

More Than A Game



photo courtesy of Detroit News

Trophy cases throughout the state are marred by objects that wouldn't attract \$1 at a garage sale. But, for the teams that earn the right to place them there, they are prized possessions that outshine all the rest. It's more than a game . . . it's the Trophy Game!

In the fall of 1903, back in the days when touchdowns counted for five points and a point-after conversion was often called a goal, University of Michigan coach Fielding Yost and his point-a-minute gridiron warriors rode into Minneapolis for a showdown with the University of Minnesota. Brandishing a 28-game winning streak, Yost's squad held a 6-0 lead when, with a minute to play, the hosts knotted the score. Unbridled pandemonium from the crowd of 20,000 caused the game to be called. Left behind upon Michigan's departure was a five-gallon water jug, "neither little nor brown."

Found by Minnesota custodian Oscar Munson, the prize was emblazoned with the words, "Michigan Jug – Captured by Oscar, October 31, 1903." The score, "Minnesota 6, Michigan 6" was added, with the Minnesota score purposely dwarfing the Michigan score beside it. After a five-year break, Minnesota challenged Michigan to another game. "We have your Little Brown Jug. Come up and win it." So began one of college football's legendary trophy games.

More than 100 years later, the battle for the "Little Brown Jug" continues. Yet, in Michigan it is no longer unique. Spurred on

by the excitement generated by the rivalry, the Great Lakes State now hosts at least seven additional battles for a Brown Jug. And, as is the case with their namesake, these jugs are seldom little or brown.

In the state's Upper Peninsula, Newberry High School first played Sault Ste. Marie on the gridiron in 1911 and, for the most part, have squared off annually since 1923. To commemorate the battle between these schools, legend has it that in 1925, a Newberry druggist donated a Jug to serve as a trophy. The prize was to be retained by the winning team until the next meeting would determine ownership. The idea, of course, came from the Michigan-Minnesota rivalry.

In 1934, for reasons unknown, a new jug debuted. Fittingly, that game between the rivals ended in a 7-7 tie.

Over the years, the rivalry has generated many classic contests between the larger school from the Soo and the smaller Newberry district. The series was interrupted in 1940 and 1959, and then went on a five-year hiatus between 1999 and 2003. As school officials recognized the importance of series to the residents of the area, the rivalry was resumed in 2004 when the Blue Devils joined Newberry in the Straits

Area Conference.

After suffering through eight defeats in the previous nine meetings, the Indians posted two straight victories once the series restarted. This season marked the 90th meeting between the schools. With a 27-7 win, the Blue Devils clinched a spot in the MHSAA playoffs, and now lead the all-time series 56-29-5 overall and are 44-24-5 in Jug games.

The appeal of playing for a jug also captured the imagination of coaches Don Barnabo of Romeo and Barney Swinehart of Utica. In 1948, the two mentors decided to add a little excitement to the annual showdown between the schools, located 15 miles apart in southeastern Michigan. For the next 19 years, the game marked the end of the gridiron season.

Like the famed college series, the initial meeting between these neighbors also ended in a tie. The series was interrupted for three seasons from 1994-96 as the teams played in different divisions of the Macomb Area Conference, but returned to the schedule in 1997. While the teams have bounced around the league's various classifications, the "Little Brown Jug" game has remained a fixture on the schedule ever since.

Earlier this fall, Romeo picked up its third straight win and fifth in the last six games. With this year's victory, the Bulldogs now lead the 54-game series with 29 wins against 21 defeats. The game has ended in a tie on four occasions. The original "Jug" still exists, but today, a much larger one is awarded in its place.

In the northwest part of the Lower Peninsula, Kingsley and Suttons Bay also play for a "Little Brown Jug." However, word is that the prize has been repainted so many times there's no brown remaining.

The series began in 1968, but was interrupted the following year when Suttons Bay did not field a team. The squads returned the following year and they've been at it ever since. With this year's 16-0 victory, Suttons Bay has posted five straight shutouts against the Stags, and has knotted the regular-season series between the schools at 19-19-1. The contest has also evolved into a nice little rivalry between good friends and former high school teammates, Suttons Bay coach Joe Trudeau and Kingsley coach Tim Wooer. In an interesting twist, Suttons Bay also holds a 3-1 advantage in playoff games against the Kingsley, although possession of the Jug is not up for grabs in postseason contests.

Not far away, Northwest Conference rivals Manton and Mesick play for yet another "Little Brown Jug." A 31-20 win by Mesick this year transferred possession of the trophy to the Bulldogs for the first time since 1999.

In both the Center Line vs. Warren Lincoln and the Union City vs. Athens games, the opponents tussle for possession of a "Brown Jug." In each case, the trophy originated in 1947. With this year's triumph Lincoln knotted the series at 30 wins apiece

In Union City, area resident Eli Hooker pitched to the Union City Athletic Union the idea of presenting a perpetual gridiron trophy to the winner of the high school's annual Little "C" Conference showdown with Athens. With the idea embraced by the group, Eli purchased a large jug from the Plantation Antique Shop in Union City. Following the 1947 game, members of the Athletic Union presented the "Little Brown Jug" to Athens, a 12-6 winner in the contest. Sixty years later, the tradition continues. With this year's 39-6 victory, Union City now enjoys a 41-18-1 lead in the annual showcase.

In southern Michigan, Brooklyn Columbia Central and Napoleon clash for custody of their own version of the "Little Brown Jug." The Golden Eagles had posted three straight wins in the series before Napoleon snapped the streak this year with a 28-6 victory. The regional rivalry dates to

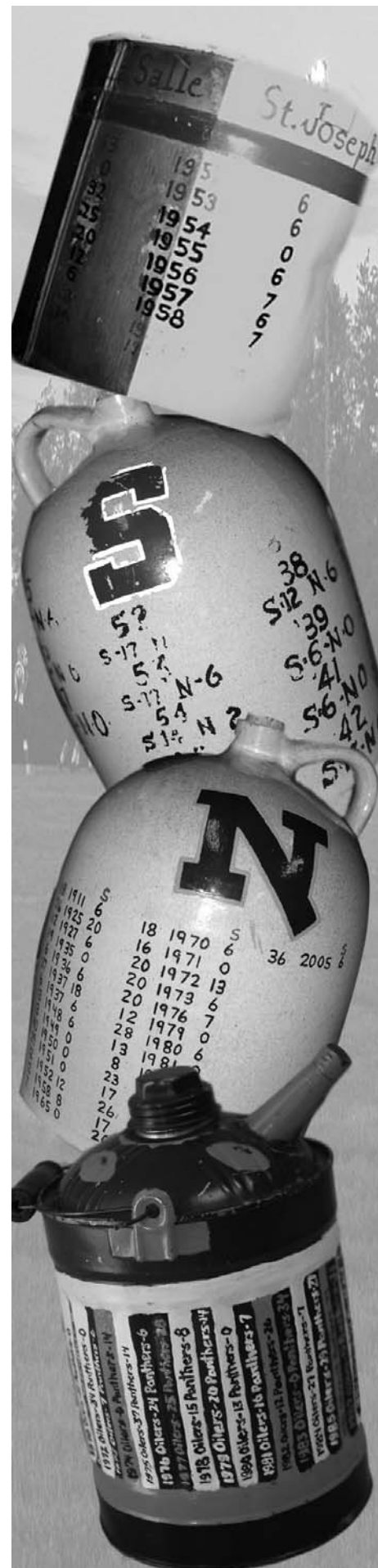
1967 and the opening of Columbia Central, which was formed through the consolidation of the Brooklyn, Cement City and Clark Lake school systems. The Golden Eagles hold a 24-15 lead in what is now the traditional season-opening game for the teams.

Traveling trophies take on all shapes and come in all sizes. Sometimes the award is linked with local folklore. Often, the prize serves as a memorial to accomplishment or remembrance. From time to time, the prize relates to the known landscape or to local industry. Occasionally, the reward is simply an object, large or small, that will serve the teams well.

While these trophies seldom possess much monetary value, without question, their real importance grows beyond compare with each hard-fought victory and painful defeat. Their sentimental value is enormous, as they represent tangible evidence of conquest over a sometimes loved and occasionally a hated rival. Memories are made of these.

The Michigan-Minnesota prize was inspiration for yet another trophy – this one a gargantuan "Cowbell." According to 94-year-old Frederic Hilbert, Wayland-area blacksmith Virgil Losey created the fully-functional facsimile in 1938 for use at a Wayland festival called the Cowbell Carnival. The arrival of World War II brought an end to the carnival and the giant Cowbell was stored away. On a train ride to Minneapolis for the 1948 "Little Brown Jug" game, Hilbert had the chance to view the famous trophy, and it stirred thoughts for using the idle Cowbell for a similar purpose. Hilbert brought the bell to a local artist "and asked him to gild it and arrange spaces to record" the results of the annual contest with Wayland Union High School's greatest rival, Caledonia. School officials accepted the Cowbell and with a 7-0 win in the fall of 1949, the Terriers took possession. Now known as the Fighting Scots, Caledonia has possessed the Cowbell on 33 of 57 occasions, with one tie.

To the southeast, Constantine and White Pigeon square off annually for the right to exhibit the "Tomahawk." According to Constantine historian, David Horn, Belle the Mule unearthed an old stone Indian arrowhead while pawing the ground during a break from plowing a field on Whabememe Farm in White Pigeon. White Pigeon residents Leon Holsinger and Ervin Meltzer donated the find while local physicians Dr. Albert Wade of White Pigeon and Dr. George Sweetland of Constantine hatched the idea of adding a handle and turning it into a traveling trophy. In 1930, the first "Tomahawk Game" was played. Constantine emerged with a 14-6 win to claim possession of the new trophy.



Some trophies have outlasted the school's existence, like the Detroit St. Joseph-Warren DeLaSalle oil can above right (Detroit St. Joseph no longer exists). Others remain in circulation, such as the Newberry-Sault Ste. Marie jug (middle). Still other rivalries just die out, rendering artifacts to the corner of the trophy case, as the Alma-Mt. Pleasant Little Red Oil Can (below right) had its last owner in 2004.

The friendly rivalry was hosted on Thanksgiving Day each year until the early 1950s when the teams joined the upstart St. Joseph Valley League. In 1965, the game was moved to Saturday night where it has remained ever since.

Adding color to the tale of the Tomahawk, the trophy was reported stolen one summer in the mid 1970s. After some detective work, it was found in a pawn shop in Chicago and was returned home.

In Copper Country, Upper Peninsula rivals Hancock and Houghton strive for possession of the coveted "Copper Bowl." Traditionally the season-ending contest, Hancock holds a solid 34-17-2 lead in head-to-head matchups since 1953, the beginning of the battle for the Bowl. However, with a victory this season, the Bulldogs hold only a slight 14-12 lead in wins since 1981.

The closing of Harper Woods Bishop Gallagher ended "The Christian Brothers Classic," a battle with the Pilots of Warren DeLaSalle for a 100-pound airplane propeller. Run by the same religious order, the schools started their series in 1969 thanks to the efforts of two Detroit St. Joseph alums, Al Baumgart, head coach of DeLaSalle and Tom Martilotti, coach of Bishop Gallagher. A metal propeller, painted blue and white on one side and purple and yellow on the other was selected to serve as the award, a play on DeLaSalle's physical location – across the street from old Detroit City Airport. In 1997, in college-like fashion, the original came up missing, and a wooden replacement was exchanged for a number of years.

The 2004 season marked the end of the "Little Red Oil Can" series between Mt. Pleasant and Alma. The run of games dated to the 1950s with the Oilers of Mt. Pleasant holding a 37-16-0 lead in games with the Panthers.

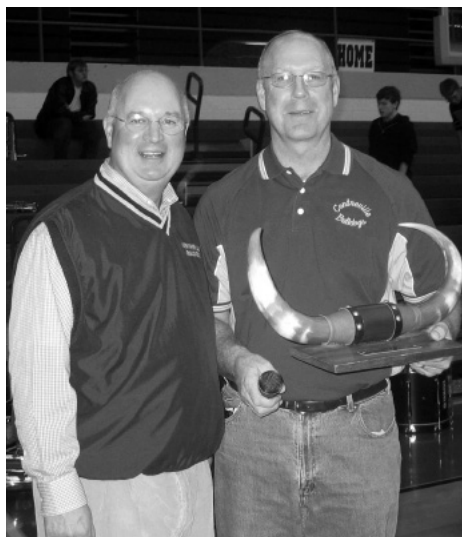
Escanaba and Menominee once played for possession of the "Hinker Bell." Salvaged from a scrapped logging train and donated for use by dedicated high school sports fan, John Hinker of Menominee, the bell was first awarded around 1948. While the series lives on, the battle for the Bell came to an abrupt halt in the 1980s when it came up missing. Rumor has it the bronze bell was stolen and was sold for scrap.

The winner of the Mendon and Centreville game earns the rights to a pair of Bullhorns; a play on the team nicknames – the Mendon Hornets and the Centreville Bulldogs. After 21 consecutive defeats, Centreville suddenly emerged victorious in this year's game.

In many instances, a single event can forge long-term friendship or a Hatfield-and-McCoy-style feud. With each passing year, those accomplishments and incidents often grow in legend and meaning.

Since the fall of 1994, Reese and Unionville-Sebewaing have played for the Pioneer "Sugar Bowl." Michigan Sugar

Company, a cooperative of around 1,300 area sugar beet farmers, donates \$350 annually to the winning school. Entering this year's contest, USA had won nine of the previous 12 meetings, including the past four regular-season contests. This year, Reese's quarterback Corbin Oldenburg rushed for 253 yards and two touchdowns, and added another TD through the air in a 20-7 Rockets' victory. According to press reports, USA marched



Rivalry "trophies" take on all shapes and sizes. Centreville and Mendon lock horns for the rights to the above Bullhorn each year, proudly displayed by Centreville athletic director Craig Brueck (right) and principal Mike Morris during a pep assembly for first Playoff game this fall.

in for a touchdown late in the 2005 game even though the game was in hand. This year, Reese ran three plays inside the five in the final minute of action trying to score one more as payback.

Quite often, long-time rivals will add a traveling trophy to the mix.

In the Kalamazoo Central-Battle Creek Central series, a game that dates to 1893, a totem pole is up for grabs. The original version, hand carved by students from both schools, was stolen in the 1950s. A one-foot tall replica is now the prize.

In one of the state's longest standing rivalries, Saginaw and Saginaw Arthur Hill once played for the "Lettermen's Trophy." First awarded in 1948, the handsome award featured the actual football used in the 1909 contest between the schools. They now play for possession of a traveling trophy sponsored by *The Saginaw News*, a plaque commemorating their 100th gridiron prep meeting.

Holland and Grand Haven began their long series back in 1901. Since 1948, the teams have challenged each other for the right to display a pair of oversized Wooden Shoes honoring the strong Dutch origins of

the area. Estimates indicate that over 3,000 athletes have played in this heated battle that has occasionally boiled over into the theft of the Shoes, one painted Buccaneer Blue and Gold, the other Dutch Crimson and White from the winner's trophy case.

Whitehall and Montague gridiron squads also clash for the rights to a bell. The teams met for the 100th time this season, although no one knows for sure when the exchange of the award began. It is believed to have started sometime in the 1960s.

A split of a school district also offers the opportunity to mark the occasion with the creation of a new trophy.

With the division of Traverse City High School, once the state's largest, into Central and West in 1997, the new cross-town rivals began competition for a traveling trophy. The Nowak-Olson Memorial Trophy honors former Central and West students who lost their lives before graduation.

In Ann Arbor, Pioneer and Huron high schools meet in the Ted Heusel Bowl, with the winner taking hold of a trophy honoring the former school board president who initiated the annual football game between these crosstown schools.

Still, there's nothing like a jug. In the western suburbs of Detroit, the winner of the Novi-Northville contest earns the right to display "The Baseline Jug" among the hardware in their trophy cases. The schools began playing each other in 1971, but this "Jug" was not awarded until 1988. Named for the section of 8 Mile Road that separates the two cities, the trophy was created by the *Novi News/Northville Record*, and in this case, the award was an authentic old milk jug. However, like others before it, the original jug was stolen sometime during the 1990s. A new trophy was commissioned and continues to be awarded to the victor. With six consecutive victories through 2006, Novi now leads 11-8 in clashes for the "Baseline Jug."

The teams have split their two playoff matchups, with Novi winning in 2004 and the Mustangs victorious in 2000. Again, this "Jug" is not up for grabs in these tournament contests.

"In all seriousness," notes Novi athletic direct Curt Ellis, "this is a tremendously positive rivalry shared by two fantastic neighboring communities."

It is a sentiment shared by many schools across Michigan.

— Ron Pesch

Ron Pesch is the historian for the MHSAA. To submit story ideas and potential statistical records, write to Pesch at: records@mhsaa.com

Editor's Note: *Pesch is compiling a list of all football trophy games in the state, to be listed on the MHSAA Web site in the future. Submit your trophy game information and photos to him at the above e-mail address.*