

For richer, for poorer

BY RANDALL MELL
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GAINESVILLE • This Bull Gator isn't ready to leave yet.

Nearly 30 minutes have passed since Mississippi stunned Bruce Barber's beloved Gators 20-17 on Saturday, and the man hasn't budged from his seat at Florida Field, a private box near the 50-yard line that has to rank as the best seats in the house. Though Barber's Gator cap is pulled down low, his eyes shaded behind a pair of designer-frame sunglasses, his disappointment radiates.

He's feeling more pain than anger.

"It's really a tough time to be a Gator fan," Barber says.

That makes it an even tougher time to be a Bull Gator. They're the elite of Florida Fandom, the boosters who make the largest financial contributions to the program. They love their Gators, and they don't like losing. At anything. They just aren't used to it. Most of them are rich and successful business folks who know how to make a bottom line sing.

With the Gators 3-3 and off to their worst start in 17 years, their streak of 226 weeks in The Associated Press or coaches' polls about to end, this program's portfolio is taking a hard, downward turn.

As a successful Fort Lauderdale money manager, Barber, 40, knows market trends and doesn't like the indicators with road trips to No. 6 LSU and No. 8 Arkansas to be followed by a trip to Jacksonville to play No. 11 Georgia.

Barber remembers walking out of his office on Oct. 19, 1987, the day the Dow plunged 518 points.

"This Gator season so far is beginning to feel like Black Monday," Barber said.

Forgive Barber, whose passion for the Gators is renowned even among Bull



SWAMP VISIT: Karen, with daughter Chloe, and Bruce Barber, with son Payton, watch the Gators on Saturday. The Fort Lauderdale couple has a box at the 50-yard line. **Staff/photo/Scott Fischer.**

Gators, because this is a weak moment with the loss still so fresh. While the Southeastern Conference is littered with meddling, power-hungry boosters looking to impose their wills on athletic directors and coaches, Barber isn't one of them. The folks in the Gator Booster Club will tell you he's one of their model donors.

It's just that Barber has this problem when the Gators lose.

"It's not that we walk around on egg shells after the Gators lose," said Karen, Bruce's wife and mother to their two children. "Bruce isn't mean, but he can be mopey and grumpy and take all of Sunday and a part of Monday to get over a loss."

Bruce has resolved this season to try to have fun after a loss, but he didn't think he would get so much practice.

"Sports are one thing," said Barber, who owns a Brookstreet Securities office in downtown Fort Lauderdale. "The Gators are more like a religion."

The loss is especially disappointing because it was Barber's 10-year anniversary as a Bull Gator. He was among the elite-level boosters honored on the field 15 minutes before Saturday's kickoff. It takes a minimum donation of

\$12,000 a year to be a Bull Gator. Though Barber thought it immodest to say how much he has donated since becoming a Bull Gator in 1993, school records show that he received the President's Award in '98 for crossing the \$100,000 contribution rate.

Barber and his wife met while attending Florida. This was supposed to be a special weekend. It wasn't just his 10-year Bull Gator anniversary. It also marked the couple's 15th wedding anniversary and the 20th anniversary of their first date as undergraduates here.

They brought their 8-year-old son, Payton, and 4-year-old daughter, Chloe, with

them this weekend.

Love for the Gators burns so deeply in Barber that he got his pilot's license 12 years ago and bought an airplane just so he could get to Gainesville quicker for games. He calls his landing in Gainesville the first "touchdown" of the Gator weekend. He insisted his Piper Turbo Saratoga be painted with Gator orange and blue trim. In fact, he took the Gator helmet he owns into the paint shop so they could match the colors exactly.

Karen shares her husband's Gator passion, though not to the same diehard degree.

The couple celebrated their ninth wedding anniversary with a dinner at the 50-yard line at Florida Field. They got it as a gift in a Gator Boosters Auction. The Barber house and office are filled with Gator memorabilia.

"I have so many orange-and-blue ties in my closet, I can go three weeks straight without having to wash them," Barber said.

At one time, Bull Gators were notorious as meddling boosters. Their violations of NCAA rules brought stiff sanctions and the firing of Charley Pell in the mid-'80s, but that seems so long ago now. A Bull Gator hasn't been cited for a



IT'S TIME TO GO LONG: Chloe Barber, 4, wears her heart on her chest (as well as her team), as she and her dad, Bruce Barber get ready for the flight to Gainesville. **Photo/Joe Amon.**

major football violation since.

"Education has been part of it," UF Athletic Director Jeremy Foley said. "And you know we did have those troubles in the '80s. We had championships that didn't count, and we couldn't go to bowl games. When you have NCAA issues, it's no fun. It doesn't count to win. I'm not going to be naive and say we couldn't see a problem, but through hard lessons our fans understood that what happened was no fun. Our boosters have been nothing but supportive since."

When it comes to hiring and firing coaches, namely Ron Zook, Barber says there are Bull Gators who would like to impose their will, but he isn't one of them.

"I think the Gator nation is probably divided," Barber said. "There

are people who want to get rid of him and start over, but they don't understand the difficulties that can cause and time that will take. I would like to see him succeed.

"I have no managerial capacity, and I don't want to. I trust Jeremy Foley."

Next: How the Jacksonville Jaguars helped a city change its dismal sense of itself.

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GATORS BROUGHT TO THEIR KNEES: Offensive tackle Mo Mitchell can't believe the 20-17 loss to Old Miss at Florida Field. **Staff photo/Scott Fisher.**

