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Classic celebration

Tailgating alumni, parties and high-stepping bands lend pizzazz to game week

By Yolanda Jones
yojones@commercialappeal.com
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The slogan for Southern Heritage Classic simply states, "It's all about the Game."

But after 16 years, the football game between Jackson State University and Tennessee State University has spiraled into a four-day homecoming celebration of alumni, family and friends, drawing major attention and funds to Memphis and the two historically black colleges.

The teams, both sporting blue and white and both with Tiger mascots, meet up Saturday at Liberty Bowl Memorial Stadium, but the festivities will have been in full swing for days.

Fred Jones is founder and producer of the Southern Heritage Classic, which pumped more than \$5.6 million into the Memphis economy in 2002, according to a study done that year by the Bureau of Sport Leisure Commerce at the University of Memphis.

But the total benefit doubles to \$11.2 million because dollars are re-spent, the study indicated.

Jones, president of Summitt Management Corp., an entertainment consulting business in Memphis, spearheaded and organized "the Classic," as it's been nicknamed, in 1990.

Since then the game has been televised on BET and attracts fans

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K-97 Summer Jam at Mid-South Coliseum featuring Jermaine Dupri, Friday night

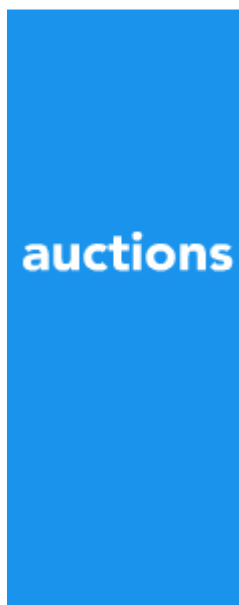
R&B concert featuring Stephanie Mills and Jeffrey Osborne, Grand Casino Tunica, Friday night

Parade featuring high school marching bands, along Park Avenue from Haynes to Airways, Saturday

Battle of the bands at Whitehaven High School stadium, Saturday

Southern Heritage Classic football game at Liberty Bowl Memorial Stadium, Saturday night

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from all over the country.

Southern Heritage Classic pictures, that is. If so, e-mail us your best pictures from the Classic. We will put them on our Web site, commercialappeal.com.

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"Technology from e-mails to computers have made it so much easier than when we started in 1990 to communicate and spread the word," Jones said. "Each year our numbers have grown as word has grown about the Classic."

(Despite damage from Hurricane Katrina in Jackson State's hometown of Jackson, Miss., Jones said the team is expected to make it here.)

Tailgating starts as early as Wednesday with people camping out to get their desired spots in and around the Liberty Bowl parking lot.

Planning has been in the works for a year and the event is expected to draw a crowd of around 40,000 over the next four days.

Not only has the Classic made its way onto the radar screen of advertisers -- FedEx and Coca-Cola among them -- targeting young black consumers, but the schools themselves have garnered attention in a time when many historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) are struggling maintain their existence.

"We have the tailgating and concerts but the weekend is about recruiting students for us," said Rubbie Patrick-Herring, president of the JSU Alumni Association in Memphis. "We have a saying at JSU, 'Do unto others what JSU has done for me.' We want this HBCU to be a positive role model for generations to come."

Gertrude Scruggs, president of TSU's alumni association in Memphis, agreed, adding "We're taking a slew of kids to the game to show them the Classic and talk to them about TSU and the opportunities the school has afforded so many."

Jackson State and Tennessee State, in Nashville, each receive \$250,000 for participating in the Classic, with \$230,000 going to the football teams and \$20,000 to each band.

In addition, the Southern Heritage Classic Foundation, the game's charitable arm, distributes \$20,000 in grants to four local organizations.

Grants total \$5,000 each and this year will be given to Kappa Alpha Psi Memphis Alumni Service Corp.; Downtown Porter Boys and Girls Club; National Coalition of 100 Black Women Inc., Memphis Chapter; and The Piney Woods School.

But thrown in with the recruiting and fund-raising is lots of entertainment.

Highlights include R&B and hip-hop concerts, tailgating parties and the much-anticipated half-time show at the game.

Last year, R&B superstar Usher kicked off the entertainment for the weekend and opened FedExForum with a sold-out concert.

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This year, old school and the new school will be represented at two concerts on Friday night.

Stephanie Mills and Jeffrey Osborne will get things started at an R&B show at the Grand Casino in Tunica on Friday.

Radio station WHRK-FM K-97's Summer Jam hip-hop concert has partnered with the Classic for the first time and will feature hip-hop mogul Jermaine Dupri and Memphis rappers, including Three 6 Mafia and Yo Gotti, on Friday at the Mid-South Coliseum.

Charlie Wilson, former front man of the 1980s R&B group The Gap Band, will be the final concert Saturday night at the Grand Casino in Tunica.

But for many the game's half-time show featuring the high-stepping bands -- Jackson State's Sonic Boom of the South and Tennessee State's Aristocrat of Bands -- is the high point of the weekend.

"People talk about the bands for a year," said Scruggs, who is a 1954 TSU graduate.

"You can just feel the excitement in the air as the Classic draws near," added Jones. "I was in the store and someone pulled me aside about the Classic. The Classic has been consistent from year one to year 16 and the tradition gets better each and every year."

-- Yolanda Jones: 529-2380



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