Cup may not have the national recognition that belongs to the Paul Bunyan Axe trophy that goes to the winner of the Minnesota-Wisconsin football game each year.

Nor does the Cup have the unique look and backstory of The Floyd of Rosedale, a bronze pig that is awarded to the winner of the annual Iowa-Minnesota game.

But to the men who comprise the respective football teams at Grove City College and Thiel College and those schools' alumni bases, the importance of the Mercer County Cup cannot be overstated.

Sixty minutes of football determines which school will prominently display the Cup for the next 52 weeks and which college will yearn to regain the trophy.

The 2014 season marks the 30th anniversary of the Cup's introduction into the Grove City-Thiel series. Grove City entered the Presidents' Athletic Conference prior to the 1984 season and first-year head coach Chris Smith decided to add something to the Wolverines' oldest rivalry.

"I thought it would be interesting if we had a tradition that we could build on," Smith said. "Looking at our rivals at that time, Thiel was our closest rival and in the same county."

Smith met with the then-owner of the McDonald's restaurants in Greenville and Grove City, who agreed to sponsor the Cup at that time.

"I did all of the legwork and got everything set up and then Thiel came down and beat us 9-7 and took the trophy home," Smith said. "That was the beginning."

"I'm sure locally, it was viewed as kind of semi-interesting, a 'What is this?'-type of thing," Smith continued. "Now, it has grown over the years and it is a big deal for the Thiel College football players and for the Grove City College football players."

In 1984, the rookie head coach made the Cup a point of emphasis for the Wolverines.

"We were very aware of the significance from the very beginning," wide receiver Brian Herrick, a 1987 Grove City

graduate, said. "It was Coach Smith's first year and he put a high priority on winning and keeping the Cup in Grove City. Thiel was already a natural rivalry and the Cup added to the fun of preparing for the game."

Grove City pulled out a 25-18 win the following year in Greenville, giving road teams a 2-0 record in Cup games. But the Wolverines did not go overboard in celebrating with the trophy.

"We were trying to build on things and that was a positive part of that season," Smith said. "Obviously, we didn't have an appreciation for the trophy as much as we do now. At that time, we picked up the Cup from the press box, got on the bus and came home."

In 1986, Grove City became the first home team to win the Mercer County Cup as the Wolverines blanked Thiel, 21-0. The victory sparked a five-game winning streak that helped Grove City clinch its first winning season since 1977.

"The win over Thiel during my senior season was a huge win for our program," Herrick, who will be inducted into the College's Athletic Hall of Fame in February, said. "We had come into the season with high expectations but lost a couple of close games to very good teams (Duquesne, Hiram and Mercyhurst) and we had gotten blown out at W&J. We needed the win for confidence to finish the season well."

"The game was close but Kirk Fennell had a huge game for us and Jeff Cass became our leader at quarterback. We ended up winning five games in a row to finish the season, including a big win over a ranked Carnegie Mellon team."

Grove City maintained the Cup through the 1988 season. The two programs then alternated victories through the 1994 season with the home team winning each of the six games. Grove City's 34-6 home win in 1994 sparked a seven-game win streak for the Wolverines in the Cup series.

Following the 2000 season, 1974 Thiel graduate Jack Leipheimer returned to Greenville to become the Tomcats' head football coach. Leipheimer, who coached until 2008 and is now Thiel's athletic director, made winning the Cup a priority.

"I thought it was huge," Leipheimer said. "I made a big deal about it with the players from the get-go. I dug out what records I could find about the last time we had beaten Grove City and made it a big deal to the team."

Thiel won the 2001 Cup game, 40-27, which represented the program's first victory on its newly-constructed on-campus facility, Alumni Stadium.

The Tomcats then retained the Cup the following season by winning at Grove City for the first time since the inaugural Cup clash.

Presidents' Athletic Conference Assistant Commissioner Kevin Fenstermacher worked at Thiel from 2001-13 in a variety of roles, including assistant athletic director and sports information director. He witnessed the impact the Cup victories had on the program.

"With Leip's history as a Thiel grad, I think it was a game that he really understood the importance of," Fenstermacher said. "It's not the only factor but it was a big part of him being able to show his vision for the program."

"We all understand the importance of the Mercer County Cup game," Fenstermacher continued. "It's a game that is circled on the Thiel calendar. It's really easy for people to get up for the game and to generate excitement for it because of the proximity of the schools and how long they've been playing each other."

In 2003, a 2-2 Grove City squad returned to Alumni Stadium for the 20th Cup game.

"We had a nice win against Bethany the week prior to Thiel," 2003 starting quarterback Sam Mowrey said. "It was important because we knew we had a tough stretch after the game, including W&J, Waynesburg and Westminster. So it was vital to get positive momentum going through the toughest part of our schedule."

"Now, adding in the rivalry and the Cup was all extra motivation. It was something that is hyped up all week and talked about, and it was important to us to go there and get possession back to

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Grove City," Mowrey, a 2004 graduate, continued.

"Thiel was playing much better football. So it wasn't going to be an easy game. They were definitely a good team and had proven that the two prior years."

Grove City trailed 15-10 late in the fourth quarter and it appeared that the Wolverines' quest for the Cup would come up short.

But cornerback Gene Iannuzzi blocked a punt and carried the ball 15 yards for a touchdown with 1:50 remaining, giving the Wolverines a 16-15 victory.

"To win the game the way we won the game was awesome!" Mowrey exclaimed, his enthusiasm not dulled by the decade that has passed. "Right when that light at the end of the tunnel was fading, we blocked the punt and returned it for a touchdown.

"So, all in all, the Cup is a great tradition and something that always makes that game a special game to play and to be a part of a tradition that was well before our time and will continue well past."

The 2003 win marked the first one-point game in Cup history. Four years later, the Wolverines pulled out a 14-13 victory at Thiel when defensive end Ryan Rylands deflected an extra point attempt with 3:05 left in the game, which turned out to be the final midseason meeting for the foreseeable future.

The conference initiated "Rivalry Week" in 2008 by pairing longtime rivals in the season finale. The Geneva-Westminster and Washington & Jefferson-Waynesburg series joined the Mercer County Cup in moving to Week 11. "Rivalry Week" has continued and is expected to remain an integral part of the conference schedule.

"We're very excited to hold these games at the end of the season," conference commissioner Joe Onderko said.

"Grove City and Thiel have a long tradition of playing each other and the coaches understand that history. The coaches also understand how important it is to go into the offseason on a strong note and that sets it up to be a great game."

"Even if you're not having a great season, a team still has something extra to play for," Leipheimer said. "Every coach wants to win the last game and go into the offseason with a positive to build on."

Prior to World War II, Grove City and Thiel met in the final game of the season 24 times. In Grove City's first two seasons of football, 1892 and 1893, the Wolverines defeated Thiel in each year's finale. With the exception of 1927, Grove City played Thiel in its final game of the season every year from 1923 until 1942.

In the 2008 season finale, Grove City maintained Cup possession with a 20-14 victory in a driving rainstorm. The victory marked the first time since 1966 that Grove City had beaten Thiel in the finale.

"Having the final game be for the Cup and the same day as Senior Day definitely added to the experience and the atmosphere," cornerback Mike Baker, a 2009 graduate, said. "It's an amazing game, one that you'll remember for the rest of your life."

The home victory also gave the Wolverines their first home win in the Cup

series since 2000. "We knew it was big for the school, big for our alumni base and for our friends," Baker said.

"We wanted to make sure we put forth our best effort and come out with a win."

Grove City's current seven-game win streak in the Cup features overtime wins at Thiel in both 2009 (31-24) and 2013 (50-44).

Four straight Grove City senior classes have graduated with 4-0 records in the Mercer County Cup and the Wolverines aim to send this year's 10-man senior class out with a 4-0 mark.

"There's a lot on the line this year for our seniors," Smith said. "We're not having the year that we want to have but they've also won the Cup in each of their first three years.

"A tradition for us is that as a senior when you win the Cup, you get your picture taken with the Cup with the other seniors. They definitely don't want to be the class that does not have that happen. They want to be the class that continues that tradition."

## MERCER COUNTY CUP SERIES YEAR-BY-YEAR

Date	Site	Final Score
Sept. 30, 1984	Grove City, Pa.	Thiel 9, Grove City 7
Sept. 29, 1985	Greenville, Pa.	Grove City 25, Thiel 18
Oct. 11, 1986	Grove City, Pa.	Grove City 21, Thiel 0
Oct. 10, 1987	Greenville, Pa.	Grove City 31, Thiel 14
Oct. 15, 1988	Grove City, Pa.	Grove City 28, Thiel 21
Oct. 14, 1989	Greenville, Pa.	Thiel 35, Grove City 18
Oct. 20, 1990	Grove City, Pa.	Grove City 10, Thiel 0
Oct. 26, 1991	Greenville, Pa.	Thiel 21, Grove City 12
Oct. 17, 1992	Grove City, Pa.	Grove City 41, Thiel 6
Oct. 16, 1993	Greenville, Pa.	Thiel 20, Grove City 14
Oct. 22, 1994	Grove City, Pa.	Grove City 34, Thiel 6
Oct. 21, 1995	Greenville, Pa.	Grove City 16, Thiel 14
Sept. 28, 1996	Grove City, Pa.	Grove City 39, Thiel 6
Sept. 27, 1997	Greenville, Pa.	Grove City 32, Thiel 9
Oct. 3, 1998	Grove City, Pa.	Grove City 55, Thiel 0
Oct. 2, 1999	Greenville, Pa.	Grove City 56, Thiel 0
Sept. 30, 2000	Grove City, Pa.	Grove City 27, Thiel 7
Sept. 29, 2001	Greenville, Pa.	Thiel 40, Grove City 27
Oct. 5, 2002	Grove City, Pa.	Thiel 23, Grove City 3
Oct. 4, 2003	Greenville, Pa.	Grove City 16, Thiel 15
Oct. 9, 2004	Grove City, Pa.	Thiel 24, Grove City 9
Oct. 8, 2005	Greenville, Pa.	Thiel 30, Grove City 0
Oct. 14, 2006	Grove City, Pa.	Thiel 20, Grove City 0
Oct. 13, 2007	Greenville, Pa.	Grove City 14, Thiel 13
Nov. 15, 2008	Grove City, Pa.	Grove City 20, Thiel 14
Nov. 14, 2009	Greenville, Pa.	Grove City 31, Thiel 24 (2 OT)
Nov. 13, 2010	Grove City, Pa.	Grove City 35, Thiel 21
Nov. 12, 2011	Greenville, Pa.	Grove City 35, Thiel 3
Nov. 10, 2012	Grove City, Pa.	Grove City 21, Thiel 7
Nov. 16, 2013	Greenville, Pa.	Grove City 50, Thiel 44 (OT)