

College Football

# Social media helping college teams start new traditions

By STEVE MEGARGEE  
Associated Press

In an era when it's increasingly difficult to get fans in the stadium, it apparently isn't so hard to get them into new rituals.

Average attendance at the Football Bowl Subdivision level has dipped nearly 6 1/2 percent over the last six years — from 46,632 in 2010 to 43,612 last season — and lagging student interest during the digital age is considered a factor. But in a sport that loves its history, the same technological advances that tempt fans to stay home also make it easier for programs start their own game-day traditions.

It has become apparent in Florida's last two games, as the Gators have mixed practices old and new. As is customary, Gator fans sing "We Are The Boys From Old Florida" at the end of the third quarter. Now they follow that up by singing along as the public-address system plays "I Won't Back Down" by Gainesville, Florida, native Tom Petty, who died Oct. 2.

The "We Are The Boys From Old Florida" sing-along has been going on for decades. The decision to play Petty's song right after the death, but fans knew what was planned because Florida announced its intentions beforehand.

Just like that, a potential new tradition was born.

"To see that after 'We Are The Boys,' to hear that place (sing) in unison, it was special," Florida coach Jim McElwain said. "Credit goes to the people who put it together, and more than that, the response of the fans. And, ultimately, 'I won't back



In this Oct. 14 photo, Florida fans wave cell phone lights and sing the Tom Petty song "I Won't Back Down" at the beginning of the fourth quarter of the team's NCAA college football game against Texas A&M in Gainesville, Fla. This is a new tradition to honor Gainesville native Tom Petty, who died earlier this month.

down' — it kind of hits home for me."

The quick turnaround of Florida's Petty project highlights the potential for social media to impact tradition making. For example, when a school wants to "stripe" its stadium in school colors, as West Virginia did last week before its game with Texas Tech, school officials merely remind fans on Twitter which color to wear based on where they'll be sitting.

"I think it's actually a little easier to start a tradition now in the digital age," Houston athletic department spokesman David Bassity said. "You're able to communicate and get information out ahead of time. I remember going back as a high-school student or in junior high with

season tickets to Oklahoma, they tried popping out the 'shock wave' — a wave from the first row to the very top row, like a vertical wave. But no one really knew about it until you got to the game and it was kind of a half buy-in. Now you have your digital platforms and you can let people know what you want to do. It becomes your own organic word of mouth."

Florida isn't alone. A number of programs have successfully launched new rituals. They may not be as old as the Friday night yell practice at Texas A&M or the rolling of Toomer's Corner at Auburn, but these practices have quickly become a part of their school's football culture:

**HAWKEYE WAVE:** No

new college football tradition has garnered quite as much attention this year as Iowa's friendly greeting. After the first quarter of home games, fans wave to patients at the UI Stead Family Children's Hospital that's adjacent to Kinnick Stadium. Patients and relatives often are looking out the window and waving back.

**HOUSTON'S 'CAGE SWAY':** After the Cougars finish their pregame warmups, they gather in front of the student section, lock arms and sway back and forth while engaging in a call-and-response with the students, who also are locking arms and swaying. The practice started in 2015. "The song had been one some of our players had kind of created



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a while back and was more of an inside-the-locker-room type of deal," Bassity said. "It became a matter of what if we do that with the student body before we go up to the locker room?"

**TOUCHING THE STATUE:** Ever since Arizona State unveiled a statue of former defensive back Pat Tillman outside the school's student-athlete facility just before the season, the Sun Devils have made a point of touching the statue as they head to the field before every home game.

"If you are going to go out there and touch that statue, you get out on that field and you bring it like he did," Arizona State coach Todd Graham said. "If we do that, great things are going to happen."

**HONORING BEAMER:** When Justin Fuente took over for the retiring Frank Beamer as Virginia Tech's coach last year, he chose to honor his predecessor by handing

out Beamer's retired No. 25 jersey to a special teams player of the week. Beamer's Virginia Tech teams were known for their exceptional special-teams performances.

**OPENING THE GATES AT WAKE:** Wake Forest has a prominent alum or former Demon Deacons athlete open the BB&T Stadium gate and lead the team onto the field for every home game. Former Wake Forest stars Arnold Palmer, Tim Duncan and Chris Paul have already taken a turn.

"It came out of our marketing department," Wake Forest athletic department spokesman Steve Shutt said. "We were looking for a way to recognize some of our alums and former athletes. When you have a famous person come back to campus rather than just have them stand up in a stadium and (have a public address announcer) say, 'Arnold Palmer's here today,' kind of put a little more meat to it."

# ALCS: Verlander coming off of 124-pitch complete game shutout in Game 2

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definitely have a lot more energy and confidence after outscoring the Astros 19-5 and outpitching them 25-12 in their three home games.

And they have already turned the tables on Dallas Keuchel, the other Astros ace who lost Game 5 after winning the series opener with 10 strikeouts over seven scoreless innings.

"Look at a number of other players that have been through playoffs, and they've had their struggles, and all of a sudden they can get hot," Yankees manager Joe Girardi said. "And I think everything is magnified when you're in the playoffs, and two games

seem like forever, where if you struggle two games in the season people don't say much."

The Yankees are one win away from their first AL pennant since 2009 and record 41st overall.

Houston has to win Verlander's start and then another game for its first AL pennant. The Astros were still in the National League for their only World Series appearance 12 years ago.

Verlander in Game 2 threw 124 pitches, exactly twice as many as Luis Severino did for the Yankees. That is also the starting matchup for Game 6.

Severino didn't take the mound for the fifth in Game 2, an inning after Girardi

and a trainer visited when the 23-year-old right-hander uncharacteristically wound his arm several times soon after giving up a solo homer to Carlos Correa. He stayed in, but then he was struck on the wrist of his no-throwing hand by a one-hopper that was the inning-ending out.

Afterward, Severino said he was fine — and that checked out with doctors — and had wanted to keep pitching.

Now he gets a chance to pitch the Yankees into the World Series.

"My (excitement) level is, I think it's a hundred," Severino said, adding he felt great after a strong bullpen session Wednesday.

Verlander made two

World Series starts as a rookie with Detroit in 2006, and made it again in 2012 with the Tigers, who completed a trade Aug. 31 to send him to Houston. General manager Jeff Luhnow has said that major league baseball approved that deal two seconds before the deadline for Verlander to be eligible to pitch in this postseason.

So what did the 34-year-old Verlander do in between starts after the 124 pitches last Saturday?

"I kind of stepped on the gas. I feel as good now as I've felt all year," Verlander said. "This is what we work so hard for. My workout regimen in the offseason, my throwing regimen in relief

shoulder regimen in season, all that stuff, this is when it pays off the most. ... I came out of that start better than almost any I have all year."

This ALCS so far has followed the same pattern as the 2001 World Series for New York, which then lost the first two games at Arizona before winning three in a row at Yankee Stadium.

That's where the Yankees would like the similarities to end. They lost 15-2 in Game 6 against Randy Johnson when Andy Pettitte started tipping his pitches. Roger Clemens started Game 7 for the Yankees against Curt Schilling, but it was Johnson who got his third win of the series pitching in relief

after the Diamondbacks scored twice in the ninth off Mariano Rivera for a 3-2 victory.

After having to win the AL wild-card game over Minnesota, then overcoming an 0-2 deficit to win the best-of-five AL Division Series, the Yankees are suddenly in an unusual position this postseason — leading a series.

"Yeah, it does feel different," Girardi said. "We've been on 'we have to win today, we can't afford to lose today for a number of reasons.' But I still think the attitude will be the same, win one game. That is what we've kind of talked about, and that's kind of what we've stuck to around here."

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