

David Grady didn't make the connection immediately.

The New Hope High School tennis coach knew his team and Bruce High, the opponent that day, share Trojans as their logos. But that was only one way the schools were connected.

Standing on the recently resurfaced tennis courts in Bruce, Grady discovered Bruce Mayor Clinton "Rudy" Pope was responsible for getting the work done. In fact, the project was one of the last things Pope was responsible for before he died Jan. 24, 2023.

It then dawned on Grady that the connection between New Hope and Bruce went deeper. That's why Grady decided to do something special to honor the memory of Pope, who was a teacher and a coach at both schools.

At 4 p.m. Friday, Bruce will travel to Columbus to take on New Hope at Lake Lowndes in the Rudy Pope Classic. Also known as the Battle of the Trojans, the match will honor the memory of Pope as well as the Pope family.

"Whoever wins the match this year will engrave the next one and we will try to keep this going," Grady said. "It gives us something to play for and maybe gets us a little excited about having a trophy involved in it and honoring the memory of Rudy Pope and his family."

Pope, 76, was a teacher and a coach at New Hope, Newnan, Waynesboro, North Pontotoc, Nettleton, Calhoun City and Bruce high schools until his retirement in 2011. At Bruce, he led the football team to the Class 2A state championship in 1996. He also was named a Star Teacher of the Year. After retirement, Pope was elected mayor of Bruce in 2013.

New Hope defeated Bruce 5-2 in the inaugural rivalry match last season. Grady said the teams didn't have the trophy, but it will be up for grabs Friday. He also said the teams will present a plaque to honor Pope and his family prior to the match.

New Hope junior Jackson Grady is in his fifth season on the team. Last year, he won his singles match 6-0, 6-0 against Bruce. He said this year's match will be even more special.

"It is kind of like the Egg Bowl, the same feeling," Jackson Grady said. "It is the Trojans. You're competing to see who is going to go home with the hardware. Everyone wants to win a trophy."

Jorja Unruh, who is in her third season on the team, and senior Tyson Phinisey, who is in his sixth season on the squad, agreed.

"It gives you a greater sense of pride for your team," said Unruh, who plays doubles. Caroline Clay was her partner last season.

Said Phinisey, "I am happy this got started because it might push New Hope and Bruce to play harder and it will be a better match."

New Hope opened its season Tuesday with a 6-1 victory against Nettleton at Lake Lowndes. With the junior varsity matches, New Hope won by a final score of 13-2.

New Hope is scheduled to play Columbus at 4 p.m. Thursday in its last tune-up before the Rudy Pope Classic. With 14 boys and 14 girls on the team, Grady hopes New Hope can build on last season when it advanced to the third round of the Class 5A tournament. He also hopes the Rudy Pope Classic will be a match each team circles on its calendar and means a little more to each group.

Phinisey already feels that way.

“It makes me feel honored to be part of it and a part of this team,” Phinisey said. “I wish I could feel more about who it was dedicated to because he sounds like a really great man.”