

“We’re Gators . . . Not Just Gator Fans”: Serious Leisure and University of Florida Football

Heather Gibson

Department of Recreation, Parks and Tourism, University of Florida

Cynthia Willming

Recreation and Leisure Studies, Bethune-Cookman College

Andrew Holdnak

Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism, University of Western Illinois

The concept of serious leisure (Stebbins, 1979; 1992) was used to examine the meanings, rituals, and practices associated with being a University of Florida Football fan. We contend that Gator football fans typify the serious leisure category of the hobbyist. Face to face in-depth interviews were conducted with four female and sixteen male fans. The transcribed interviews were analyzed using constant comparison and grounded theory methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998 a & b). Themes emerging from the data confirmed Stebbins’ six characteristics of serious leisure. The results suggest that being a Gator football fan provides both a source of identity for the fan as an individual and a sense of belonging in an increasingly fragmented postmodern society.

KEYWORDS: *Serious leisure, identity, football fans; sense of belonging*

Introduction

Around the world, sport garners attention at all levels of society from participants and fans to the media, governments, and multi-national corporations. Dunning (1999) argued, “no activities have ever served so regularly as foci of simultaneous common interest and concern to so many people all over the world” (p. 3). With the growing complexity and fragmentation of modern (Simmel, 1955), and now post-modern society (Dunning, 1999), sociologists have postulated that the social worlds and opportunities for collective identity inherent in sport raise it to a higher level of social importance. Indeed, Dunning suggested, “identification with a sports team can provide people with an important identity-prop, a source of ‘we-feelings’ and a sense of belonging in what would otherwise be an isolated existence” (p. 6).

Over the years, many scholars have examined the social importance of sport both at the micro level in the lives of fans and at the macro level of society. These studies have focused on such topics as the deeply committed

Address correspondence to: Heather Gibson, Department of Recreation Parks and Tourism 304 Florida Gym, University of Florida, PO Box 118209, Gainesville, FL 326611-8209, Phone: (352) 392-4042 ext. 1249; Fax: (352) 392-7588; E-mail: hgibson@hhp.ufl.edu

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sports fan (McPherson, 1975); team identification, "basking-in-reflected-glory" (BIRGing) and "cutting-off-reflected-failure" (CORFing) (Cialdini, et al., 1976; Kimble & Cooper, 1992; Lee, 1985; Wann & Branscombe, 1990); levels of fan identification (Anderson, 1979; Wann & Branscombe, 1993); levels of fan satisfaction (Madrigal, 1995); fan involvement (Kerstetter & Kovich, 1997; Shank & Beasley, 2000); and fandom as a search for community (Anderson & Stone, 1981; Dunning, 1999). To date however, most studies of sport fans in the US have concentrated on students as fans. There is a need to understand the place of sport fandom within the context of individual's lives as they transition through the various phases of the life course. Our study is unique in that we focus on long-term fans, some of who started their careers as a fan during their student days over 50 years ago.

While sport scholars have analyzed various aspects of fan-related behaviors and the role of sport in society, the social world of the fan has received scant attention from leisure scholars (Jones, 2000). This is curious given that sport is a major form of leisure in the US and around the world. Our guiding philosophy is that leisure is the overall domain under which special forms of leisure, sport and tourism reside. As such, we contend that an in-depth study of a sport subculture is both warranted and significant to our understanding of leisure behavior.

Leisure scholars have examined various non-fan-related social worlds, such as American Kennel Club participants, tournament bass fishers, doll house builders, and bird watchers, and found that participation in them frequently provides a central source of meaning and identity for its members (e.g., Baldwin & Norris, 1999; Bartram, 2001; Crouch, 1993; Irwin, 1977; Kellert, 1985; Mittelstaedt, 1995; Olmsted, 1993; Scott & Godbey, 1992; 1994; Stebbins, 1979; 1992; Yoder, 1997). The question posed is do sport based social worlds in the US provide fans with similar opportunities for identification and meaning?

For fans of the University of Florida football team, being a Gator appears to be a central source of meaning and identity as evident in the clothes they wear, the adjectives they use to describe themselves, and in some cases the color of the car they drive or the place they live. Some travel hundreds of miles to follow their team, to tailgate with their family and friends, and for some who are alumni of the University, football provides a link with their alma mater. No other sport in the U.S. seems to engender the same pre-game socializing (tailgating), rituals, and atmosphere as football. As leisure scholars, several questions present themselves for investigation. Why do Gator football fans devote so much time and effort to following their team? What are the meanings, rituals, and practices associated with being a University of Florida football fan? Is being a Gator football fan a type of serious leisure?

According to Stebbins (1982), "sitting at a football game" (p. 253) or spectating does not constitute serious leisure, but is characteristic of unserious or casual leisure. Contrary to Stebbins, we contend Gator football fans, with high levels of commitment and team identification, typify the serious

leisure category of the hobbyist, those individuals who "are serious about and committed to their endeavors" (Stebbins, 1982, p. 259). It is our contention that "the fan is not merely a passive spectator. He (sic) is. . . a vital component in the proper functioning of the institution of sport, for both society and for individuals" (Edwards, 1973, p. 23). The primary purpose of our paper was to examine the meanings and rituals associated with being a University of Florida Gator football fan. Secondary purposes were to examine the construction of identity and collective identity around being a Gator football fan. This study used Stebbins' (1979; 1982; 1992; 2001) concept of serious leisure to guide the data analysis and asked the question can sports fandom constitute a type of serious leisure with a career path, a unique ethos, and the like for Gator football fans? The research team consisted of faculty and students from the university who are members of the social world pertaining to UF football to different degrees. Some of the research team were undergraduate students at UF and are avid Gator fans while others are relatively new to Gator football and stand on the periphery of the social world and watch with incredulity.

Background to the Study

The concept of serious leisure emerged from the work of Robert Stebbins (1979; 1982; 1992; 2001). Stebbins developed a theory of serious leisure through extensive ethnographic research of musicians, astronomers, magicians, stand-up comics, and baseball players among others. He defined serious leisure as "the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity that is sufficiently substantial and interesting for the participant to find a career there in the acquisition and expression of its special skills and knowledge" (Stebbins, 1992, p. 3). From this research he contended there are three categories of participation in serious leisure: amateurs, hobbyists, and career volunteers. Stebbins (1992) suggested that serious leisure is most effectively examined as a dichotomous quality of unserious or casual leisure as its opposite. He defined casual leisure as "immediately, intrinsically rewarding, relatively short lived pleasurable activity requiring little or no special training to enjoy it" (Stebbins, 1997, p. 18) or "doing what comes naturally" (Stebbins, 2001, p. 58). He proposed activities such as riding a roller coaster, watching television, or sitting at a football game (Stebbins, 1982; 1992) exemplify forms of casual leisure. These forms of passive entertainment require "only minimal analysis of or need to concentrate on its contents" and the activity is "enjoyed for its own sake quite apart from any desire or obligation to study it in some way" (Stebbins, 2001, p. 60). When this entertainment evolves from passive to active, that is, participation requires a certain level of skill, knowledge or experience, it is then more accurately conceptualized as a hobby or amateur activity (Stebbins, 1997, pp. 19-20).

Serious leisure for amateurs, hobbyists, and career volunteers is further differentiated from unserious or casual leisure as it is characterized by six unique qualities. First, serious leisure participants must occasionally perse-

vere through adversity. Even though participation in the activity may require individuals to conquer moments of difficulty, the activity still provides participants with a positive sense of well-being. Second, participants develop careers in their chosen leisure pursuit that involve stages of development, transition, and various achievements. Third, careers in serious leisure require substantial personal effort to attain skills, training, knowledge, and exemplify "long experience in a role" (Stebbins, 1982, p. 256). Fourth, serious leisure provides eight durable benefits for the participant such as self actualization, self-enrichment, self expression, renewal of self, feelings of accomplishment, enhancement of self-image, sense of belongingness and social interaction, lasting physical products as a result of participation, and pure fun (Stebbins, 1992). Fifth, participants develop a unique ethos, a central component of which is a distinct social world (Unruh, 1980), with its own subcultural norms, values, and beliefs (Stebbins, 1992). Sixth, serious leisure participants tend to identify strongly with their activity and "they are inclined to speak proudly, excitedly and frequently about them" (Stebbins, 1992, p. 7).

In terms of the hobbyist, Stebbins (1992) contended, "a hobby is a specialized pursuit beyond one's occupation, a pursuit that one finds particularly interesting and enjoyable because of its durable benefits" (p. 10). He initially identified four categories of hobbyists: collectors, makers and tinkerers, activity participants in non-competitive, rule-based pursuits, and players of sports and games (without professional counterparts). Later, he identified a fifth category, that of the liberal arts hobbyist (Stebbins, 2001). Stebbins (1992) argued more research is needed to understand hobbyist participation and as such, new findings might change the categorization of the hobbyist. Based on our empirical findings about college-football fans, we suggest the category of the hobbyist should be expanded to include what we term the *sport enthusiast*.

The major difference between hobbyists and amateurs is that hobbyists do not have professional counterparts, and as such are not part of any professional-amateur-public (PAP) system. Publics "are sets of people with a common interest; people not served by, but rather informed, enlightened, or entertained by professionals, or amateurs, or both, and who make active demands on them" (Stebbins, 1992, p. 59). Stebbins postulated that future work might show that hobbyist publics do exist. After all, as with amateurs, hobbyists have family and friends who might facilitate and constrain participation in a hobby and all hobbyist social worlds are microcosms of wider social systems. He also suggested that future research might illustrate the similarities between the attitudes of hobbyists, career volunteers, and amateurs because each is so highly committed to their chosen activities.

Stebbins (1993) suggested as more investigations of serious leisure activities are conducted it will become increasingly more important to address the mesostructural level of serious leisure. Indeed, several scholars have pointed to the class-based nature of much serious leisure (Parker, Hamilton-Smith, & Davidson, 1993; Parker, 1996) suggesting that it is largely a middle class phenomenon. Others have addressed the gendered nature of serious

leisure suggesting that many of these social worlds are male dominated (Bartram, 2001; Rainsborough, 1999). Moreover, Hamilton-Smith (1993) pointed to the need to address the individual-cultural location of identity construction in serious leisure. He argued that identification based on participation in serious leisure is not just a matter of micro level processes, but that the wider socio-cultural context is also influential in shaping identity. Identities, which draw upon the wider cultural context, contribute to what he calls the cultural continuity of a society, which in turn promotes social cohesion or what Dunning (1999) called the "we feeling." Indeed, Stebbins (1999) and Arai and Pedlar (1997) found that participation in serious leisure may not only provide a sense of belonging to the participants, but the wider community may benefit as well. Certainly, in communities that host sports events involving local and visitor participation, residents frequently experience enhanced levels of community pride, or what Burgan and Mules (1992) call psychic income. This might be the case for the city of Gainesville, Florida during football weekends.

Methods

Study Site

The study site for this investigation was the University of Florida (UF). The University is located in the city of Gainesville in North Central Florida approximately 65 miles east of Jacksonville and 100 miles north of Orlando. The University's sports teams are known as the Gators or in the case of the female athletes, the Lady Gators. The UF football team is a member of the Southeastern Conference and is one of the top teams in the country. The Gators play an average of five home and five away games per season. If they have a successful season they will be invited to play in a Bowl game, which is a championship game held on or around New Year's Day. On average, 85,000 fans attend home football games in Gainesville, and 50,000 non-students and 21,500 students have season tickets. Almost 80 percent of the non-student season ticket holders travel from outside Gainesville to attend home games (University of Florida Athletic Association, 2000). The University of Florida has 17 additional sports teams that attract fans throughout the year, most notably men's basketball and baseball, but football remains the biggest attraction.

On the Friday afternoons before the Saturday football games, the excitement is already building in Gainesville. Vehicles on the highways heading towards Gainesville display flags proclaiming their allegiance to the Gators and there is a proliferation of orange and blue clothing (UF colors) worn by administrative staff, students, and fans. Many fans arrive in their recreational vehicles to stake out their spots in the parking lots on and around the university. There are many entrepreneurial students who sell parking spaces in the yards of their houses. Some fans have been parking in the same place for years; it is the students who change from year to year as the tenants of the rented houses change. The grocery stores close to the university prom-

inently display tailgating supplies at the front of their stores the week before a game and on Saturday mornings they do a brisk trade. Every spare space on the UF campus is filled with fans grilling, eating, drinking, and socializing. Some have elaborate tailgate spreads while others have simpler affairs. There are tents, RVs, chairs and tables, coolers, and orange and blue everywhere. About an hour before the game, the fans start closing up their vehicles and begin walking towards the stadium ready to cheer their team, to what they hope will be another victory. Then all too soon it is Sunday morning and the town is quiet except for the crews cleaning up the trash left by the fans from the day before. Fans who have stayed in town overnight can be seen streaming away from Gainesville, flags still flying on their vehicles, reminiscing about the game the day before. If there is a home game the next weekend, they will repeat the process again. If the game is away, some will travel to follow the Gators on the road, and others will have parties at home to watch the game on television. For Gator football fans everything is scheduled around the football fall season.

Data Collection

The study is part of a three-year project investigating the behaviors of Gator fans, primarily those who travel from outside the vicinity of the university to attend football games. Almost eighty percent of the non-student fans that have season tickets travel from outside of Gainesville and the County to attend the football games (University of Florida Athletic Association, 2000). Indeed a newspaper report of the Football-Fan Day held in August 2001 noted, "largely absent from the gathering were students, and for the most part, locals" (Zimmerman, 2001, p. 2a). The fans in attendance had come from all over the State of Florida, some driving hours to attend. Thus, part of the curiosity underlying the initial study in 1999 was why do these fans travel so far and so regularly both during the football season and for other events such as fan days, or to watch other Gator sports? The major focus of the second part of the study (reported here) was to understand the construction of individual and collective identity around Gator football and Gator fandom. In the early stages of the second part of the study thoughts of Turner's (1969) theory of ritual process and a Durkheimian conception of sport as a form of religion (Dunning, 1999) were the theoretical concepts underpinning the investigation. However, as the data collection progressed using grounded theory and constant comparative methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998 a & b), various themes such as persistence, a career-like path, commitment, and identification emerged from the data, all of which were reminiscent of Stebbins' (1979; 1982; 1992; 2001) concept of serious leisure.

Using systematic-random sampling procedures, 181 Gator fans were surveyed before three home football games during the fall of 1999. The purpose of the study was to investigate the travel behaviors associated with being a Gator fan as a form of sport tourism and to investigate the rituals and mean-

ings associated with being a Gator football fan. As part of the questionnaire, the fans were asked to self-identify themselves as a particular type of fan. Over two-thirds were Type I (Gator football is my number one interest); less than one quarter were Type II (I follow all Gator sports); few were Type III (I am a spouse or parent of Gator fan); and fewer were Type IV (To me the game is a social event). Type I fans reported that they were more likely to decorate their homes in Gator related paraphernalia, to be a member of a Gator Booster Club, and to regularly follow Gator football in the off-season when compared to the other fans. Type II fans were slightly more likely to attend Bowl Games regularly than Type I and two-thirds reported they always attend the UF vs. University of Georgia game which is held annually in Jacksonville, Florida and is billed as the world's largest cocktail party (Gibson, Willming & Holdnak, 2000).

The idea that there were different types of fan among the "Gator faithful" and that they appeared to have different behaviors and levels of identification led us to employ qualitative methods to gain a more in-depth understanding of the meanings associated with being a fan. Prior to the 2000 season, fans that had indicated on their questionnaire that they would be willing to take part in a follow-up interview were identified. These fans were grouped according to the four fan types outlined above. Using a process of theoretical sampling whereby participants who represented different levels of participation in the social world of Gator fans were selected for possible participation in the second stage of the study.

Before each home football game of the 2000 season, fans from each of the four sub-groups were sent a letter reminding them of their participation in the survey and inviting them to take part in a follow-up interview. The letters were staggered so that further sampling on a game-by-game basis could include fans that might be able to contribute information on any of the emerging patterns in the data. Three to five days after the letters were mailed, the potential participants were telephoned to find out if they would like to participate in the study and to schedule an interview for the next home football game. If a participant no longer wished to take part in the study, a replacement from the sub-sample was identified and contacted for the next game. A total of 41 fans were invited to participate in the second part of the study. Twenty interviews were subsequently completed with representatives from three of the four fan types. We were unable to interview any Type III fans (spouse or parent of a Gator fan), although among the fans we interviewed there were fans that could be classified as a Type III, but their primary identity was as a Type I or II fan. Reasons for non-participation in the interviews included being no longer interested in the study or they were unreachable by mail or telephone.

Some of the interviews were conducted on the Friday evenings before home football games or on Sunday mornings. Most of these interviews took place in the hotel lobby where the interviewee was staying for the weekend. The remaining interviews were conducted at the interviewees' tailgate gatherings, in which case the interviewers were instructed to find a quiet location

out of the hearing range of other tailgate participants. Sometimes this entailed going inside of the participant's RV or using vacant university conference rooms. An interview schedule guided the semi-structured interviews. Participants were asked about their fan-related behaviors such as: Why did you become a Gator fan, describe how you follow the Gators, how has the way you followed the Gators changed over the years, describe how you follow the Gators when you attend away games, and do you use vacation time to follow the Gators? As the interviews were conducted each week, emerging themes were identified and discussed and subsequently, appropriate changes were made in the interview in accordance with constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). For example, after the first week it became evident that being a Gator fan had dynamic qualities and seemed to be linked to different life stages and so probes about changes over time were added. The interviews varied in length from 20 to 60 minutes. As the interviews were completed, they were transcribed verbatim and mailed to the participants to verify transcript accuracy. Each interview was also accompanied by observations from the interviewers about the fan and, if appropriate, about the tailgate and other members of the tailgate party.

Constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998 a & b) was employed during both the interview process and analysis stages. Each member of the research team independently coded the transcripts for common patterns among the data. The researchers then met to discuss the patterns that appeared to be present in the data and through a process of comparing and contrasting they corroborated a series of categories and sub-categories emerging from the data. In the process of searching for a central concept within the data based on theoretical sensitivity (Strauss & Corbin, 1998 b) and consistent with grounded theory and theoretical elaboration (Vaughan, 1992), it was suggested that the already existing theory of serious leisure (Stebbins, 1979; 1982; 1992; 2001) be used as a framework to guide the analysis. Baldwin and Norris (1999) suggested Stebbins' framework is valuable to study specialized forms of leisure because it "provides a taxonomic method for classifying individuals for whom leisure is a central life interest" (p. 3). Thus, the research team separately coded the data according to the tenets of Stebbins' six characteristics of serious leisure. Subsequently, the team met to discuss and corroborate their coding schemes and they unanimously agreed that the data supported the contention that Gator fandom is a form of serious leisure.

During the fall of 2001, the lead researcher collected field notes of her observations of the Gator social world. This involved attending games and tailgates, informal talks with Gator fans, student athletes, members of the coaching staff, and reading and listening to media coverage of Gator football. She was also introduced to a doctoral student in the Sociology Department at UF who was engaged in an ethnographic study of the Gator football social world for her dissertation. The doctoral student concurred with our findings even down to quoting some of the same phrases and adjectives used by the fans that were interviewed in our study. These procedures were used

to shed additional insights on the Gator social world and triangulated our findings from data collected in 1999 and 2000.

Study Participants

Sixteen white males and four white females ranging in age from 30 to 78 years (mean age of 53.8 years) were interviewed (Table 1). Their length of time as a Gator fan ranged from 7 (one fan) to 51 years, with a mean of 33.8 years. Sixteen participants classified themselves as Type I fans, three as Type II fans, and one as Type IV fan. All of the fans were season ticket holders and attended most, if not all, home games and some traveled to away games as well. On average they traveled 249.6 miles to attend home games.

Findings

In our analysis of the data, patterns emerged from the coding process that appeared to suggest that Gator football for these fans is a form of serious leisure. Thus, the results are presented in accordance with the six characteristics of serious leisure as identified by Stebbins (1979; 1982; 1992; 2001). These are: (a) perseverance; (b) long-term careers; (c) significant personal effort; (d) durable-self benefits; (e) unique ethos; and (f) identification.

Perseverance

Stebbins (1982; 1992) suggested that one distinguishing characteristic of serious leisure is the quality of perseverance. He found that sometimes in the pursuit of an activity participants might encounter difficulties or occasional set-backs such as sports injuries or not securing a role in the case of amateur theater actors. He found that participants, who are serious about their activity, persevere through these difficult times. For sports fans much of the perseverance is associated with supporting their team through winning and losing seasons and not "cutting off from reflected failure" a strategy frequently used by fans when their team loses (Cialdini et al., 1976; Hirt, Zillman, Erickson, & Kennedy, 1992). In fact, several Gator football fans used the term "fair weather friend" to label those fans that did not possess the same level of persistence they had. A long time female fan explained:

It's great to be a Gator, win or lose. I support them, don't matter what they do, I'm not a fair-weather friend; I've sat through the year we came out 0-10-1. We never left because it said these boys need our support whether they're winning or losing. So . . . we stayed, didn't leave early from the game, kept hoping something would happen. (Female 65, #18)

The phrase, "It's great to be a Gator," is a common mantra among Gator football fans and in this instance it is used to emphasize the fact that being a Gator means persisting in the support of your team through winning and losing football games and not leaving the stadium early in the face of defeat. The reference to 0-10-1 refers to the notably bad 1979 season when UF won no games, lost ten, and tied one. In fact, several fans reminisced about this

TABLE 1
Profile of Gator Fans Interviewed

Gator Fan	Number of years as a fan	Fan Type	Alumnus of UF	Observations
Male 46, # 21	36	Type I- Football	No	Valued the family experience of tailgating and the Gator experience
Male 79, #23	38	Type I- Football	No	Orange cap and socks are his game-day apparel
Male 54, #4	30	Type II-all Gator sports	No	Very enthusiastic fan with a Gator cell phone
Male 60, #75	7	Type I- Football	No	Loves UF and football equally
Male 52, #177	46	Type I- Football	Yes	Tries to wear the same shirt as Steve Spurrier each season
Male 50, #11	50	Type I- Football	No	Defined area for tailgate. Truck over-decorated with Gator insignia
Male 39, #169	22	Type I- Football	Yes	Impressive tailgate. Everybody in Gator wear. Gator music playing
Male 47, #24	29	Type IV- Social fan	Yes	Wears Gator clothing and interested in football but not a die-hard fan
Male 65, #150	26	Type I- Football	No	Not an overly fervent fan but definitely identifies himself as a Gator not FSU
Female 73, #16	51	Type I- Football	No	Fervent fan wearing Gator apparel from head to toe. Passionate about the Gators
Female 30, #163	30	Type I- Football	Yes	Enthusiastic fan. Drives five hours for each home game
Male 47, #181	47	Type I- Football	No	Orange and blue truck. Intra-generational tailgate. Fervent fan
Male 54, #72	21	Type I- Football	No	Van decorated with Gator colors—seat cushions and matching cooler.
Male 55, #91	31	Type I- Football	No	Relaxed and friendly tailgate with everybody dressed in Gator colors singing Gator songs
Male 74, #120	51	Type I- Football	No	Excited to talk about the Gators and what it has meant to be a fan
Male 73, #14	46	Type I- Football	No	Vehicle and whole tailgate party attired in Gator wear
Female 48, #98	11	Type I- Football	No	Wears Gator apparel even at work
Male 38, #87	30	Type II-all Gator sports	Yes	Fan sported a Gator hat and shirt for every game
Female 65, #18	51	Type II-all Gator sports	Yes	Dressed in gator wear from head to toe. Loyal to both Gators and UF
Male 49, #67	32	Type I- Football	Yes	Wore a Gator hat and shirt and used a Gator cell phone. Passionate fan

season and they were anxious to show that despite this record they had remained steadfast in their support of the Gator football team. One fan was particularly adamant that loyal Gator fans were those who had experienced the 1979 football season and had not “jumped on the bandwagon” in the more successful decade of the 1990s. He stated:

And you know, the problem is most people will tell you that, “yeah, we hang in there”. . . most of the people you talk to have been Gators for about ten years, since Spurrier, some of us have been Gators, we’ve been through 0-10 seasons, 0-10-1, and we know what it’s like to get our butts kicked every week. You know, . . . you’re either for the university, or you’re not. It’s very simple for those of us who have been around awhile. (Male 49, #67)

The sentiments expressed by this long time Gator football fan reflects a common feeling among many of the other long-term fans, that in recent years with the advent of the “Steve Spurrier Era” as Head Coach of the UF football team, being a loyal fan did not require as much perseverance. During the “Steve Spurrier Era” (1990 to 2002), UF had experienced winning seasons, culminating in winning the National Championship in 1996. In fact, these fans felt that they had almost been spoiled, as one Gator fan explained, “I used to feel better about the wins years ago because it meant more. We win so much now you tend to take it for granted. My brother put it best, “the winning doesn’t feel as good as the losing feels bad” (Male 39, #169). A forty-seven year old fan concurred with this sentiment and said looking back over his 29 years as a fan: “There were years when we were not really a competitive team nationally so it was kind of hard. That’s where you really test your loyalty” (Male 47, #24). Interestingly, in January 2002, Steve Spurrier announced his resignation as head coach to the great surprise of the football world. Now, at the start of the post-Spurrier era there is a sense of waiting to see what will happen among Gator fans. A new coach has been hired and fans write letters of support to him in the *Gainesville Sun*, the community newspaper, but the Gator social world is in limbo, not quite sure what will happen next season in what may prove to be another test of commitment.

In our data, strength of commitment to the Gators is tested the week following the loss of a game, particularly among colleagues at work. The fans used words such as “depressed” or “hurt” to describe how they felt when their team lost; however, they were not afraid “to face and be ridiculed for losing the game” (Male 52, #177). One fan explained that if he were ever admitted to a hospital during the weekend of a Gator football loss, “I’d probably try and drag myself out of that hospital and go to work just to show everybody that I’m not one that’s gonna lay up because we lost. I wanna be known as a Gator fan and supporter even though we lose, or in hard times or good times” (Male 54, #4). This ridicule can be particularly acute if the loss involves in-state rival Florida State University (FSU). As one fan who is a dentist recounted, “I am a Gator fan so you gotta put up with it when you lose to Florida State everybody that next week that comes in that’s a Florida

State fan wants to talk about the game and harass you” (Male 55, #91). All of the Gator fans in this study felt that while losing a game is a traumatic experience, “being there” for their team in the face of defeat was extremely important. One fan expressed empathy for the athletes and said, “You feel bad for the guys losing because they’re just kids anyway you know (Male 50, #11). Another fan felt that despite the loss “you still have good friendships. Sort of commiserative” (Male 60, #75). Among some fans there was a feeling that it was their “privilege” to get annoyed at the coach’s decisions or some of the player’s mistakes that resulted in the loss, but these would not keep them away from the next game. “There are very few people that walk away saying “I ain’t going to a game next week” a 49-year-old male explained despite a loss.

Long Term Careers

A second characteristic of serious leisure is that participants have been involved in the activity long enough that they have encountered turning points and different stages of achievement (Stebbins, 1982). When asked how long they had been Gator fans, some replied “[s]ince the day I was born, I was a Gator” (Male 50, #11). Others mentioned specific events such as moving into the vicinity of the university or enrolling at UF as a student. One fan stated he had been a Gator fan “since I was a freshman; a student here in 1971. So coming up on 30 years” (Male 47, #24). Five fans reported that they had been Gators for at least fifty years, while others mentioned the decades of the sixties and the seventies as marking the start of their allegiance. Only two of those interviewed had been Gators for less than twenty years, one was a 60 year old male who had moved to the state of Florida eight years earlier and the other was a 48 year old female who had moved to the state during the mid 1980s. Some of the fans mentioned growing up watching Gator football either attending the games in-person or listening to them on the radio. Some of the fans reminisced about Steve Spurrier as a UF football player winning the Heismann Trophy (in 1966) and how their admiration and loyalty to him dated back to their youth. Others mentioned a family connection as being the catalyst for their career as a Gator fan. As one fan explained, “[m]y wife and I went here, my kids . . . went here, my brothers went here, and my brother-in-law went here; it’s a family” (Male 49, #67). Another fan reinforced this family-based Gator career connection and stated, “[t]o me it means a tradition of education and good athletics” (Male 38, #87). He went on to explain that he comes from a family of ten, and six of his siblings have graduated from UF.

While length of time as a Gator fan might be one indicator of a serious leisure career, recounting changes over time in the way they supported the Gators is another. All of the fans mentioned change over time in some of their fan-related behaviors. One example of this was change in the intensity with which they supported the Gators. “I don’t know if it’s changed, I think it’s gotten stronger, that’s a good word” (Male 54, #4) explained one fan. Among some of the fans there was evidence that the winning seasons of the

“Steve Spurrier Era” could be linked to this change in intensity. As one fan said, “[y]es I think I’d have to say that my interest is more intense let’s say, as they have been more successful. Kind of a natural response” (Male 47, #24), although he was quick to point out that he was also a loyal fan through the losing years. Another fan described himself as becoming “more rabid! (laughs) The more Spurrier’s won, the stronger I’ve been!” (Male 79, #23). This winning connection may also be linked to attending more away games, as one fan in reflecting upon his career as Gator fan said:

Umm, I’m pretty rabid; I bleed Orange and Blue most all the time I would say. I don’t know that it’s changed all that much. Umm, maybe in the last ten years . . . more trips to bowl games and away games that I didn’t used to do prior to the 90s I would say. (Male 52, #177)

Some fans attributed the change in their intensity of support for the Gators to the fact that they now receive more media coverage and “[i]t is easier to keep up with them” (Male 74, #120). Although this in all probability is also related to the fact that winning teams tend to be more visible in the media (Turner, 1999). Another fan attributed the change in his loyalty to the fact that his son is now a student at UF and can share his enthusiasm.

The influence of the family life cycle was noticeable as another indicator of career change among most of these Gator fans. Many fans spoke of changes attributed to the family life cycle whereby as they transitioned from singlehood to parenthood and even grandparenthood their game day behaviors changed. For example, talking of his single days, one Gator fan remarked that “it was more of a men’s trip” (Male 54, #4). Another fan, in talking about the people who have tailgated around her for years, said “[w]e just know each other for years, and we go up and down and say how’s your family” (Female 65, #18). She went on to say “[w]e’ve seen kids grow up” and in talking about how her own children who are now young adults “they were little when they were going to the ball game with us.” Family life cycle changes were evident in most of the fans’ descriptions of their careers as Gators. The majority of the change was associated with children growing up and as one fan explained, “[t]hrough the years we’ve been able to raise our family with Gators” (Male 65, #67). Some mentioned that as their children had grown they had attended more away games, taking their children with them. Others mentioned how their tailgate companions had grown over the years as their children had married and brought their spouses into the group and even in turn, their children. Others mentioned the effects of aging on their tailgate companions and the subsequent changes in their fan related behaviors. One female explained:

We have partied out here together some of us 20 years, it’s been like one great big family. . . . It has been relatively stable, except for the, . . . I guess the past year, some of them got that, older ones have had illness and can’t get here that early, and um, of course some of them have died. (Female 65, #18)

Another sign of aging spoken of by some was how they did not drive to as many away games in recent years due to their age. Some reported no longer walking to the stadium, instead riding in the “Handivan.” One fan told of

how they had created a memorial for one of their deceased tailgate companions:

We've all had our lumps and we can kind of see it in everybody's face every year, but there's a couple of us that aren't here anymore and uh . . . we had a tribute to one and in fact he has a stone down by the tree down here. (Male 39, #169)

There were also changes in the style of tailgating over time. Some mentioned the change from their student days when ". . . we really didn't tailgate, we just kind of wandered over from the dorms" (Male 47, #24) and "I used to come drunk, now I come pretty much sober!" (Male 47, #181) to the description that a female fan gave of "her" tailgate:

I mean we've gotten high class . . . we have an orange and blue tent out there. One of the fellows has a [satellite] dish. . . . They have electricity out here and we plug in with fans when it's hot and grills . . . (Interviewer: Satellite TV! (laughs)) [we] watch other teams, and what's going on. (Female 65, #18)

In walking around the pre-game tailgates in the fall 2001, satellite dishes were certainly becoming a common accessory for tailgates, replacing the radio and the TV with the rabbit ear antennae used previously.

Another example of change associated with longevity of a career as a Gator fan pertained to graduating from a casual fan without season tickets to a season ticket holder. As some had become more prosperous and also gained sufficient seniority as a fan, they were able to improve their seats. One fan said, "I'm in . . . I'm in the third location" but he already had his sights set on upgrading his seats again as he said, "[w]hat I would like to be able to move to someday, and I think my friends also, would be the chair backs" (Male 47, #24). By this he meant that he aspired to sitting in a section of the stadium containing chair-style seats instead of the regular bleacher style seating. Other fans talked of being "grandfathered into their seats" referring to the fact that new season ticket holders are required to "give" a donation to the athletic department in order to secure their tickets. Some fans reported handing down season tickets through the generations. A 39-year-old male explained how he upgraded his seats as a child and is now on the forty-yard line. While some fans have improved their seats in the stadium, others reported, "[w]e sit with a couple that's, everybody around us has been there 25, 20 years or over in the same seats" (Female 65, #18). In fact, many of the fans talked about how they have become good friends with the people who sit close to them in the stadium and how they have seen their children grow or how different generations have occupied the seats at one time or another. Another change related to longevity of career related to parking location. Parking privileges have tended to improve with seniority as a fan, although some have been brought about by building changes at the University. Gator fans do not tend to change location frequently, as one fan reported, "[w]e've been parking in this place for 27 years (Male 47, #181) and another women said of her last parking move "[n]ow we moved over here, but it's been since 1976" (Female 65, #18).

Significant Personal Effort

Stebbins (1982) suggested that long time experience in a role, coupled with personal effort and attaining knowledge and skills in a chosen pursuit, distinguishes serious leisure from casual leisure. All of the fans have long experience in their roles and expend considerable effort being Gator football fans. Being a fan may not engender developing performance skills as in the case of amateur actors (Stebbins, 1979) or tournament bass anglers (Yoder, 1997), but skill does characterize their efforts. While Gator fans demonstrated skills pertaining to organizing a good tailgate and being knowledgeable about the team, the main distinguishing factor in this analysis was the amount of effort expended by these fans in following the Gator football team. Most of the fans "[a]ttend all Gator football games" (Male 74, #120), and some even reported attending basketball, baseball, and a number of other UF sports. These fans drive between 70 and 700 miles roundtrip regularly to attend home football games. They also reported attending some, if not all of the away football games, and not surprisingly say that "[o]h gosh, it occupies a lot of our time. . ." (Male 55, #91); including for some, the use of vacation time. In fact, one fan explained:

We make all the home games. There has to be something pretty major for us to miss a home game. We've missed one, the Florida State game in 91, because we had a death in the immediate family and we couldn't make that one but other than that we have had our season tickets since 82 and that is the only home game we have ever missed. (Male 46, #21)

Another fan was proud to report that "I could tell you, I think I've missed five games in twenty years" (Male 49, #67). Most of the fans also reported coming to Gainesville in the spring for the annual Orange and Blue game, the pre-season intra squad scrimmage. As one woman stated, "I come up for the Orange and Blue [game] all the time, see what's gonna happen" (Female 65, #18). The Orange and Blue Game is a Florida tradition, which is considered by fans as a "quick fix" of Florida Football to last through the off-season. The game usually takes place on the mid-day between the previous season and the upcoming fall season and has at times been a predictor of the upcoming football season.

Others attended fan days and arrived early for the Homecoming Parade, which coincides with a home football game. One woman pointed out that regular attendance was an expected behavior of a loyal fan, she even reported traveling from out of town to watch swimming and track meets. She stated, "[t]hey know that we will be down here no matter what, rain or (pause). . . ." (Female 73, #16). While, these fans would not miss a game unless they had to, they also spoke of how much time was devoted to following their team. One male fan reported selling his boat, as he did not have time to use it while being a Gator fan. Another fan said, "[t]he weekends are gone. We don't do anything on the weekends except football. And if there is not a home game one of the group will host a party for the game and everybody goes to their house to watch the game" (Male 60, #75).

Another example of the effort expended by fans was their game day routines. Because these fans live out of town, many of them reported leaving home in the pre-dawn hours to make the journey to UF. One Gator fan described his typical game day routine as “[u]p at four o’clock in the morning, down to my sister-in-law’s to get the motor home packed up and ready to go. Uh, at Flavet field at about 8:15, 8:30 . . .” (Male 60, #75). Many fans had labor-intensive tailgating rituals and frequently spent the week before a game contacting friends and relatives and preparing tailgate supplies. As one fan stated:

[W]ell, uh, I start preparing on Friday, you know making sure that I have got everything that I am going to take, getting it ready. I make sure that I have rain gear, and I have uh, folding chairs, and a cooler, you know everything, hat, all the stuff, make sure that’s all in my car. Making sure I got the tickets. (Male 65, #150)

Based on his long time experience as a fan, he has learned exactly what to take to a game to be prepared for every eventuality. Another fan spoke of marinating the lamb chops he was going to cook at the tailgate as early as the Tuesday before. Relating some of these tailgate rituals back to the discussion on longevity of career of being a fan, one fan explained that his “serious tailgating” is related to “you know what that is, that’s years of really being with the same people all the time” (Male 49, #67) as he was busy deep frying a turkey and grilling ten pounds of fresh salmon. Among these Gator fans there were many examples of the considerable effort they devoted to being a fan in terms of time, money, sacrificing other activities, and family experiences. There was also evidence that these fans had developed a range of skills and knowledge over the years such as knowing how early to arrive before a game to get their parking space, or exactly what “equipment” they needed to bring with them for a successful tailgate party, or to maintain a certain level of comfort while they watched the game in different types of weather. Yet, at the same time they all reported that the benefits of being a Gator fan outweighed the efforts they expended in this endeavor.

Durable Self Benefits

Stebbins (1979) identified eight self-benefits associated with serious leisure including social interaction, sense of belonging, self-enrichment, and re-creation. All of the fans reported the “specialness” of family time and the friendships they had made through the years as being the major benefit of being a fan. Several reported that “the only time we see each other is whenever we meet down here during the season” (Male 47, #181). Others described their time spent at UF following their team as:

I think . . . it’s a quality time to visit with my friends and their family members and their friends . . . It’s a quality time to talk with them and it’s not a . . . we’ll talk about the game and Florida stuff, but more so it’s talking about . . . Hey how’s your life going? What’s been going on? How are the kids? You know . . .

what are your thoughts on retirement? Just the things you know the meaningful things that you want to talk to your friends about. (Male 47, #24)

Many of the fans concurred with the sentiments of this fan. One fan said, "It's not just football. It's everything, the people that I've met up here" (Male 39, #169). When asked about being a fan, another male reported, "[w]hat does it mean? It means a sense of pride, enjoyment of coming to the game, meeting people you've never met before, having some new friends (Male 50, # 11) and the whole experience of being at a football game is "just a lot of fun" (Male 49, #67). In fact, one fan said, "I think sometimes the tailgating is more important than the game, uh, not that I think of it less, but just to meet your friends . . . during football season you meet them instead of just corresponding or calling. So you kind of look forward to football season just so you can see them again. So it's just the friendship" (Male 65, #150). For many of these fans, the social experiences accompanying football have provided a wider sense of meaning to their lives. One male fan spoke of the football-related activities as "creating memories" (Male 74, #120). Another female fan said that being a Gator fan ". . . get[s] us to take some trips, otherwise, he [her husband] does not like to take vacations" (Female 73, #16). In fact, this woman became rather emotional when she was talking about the meaning of being a Gator, she explained, "It's (choke), that's probably my biggest enjoyment watching the Gators" [on the verge of tears]. Of course the psychological benefits of being a Gator are especially enhanced when the team wins. In describing how they feel when the Gators win, fans use words such as "ecstatic", "jubilant" and as one fan said, "Oh, if I were able to I would do back flips, (laughter), I'm really happy, I feel real good when they win, I like to see them win" (Male 60, #75).

Unique Ethos

Stebbins (1992) suggested that serious leisure participants are part of a social world characterized by its own subculture or unique ethos comprised of a set of values, attitudes and norms. Drawing upon the writings of Cressey (1932), Shibutani (1955) and Irwin (1977), among others, Unruh (1980) suggested that social worlds are social organizations arranged around a common activity and are characterized by different levels of involvement, meanings, and interaction. Geographically, social worlds may be localized, spread throughout the country, or increasingly with globalization and better communication, around the world. Stebbins (1993) argued that a missing element in Unruh's conceptualization is the existence of a strong subculture in these social worlds. Thus, he suggested that the ethos associated with serious leisure pursuits is a combination of both subculture and social structure. He further suggested that this mesostructural level of serious leisure pursuits has several features: A distinctive social world, social networks, characteristic lifestyles, a number of small groups, and especially in sport, a central collective activity.

The ethos associated with being a Gator football fan is extremely well developed. Many of the fans belong to regional Gator clubs. Also, when they are not in Gainesville many of them reported using the media, and increasingly the Internet, to keep in contact with Gator football news. One female fan described how she followed the Gators:

Well, on the Internet, Gatorzone.com and then on the Sunday morning after the football game, I watch football highlights with Spurrier and then on Thursday night radio . . . you know, the Thursday night show with Steve Spurrier. (Female 48, #98)

Unruh (1980) postulated that many social worlds are characterized by mediated interaction using television, radio, newsletters, and the like to communicate. Following this line of thinking, Stebbins (1999) predicted that contact by the Internet would become increasingly more prevalent among devotees of a serious leisure activity. In the case of Gator football fans, he appears to be right. Another female fan reported that she felt "closer" to her Gator friends because of e-mail; however, in common with many e-mail users she complained about how easy it was to lose three hours chatting on e-mail to the detriment of other activities. Other fans mentioned they subscribed to the *Gainesville Sun*, the local newspaper for the UF community, even though they lived outside the circulation area. Others watched anything they could about the Gator football team on television, even down to going to a sports bar if they could not watch a game on their home television. Radio shows and the *Gatorbait* magazine were other ways of keeping in contact with Gator football news.

There was also much evidence to suggest that distinctive lifestyles exist among Gator football fans. Not only do they spend time surfing the web and reading the various news reports, life for many of these fans revolved around football. Many fans spoke of scheduling family events around football games. One male fan and his wife explained:

(Wife) We have a thirtieth anniversary coming up for one of our friends, and we . . . (Gator fan) we had to make sure it was an "off weekend." (laughter). In fact, my brother-in-law is getting re-married and we had to make sure it was not on a game weekend (laughter). (Male 49, #67)

Another fan described how every Fourth of July they "get together as families . . . and we play video, Gator videos . . . Friday through Monday you know (laughter). It's called a Lonely Gator Club where we can't wait for the season to start" (laughter) (Male 49, #67). These fans also prioritized being a Gator football fan above other components of their lives. One fan joked that "Gators come first and foremost, you know. . . . My wife says I love them more than . . . her! . . . Yeah, no, not really baby! [turning to his wife] (laughter)" (Male 54, #4).

The centrality of being a Gator football fan in the lives of these individuals was demonstrated further when they were asked to imagine their lives without Gator football. Most were speechless and could not believe they were being asked to contemplate such a fate. One fan said "[y]ou're kidding

me. . . . I'll be planted. . . . How could that happen? . . . I don't know what I would do. That's impossible. We won't go there. That would be a nightmare. Let's try and stay upbeat. . . . That will depress me" (Male 54, #72). Another said "[t]hey'd probably be putting dirt over me. (laughs) Hmm . . . you're making it tough aren't ya? Um . . . (long pause) Yeah, ah . . . be truthful. I can't imagine being without Gators, you know I've been with them, doing them for so long" (Male 54, #4). This scheduling of life around football is not only evident among the fans, but events both at the University and in the community are influenced by the presence or absence of a football game on a particular weekend in the fall. For example the Fall Arts Festival, an annual community event will never be scheduled on the same weekend as a home game as the arts festival will lose in the battle for attendance, especially on a Saturday to football.

Gator fans practice various rituals pertaining to game day behaviors and tailgating activities. One fan said, "[c]ooking is a major part of my weekend before the game. That's like my ritual. I wouldn't know what to do if I didn't cook . . . I'm nervous if I don't have something do to" (Male 39, #169). In fact, the same Gator fan explained that he never cooks hot dogs or hamburgers as the "games are too righteous" for this type of food. Others talked about their after-the-game rituals when they come back to their vehicle. One fan explained that if the Gators win they always celebrate by opening a bottle of champagne, if they lose the bottle remains unopened.

There is also a set of values evident among the fans, the most preeminent of which appears to revolve around loyalty. One fan explained, "I think it is just a loyalty thing. Once you become a Gator fan, then you start looking at everything else a little bit differently" (Male 55, #91). Others related their loyalty to pride in the university, "[a] big part of it is just loyalty. As an alumni (sic) loyalty to the school and to the programs. You know feeling proud of the accomplishments of the team or teams" (Male 47, #24). For some, the trips to Gainesville each season were regarded as a pilgrimage. One fan said, "[i]t's a Mecca" (Male 39, #169). Indeed, Unruh (1980) suggested that all social worlds have geographical centers associated with them. In the case of Gator football fans the Mecca or center of their social world is Gainesville, and more particularly "The Swamp" (Ben Hill Griffin Stadium). A fervent fan described how he and his friends hold initiation ceremonies for new fans that park near them. He said:

We have a tradition down here at the sinkhole, if you're a newcomer and you want to come here and park, you have to sing, "We are the Boys of Old Florida," off the tailgate of my truck and we are fixin' to have about four of them, whether you can do it drunk or sober, it doesn't matter, if you fall off we'll pick you up and put you back up there! (Male 47, #181)

The song he refers to is sung between the third and fourth quarters of every home game and the fans link arms and sway in time to the song as it is sung. The "Boys of Old Florida" is a legacy from earlier days of the University when UF was a men's institution and Florida State University was the

women's college. While UF has been co-educational for over half a century, the masculine ethos surrounding football is so strong that various attempts at changing the words of the song have been strongly resisted. Thus, a "true Gator" needs to know the words and sing them proudly. This is not only a rite of passage into the social world, but it enables the fan to take full part in the collective activity, that of the football game, which is an integral part of the Gator social world. In turn, this reinforces the sense of community built around membership in the social world and as such, relates to identification, the sixth characteristic of serious leisure.

Identification

Stebbins' (1979; 1982; 1992) sixth characteristic of serious leisure is that participants strongly identify with their chosen activity. All of the fans in this study had constructed a large portion of their identities around being a Gator football fan. Part of this identification with the Gators was evident in the clothes they wore and the decoration of their vehicles in orange and blue, UF colors. Some even had motor homes and vans decorated in orange and blue, with alligator shaped telephones and orange and blue chairs. When asked about what he wore to a game one male fan said:

Same thing . . . Pants with a Gator on it, shirt with a Gator on it. I drive up with a shirt with a Gator on it. I drive home with a shirt with a Gator on it. . . . I have long sleeve, short sleeve . . . all of them have Gators. . . . Yeah, they were custom made for me. . . . Yeah, just like my van was custom [made] for me. My whole van is orange and blue. My cooler matches. (Male 54, #72)

Orange and blue earrings, shoes, shirts, hats, and shorts were mentioned as regular game-day wear. In fact, some fans wear Gator clothing all week long "[w]ell, this is my daughter here, [name], she just graduated, um she'll tell you that most of what I have has some Gator logo on it, including my suits and not my suit suits, but my shirts, I wear Gator stuff every day" (Male 49, #67). One group of fans explained that they even go as far as trying to match their clothing to the colors that the football team will be wearing that day. The team has two sets of shirts, blue and white. Another fan explained that "people say I am obsessed. (laughter). My truck is blue, it is blue and orange. My dog's name is Gator" (Male 47, #181). However, clothing and other paraphernalia was only the surface measure of the extent to which the identities of these fans were tied to the Gators.

Among the seven fans that graduated from UF, there was an additional level of pride in the university as well as in Gator football, as one woman explained, "I guess I would say that I went to the university; I am from Gainesville so I am very proud to be a Gator fan. I support the university and the sports" (Female 30, #163). Another fan stated, "[m]ost anything that goes on that has anything to do with the University of Florida interests me . . . because I'm proud to have gone to school here . . . and proud of the reputation the University of Florida has and . . . not only in football but in all fields" (Male 52, #177). One male fan said while he does not have "an

orange and blue painted car or big motor home” he says he is “proud to be an alumni (sic) of the school” (Male 47, #24). Indeed, one fan tried to explain the difference:

I always consider myself not a Gator fan, I always consider myself a Gator. I consider anybody who . . . graduates or goes to school here a Gator, as opposed to not being a Gator. (laughs). You see, there are two types of fans, those that are Gator fans and those that wish they were. So . . . when somebody asks me if I’m a Gator fan, I usually try to correct them and say I’m a Gator not a Gator fan. (Male 52, #177)

Another fan who had attended UF for two years as a student had recently enrolled in a graduate program “because I want to have a degree from the University of Florida and I wanna prove to myself that I can make it in this school” (Male 49, #67). In contrast, fans who were not alumni of the University appeared to tie their identities more exclusively to athletics and Gator football. Sentiments such as I’m “just a Gator fan period” (Male 59, #75) and “I’m not just a one sport sort of person, I’m a Gator fan period!” (Male 54, #72) exemplify the philosophy of these fans.

The intensity of identification of these fans with the Gators was illustrated further when they talked about their team in comparison to other teams in the Southeastern Conference, particularly their in-state rival Florida State University (the Seminoles). This rivalry was frequently evident among family members. As one fan said, “I’ve always teased my wife that I would never be married to a Bulldog fan [University of Georgia]” (Male 46, #21). Another mentioned, “I got a sister-in-law . . . that she’s a . . . graduate from Florida State. . . . I don’t like to mention that. . . . No, she won’t be a Gator” (Male 54, #4). In fact, he went on to say that his sister-in-law’s father was an avid Gator fan when he was alive and he would be “rolling over in his grave” at his daughter’s choice of allegiance. Several fans mentioned that their children had made “misguided choices” in selecting a university other than UF to attend. One fan whose daughter chose to attend Florida State University said that his friends used to taunt him with the slogan “Dad’s don’t let their daughters go to Florida State” (Male 55, #91). Another fan described his daughter as a “rebellious young lady” for choosing Florida State. He went on to say that her choice was motivated by the need to “be different than mom and dad and she grew up coming up here and she thought that she needed to get away from all this . . . she was up there for six weeks [at FSU] and was absolutely miserable [so she transferred to UF]”.

On the whole, these fans viewed these rivalries as “just fun.” One woman explained, “We have rivalries, we get, you know, e-mails, the whole sympathy cards, in a fun way you know! What’s happened to your team? My daughter-in-law said last week!” (Female 65, #18). However, among some of the fans, there was evidence of derision in their feelings towards non-Gator fans. One fan explained, “There’s only three kinds of people in Florida. There’s a Gator, a wannabe Gator, and Gator bait” (Male 54, #72). He goes on to say that he would never hire a Seminole fan as “They’re all mentally deficient

to begin with, no one will hire someone to work for them that is mentally deficient. The only reason they went to Florida State is because they couldn't get into Florida. It's true!" (Male 54, #72). The derisory nature was exacerbated a few years ago when a FSU football player was arrested for a shoplifting incident and since then Seminoles are referred to as "Criminoles." Another fan went on to say "I'd rather my son be gay than be a Seminole!" (Male 47, #181). These fans have arguably taken identification to the extremes and are not representative of all of the fans in this study. Others exemplified social comparisons in more moderate ways. One fan explained that UF is unique compared to other universities with the exception of one, as he conceded that "you may find it in Notre Dame who has a tradition of however many years . . . but this school is very very special, and they, they indoctrinate you early on, it's the proof in the pudding. Fifteen thousand student tickets this year scarfed up in less than four days" (Male 49, #67).

In addition to their immediate social groups, these fans identified themselves with the wider community of Gator fans, as one fan put it, having "a common bond" with other Gator fans (Male 55, #91). Another fan explained that being a Gator meant that you had a common topic of conversation and shared identity with other Gators:

[Being a Gator] opens up lots of, ah, good communications. They find you're a Gator fan. . . . My family doctor's a Gator, my whole classroom is a Gator, cause I teach school . . . the students have given me Gators all the time, they call me "Gator lady" on campus at my elementary school, and friendships have formed with Gators, you know . . . but it's a recognition and camaraderie of people you meet, [they] come up at airports and everything, come up and talk to ya. (Female 65, #18)

Perhaps as Dunning (1999) postulated, identities and feelings of community around sport may prove to be a major source of "we feelings" in post-modern society. Certainly, for the long time fans in this study much of their identity appeared to be constructed around being a Gator football fan and membership in the wider Gator social world.

Discussion

In his conclusion to *Amateurs, Professionals and Serious Leisure*, Stebbins (1992) wrote, "[t]here it is the gauntlet is down. Let us make sure that serious leisure has a prominent place on the research agenda of the next century" (p. 135). There is certainly evidence that many leisure scholars have taken up this charge. Since then, there have been two special issues of the journal *World Leisure* devoted to serious leisure (vol. 35, (1), 1993; vol. 43, (2), 2001), and one issue devoted to volunteering (vol. 38, (3), 1997). Various researchers have investigated different forms of serious leisure such as the American Kennel Club (Baldwin & Norris, 1999), and bass fishing (Yoder, 1997). However, until recently, sport fandom as a form of serious leisure received little attention from scholars (Jones, 2000). We feel our data show that the sports fans studied here exemplify the characteristics of serious

leisure on all accounts (Stebbins, 1979; 1982; 1992; 2001). Moreover, Stebbins postulated that as more scholars investigate forms of serious leisure modifications to his premises would occur. Accordingly, from our findings, we propose a number of ideas that might be incorporated into future work on serious leisure.

An interesting finding in our study was the interaction between family life cycle and career progression as a Gator football fan. Kelly and Freysinger (2000) conceptualized leisure as a dimension of life that is interwoven and not necessarily distinct from other domains of life. Other scholars have recognized that the place and meaning of leisure in people's lives is dynamic and may change as they encounter different stages of the life span (Kleiber & Kelly, 1980) or family life cycle (Rapoport & Rapoport, 1975). The careers of Gator football fans appeared to be integrally related to their journey through life. Their memories as fans were not only centered on the successes and failures of the team, but also on the people with whom they shared these experiences. Children growing up, adding new members of the family through marriage, aging of their group members, and even loss of fellow fans who have died were linked to changes in the way they have followed the Gators through the years. Indeed, sometimes life stage necessitated a change in tailgating style to accommodate more or less people, or aging may have curtailed the distances they would drive to follow the team; however, a constant element in their lives was being a Gator and college football. Indeed, Stebbins (1992) suggested that career progression in serious leisure is characterized by social and psychological continuity. We would also suggest that adopting a lifecourse perspective might enable us to better understand how a serious leisure career is contextualized within the life journey of individuals. Certainly, for these fans, the special times spent with family and friends constituted one of the most important benefits of being a Gator fan, as did the inter-generational nature of these groups and the sense of community built around being a Gator. All of these themes have emerged in leisure studies as pertinent issues in recent years and membership in the Gator social world seems to suggest a venue in which to examine some of them.

Another finding was related to Gator football fans' involvement in family-based leisure during game days. For many Gator fans, tailgating was described as family time. Some of these fans spoke of tailgates with twenty people or more. In a society which, as some scholars argue, is time compressed (Schor, 1991), time for socializing with family has become scarce, as even nuclear family members have difficulty sitting down to eat with each other. Many of the fans spoke of tailgating as providing quality family time for all generations, from young children to grandparents. Some fans reported that the football season was their only opportunity in throughout the to see some of their friends and family. Social interaction is a component of life that has been linked to higher levels of life satisfaction (Glass, Mendes de Leon, Marottoli & Berkman, 1999) and the socializing around football for the Gator fans in this study is an important benefit derived from their

participation in serious leisure. Nonetheless, our data also hinted at what Stebbins called the selfishness or the uncontrollability often inherent in serious leisure, which might upset family relations.

All of the fans expended considerable time, money, and effort to attend football games. Some even exhibited uncontrollability, which occurs when participation in a serious leisure activity may exceed time, money, and preclude other activities (Stebbins, 1979). One fan sold his boat so that he would have more time to follow the Gators while others scheduled family events around the games. Many spent a significant amount of time reading and listening to media accounts about the team and increasingly some used electronic communication such as e-mail and Gator list serves to discuss the exploits of their team with other fans. Media and computer-based communication certainly enabled these fans and many other Gator fans around the world to maintain contact with their Gator social world.

What was not clearly apparent from these data was the extent to which participation in the Gator social world stressed other relationships a fan had with family and friends. One fan joked "Gators come first" even before his wife. Others mentioned that their wives did not always accompany them to the games. There was certainly evidence among the fans interviewed that Gator football for many was a inter-generational family event; however, we did not interview the family members who stayed home or the co-workers who may have to put up with the mood swings that accompanied the winning and losing of games. Here, Stebbins' (1992) contention that a hobbyist public (HP) might exist seems to be supported, although more research needs to be conducted to substantiate the specific relationships this HP has to the hobbyists, in this case Gator football fans.

A gender analysis might also be appropriate in analyzing these relationships (Bartram, 2001; Rainsborough, 1999). While male fans reported that they were actively involved in arranging and preparing their tailgates for home games, future researchers should interview the spouses and other family members to find out exactly what roles they all play in tailgate preparation, especially as it pertains to traditionally female roles of food preparation and childcare. Davidson's (1996) study of family vacations and Shaw's (1992) study of everyday family leisure suggests that men and women experience family events differently with women doing a major share of the facilitation and preparation of such events. A question for future research might be does this pattern also occur in sports fan social worlds especially in relation to attending games and tailgating?

Another issue that has become increasingly pressing in recent years is the loss of community in modern life (Putnam, 1995). Arai and Pedlar (1997) and Stebbins (1999) suggested that serious leisure might increasingly promote a sense of community among participants and facilitate social integration. Invoking a mesostructural analysis, Stebbins (1993) postulated about the ways in which social worlds formed around serious leisure are linked to a wider society. Fans spoke of the common bonds they had with other Gators not only in their immediate social networks, but increasingly

around the world. For example, during the 2001 Olympic Games held in Sydney, Australia, the UF Alumni Association in conjunction with the state representatives invited all UF alumni living in Australia and any other Florida residents attending the Games to a satellite broadcast of a Gator football game. Certainly among the fans we interviewed and others we have encountered, seeing somebody wearing Gator clothing outside the context of a game reinforces their collective identity and frequently leads to both parties performing the Gator chomp as a sign of membership in the Gator social world and saying "Go Gators" as a greeting. (The Gator chomp involves using both arms to simulate an alligator opening and closing its mouth).

Stebbins suggested that one feature of a mesostructural analysis, that may be of particular relevance to sport, is the existence of a collective activity. The collective activity inherent in the Gator social world is game day, particularly home football games. As Dunning (1999) suggested, the quest for a sense of community and "we feeling" may be satisfied through sport as watching a sporting competition is not only a shared activity, but individuals frequently share a bond with other fans through their identification with a particular team. This site of collective identity is not only apparent at the regional level, but it has long been known that sport may also encourage patriotism (Stevenson & Nixon, 1987) especially in the U.S. where sporting events at all levels of competition start with singing the national anthem. The use of sport to promote patriotism was particularly evident during the last year of this study with the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. On the Saturday following the terrorist attacks, UF was scheduled to play the University of Tennessee football team at home. This would have been one of the most important home football games of the year, although the game was subsequently postponed. One of the arguments for going ahead with the game and one that was echoed around the U.S. in relation to other sporting events, was that collective activities of this type might reinforce unity and promote patriotism at a time when the country was feeling vulnerable. As it turned out, all sporting events were postponed on that Saturday for security reasons; however, at the next home football game a mix of patriotism and Gator identity was apparent with t-shirts portraying the U.S. flag and the words "In all kinds of weather we'll stick together" taken from the song "We are the boys of old Florida" printed across the front. Thus, in a society which is increasingly complex and fragmented (Simmel, 1955) being a Gator football fan may not only anchor individual identity, but it might also provide a forum for collective identity with periodic opportunities to reaffirm this sense of connectivity in a stadium filled with 85,000 other fans.

The search for alternative sites of community and identity may become increasingly important as automation continues to change the social nature of the workplace and the aging of the western world changes the composition of the workforce. However, Reid and Mannell (1994) suggested we need to change our belief that work centered lives are a prerequisite for meaningful leisure as many more people in the future will be outside of the workforce either as retirees or unemployed. Existing research in our field has

shown that taking part in what Kelly (1987) calls high investment activities appears to be linked to higher levels of life satisfaction for older adults (Dupuis & Smale, 1995; Havighurst, 1957; Kaplan, 1979; Riddick & Daniel, 1984; Romsa, Bondy, & Blenman, 1985). Among the fans interviewed in this study there were a number of older individuals with long careers as Gator fans and Gator football still had a central role in their lives. One avenue for future research might be to explore the role of Gator fandom in the transition to retirement and later life. Certainly, Stebbins (1992) has already discussed the possible benefits that serious leisure may engender for older adults providing among others social networks, structure, and a sense of purpose.

As we move into the 21st Century, technological innovation, the increased pace of life, and changes in the demographic composition of society are poised to change the structure of life in the western world in various ways. There has also been concern over the shallowness of commodified leisure (Kelly, 1991; Parker, 1991; Stebbins, 1992). Perhaps, as we investigate different forms of serious leisure we may find that many of the social and individual needs such as identity, social interaction, and structure being met in other domains of life not previously considered as important for the well-being of society. While such a conclusion sounds functionalist, and could easily be critiqued as perpetuating the status quo, listening to the voices of these fans and the meaning associated with being a Gator football fan, it is apparent that "sitting at a football game" for these fans is serious leisure. Thus, as leisure researchers and practitioners perhaps we should pay more attention to sport spectatorship and fandom as a form of leisure. Recognizing for example that tailgating facilitates inter-generational family relations might encourage organizers of sports events to build in time and space for such interaction. Indeed, Green and Chalip (1998) found that informal socializing among flag football participants at a tournament was something they wanted more of, instead of having their time tightly structured. Many youth sports events attract not only parents but grandparents and other family members. Perhaps scheduling sports so that they incorporate time for socializing might be a way of facilitating more time spent as a family. Community sports events can also instill psychic income (Burgan & Mules, 1992) for the hosts. The excitement arising from hosting a special event can provide a focus for community identity, especially if residents are encouraged to be involved in the event either as participants or volunteers (Garnham, 1996). Moreover hosting visitors may also provide an economic boost for a community (Walo, Bull, & Breen, 1996). Certainly, Arai and Pedlar (1997) and Stebbins (1999) have discussed the potential benefits that serious leisure forms may have for a community, for Gainesville, Florida, Gator football and its fans are a major source of community identity and pride.

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