
Thanks to SEC hockey, football's fiercest rivals hit the ice

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By Tal Pinchevsky - NHL.com Staff Writer

In early 2011, rival squads representing Auburn University and the University of Alabama congregated near Birmingham to continue a rivalry that has been raging since 1893. Mobs of fans came out to cheer on the schools that have won the past two NCAA Division I football championships.

But this wasn't the Iron Bowl, the annual football matchup considered one of football's roughest games.

This was the Iron Cup.

The inaugural hockey event drew more than 6,000 curious fans for a three-day affair that saw Alabama win all three games by a combined score of 34-6. It wasn't exactly the 87,000 fans that the annual football game between these Southeastern Conference schools typically draws, but it was an impressive turnout for collegiate club hockey.

Especially in the land where college football is king.

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"Folks email and call all the time to see if they saw a misprint. Is there really such thing as SEC hockey?" says Kenny "Sarge" Day, a 30-year Army veteran and former Georgia Tech assistant hockey coach who currently serves as the commissioner of SEC Club Hockey. "Yes, it is collegiate club hockey. The reason it is at the club level, quite frankly, is because of Title IX restrictions.

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In three short years, the South Eastern Collegiate Hockey Conference, a Division III league in the ACHA, has expanded from a fringe hockey conference with a small handful of teams to a rising presence on southern campuses.

Last season, the conference featured 11 of the SEC's 12 teams, the only holdout being Kentucky, which already has a Division II hockey program. Louisiana State University suspended its program this season, leaving 10 SEC hockey teams. But, the rivalries have remained fierce -- both in and out of the conference.

"We play the Savannah Hockey Classic, a big two-day tournament in Savannah Georgia," Days says. "Every Martin Luther King weekend since 1998, it's always Georgia, Georgia Tech, Florida and Florida State. We now draw over 10,000 fans in two days to that tournament. Another in-state rivalry is Ole Miss and Mississippi State. Miss State draws 3,000 fans to their home games, which is almost unheard of at the club level.

"Some teams have rivalries with teams not in our conference, such as Georgia [SEC] and Georgia Tech [ACC]. You can put Georgia and Georgia Tech in a game of marbles and thousands of people will show up. So with hockey you get a nice crowd."

While rivalries traditionally rule college sports, one of the SEC's hottest, and least likely, hockey matchups lately has been Florida-Arkansas, two programs that have ruled the conference the past two years.

"I inherited a program that at that time was on disciplinary probation. In 2009, there were 35-40 people in the stands and seeing that number going up and up and has been a joy," Brian Gallini, Arkansas head coach and law professor told NHL.com. "The nature of the Razorback fan is unique. They'll support anything with a Razorback on it. Football, basketball and baseball obviously lead the attendance parade, but it wouldn't shock me if we were fourth on the list in terms of attendance and attention."

Winning has certainly helped draw both attendance and attention at Arkansas.

The Razorbacks have won the past two SEC championships, beating Florida both times; 6-2 in 2010 and 5-2 in 2011.

Led by head coach Mike Quenneville, a cousin of Blackhawk's coach Joel Quenneville, Alabama is another strong team looking for a shot at the Army Strong Championship Cup, the conference championship trophy. The trophy was formerly sponsored by the Atlanta Thrashers before the team moved to Winnipeg.

Currently, Alabama boasts a 6-1 mark this season while Florida (6-1) and Arkansas (6-0) were perched atop their respective divisions and looking forward to a championship rematch.

"The funny thing about Florida is both times we've played them it's been for the SEC title and in neutral locations," says

Gallini. "Meeting in back-to-back finals has created a rivalry. This year we'll finally see them during the regular season."

As the conference has expanded and improved, players from Europe have even started taking notice of collegiate club opportunities in the south.

The improving level of play was apparent in December, when the American Collegiate Hockey Association, the organization which oversees all collegiate club ice hockey, named six SEC teams (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Mississippi, Vanderbilt, and South Carolina) to its Top 15 rankings in the DIII South Region. The six ranked teams were the most the SEC has had at one time.

"Now we're getting players coming from all over the country and all over the world. We've had our share of Russians and kids from Sweden," says Day. "The main draw is the education. They [students] discover they can still play at the competitive level in the sport while getting a quality education."

Not to mention a taste of some of the most intense rivalries in sports.