There is an old sport’s saying that states that if you’re a champion, you have “it” in your heart.

Sometimes it doesn’t hurt to have a champion’s mentality brought out of you, as the Black and Gold football team found out in a 41-34 double overtime win in the inaugural Two Rivers Classic.

In their third season, it’s hard to say that the Braves have played in a truly meaningful football game yet. No conference games, no conference championships and no postseason play.

But on Aug. 29, the Black and Gold figured out what the saying, “Play like a champion,” means, and they found it thanks to a new rival, the Fayetteville State Broncos.

What’s in a rivalry?

With the UNCP football team picking up momentum in 2008 with a nine win season and with just 47 miles separating Pembroke and Fayetteville, the Two Rivers Classic seemed like a natural fit for an established rivalry.

Rivalries between schools are defined by their close proximities, and with many players coming from the Robeson and Cumberland county areas, the two schools were a perfect fit for each other.

Even though the rivalry game is in its first year, the UNCP players and coaching staff are already seeing the foundation building for a timeless annual matchup.

“A rivalry is when you have two teams that for some reason just hate each other,” Black and Gold quarterback Cory Smith said. “Rivalry games are made over time and the hits are hard, the crowds are bigger and louder and it just makes [the game] more fun.”

While it may be hard to hate the Broncos just yet, a few more close games may change the feel of the rivalry in a few years.

But for now as the rivalry grows, some players, like UNCP wide receiver LJ Johnson, look at the game as just another battle.

“To me, it’s just another game,” Johnson said. “It may mean a lot as far as bragging rights in the surrounding areas, but it’s just another game that I want to win.”

“There is a little more on the table because unlike the other games there is a trophy involved. It will forever be written in history.”

With trophies, postseason hopes and recruiting battles on the line in future matchups, you can be sure that the growing rivalry will soon be worth more than just a few bragging rights.

“I think the rivalry will be good not only for our program, but for the school as well,” Smith said. “I think it could grow into a huge rivalry overtime.”

Coach’s perspective

Although bragging rights and trophies hold special places in the player’s hearts, sometimes the head men in charge have as much excitement as the athletes who take the field in rivalry games.

Black and Gold head coach Pete Shinnick echoed this sentiment in his comments leading up to the rivalry game, saying Continued on page 2B