

Alliance names Jones Entrepreneur of the Year

By David Williams

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Fred Jones, whose Southern Heritage Classic has become a local sports and social institution, is the Entrepreneur of the Year for the National Alliance of Market Developers.

The NAMD, which focuses on the advancement of African-American business, will present that and other awards April 22 during its annual conference in Cleveland.

"I take it as a great honor, especially from people who are in the business and understand what it is that you do," said Jones, SHC founder and producer, president of Summitt Management and a limited partner of the NBA's Memphis Grizzlies.

"I'm most proud of the effect that (the SHC and the Grizzlies) have had on people. When you talk to people about the Southern Heritage Classic, about the Grizzlies, they are very appreciative of what they have meant, and are continuing to mean, to the community."

The Southern Heritage Classic football game, matching Tennessee State against Jackson State at Liberty Bowl Memorial Stadium, will be played for the 16th time on Sept. 10. The game routinely draws more than 50,000 fans and is the centerpiece of a multi-event weekend gathering.

It began in 1990 with one sponsor -- Coca-Cola -- in a struggling local sports market.

After nearly 40,000 fans watched that first game, Jones said, "I am going to have more corporate sponsorship in 1991, no question. With the success of the Classic in 1990 and the response from the media and the people on the street and the community in general, the corporate people are looking at us a lot differently now."

By the mid-1990s the game was consistently drawing 50,000 or more fans, which helped attract more sponsors.

The Classic had 23 sponsors for last year's game and is thriving even as the local sports market has reached perhaps its most competitive level in history -- from the opening of AutoZone Park to the arrival of the Grizzlies and opening of FedExForum to the rise of University of Memphis football.

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