

Texas-Texas A&M: Why Do We Have Rivalries?

By Arabella Diedrich

The Texas-Texas A&M rivalry might be the best college football feud in the history of rivalries. Georgia-Florida, Alabama-Auburn, Army-Navy and Michigan-Ohio State all have arguments to make but the maroon and burnt orange clash has everything a rivalry needs, according to experts.

In examining competition, researchers like Joe Cobbs, who teaches Rivalry and Rituals in International Sports at North Kentucky University, and New York University Professor Gavin Kilduff, who has investigated sports psychology for over a decade, agreed upon the psychological components.

Rivalries represent long lasting competition between two groups, typically brands or sports teams, where each group feels especially motivated to outperform the other.

“We define rivalry as a subjective competitive relationship that a focal actor has with another actor which increases the focal actor’s psychological involvement and stakes of competition independent of the objective characteristics of the situation,” Kilduff said in his 2010 dissertation.

What separates a rival from general competitors is repeated competition, how well competition is matched, similarity and deep-rooted differences. UT and Texas A&M check off more items from the rivalry ingredient list than regular opponents like Rice or Baylor.

As one of the longest running college football rivalries, garnering 118 games total since their first game on Oct. 19, 1894, the rivals check the consistent competition box. Prior to the Aggies joining the Southeastern Conference, the pair maintained an annual game streak from 1915 until their last matchup in 2011.

Brains are wired to favor patterns like repetition because it causes the strongest learning outcome. The mere exposure effect in psychology holds that repeated exposure to a stimulus increases the likelihood of liking said stimulus. In terms of competition, a team is more likely to identify patterns of their opponent’s strengths and weaknesses through repeated confrontation.

When examining how evenly matched the rivalry is between Longhorns and Aggies, UT leading 76-37-5 may hint at unbalanced performance rates. While rivalries tend to be stronger if the competition is matched, a superior team often convinces the perceived inferior team that they have more to gain from a chance at winning, Cobbs said.

Dominance adds to a losing group or team’s psychological need to overcome defeat. The NKU professor said threat and enhancement are strong predictors of whether an actor will risk loss. The chance of status enhancement, or threat, is higher if a team beats a rival over a normal competitor because the score history establishes expectations.

Despite score disparities, the rivalry is sustained by the pairs' similarities. Cobb's research implied that geographical proximity and similar supply pool are indicators of rivalry as groups fight over shared resources.

UT and Texas A&M, 87 miles apart, are the only two flagship universities in Texas. Both rank as top colleges in the state admit students from comparable applicant pools.

In contrast, deep-rooted differences allow for conflict that strengthens rivalry. Social comparison theory in psychology implies that people or groups evaluate themselves based on how different the beliefs and abilities of others are to their own, said the NYU professor.

Differences between UT and Texas A&M date back to the universities' foundings in the 1800s. The Morrill Act of 1862 demanded an agricultural and mechanical college in Texas that would branch from the "university of the first class," soon to be established by the Texas State Constitution. To this day, the schools argue over which school holds the university of the first class title because Texas A&M was founded first but UT was the intended main college.

Because UT is often viewed as the prestigious, liberal arts school and Texas A&M is seen as the agricultural and military blue-collar school, Cobbs said a big brother-little brother relationship emerged. In the presence of identity and labels, one school may feel misrepresented, leading to contempt for the other team and increased reliance on the other team's identity to establish their own..

Research on in-groups, a group in which one belongs, and out-groups, the other or opposing group, suggests that people tend to like and think kindly about people who are part of their own group, UT cognitive scientist and psychologist Art Markman said.

"In sports, that means that fans highlight the great performances of the members of the team they root for and praise their scrappy play," he said. "In contrast, they tend to find uncharitable interpretations of the behavior of outgroups, so the rival players aren't scrappy, but instead play dirty and get lucky when they win."

The in and out groups of sports rivalries are largely made up of fans, or UT and Texas A&M's case, alumni and students. During their time at the university, students are socialized to oppose the rival Kilduff said.

When students become Longhorns or Aggies, one of the first things they are routinely exposed to is the school's fight song. In the second line of "Texas Fight", which is performed at a majority of football games regardless of the opponent, Longhorns sing "it's goodbye to A&M." This verse was written in response to the second verse, "goodbye to Texas University," of "Aggie War Hymn."

“People are drawn to teams they identify with. They stay loyal because they derive their identity from group membership,” Kilduff said.

Along with the feeling of community and belonging, if kept relatively friendly, rivalries enable good-natured competition between groups of people that can increase engagement and greater enjoyment of sporting events, Markman said.

Cobbs added that while competitions offer similar benefits, the consistency associated with rivalry increases the intensity of positive feelings and stakes, drawing fans and viewers in. College football viewership, TV ratings and game-day turnout increases for rivalry games.

“A broader society in general has moved much more towards a big game mentality,” Cobbs said. “People are less inclined to watch the mundane regular season matchup.”

Rivalry narratives between brands and teams tend to be more engaging than on-and-off relationships of competitors because they are like ongoing stories with attachments to characters, Kilduff said. There’s a want for another chapter and a need to see how the story ends.