

Football Country

The history of the Clemson – USC Rivalry

Every year, thousands of South Carolinians look forward to the coming of autumn with great anticipation. They aren't concerned about the changing weather, falling leaves, or striking colors. There is something much more intense on their minds – football. South Carolina has a longstanding tradition of football players and football fans. It can be seen at the high school and college levels, and many of the state's athletes have carried the tradition onto the professional ranks.

In nearly every town across the state, excitement builds around the annual meeting of two high school rival teams. This game determines bragging rights for the next year. The biggest rivalry in South Carolina – one that has lasted for over 100 years – is not at the high school level. It is between the University of South Carolina and Clemson, two teams with a long history of academics and (*often more importantly*) football.

The first football contest between these two universities took place on November 12, 1896. Both schools had been claiming for years to be superior to the other. A football game seemed like an appropriate way to decide the issue in true “gladiator-like” fashion. South Carolina College defeated Clemson Agricultural College on that day by a score of 12 to 6. The victory was short lived. Clemson won the next four meetings, and the rivalry has gone back and forth numerous times since.

When the two teams first met on “Big Thursday” in 1896, over 2,000 fans piled into a small stadium to watch the game. The rivalry became a fan favorite, and the number of spectators increased drastically over the first few decades. At the time, the game revolved around the state fair, so it was always played in Columbia near the fairgrounds. In 1959, the venue started to rotate between the two colleges, and Saturday replaced Thursday as game night. Today, it's not uncommon for over 80,000 fans to fill Clemson's “Death Valley” stadium to watch the two teams battle it out on the football field.

Like any great rivalry, the Clemson – USC match up has had its share of nail biters, and its share of blowouts. In the early 1930s, the University of South Carolina rallied behind running back Earl Clary – known as the “Gaffney Ghost” – to dominate the series. Clemson returned the favor in 1976 when its 28-9 victory kept USC from earning a spot in the Peach Bowl. In 1981, Clemson managed to hold off South Carolina and earn the highest honors in college football. The Tigers went undefeated that year and became national champions.

The Clemson – USC rivalry has especially sizzled in recent years. Throughout the 1990s, renowned coaches Bobby Bowden (*Clemson*) and Lou Holtz (*South Carolina*) have placed their teams in the national spotlight. In 2002, the two teams faced off for the 100th time in the longstanding competition (*Clemson won the game 27 to 20*).

There has been another interesting development in the Clemson – USC football rivalry. The intensity of the competition has spilled over into other sports. When Clemson faces off against South Carolina in baseball, basketball, or even volleyball, it is always easy to fill up the stands. Because these rivalries are so intense, they have improved the programs in all sports – not just football.