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MSU-Florida matchup rekindles former rivalry

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Today's Michigan State-Florida matchup in the semifinal of the Legends Classic in Atlantic City, N.J., doesn't have the same cachet as the Gators-Spartans battles of the early 2000s.

Back then, MSU coach Tom Izzo and Florida coach Billy Donovan were considered up-and-coming coaches in the midst of building powerhouses. Now both are viewed as part of college basketball's elite, proven winners who demonstrated that their early wins were far from flukes.

Even though this year's contest between No. 2 MSU (4-0) and Florida (4-0) won't be a matchup of two of college basketball's best squads (the Gators have missed the last two NCAA tournaments), the game will revive memories of past games that created plenty of excitement in East Lansing and Gainesville.

"I've got great respect for Tom," Donovan said. "We've always had a very good relationship. We became head coaches right about the same time. When I was an assistant at Kentucky and he was an assistant at Michigan State, we saw each other a lot on the road, and certainly he's done a terrific job there at Michigan State."

When they met, Izzo was working for Jud Heathcote and Donovan was a graduate assistant and full-time assistant coach at Kentucky (1989-94). When the two encountered each other again as head coaches, each played a role in helping the other's program reach national prominence.

For a long time, Donovan was on the losing end. MSU won its first NCAA championship under Izzo by beating the Gators in the 2000 title game. That was the beginning of a rivalry with Florida in the earlier part of the decade, as MSU went 3-1 against the Gators from 2000-03.

By 2003, MSU's glory days appeared to have ended with the departure of the players who contributed to the 1999-2001 run of three Final Fours. The Spartans faced Florida one more time, at the 2003 NCAA tournament, and made a statement that MSU was not a short-term phenomenon.

MSU was a seven seed and the Gators were a two seed. The game took place in Tampa, which gave Florida the home-court advantage. But using mix of up-tempo offense and 55.6% shooting, MSU dominated the Gators, 68-46, to advance to the Sweet 16 for the fifth time since 1998.

"The Florida win helped validate some things," Izzo said.

Donovan used those lessons -- and many others -- to put together back-to-back NCAA title runs in 2006-07.

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