

Pitt, Penn State rivalry ramping up ahead of 2016 return

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Penn State defensive coordinator Bob Shoop laughed as soon as the question was finished, grinning and shaking his head at the mention of his university's rivalry with Pitt ramping back up.

The two teams will meet in 2016 for the first time since 2000, but Shoop refused to talk about it.

"I'm not allowed to answer that," Shoop said, still chuckling. "All I know is that we played against Temple on Sept. 5 on Lincoln Financial Field."

Shoop might not be permitted to talk about it, but there's been plenty of chatter across the state of Pennsylvania. With Pitt bringing in a new, energetic coaching staff and James Franklin entering his second season with the Nittany Lions, the rivalry seems to be making its return at the right time.

Both coaching staffs appear focused on the importance of recruiting western Pennsylvania players and keeping the state's top players at home. And if there was any doubt that the rivalry is alive and well, it was put to rest early in the year, when members of both staffs sent not-so-subtle jabs back and forth on Twitter.

Game on.

The social media exchanges didn't go unnoticed by high school coaches in the area, including Central Valley's Mark Lyons and Beaver Falls' Ryan Matsook ("There's been a little bit of a rivalry here, and they haven't even played a game," Lyons said). Both coaches sense a renewed energy, not only in the rivalry, but within each program due to the schools' respective coaching staffs.

And with talent on the upswing in western Pennsylvania, it couldn't be coming at a better time.

“You hear the phrase all the time, they want to build a fence around the state,” Lyons said of both schools making an extra push in the region. “It’s them making a conscious effort.”

“A lot of Pennsylvania players have gone to the Marylands and West Virginias and Virginias,” said Matsook, who coaches Donovan Jeter, a sophomore defensive tackle being recruited by Pitt and Penn State. “There’s not one thing wrong with those respective schools, but (Pitt’s and Penn State’s) rosters should be littered with not only WPIAL players, but Pennsylvania players.”

Pitt currently has 36 WPIAL players on its roster. Penn State has four. But the Nittany Lions had the No. 15 recruiting class in 2015, according to [Rivals.com](#), bringing in 11 four-star recruits. Pitt, in the midst of yet another coaching change, was ranked No. 66.

When Central Valley star Jordan Whitehead picked Pitt, [first committing to former coach Paul Chryst, then choosing to stay when Pat Narduzzi took over](#), Matsook called it not just a big win for Pitt, but for the state of Pennsylvania. Penn State was also among Whitehead’s final schools along with West Virginia and Ohio State. [The Panthers also plucked standout athlete Dane Jackson out of Cornell/Quaker Valley.](#)

“Western Pennsylvania is very important,” said Penn State defensive recruiting coordinator Terry Smith, the former head coach at Gateway High School in Monroeville. “The talent level in this area is growing. Western Pennsylvania used to be at a high level and then it dipped a little bit, but now it’s coming back and it’s a lot of young talent. It’s really important for us to number one, put a boundary up around the state. We can’t let our elite talent leave the state.”

But while Smith is focused on bringing Pennsylvania’s players to State College, he knows sometimes giving a player what he wants is out of the coaches’ control.

“We’re different worlds than Pitt,” Smith said. “Pitt’s in the city. If a kid wants the city, we cannot offer the city. The key for us is to make we get those kids on campus to see how beautiful University Park really is. Then the recruiting will start to take shape.”

Pitt doesn’t have that problem.

Western Pennsylvania kids are already familiar with the city and often with the campus. Pitt director of football operations and Aliquippa native Chris LaSala said it's always been a goal for Pitt coaches to keep players from western Pennsylvania at home.

"You don't have to teach those guys," he said. "They've grown up around Pittsburgh. It's important to those kids before they even get here. It's big for many schools to keep their local prospects at home for many reasons: For their fans, for their university and for the kids and the kids' families."

If the looming return of the rivalry is accomplishing anything, it's bringing some buzz back to Pennsylvania football. Both teams put together mediocre seasons last year, with Penn State finishing 7-6 and Pitt finishing 6-7.

But the Panthers got a complete makeover with Narduzzi, and with such a strong recruiting class coming in, Penn State has a reason to be optimistic.

"No knock to the old (Pitt) staff, but I think this new staff is really great and it starts with the leader," Lyons said. "They have been energetic. There seems to be a sense of confidence in what they are doing, and it spills over into their conversation. Every time you get the opportunity to talk to one of them, you can feel the confidence in what they are doing."

Matsook has been long awaiting the return of Pitt-Penn State games. Even now, the schools aren't guaranteed to play beyond 2019. But he believes having the rivalry game return can only help recruiting for both programs.

Players want to be a part of games like that.

Referencing the Twitter battle, Matsook said the return of the interstate rivalry has been duly noted. And that's not only good for both programs, but for the state of the sport in Pennsylvania.

"I think (not playing) has been a huge blow to kids wanting to leave the state," Matsook said. "As a Pennsylvania resident and a football fan and just growing up and being a part of the Pitt-Penn State rivalry, it's ridiculous how, in big-time college athletics, people don't see that that's valuable and the importance of that."

“They should play. It’s a direct reflection of the state of both programs that they don’t. Hopefully, renewing it will bring a buzz.”

For the players, perhaps the rivalry’s biggest drawing point is that many of them not only were recruited by both schools, but also know each other. Some played on the same team, LaSala said, or against each other. And with the growing amount of community and AAU basketball teams, it’s becoming more likely that Pitt and Penn State players crossed paths at some point.

The current players might not quite understand it yet. They haven’t lived it. But the battle between the schools is already simmering, even though there’s still another season left before they will meet on the football field for the first time in 16 years.

While the conversations have cooled on Twitter, there’s little doubt the intensity will just keep building until then.

“It’s the supremacy of who is the best college football program between the big two in Pennsylvania,” Lyons said. “East vs. West, that kind of thing.”