

## SPORTS

# From Botetourt to Boston: Zack Kelly hopes for early re- turn to Major League Baseball after injury

*The former Lord Botetourt star, who labored in the minors before getting called up to the Red Sox last year, faces arm surgery after an injury.*



by **Steve Hemphill**

April 29, 2023



Zack Kelly and his son, Kayden, with his parents at spring training. His father, Reed Kelly, is the former sheriff of Botetourt County. Courtesy of Kelly

Zack Kelly knew something wasn't right as soon as the baseball left his hand.

As the pain started to shoot through his elbow, hundreds of thoughts were shooting through his mind — and at that point, not too many were good thoughts.

Photos that circulated from that day corroborated his feelings. The free agent pitcher from Daleville, who had clawed way from Division II college baseball to four seasons of minor league baseball with three different organizations, had

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secured a major-league roster spot with the Boston Red Sox just a couple of weeks before that mid-April Wednesday night in St. Petersburg, Fla.



Zack Kelly was injured during this game with Tampa Bay on April 12.

“Something didn’t feel right,” said Kelly, who attended and played baseball for Lord Botetourt High School. “I kind of felt something out of the ordinary for the better part of that outing. It felt like every time I went to throw, my elbow was kind of stretching apart.

“I was just trying to get through the inning. Then finally on that last pitch, I ended up hitting [Rays infielder Yaddy Diaz] and I knew I wasn’t going to be able to keep throwing.”

Kelly talked about that game with the Tampa Bay Rays earlier this week. Any sadness or anxiety that he was experiencing on April 12 has passed and the attitude that has helped him get this far is back in place.

The news from the Red Sox medical staff was not great, but Kelly knows it could have been a lot worse.

At some time in early May, Kelly, 28, will head to Alabama to have a nerve in his pitching elbow reattached. The procedure requires about four months of rehabilitation before a patient is ready to return to the field.

“All things considered, it’s not as bad as I thought it could be when I first went down,” he said.

He now looks at his current injury as just another chapter of his baseball story — one that still has plenty of chapters ahead.

Prior to his third season in the L.A. Angels' minor league system, Kelly had felt something odd with the elbow in his pitching arm. The diagnosis was that he tore his ulnar collateral ligament, which usually leads to what's known as Tommy John surgery.

From his high school days at Lord Botetourt in Daleville, through his college career, which started at Concord University in West Virginia and then continued at Newberry College in South Carolina, Kelly had avoided injuries as he built a promising resume as a right-handed pitcher.

He was not drafted following his senior year in 2017, but did agree to sign with the Oakland Athletics and join the club's rookie-league team in Arizona. The invitation came with a \$500 signing bonus.

The A's released him after spring training in 2018, but he quickly moved on to the Angels, where he spent the next two seasons in their system.

The Angels released him but were still on the hook to get Kelly's injury repaired. All this was happening in the spring of 2020 — just before the world was going to be shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

A second opinion provided Kelly with a better-sounding option. He was a prime candidate to have his UCL reattached — a procedure that has a shorter recovery time. Kelly said the nerve he now has to have reattached had to be moved during his UCL surgery, so what happened is a byproduct of the first procedure.

During isolation, Kelly spent the time rehabbing and contemplating what would come next. COVID restrictions where he and his wife, Brittany, were living in South Carolina were not as severe as some other states, but certain precautions had to be taken.

He says now he also benefited from some of the prohibitions.

Other than the shortened and fan-less Major League season, professional baseball went on a season-long hiatus as Kelly recovered. And in addition to the lost 2020 season, the league's owners decided along the way that the number of leagues and teams in the minor leagues would be reduced. Less teams means less roster spots.

“There were definitely some challenges to it,” Kelly said. “You had to know where you were allowed to go and not go. But it was probably most beneficial that I didn't miss any games. Nobody got any more game experience.”

Sport rehab is not the most enjoyable experience for many professional athletes. Kelly said he enjoyed it. He's approaching it this time in the same manner.

“I’m excited about it,” he said. “When I had my [previous surgery], I was able to focus just on my body, getting stronger, more flexible and putting my body into a better condition moving forward.”

“I took a huge stride as a pitcher in the weight room and training room [in 2020]. I came back so much stronger. I’d much rather be pitching and being with the team, but I’m trying to look at it as a positive.”

There is one big difference for Kelly as he begins this rehab stint. Unlike his free-agent status in 2020, the Red Sox are sticking by their pitcher – and for good reason.

As Kelly’s rehab progressed, he worked on finding a new agent. In the interim, he was representing himself — contacting scouts who might be looking for players like him. He eventually hooked up with a New York City-based agent John Carcione, who said he only needed to watch a few videos of Kelly in action before he was ready to join forces.

“In terms of pitching, his stuff, his changeup — everything — he was nasty,” Carcione said. “So I gave him a call back. ... We just clicked from there on out.”

Shortly after that, Kelly was signed by the Red Sox and was ready to resume his career.

During his two minor league seasons in Boston’s farm system, Kelly was a regular on its top-prospects list. He spent the first half of 2021 with Double-A Portland (Maine) Sea Dogs, where he had a 3-1 record, with 40 strikeouts, five saves and a 1.69 ERA in 21 appearances. That was good enough to earn a mid-year promotion to Triple-A Worcester. He appeared mostly in middle relief in 15 games, going 1-0 with 29 strikeouts and 2.89 ERA while surrendering just six walks.

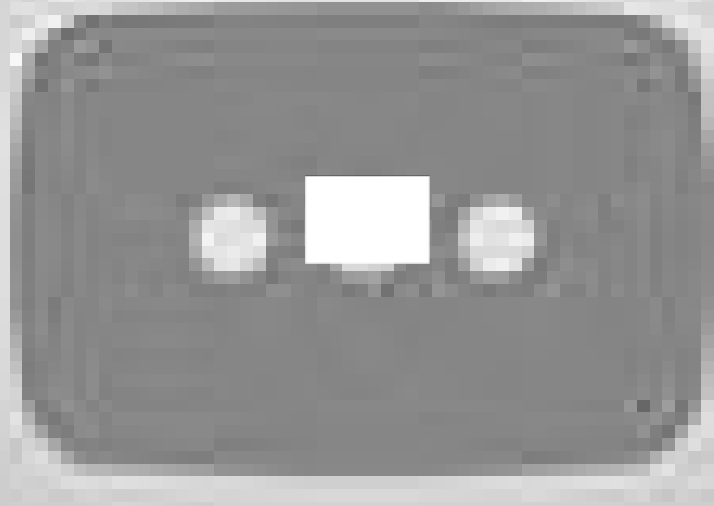
In 2022, Kelly continued to excel. He appeared in 44 games for the WooSox, had a 6-3 record with three saves and struck out 72 batters – his best total since he had struck out 83 in Double-A Mobile in 2019, where the Angels affiliate used him primarily as a starter.

All that was left at that point was to see if the Red Sox wanted to see what Kelly could do in the Majors. The 2022 season was not great for the Red Sox. The roster was in a constant flux due to injuries and in-season trades and they spent much of the season in the lower half of the American League East Division. By August, Carcione said it was obvious that Kelly deserved a chance to see what he could contribute.

“We were kind of just waiting for it to happen,” Carcione said. “It was getting close to the end of the year, and I was kind of being a little bit of a pest toward the team. I was asking ‘what are we waiting on?’”

Carcione said on Aug. 29 of last year – the agent’s birthday – Kelly called to tell him the wait was over.

“It was a long time coming,” Carcione said. “He had two great seasons [in the minors] and it was great when he got moved up to Triple-A. But him finally getting that call was unbelievable. .... It just goes to show that he’s got the stuff.”



Zack Kelly highlights from 2022.

Kelly's debut came one night later on the road against the Minnesota Twins. He came in for the sixth inning and struck out two batters while giving up a hit in a 4-2 loss. In the following game, Kelly needed just nine pitches to get out of a perfect seventh inning, striking out one along the way.

He appeared in 13 games during his time in Boston that season, finishing with a 3.95 ERA with 14 hits, 11 strikeouts and 4 walks.

It was also during his first month in the majors that Brittany gave birth to their son Kayden.



Zack Kelly during spring training in Fort Myers. Courtesy of Kelly.

This past spring Kelly pitched well enough to hold onto his roster spot, which meant he began the 2023 season with his first major league contract – the league minimum this season is \$720,000. That’s a long way from the \$500 that came with his first pro deal.

“The one thing about Zack is that it’s never been about the money.” Carcione said. “I think now that he’s getting compensated pretty well, that just shows that he belonged there the whole time.”

In the couple of weeks that have passed since Kelly’s injury, Carcione said he has been impressed with how much attention his client has received from the Red Sox. He said they have heard from nearly every person on the coaching staff and front office, and the medical team will be overseeing Kelly’s recovery at their spring training facility in Fort Myers, Florida.



“The Red Sox are world-class,” Carcione said. “They want Zack to recover and be available as soon as he can. We hope he can get back by the last month of the season.”

Although his wife and son had relocated with him to the Boston area, Kelly said one bright spot about being injured right now is that while he rehabs, he will have plenty of time to spend with Kayden, who at 7 months old is always ready for the next adventure.

“Once he was able to move, he can’t sit still,” Kelly said. “He always wants what he can’t have, so we’re busy.”

Kelly said he hopes his post-op stay in Florida is not too long. He is excited to get back to Boston so he continues his recovery with the Red Sox medical team and gets back with his teammates.

“If you had told me when I graduated high school in 2013 that I’d still be playing baseball 10 years later, I probably would have laughed at you,” Kelly said. “I’m definitely fortunate to still be playing. ... To get to go to Fenway Park to go to work every day is something that I would have never dreamed of in a million years.”



Zack Kelly with Kayden and Brittany at Fenway Park. Courtesy of Kelly.

## SPORTS

# How Roanoke's minor league hockey team kept its fan base during a pandemic shutdown

*Even though a season was canceled, the owners kept paying the staff, which spent the time revamping the team's operations.*



by **Steve Hemphill**

October 19, 2023



Fans cheer on the Roanoke Rail Yard Dawgs as they play for the league championship in May 2023. Photo by Stephen Blue / Sideline Media. Courtesy of Rail Yard Dawgs.

The past couple of vacations were shorter than usual for the Roanoke Rail Yard Dawgs.



That's maybe the lone hardship for a hockey team that keeps playing for league championships.

For the second year in a row, no Dawgs are howling about the shortened offseason.

Last May, the Rail Yard Dawgs celebrated their first SPHL championship by clinching the best-of-five series with a 2-1 win over the Birmingham Bulls in front of 5,394 loyal and rabid fans at the Berglund Center.

The championship came a year after the Dawgs — as they are known to most loyal fans — reached the SPHL's championship series for the first time, losing that series in four games to the Peoria Rivermen.

On Friday, Roanoke begins its quest for a second straight President's Cup on home ice against the Fayetteville Marksmen. In the pregame, the team's championship banner will be unfurled at the arena, giving everyone one more chance to revel in what represents a triumph that came because of a unique combination of commitment among the franchise's ownership group, front office, coaching staff, players and — most importantly — fans.

Dawgs team captain Mac Jansen said last week that claiming a second trophy now becomes just as important as winning that first.

“I wouldn't want to say that losing [the championship series] was easier,” he said. “but when you win it, and you get a little taste, all you want to do is get back.”

In the realm of team sports, reaching a peak such as the Rail Yard Dawgs did last spring often involves crawling out of some valleys along the way, including dealing with injuries, slumps and problems with team chemistry.

Back in 2020, Roanoke, like the rest of the world, found itself in a depression.



Roanoke's Nick Ford (in blue) faces off against Jared Bethune of the Birmingham Bulls in the 2023 championship series in May. Photo by Stephen Blue / Sideline Media. Courtesy of Rail Yard Dawgs.

## Sudden stop

The rumors of the incoming danger started to surface over a weekend that the Dawgs' players and coaches were probably not paying much attention to the news cycle and an emerging story about a growing health emergency that had reached the West Coast.

The team arrived home from Illinois early Monday morning after one of the more treacherous road trips of the season — two games in Moline followed by a rare Sunday afternoon tilt in Peoria against the league-leading Rivermen. After splitting its games with the Quad City Storm, Roanoke fell 3-2 to Peoria but had reason to be encouraged about what lay ahead.

One more road trip to Birmingham remained before the final seven games of the season would be played at home.

The scheduling definitely favored the Rail Yard Dawgs, who were on the cusp of clinching a fourth straight trip to the SPHL playoffs. Interest in the team had gradually increased since the league announced in 2015 that it was placing a franchise in Roanoke and played its first game at the Berglund Center in the fall of 2016.

The Dawgs averaged nearly 4,000 in attendance in their six February home games, including a season-high 5,561 on Feb. 22. As the playoffs drew closer, so did interest in the team.

On Wednesday, March 11, the momentum came to a screeching halt.

News broke early that evening that the mysterious virus still unknown to most Americans — COVID-19 — had infected movie superstar Tom Hanks. A few hours later, the NBA suspended its basketball season after Utah Jazz center Rudy Gobert had tested positive for the same virus prior to a scheduled game in Oklahoma City.

The next day, college basketball followed the example of the NBA, as conference tournaments were put on hold. Major League Baseball, which had reached the homestretch of spring training, also ceased operations.

The SPHL followed suit, opting to put the weekend slate of games on hold, but there was still hope in the early days of the pandemic.

As was the case with many minor league franchises around the country, the 2019-20 season never resumed.



Jamie McGinn, principal owner of the Roanoke Rail Yard Dawgs, hoists the championship trophy in May 2023. He played for six different NHL teams over his career. Photo by Stephen Blue / Sideline Media. Courtesy of Rail Yard Dawgs.

## Games put on ice

So what had been considered good news just a few days earlier — hosting a long homestand to wrap up the regular season — became a financial crisis. The seven games that were never played represented 25% of the Dawgs' home schedule,

general manager Mickey Gray said.

“When I voted with the board of governors to cancel the remainder of the 2019-20 season — and when you get into this, you never think you’re going to have to do something like that,” Gray said. “Both personally and professionally that was very difficult to do.”

As the country inched its way back over the next year from mandatory mask-wearing, social distancing and remote work schedules, professional sports began its recovery as well.

With several franchises located in conservative-leaning Southern states with fewer COVID restrictions, the SPHL announced that the teams that were allowed to resume playing would.

But in Virginia, restrictions were still in place when the next season was set to begin in October 2020, and the Rail Yard Dawgs had no choice but to suspend play.

Without a team, all the Dawgs’ players became free agents. That could have been the case as well for the front office, which would have been understandable.

As Gray put it, there would be at least 18 months in between the Dawgs’ last home game in February 2020 and their first game back in October 2021. Laying off the front office would have been understandable, but that’s not the path the principal owners of the team, led by longtime NHL player Jamie McGinn, chose to handle the situation.

“The very next morning [after the 2019-20 season was canceled], I got a phone call from [Jamie], and he said, ‘I know yesterday was a bad day, but I just want you to know we’ve got you guys. All the checks are going to clear. If you need anything give me a call,’” Gray said. “When your owner calls you the day after you voted to cancel an entire season and cost [the owners] hundreds of thousands of dollars, for him to come back and say that meant a lot to us.”

Gray said he and his staff were determined to make sure they were earning their paychecks.

He and team vice president Alexandra Crutchfield spent hours going through every detail of the franchise’s operation.

“We joke about it now, but it was miserable at the moment,” Gray said. “But we were very direct that we didn’t want to waste that time. So we locked ourselves in a room with a giant whiteboard, and dissected and argued and ripped apart every aspect of our operation.”

The results of the work started to show once the Dawgs announced that the team would begin play again in October 2021, Gray said.

Strategies for its full-time staff — usually about six or seven people — to be as efficient as possible were put in place, as were ways for its two-person ticketing and merchandise team to increase engagement with fans. Gray said Crutchfield also delved into the world of social media with the goal of finding better ways to engage with the public there.

“While I hated COVID and that time was awful for a lot of people, we were fortunate to be able to [remain] employed and take that deep dive and look at what we were doing and what we could do better,” Gray said.



Dan Bremner, head coach of the Roanoke Rail Yard Dawgs. Photo by Stephen Blue / Sideline Media. Courtesy of Rail Yard Dawgs.

## The man is here to coach

The McGinns also kept paying head coach Dan Bremner, who had been named the team’s head coach in the middle of the 2017-18 season and had led the Dawgs to the playoffs the two years prior to the COVID shutdown.

Providing Roanoke with a winning hockey team had become just a part of his mission in Southwest Virginia.

Shortly after arriving in town, he co-founded the Vinton-based Virginia Hockey Lab, which was there not just to benefit his team, but also to help build interest in ice hockey throughout the Roanoke Valley.

With no players of his own to coach downtown, Bremner shifted his attention to anyone else with a pair of skates and a stick.

“I kind of buried myself in youth hockey,” Bremner said. “I coached probably every team at some point during that COVID season, from kids just learning how to skate all the way up to 18-U teams. I was able to travel and go to



tournaments with them. It was a great opportunity for me to embed myself into that youth hockey community.

“I never stopped coaching, and it was awesome to see them grow. ... There were all kinds of restrictions on these poor kids, yet they loved the game and were able to get through it.”

McGinn said he had admired the dedication and approach Bremner had displayed since arriving in Roanoke. What he saw during the pandemic was just as important.

“One of the things we always talked about for our coach was that he had to be passionate about the game, he’s got to be well prepared, he’s got to be committed to Roanoke, and great in the community,” McGinn said. “I think Dan checks all of those boxes.

“He’s definitely fiery, but the thing we love about him is that he’s helping out with youth hockey, and he’s instilled himself to where he’s a celebrity in this community. People are watching what he’s doing all the time, so the fact that he’s giving back to the community and helping coach for us is huge. Now they all want to come to the games and play hockey.

“Maybe in the future, we can get one of these kids to be a Dawg one day.”

Bremner also kept in touch with many of the players on his team that parted ways early in 2020.



Roanoke Rail Yard Dawgs captain Mac Jansen accepts the President's trophy after Roanoke defeated Birmingham in Game 4 of the SPHL championship series. Photo by Stephen Blue / Sideline Media. Courtesy of Rail Yard Dawgs.

## Dawgs for life

Jansen, along with veteran Dawgs Matt O'Dea and CJ Stubbs, found work in the Federal Prospects Hockey League, which also had several teams that were allowed to play. The trio helped the Georgia-based Columbus River Dragons to the Ignite Cup championship. Jansen even had a goal in the last game of the final series.

But once the season ended, Jansen said he and his longtime teammates were back to being Dawgs.

Bremner said getting some of the former players back was important, especially when he discovered that rebuilding the team's chemistry and getting back to where things stood 18 months earlier was more difficult than he expected.

"We are pretty fortunate to have a core group of guys who are pretty set on being Dawgs," Jansen said. "We have plans as a group and as a team to do some special things. We've understood that with this group, we can do special things. The past two years, with last year winning it and the year before that being right there."

Jansen, Stubbs and O'Dea all returned for the 2021-22 season, as did right winger Josh Nenadal, among others.

When they did eventually get back into town, they found that even though the team had been gone for a while, the fans had not forgotten them. That part of the Dawgs' operation may be the most important piece of the whole puzzle.



Young fans cheer on the team. The Rail Yard Dawgs were surprised by how much team merchandise they sold even when the team wasn't playing during the pandemic. Photo by Stephen Blue / Sideline Media. Courtesy of Rail Yard Dawgs.

## The Dawgs and their rabid fans

When the McGinn brothers — Jamie, Tye and Brock — and their father, Bob McGinn, first started looking into buying and placing a minor league hockey franchise, they received an invitation from Berglund Center general manager Robyn Schon to visit the Roanoke Valley, an area the Canadian family knew nothing about, and see what the area might provide them. The brothers, who have all played in the National Hockey League, were interested in investing in a community that would support the endeavor. They made a deal with the Berglund Center with the plan to begin play in the fall of 2016.





Bob McGinn with the championship trophy. He and his three sons, all former NHL players, own most of the team. Photo by Stephen Blue / Sideline Media. Courtesy of Rail Yard Dawgs.

As soon as the agreement was in place, the Rail Yard Dawgs Booster Club came into being, with big plans on how to make its new hockey team feel welcome.

Just as the Dawgs' run to championship had its ups and downs, so did the spirit of hockey fans in the Roanoke Valley. Since the mid-1960s, hockey franchises had come and gone. There had been a Roanoke Valley-based team in the ECHL for more than two decades between 1983 and 2004, but other than a one-year try with the Roanoke Valley Vipers in the now-defunct United Hockey League in 2005, local fans did not have a professional team to root for.

Still, the Dawgs' booster club had a solid base right from the start; the club's mission has changed little since its inception. Members got to work right away in finding housing options for the incoming players. When the Dawgs got to their homes, they found them stocked with food and other household items. After home games, the team had a meal waiting for them.

And during the games, the boosters and other season ticket holders made sure the Dawgs knew they were playing at home.

"One of the walls we had to break down was that fans didn't have trust in [past] owners," Jamie McGinn said. "Then you get a few Canadians coming in who want to own a team in Roanoke, Virginia — I think they put the wall up right away."

“So our commitment to the Roanoke Valley was that we’re going to be here for a long time. I think we were still struggling the first couple of years to break down that wall. But then we signed another lease, and we kept our employees hired during COVID. Now people know that we’re committed and that we love the city.”

When COVID put everything on hold, the Dawgs found out their fans didn’t just go away.

Gray said he discovered just how strong the club’s bond with its fans had become when his staff started the process of refunding ticket holders for the lost games in 2020.

“We were fortunate for our fan base,” Gray said. “We had some fans forgiving refunds for season tickets that they were owed for the games that weren’t played. We had fans who told us to hold onto the money, we know you’re coming back.

“And the amount of merchandise they were willing to buy while we were shut down to help us keep the lights on was fantastic.”

Jansen said the players found out they weren’t going to be forgotten either. Some of the team’s biggest boosters even made their way to Georgia to catch some River Dragons games. And when the team resumed operations on Oct. 15, 2021, 4,136 fans were there to see it.

“It’s just a growing, passionate fan base,” Jansen said. “Some of us who have been here for quite a while have seen the rise of how passionate these fans are and how hungry they are for a successful sports team. ... We don’t pack the place every night, but it sure sounds packed. When you get 3,000 or 4,000 fans in here, it sounds like there’s 10,000.”





Fans packed the Berglund Center for the championship series. Roanoke had the third highest attendance in the 11-team league during the 2022-2023 season. Photo by Stephen Blue / Sideline Media. Courtesy of Rail Yard Dawgs.

There probably wasn't much talk about the COVID days back in May when the Dawgs needed two wins to claim their first championship — just a lot of cheering. With the series tied at 1-1, the Dawgs beat Birmingham 5-4 in overtime to win Game 3, then clinched the title the next night. The attendance average for the two nights was 5,306.

And among the fans in the stands were all three McGinn brothers.



Tye McGinn is one of the team owners. He's played for four different NHL teams and is now playing professionally in Germany. Photo by Stephen Blue / Sideline Media. Courtesy of Rail Yard Dawgs.





Brock McGinn, another one of the co-owners, accepts the trophy from his father. He's played for three different NHL teams and is currently on the roster for a fourth, the Anaheim Ducks. Photo by Stephen Blue / Sideline Media. Courtesy of Rail Yard Dawgs.

"I don't know if there's a word in the English language to describe how happy, excited, etc. ... that they were," Gray said of his bosses. "It was kind of cool. All three McGinn brothers — all of them who have played hockey at the highest level — were able to come down and accept the trophy. They got to be fans and sit here and watch this. It was great."

As the Rail Yard Dawgs' seventh season gets underway, the fans know their team will be in the valley for an extended amount of time. Prior to this season, the two sides agreed to extend the relationship between the club and arena for five more years, keeping the Dawgs in the Berglund Center through the 2027-28 season. This contract followed a pair of three-year deals that were made prior to the 2016-17 and 2019-20 seasons.

"It wasn't a high-pressure kind of thing," Gray said. "We wanted to be here, they wanted us here, and we made a deal that benefits everyone."

As usual, training camp has been a slog for the Dawgs, Jansen said, but it will all be worth it when the puck is dropped on Friday. He's ready to hear the home crowd cheer on the Dawgs, while making life rough on the visiting Marksmen.

"That's why a lot of the guys play this game," Jansen said. "To play in front of families who care about you."

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SPORTS

## 'Virginia's Championship City' marks a major milestone with Stagg Bowl

Salem on Friday hosts the 50th Stagg Bowl — and the city's 102nd NCAA championship.

by **Steve Hemphill**  
 December 14, 2023



Mount Union celebrates its 2015 Stagg Bowl victory, one of 13 Division III championships it won at Salem Stadium. Courtesy City of Salem.

The Amos Alonzo Stagg Bowl turns 50 on Friday night when Cortland and North Central face off for the NCAA Division III football national championship.

And a milestone game deserves to be played somewhere that recently reached a notable benchmark of its own.

The nationally televised championship (7 p.m. ESPNU) returns to its longtime home: Salem Stadium, which hosted every Stagg Bowl between 1993 and 2017. And while the NCAA decided back in the mid-2010s that it wanted to take the game to other venues, it also decided that the 50th edition needed to be played in the city that now has a dyed-in-the-wool association with the NCAA and its Division II and III championships.

“We got it because the committee wanted to reward Salem for 25 years of hosting,” said Carey Harveycutter, the city’s longtime director of civic facilities, who now carries the title of director of tourism. “And we only wanted it on the 50th. So, if they hadn’t canceled the 2020 game, we would have had this in ’22.”





Carey Harveycutter (left), and ODAC commissioner Brad Bankston at the 2010 Stagg Bowl. Courtesy City of Salem.

When you add all the other basketball, baseball, softball, soccer, volleyball and lacrosse championships that had been determined within the city limits, Friday's game will be title game No. 100 ... and 102.

OK, that milestone is a little off — blame the Division III men's and women's soccer trophies that were handed out at the beginning of the month.

For those keeping track, that's one of the few times Harveycutter's timing has been off on the part of his professional career that he never dreamed would be included on his resume.

As director of civic facilities, Harveycutter's job was to find potential clients to fill dates in the city's various venues. At that point, he had proven to be good at his job, but not in a sporting sense.

Concerts were his specialty back then, and a few years earlier, he was also part of the brain trust that turned the facility's massive parking lot into the Salem Fair.

But by the early 1990s, Harveycutter was eyeing a new whale of a client — the NCAA. And the target was a big one. Salem wanted to host a football championship. And the plan was to treat the event just like they would if Taylor Swift was coming to town.

“We wanted the game because we thought it would be a great football game to have,” Harveycutter said. “It was after the high school season, so we wouldn't have to worry about the turf.

“We had no idea it would grow into what it became.”



Mount Union's fans were regular visitors to Salem during the 25 years it hosted the Stagg Bowl. The Purple Raiders reached the Stagg Bowl 20 times during that span. Courtesy of City of Salem.

## The first game

All these years later, Harveycutter still shivers just a little when he recalls the weather conditions on Dec. 11, 1993.

The modern-day Stagg Bowl had been played 20 times before making its first appearance in Salem. The chairman of the NCAA Division III Football Committee at the time, Moose Malmquist, felt that the event needed a change of scenery.

“The exact quote was: ‘I want this to be the best damn championship these boys have ever been in,’” Harveycutter said.

In the end, Salem was awarded the next three championships, beginning in 1993. It would be the highest-profile college football game to be played in the Roanoke Valley since the traditional VMI-Virginia Tech Thanksgiving weekend game at old Victory Stadium was abandoned after the 1971 season.

“When they made the bid, I think it became an entire regional push,” said Mike Stevens, who at the time was a sportscaster on WDBJ-TV in Roanoke but now serves as the City of Salem’s director of communications. “We couldn’t have gotten the game from the NCAA if we had not shown them what was available in the Roanoke Valley.”

And while Harveycutter could assure the NCAA’s site selection committee that Salem had a quality stadium, plenty of available hotel rooms and a variety of food options for visitors, he did his best to sidestep climate concerns.

As anyone who has lived in Southwest Virginia knows, December weather patterns in the area are quite unpredictable. So Harveycutter decided to play the odds.

“When we submitted the bid, we told the committee that the average temperature in mid-December was 50 degrees, the chance of rain was about 10%. Snow — less than half of 1%.”

The 1993 Stagg Bowl featured two first-time qualifiers, Mount Union College of Ohio and the recently renamed Rowan University of New Jersey. When they arrived in the Roanoke Valley, they enjoyed the mild late-fall conditions Harveycutter promised.

Game day was different.



Despite nearly 20 inches of snow falling in the previous 24 hours, Salem's city workers managed to get Salem Stadium and the surrounding roads in working order for the 2009 Stagg Bowl. Courtesy City of Salem.

A cold front arrived in the valley, and it brought its old friend the wind. Salem's championship committee had expected as first-time hosts that some issues might pop up. The weather helped enhance some of those problems.

"At game time, there was about a minus-30-degree wind chill and the flag was blowing out the stadium the entire game," Harvey cutter said.

However, there was plenty that went right, too.

Despite the poor weather, the game was a sellout. The announced crowd of 7,304 was the largest to witness the Stagg Bowl in more than a decade. The local media gave the event plenty of attention in the weeks leading up to game day. And for the first time in Salem's history, a game being played within the city limits was being televised on ESPN. Harvey cutter said he still remembers when it finally came time for "The Star-Spangled Banner" to be played.

"That was the most moving thing when we started," he said. "We had done all this work and then the Salem band played the national anthem, and it put a tear in my eye. I realized, 'Hey, we were really able to do this.' Salem, Virginia, hosting a live national TV broadcast on ESPN."



A view of Salem Stadium during the 2009 snow-delayed Stagg Bowl. Courtesy City of Salem.

There have been better weather days since that first game — and worse. Perhaps the best-known was in 2009, when nearly 20 inches of snow dumped on the Roanoke Valley in less than 24 hours. While the 11 a.m. kickoff was delayed to the evening, employees from nearly every department in the city worked to get the stadium, stands and roads cleared. Once again, the city proved to the NCAA that when one of its events was in town, it was the city's priority.



“They excel at providing hospitality and a welcoming environment for events that for years weren’t coveted,” said Old Dominion Athletic Conference commissioner Brad Bankston, whose conference serves as the league host for Salem’s Division III events. “Because of the investment the city made in the student-athlete and the experience the student-athlete had, they really built a framework of what these events are and have been moving forward.”



Due to Covid-related restrictions, Salem Civic Center hosted the entire 12-team Division III men’s volleyball tournament in 2021. Courtesy City of Salem.



Women’s lacrosse is one of many Division III championships that have been hosted at Kerr Stadium of Salem.

## 1 to 100

From that point on, Salem became a regular partner of the NCAA. In 1994, the Moyer Sports Complex hosted the Division III softball tournament for the first time. In 1996, the first of 22 NCAA Division III basketball was played across the parking lot from the football field at Salem Civic center.

Both Harveycutter and his longtime events co-director John Shaner, who is also director of the city’s parks and recreation department, are known around the country as experts in the process of putting on NCAA events. They have been asked to speak to planning committees in other host cities, and even serve as tournament representatives for events being held outside of Salem.

But their focus remains on the Salem events and making sure the community will continue to support the mission. The next championship on the schedule is this spring’s Division III lacrosse at Roanoke’s Kerr Stadium. Other championships on the books include men’s and women’s volleyball, women’s basketball and soccer.

Current Salem Councilman Randy Foley, who also served as mayor between 2008 and 2020, said the sense of pride the community has in being known as “Virginia’s Championship City” goes well beyond the city limits. Foley said when he lived away from his hometown while serving in the Air Force in the 1990s and early 2000s, it always warmed his heart when a sporting event in Salem was being shown on national TV.

“It’s been a big part of the community,” he said. “Seeing the hometown was great on ESPN.

“But while we received the notoriety, it probably has impacted the Roanoke Valley even more economically. It’s been a team effort.”

The football game will be moving on to other locations after Friday, beginning with the 2024 event scheduled to be held in Humble, Texas.



The 2016 Stagg Bowl played between Wisconsin-Oshkosh and Mary Hardin-Baylor was the first championship game since 2004 that didn't include either Mount Union or Wisconsin-Whitewater. City of Salem.

## Plenty of memories

Harveycutter said so much has happened during Salem's 30 years of hosting NCAA championships that it's hard to pick just a few.

While there have been plenty of great participants, few compared to Mount Union wide receiver Pierre Garçon, who starred in three of the Purple Raiders' 19 trips to Salem. Garçon went on to play 11 years in the NFL. A close second is probably Garçon's wideout predecessor Cecil Shorts III, who spent six years in the NFL after graduating.

And then there were the coaches. Mount Union's Larry Kehres became a family friend, Harveycutter said, as did Rowan coach K.C. Keeler, whose teams made it to Salem five times but never won the title. It was different for current Kansas coach Lance Leipold, whose Wisconsin-Whitewater teams faced Mount Union nine times in 10 years at the Stagg Bowl and won six of those.

The 2003 game was also the year college football's winningest coach, John Gagliardi, won the last of his four national championships when St. John's of Minnesota upset Mount Union 24-6.

"A few years earlier, John got here, and they lost," Harveycutter said. "I'm not sure anyone thought he would get another chance, but he did. It was great to see."

He expects a few more memories will come out of this weekend, and he's looking forward to it, especially if they're not weather-related.

"There's a lot more visitors coming to this one," he said. "There's a lot more VIPs. There's a lot more friends that I haven't seen in a number of years. So I'll be torn between the operations side of the game ... and seeing people I haven't seen in a long time.

"It's just going to be really good to see everyone."





Friday's Stagg Bowl participants are North Central (Ill.) and Cortland (N.Y.). Courtesy City of Salem.

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