



FUTBOL IN BAMA

BY LOYD MCINTOSH

TAILGATE SOCCER STYLE

EVERYONE knows football is king in Alabama and that college tailgating in the Heart of Dixie is, perhaps, best described as epic. However, what many people might not know, and hardcore gridiron fans to this day won't accept, is that soccer is growing in popularity around the state. While futbol poses no threat to the massive popularity of football in Alabama, soccer fans at colleges large and small have taken notice of the sense of community and camaraderie of tailgating and decided it's high time they got in on the action.

In Birmingham, a group of parents are setting up a tailgate on a grassy hill overlooking Preston Goldfarb Field at Beryslon Park on the campus of Birmingham-Southern College. An NCAA Division III private liberal arts college just west of the city's downtown, the Birmingham-Southern Panthers soccer team is one of the Deep South's more successful programs, developing a solid reputation in a city that often looked at soccer as some sort of communist threat to corrupt America's youth.

On this particular day in mid-October, however, the only threat might be the possibility of a sunburn. The temperature is in the low to mid-60s, a bright sun overhead, and not a cloud in the sky. A nice crowd has turned out to see the Panthers play Sewanee in the final home game of the season. It's also the final home game for Birmingham-Southern's head coach, Preston Goldfarb, retiring after 33 years, 10 regular season conference titles, seven conference tournament championships, and five national championship tournament appearances. Not only is it a great day for a tailgate, but it's a great occasion as well.

“Why should the Division I football schools have all the fun,” says Susan Swagler, one of the leaders of today’s tailgate and the mom of midfielder Brother Swagler, a freshman from nearby Mountain Brook High School. “We can put together a tailgate. We can make some chili, and we can invite some people on Sign Up Genius. It really is kind of a homegrown effort. We can do it. It’s easy.”

Swagler, husband Rick and fellow soccer parent Julie Meehan started tailgating at Panthers soccer games earlier in the season after learning that, despite the men’s team’s success and fan base, a tailgating tradition had yet to be established. The Swaglers admit they’ve never been ones to tailgate on a huge level. However, they say they’ve enjoyed learning how to throw an outdoor sports party even if their tailgate is in no way comparable to the scene just an hour away in Tuscaloosa. “This is kind of new to us, and I don’t know if it’s at the same standard of a football tailgate, but the bar was pretty low,” says Rick Swagler, with a self-deprecating laugh. “We’re having a good time.”

Susan Swagler says she made the decision to tailgate at Birmingham-Southern soccer games soon after her son signed to play for the Panthers. She says she and other soccer parents used to have what could only be called a mini-tailgate during Brother’s club-team matches. She says sneaking a cocktail or two in a red Solo cup didn’t go over so well in that environment. “I told my husband we’re going to do some tailgating because we always had to do it on the down low during his club games. I got busted once or twice,” says Swagler. “This is grown-up stuff. Nobody gets busted here, and we all behave ourselves.”

The tailgate on this day features a few items from a couple of well-liked local brands: cheese biscuits from Jim ‘N Nick’s Bar-B-Q and ice-cold cans of India Pale Ale from Avondale Brewing Company, a hip, neighborhood microbrewery. But the star of this tailgate is chili. Meehan and the Swaglers prepared a pair of delicious batches of chili from scratch, even going so far as toasting and grinding their own spices. Swagler also has made a fantastic charred onion dip, a recipe developed by Birmingham chef and restaurateur Frank Stitt. The setup and selection are quite different from their first tailgate—to their knowledge, the first-ever tailgate at a men’s Birmingham-Southern soccer game—in early September.

“When I asked (head coach) Preston Goldfarb, ‘Hey, can we tailgate?’ he said ‘Do whatever you want.’ We really didn’t



Texas-Style Chili

adapted from a recipe by Julia Moskin

- 1 tablespoon whole cumin seeds
- 1 1/2 teaspoons whole coriander seeds
- 4 pounds beef chuck
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 large yellow onion, chopped (plus extra for garnish)
- 6 large garlic cloves, minced
- 5 large fresh jalapeños, red or green, and a few more if you want more heat
- 2–3 tablespoons ground pure chili powder (I use ancho) or one of the chili powder mixtures from Penzey’s Spices (I like Chili 3000)
- 1 tablespoon dried oregano
- 1 bottle of dark beer
- 1 28-ounce can diced tomatoes or 3 10-ounce cans Ro-Tel tomatoes with green chilies (I mix mild and hot)
- 1 6-ounce can tomato paste
- 1 tablespoon cocoa powder
- 3 whole dried large chilies such as New Mexico or ancho or guajillo
- 3 tablespoons masa harina (available at Mexican grocery stores)
- Chopped fresh cilantro for serving
- Sour cream for serving

IN A SMALL, heavy skillet, toast cumin and coriander seeds until fragrant, about one minute. Using a mortar and pestle, grind the spices to a powder and set aside.

ROUGHLY cut the beef into 2-inch cubes. Sprinkle with salt and black pepper. In a large, heavy pot over high heat, heat the oil until shimmering. Working in batches to avoid crowding, brown the meat, turning it occasionally until crusty. Adjust the heat as necessary. Remove the cooked meat and place on paper towels. Add more oil as needed. Do not clean out the pot.

TO THE EMPTY but crusty pot, add the onion, garlic, jalapeños, chile powder, cumin-coriander powder and oregano. Stir to loosen and incorporate the browned bits on the bottom of the pan. Cook until the onion is softened, 5 to 8 minutes. Add the meat, beer, tomatoes, tomato paste, cocoa powder, whole dried chilies, and one quart of water. Bring to a simmer and let simmer for 1½ hours.

IN THE LAST 15 minutes of cooking, remove the dried chilies and mix the masa harina with enough water to make a soupy paste. Stir this paste into the chili and cook for 15 more minutes. Adjust seasonings if necessary.

SERVE immediately, or cool and refrigerate. The chili is even better the next day. Reheat on low, if necessary, and ladle into bowls. Serve with chopped fresh cilantro and sour cream.

follow football, Rick and I, since Brother didn't play, so we were never part of this long and storied tailgating tradition," says Swagler.

"We were right behind the team bench with our Winn-Dixie hot wings, and we have our tailgate on the car open because we figured 'Okay it's a tailgate so that's what you do.' All of the boys walked over from the locker room, and we didn't realize the guys would be walking right past, which was awesome, but they're not allowed to talk to us," Swagler explains. "So I'm like, 'Hey, Brother!' And Brother's pretending like I'm not there. Preston looks up and sees us, and he just shakes his head. I guess he thought we would be set up somewhere else."



The Swaglers are one of only a handful of Birmingham-Southern soccer families from the Birmingham area. Many others come from more far-flung locations—Louisiana, Washington D.C. and even Ottawa, Ontario. Swagler said she wanted this tailgate to be one that would put her son's college and city in a positive light. "A lot of these people are not from here. Some of them, it's their first time in Birmingham, and we wanted them to see and experience Southern hospitality. We wanted them to see what a great food city we are," says Swagler. "Mainly this is just to show these folks who are not from here what we're about. We're about food, having a good time, making everybody comfortable, and just making everyone feel welcome."

The final home game of the 2015 season and the final home game of Goldfarb's 33-year-career was a good one. Scoreless throughout regular time, Birmingham-Southern broke the draw in overtime on a goal by Huntsville native Cody Santos. The Swaglers, Meehan and their guests were able to see it all from the tailgate's vantage point on a hill overlooking the field. No need to decide to go into the game or stay at the tailgate here. "That's the cool thing about it. We're able to tailgate while we watch a ballgame. We're not stuck off in a parking lot. We've been here ever since," says Swagler. "The first time it was just Rick and me and our girls and some of their friends and then a few kids from here who wandered by. But now it's grown into this." ■