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A CIVIL WAR: Army vs. Navy--A Year Inside College Football's Purest Rivalry

By John Feinstein

Little, Brown. 412 pp. \$24.95.

Not all late autumn college football rivalries are created equal. When Gators snap at Seminoles or Buckeyes barrel into Wolverines, bowl berths and national championships are on the line. When Cornhuskers lock eyes with Buffaloes, some of those eyes peer beyond the game to NFL careers.

But it's different each December in neutral Philadelphia when the U.S. military and naval academies wage their annual war game on the gridiron as thousands of young cadets and midshipmen stand and cheer for three solid hours.

Although both teams have in recent years edged upward from mediocrity to adequacy (they'll enter Saturday's game with a combined 17-3 record), it's been more than three decades since either reached a major bowl (Navy, Cotton Bowl 1964), half a century since either was national champ (Army, 1945). Service athletes enshrined in greatness--Doc Blanchard, Glenn Davis, Joe Bellino, Roger Staubach--have long since grown grey.

Yet, next Saturday, when the Army and Navy teams take the field, their game will be tinged with an aura no other college football rivalry can boast, because rivalry isn't about difference but about similarity. Its intensity lies in struggle with the person most like oneself, say, a sibling.

And the teams from West Point and Annapolis, who psyche themselves up for their other opponents by declaring, "It's our way of life against theirs," can't do that with their brother student officers. They share a way of life.

In *A Civil War*, noted sportswriter John Feinstein (*A Season on the Brink*) traces that life through the 1995 football season, the collision course that culminated in last year's Army-Navy thriller, won by the Knights of the Hudson by one point after a last-minute length-of-the-field drive.

After some early background, in alternating chapters Feinstein follows the 1995 fortunes of each team as it tried to re-establish football respectability, no easy task for academies who in their glorious yesteryear regularly trounced powerhouses like Notre Dame and Penn State but now schedule cream puffs like San Diego State, Yale, Delaware and Bowling Green.

With glacial deliberateness, Feinstein traces capricious personnel changes, missed field goals, bowl aspirations and the ebbs and floods of hope.

And ultimately, as sportswriting, his book fails. It never generates the tension and aesthetic thrill that make sport exciting. Perhaps it has to do with the second-tier level of the teams involved. Perhaps it is simply that old sports news is very old indeed. But it feels as if even Feinstein's own enthusiasm for these long-forgotten Saturday afternoons is counterfeit.

Yet as human interest, as a series of portraits of gallant young men who serve their academies each Saturday, then go on to serve the rest of us for years afterward, this is an unusually warm read.

These men are a special breed. Says one coach, "At every other school in America, the hardest part of any football player's day is football practice. At the military academies, the *easiest* part of a football player's day is football practice." Simply surviving their first basic training summer leaves most freshmen players weakened and underweight.

There's Ryan Bucchianeri, the 155 pound Navy placekicker whose missed field goal and the subsequent *Sports Illustrated* story about it made him a pariah among his teammates.

There's Leon Gantt, the star wide receiver out of Livingston, Tex., recruited by the football powers, who chose Army because he wanted discipline and a medical career. And there's Akili King, the minister's son from Jackson, Miss. who always wanted to be a soldier, who was a brilliant Cadet running back on the field but unable to stay out of trouble off it.

Most touching of all is the story of Shaun Stephenson who enlisted in the Marines after high school and followed his brother Dion to Desert Storm. After Dion was killed at Khafji by friendly fire, Shaun was sent home and entered the Naval Academy, where he played wide receiver and wrote hard-hitting research papers about friendly fire casualties.

Only on its surface is this book about football. In football, half the people leave the field as losers. In this report of our midshipmen and cadets, losers are very hard to find.