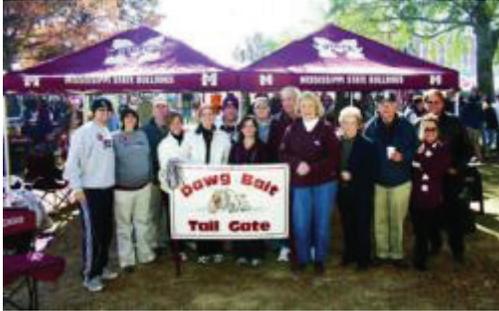


Tailgating is about friends, family — and the Bulldogs

September 16, 2011



By GWEN SISSON

sdnlife@bellsouth.net

Ryan Akers used to joke that there are three things people can count on — death, taxes and the Dawg Bait Tailgate.

For about 30 years, tailgating and cheering on the Mississippi State Bulldogs has been a time for family, food and football. At any game, there are usually two generations and usually several three generations of families, including the Covins and the Newmans. However, the Coleman family is the only family to have four generations represented in the Dawg Bait Tailgate, including Tommy and Frances Coleman who began the Dawg Bait Tailgate; the second generation is Danny and Cindy Akers, followed by the third generation of Ryan and Brandy Akers and sister, Fran. The fourth generation is two year old Will Akers, with a little sister on the way shortly.

“That’s really something to behold when you stop and think about it,” said Ryan Akers of the Dawg Bait Tailgate. “Not everyone gets to experience this as a family, so we are fortunate.”

Akers said in some form, the Dawg Bait tailgate has been around for over 30 years.

“My grandparents started this tailgate with a group of their friends around 1980, though I think it may have actually been longer than that,” Akers said. “I’ve been coming to this tailgate since I was around 7, so it’s close to 30 years for me too.”

Cindy Akers, Ryan’s mom, said MSU tailgating is all about family, friends and food.

“There is nothing better than Bulldog football,” Cindy Akers said. “Friends all stopping by to visit and there are too many foods to even pick a favorite. Ryan and Danny, his father, are unreal cooks. I think secretly they try to ‘out-cook’ each other but neither will ever admit to that. It’s all in fun.”

Cindy Akers said all four generations of their family have tailgated in the same spot ever since her parents, Tommy and Frances Coleman, pulled the car up at the same location and actually opened the trunk of the car and pulled out the picnic lunch.

“It’s work to get everything there these days but it’s worth it all win or lose,” Cindy Akers said.

Ryan Akers said the earlier days were much different than the tailgate experience they will have Thursday. He said the tailgate is much bigger now in terms of members, friends and family, equipment, food and process.

“Once I was in grad school, I started inviting some of my friends and we started trying to ease some of the work off of those that created it,” Akers said. “When I moved back to Starkville, Brandy and I really took over the most of the process of getting prepared each week. Then we’ve added many of our coworkers and colleagues from here on campus and they bring their families. They are just as critical to the success of our tailgate each week. Sounds like a cliché, but it really feels like family out there on a Saturday afternoon, which is how it should be.”

Over the years, people have come and gone, but the mainstays usually range around 20-25 people at the Dawg Bait Tailgate. Akers

said some of the bigger conference games tend to bring in more family and friends and then they also have occasional fans of the opposing teams.

They have had as many as 40 and as little as 10 people join them at the Mississippi State University campus to cheer on the Bulldogs over the past few years.

Other than family, the Dawg Bait Tailgate includes friends of the family, some of Akers best friends from his days as a student at MSU, coworkers and colleagues, friends and guests of the University, and they do accept fans from other institutions. In fact, Akers said he thinks they have hosted fans from all SEC schools, except Arkansas and South Carolina. Akers said there are no particular reasons for the exceptions, he just doesn't recall any visitors.

"Everyone has nothing but positive things to say so folks seem to feel at home and have a good time," Akers said. "I think that everyone leaves with a positive impression of MSU, which is something that we hope to always see. Again, we are fortunate. Without all of the support from the mainstays and our guests over the years, the tailgate wouldn't be what it is today. I'm just glad to be a part of it and glad that I can carry on a family tradition. Hopefully, one day my son will take over for me."

Akers said tailgating has been an important part of his family for many years, and he has many great memories.

"Most of my really early ones are wrapped up in playing football with my friends and not having any real tailgate 'responsibilities,'" Akers said. "However, over the years, there have been a ton of memories made."

One that comes to mind was for an Auburn game a couple of years ago when there was an 11:30 a.m. kickoff. That early game meant that the family was out on campus by 7:30 a.m.

"Obviously, it was a breakfast tailgate, but we turned it into a contest of sorts and modeled it after the Food Network show, Iron Chef America," Akers said. "So, Iron Chef Tailgate was implemented with the secret ingredient being eggs. It was fantastic."

Akers said the quality and the quantity of the food was incredible.

"We printed programs and sent them out via email prior to the week which just added to week's preparation," Akers said. "About an hour before kickoff, a couple of Auburn fans walked up, opened their wallet, and said, 'How much?' And they were being serious. We still laugh about that today."

Akers said the two game home stretch in 2000, where the Bulldogs beat ranked teams in Florida and Auburn in consecutive weeks, was also pretty amazing.

"The energy from those two games is comparable to what it feels like now," Akers said. "After we beat Auburn, Coach Tommy Tuberville walked up the sidewalk adjacent to our tailgate with his head down and trying to stay unrecognizable and being fairly successful at it until a family member whose name I probably shouldn't mention here says 'Nice Game, Coach.' Then everyone noticed him and started jabbing at him a bit...probably more so for what he'd alluded to regarding Mississippi after leaving TSUN. But those two game atmospheres were fantastic obviously."

Akers said the Arkansas win to get MSU into the SEC Championship was exciting.

"That game and the '99 Egg Bowl win, were two that immediately come to mind and those moments after the game at the tailgate are sort of frozen in time," Akers said. "Absolutely amazing times to be with friends and family."

One memory sticks out for Ryan Akers when he was a teenager.

"My grandmother, a longtime administrator on campus, would always introduce her family to all the tailgate guests," Akers said.

"Once, prior to an Egg Bowl back in the early 90s, she introduced me to this ominous looking man wearing this trench coat on a cold and dreary day and that's really all I remember about the moment. I was told that he was going to be a successful author and he did have the look of someone important. I was a teenager then, so I was more worried about winning that game, not too much about meeting some random person. You know how teenagers are."

Akers said there's a lesson to be learned here. He said to pay attention to your grandparents. In hindsight, Akers would have liked to have talked to John Grisham that day.

And last year, Akers brought his son, Will, to the tailgate, who represented the fourth generation of his family to enjoy the food, the fun and the football.

“I was able to take our son Will to the tailgate for the first time last year, so that was a special moment for me,” Akers said. “He’s already talking about his school, ‘Sisissippi State’ and of course, he really freaks out about seeing Bully. So, continuity and smiling faces are what I look forward to the most regarding tailgate, and some great food too.”

The Dawg Bait Tailgate celebrates birthdays, engagements and any achievements and milestones. One year, they had a wedding at the tailgate. And there have been more than one baby shower. Celebrating family is just part of the tradition, according to Akers.

The tailgate itself is one big tradition, with a variety of elements that make each season special.

“In our family, if you have things to do, you better plan around the tailgate, because if the Dawgs are in town, you know that you’ll be there in the same spot that we’ve been for years,” Akers said. “It’s what we do in our family. Seems like it always has been that way and I hope it always will.”

Akers said to some, everything that is done to prep for the tailgate is a tradition.

He said emails go out the week prior to the game, menus are set and headcounts are made. Thursday nights begin the equipment setup process with the tents. Everything is carefully loaded into his and his grandfather’s trucks.

Akers said his grandfather, Tommy Coleman, is retired, so on Friday mornings, he heads out to campus very early in the morning to stake out their usual tailgate area and hold the spot for what they call the Running of the Tents at 5 a.m.

“I usually meet him out there prior to work that morning to help him take the tents off the truck,” Akers said. “Then he waits, literally all day, until around 4:45 p.m. when I arrive again and meet with our help to put the tents up.”

Then it’s back home to begin the cooking which usually takes place while watching Game Day previews until midnight.

On Saturday morning, Akers and his grandfather load up the rest of the equipment and are out on campus dropping off things at the tailgate, getting ice, gas for the generator, and other last minute items. Then it’s back home for a couple of hours to finish the cooking and gather the family.

“We are always back at the tailgate at least four hours before game time,” Akers said. “Sure, with how the tailgate has grown over the past 10-15 years, that’s a lot of work, but it’s all worth it during Game Day.”

And the group is excited about Thursday night’s first home game.

“Of course, I’m looking forward to the Dawgs defending their turf at Davis Wade Stadium and getting back in the hunt for the SEC Championship game,” Akers said. “I can’t wait to see the electric atmosphere prior to and during the game. I can’t wait to show our opponents, visiting fans, and the rest of the country, what our football team is capable of.”

Akers works in higher education and he is a huge college football fan. He understands that each school, especially in the SEC, has its own unique traditions and its own fans that think their campus is the place to be on game days.

“I’m no different,” Akers said. “To me, there is no better place on a beautiful fall afternoon than right here in the Junction and inside Davis Wade Stadium at Mississippi State University. It doesn’t get any better. To say that all of our fans are excited about this year’s team is a great understatement.”

Akers enjoys football and tailgating so much, he misses it during the offseason.

“Continuity, smiling faces, and just being back out there,” Akers said. “I’m looking forward to continuing this great fellowship another year. There’s nothing like it.”

After finishing at MSU, Akers was a Bulldog in Athens, Ga. for six years. Every weekend during the football season, with a couple of exceptions, he returned to Starkville to get ready for the tailgate.

“I only missed about one game a season during that span, which was really at the height of recent success for UGA football,” Akers said. “My friends and coworkers at UGA didn’t seem to understand my insistence that I return home since they are pretty proud of their tailgate and their team too. I guess this all really depends on your definition of tradition.”

In fact, one of his best friends in Georgia asked him what was so special about Starkville and MSU after seeing him return home week after week.

“I told her that unless she’d been to a State game or to Starkville, she probably wouldn’t understand it,” Akers said. “I asked her to marry me a couple of years later. Thankfully, she said yes and now I think she understands.”

Brandy Akers is now a vital part of the success of the tailgate each week.

“I love tailgating,” said Brandy Akers. “It is so special to me to be in the Junction with my family and friends before a football game celebrating MSU football with thousands of Bulldog fans. I love the energy on campus, the beautiful fall weather, and the delicious food. My favorite tailgate dishes are my husband’s red beans and rice, Michael Newman’s ribs, and all the desserts.”

Akers grandmother, MSU’s Dean of Libraries Frances Coleman, said everyone loves Ryan’s Red Beans and Rice and tailgating.

“Our family loves Mississippi State,” Coleman said. “We look forward every year to football season. We always enjoying tailgating with family and friends and each year we make new friends. We all enjoy it so much and it really adds to the football season for us. All of the food is wonderful, but Ryan’s Red Beans and Rice is a favorite of everyone.”

Akers said everyone seems to always want to know what game he will be making Red Beans and Rice.

“To say that it’s got some heat to it, is putting it mildly,” Akers said. “I worked on that recipe for over three years and finally got it just right and it makes its appearance each year after November. I’ve probably received the most specific compliments for that dish. But all of the food that everyone prepares for these tailgates is just tremendous.”

The Dawg Bait Tailgate has served everything from traditional tailgate staples of ribs, barbeque, hamburgers, and hot dogs, to empanadas, Lebanese meat pies, Eggs Florentine and French onion soup.

“All in all though, folks tend to flock to the hamburgers and hot dogs (the traditional first tailgate fare), the deep fried turkey (the traditional last tailgate fare), my Dad’s chicken wings and ribs, my wife Brandy’s Pecan Treats, Michael Newman’s pork tenderloin, etc.,” Akers said. “We also have an array of smaller dishes ranging from jalapeno white cheddar cheese dip and several different types of potato salads and desserts, including the tailgate essential, Moon Pies, brought by one of my best friends for years, Eric Bishop and his wife, Joan, for my grandmother.”

Akers has been serving as the tailgate grill master for the past several years.

“I wish that I could tell you that there is some secret science behind it, but honestly, like most folks out in the kitchen, patio, or in the Junction, my approach to the grill comes through trial and error,” Akers said. “All good cooks, and even the bad ones, experiment with different recipes and ideas. Some turn out good and some bad. I’ve just learned what works for me and for the folks at the tailgate.”

Akers said after learning the tastes and preferences of many of the tailgate mainstays, he can typically design a menu that has something for everyone.

“I’m known to make a lot of my food pretty spicy, so I always have to make sure that there is considerable food available for folks that cannot handle too much spice,” Akers said. “Other than that, we all just cook what we like to cook and try to pair it well with the main dish for the week. Everyone seems to be happy.”

Menus for this year’s Dawg Bait Tailgate have already been set, featuring a central dish that everyone builds around.

“At this point, the only thing that I have planned that will be new to the tailgate is a Turducken — chicken stuffed inside a duck stuffed inside a turkey,” Akers said. “The central dish for the last couple of Egg Bowls at home has been a deep fried turkey. Those have been great, but everyone is always burnt out on turkey once the game is over, so I thought about the Cajun Stuffed Turducken for the Egg Bowl this year.”

Some have suggested the group look into paying someone to set up the tents and do the cooking, but Akers said that’s not a consideration.

“I think it just goes back to family time,” Akers said. “The process for taking everything down and getting it home and stored for the next tailgate is just as methodical as the prep. And then the process starts itself over.”