

FEAR THE OKRA! No, not the tasty morsel next to your meatloaf. We're talking about the Fighting Okra, the unofficial (and sometimes pugilistic) mascot of Delta State University in Cleveland, Miss. It can be one large, prickly, biped veggie when it wants to be.

While the Statesman is the official university mascot (and often challenges the giant vegetable to pushup contests, races, even dance-offs), the Fighting Okra now gets equal billing. Says Alumni Director Jeffrey Farris, "The people who make up our university environment definitely still respect the Statesman. But there is a great fondness for the Okra too."

Delta State archivist Emily Jones reports there's more than one story behind the Okra's legend. "Some say it was students cheering on their resident

assistant at a basketball game with 'You're OK, our RA.' Others," she says, "credit baseball players as far back as 1988 with looking for a more ferocious image and suggesting the okra because it was 'green, Southern and ugly.'"

Whatever the truth, the battle cry of "Fear the Okra" really came into its own in 2011. That year, humorous television commercials hit the airwaves featuring the vaunted veggie and upped the recognition of Delta State. The mascot has been featured on "The David

Letterman Show," The Food Network and on ESPN's "SportsCenter."

While the Fighting Okra is uniquely Delta State's, it isn't alone as an agricultural-based school representative. Syracuse University boasts the Orange. Saskatchewan's Lakeland College sports Rowdy the Rustler. Unofficial Stanford mascot the Tree has oversized lipsticked lips. Minnesota's Concordia College features Kernel Cobb, a human-sized husk of cheering corn. And then there are the Texas A&M Aggies, the Nebraska Cornhuskers, and The Ohio State Buckeyes. Championships abound at many of those schools (including nine national titles at Delta State). So while not as inherently ferocious sounding as Bulldogs, Bears or Screaming Eagles, victories on the field of competition have proved that even a plant can be a popular and powerful mascot. —Bill Lewis



Delta State's Fighting Okra is a prickly standout among ag-themed mascots.

Victory for Vegetation

■ To see the Fighting Okra in action, see feartheokra.com.