

MacMurray College Closure Removes Longtime Athletic Rival for Blackburn College

by Tom Emery
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CARLINVILLE - The impending closure of MacMurray College in Jacksonville will end one of the top athletic rivalries for Blackburn College.

Separated by only fifty miles, MacMurray was one of Blackburn's oldest, and most-played, rivalries in practically every sport. The schools were not only geographic, but recruiting foes as well.

Both were charter members of the St. Louis Intercollegiate Athletic Conference, which opened play in the 1990-91 academic year, the same season that brought the end of the Prairie College Conference, established in 1953.

In addition, the schools were members of the Illinois-Indiana Soccer Conference from 1978-87. Before Blackburn discontinued football in 2008, the schools had faced each other in the Illinois-Badger-Hawkeye Conference from 1989-91.

The rivalry was particularly strong in basketball, one of the highest-profile sports in either campus. In men's basketball, Blackburn trailed in the rivalry 59-47, but enjoyed plenty of memorable moments against the Highlanders, including a 73-62 win in the 1992 SLIAC tournament title game.

The schools first met in the 1957-58 season, the inaugural year of MacMurray men's athletics, and Blackburn won both matchups, 79-77 and 76-67. The teams did not play again until Dec. 1, 1965, and met every year since, usually twice a season in conference play.

With 106 meetings, the only two opponents that Blackburn faced more than the Highlanders in men's basketball are Principia (158 times) and Greenville (154). The Beavers won six of their last eight meetings with MacMurray.

The Blackburn and MacMurray women's basketball teams jockeyed for control of the SLIAC for the first several years of the conference's existence. Blackburn earned three of the first five regular-season SLIAC titles, then watched as MacMurray claimed the championship in both 1995-96 and 1996-97.

Blackburn, meanwhile, claimed the first five SLIAC tournament titles from 1991-95, a string broken by a gut-wrenching 55-53 loss at MacMurray in the 1996 semifinals. However, Blackburn gained a measure of revenge with a thrilling 81-80 victory in the 1997 tournament title game in Carlinville. MacMurray held a narrow 43-38 edge over Blackburn in games since 1981.

Men's soccer is one of the longest-running sports at Blackburn, dating to 1954, and is one of the top programs for alumni interest. The series with MacMurray began with two games in the 1957 season, with each program claiming a 2-1 win. The schools played at least once a year since, with the exception of 1960 and 1964, and squared off a total of 78 times.

The men's soccer rivalry was defined by big runs. The series was evenly matched through 1977, but MacMurray reeled off 29 straight wins from 1978-2000. Since then, however, Blackburn dominated the series, going 19-4-3 since 2001.

Blackburn introduced women's soccer in 1995, and the program's first-ever game was a 6-1 loss to MacMurray in Carlinville that September 5. However, Blackburn quickly turned it around, and owned a commanding 23-6-1 advantage in SLIAC play.

Likewise, MacMurray owned the rivalry in baseball for much of the time, winning 48 of the first 50 meetings between the schools. The Beavers won fifteen straight during the program's glory days from 2002-07, but the Highlanders reclaimed their dominance in the last few years, winning nine of the last eleven games.

By comparison, Blackburn held a 35-28 lead in conference play in the series in softball, and won the last six meetings. MacMurray had the advantage in volleyball over the years, but the Beavers usually got the better of the Highlanders in golf.

Blackburn and MacMurray also faced each other in cross country as well as a variety of sports that one or both schools no longer sponsor, including track, wrestling, and swimming.

In football, MacMurray won most of the meetings between the schools, though Blackburn rolled to a 33-12 rout in Jacksonville on Oct. 7, 1995. Blackburn also took home a 33-20 victory at MacMurray in the 2007 season finale. The schools were part of a three-way tie for the SLIAC football title in 1996.

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