

The Making of a Memory

By John Clarke

A trip to the NCAA Football National Championship game

When my son John Randall called to invite me on the "trip of a lifetime," he had my attention. The destination: Tampa, Florida, for the NCAA Football National Championship game.

The championship game was to be between the University of Alabama and Clemson University—a rematch of the championship game from the year before when Alabama prevailed by a narrow margin. My son is a 2004 Clemson graduate and, in true Clemson alumni form, he loves the football team and will go to great lengths to attend a game.

My first question had to do with the price of a ticket. Despite the astronomical cost of tickets, plus the cost of flights to get to the game, our wives (probably reluctantly) blessed the trip and we went to work to make it happen.

Wanting to avoid the possibility of ending up with bogus tickets, we decided to avoid eBay and Craig's List. The morning after our decision to go, I got to work tracking down any available tickets. I tried some folks I knew in Tampa, hoping they had connections. No luck. I tracked down a few Clemson alumni here in Carteret County to see if they had purchased tickets and if they had any extras. Again, no luck.

I hit the internet and we soon decided that we would focus on "less expensive" tickets. Early the next morning, I received a text that my son was online and had found two seats together in section 315. The price: \$950 each. Prices were certainly not getting any cheaper. We again confirmed our belief that this would be a once-in-a-lifetime event—and he bought the tickets. FedEx would deliver them to him in two days. (By that evening, those tickets were over \$1,200.)

I was able to get a 5:50 a.m. game day flight out of Jacksonville with a connection in Atlanta for the final leg to Tampa. My early morning departure meant a 3 a.m. wake-up call, but I figured we could all sleep later. Our son lives near Trenton, New Jersey, and was able to get a round-trip flight to Orlando for only \$80. The plan was for him to rent

a car in Orlando and drive to Tampa to pick me up. An in-law family connection for my son resulted in a no-cost stay in a condominium in Gulfport, so it was all coming together.

We had a mild scare when, as game day approached, a snow and ice storm hit Atlanta, shutting down the airport. Fortunately, it cleared up and we were back on track. In addition, one of my son's good friends from Clemson lives in the Tampa area and was also going to the game with his wife and friends from work. He agreed to be the tailgate coordinator and bring libations and snacks for us to enjoy prior to the game. This event was starting to sound just like a regular college football weekend except, of course, for the cost and the implications of a big win.

Monday morning, January 9, arrived, and the alarm went off at 3 a.m. as planned. For the first time ever, I drove from my home in Pine Knoll Shores through Jacksonville and only put on the brakes to turn left onto Highway 24 from Highway 58 at Cedar Point. All lights were green and the roads were deserted.

There was ice in the airport parking lot in Jacksonville, and our plane had to be de-iced as well. It was clear sailing to Atlanta, however, and when I found my connection gate there, I spotted the fans all decked in either Clemson orange or Alabama crimson—all cordial regardless of team alignment. The relatively short trip to Tampa was uneventful.

I was waiting for my son to pick me up when a Mustang convertible covered in Clemson magnets pulled up. My son was behind the wheel, wearing a dress shirt and tie. "What's with the tie, JR?" I asked. His reply: "Dad, we are here to take care of business." He went on to say he was dressed for a "business meeting" since his school was going to take care of business on the field that night. Now I felt underdressed in jeans and a long sleeve t-shirt.

Since it was just 11 a.m. and we still had nine hours until kickoff, we decided to check out the Little Havana section of Tampa for some lunch. We found a Cuban influence barbecue restaurant that was welcoming fans of both teams with a free side dish.

We met up with our fellow tailgaters around 3 p.m. As we looked over the vastness of the large, mostly grass fields around the stadium, it was overwhelmingly evident that the Clemson fans outnumbered the Alabama crowd by at least 3 to 1. Clemson orange was everywhere. We hypothesized that Alabama had been there 16 times and it gets expensive to come to these games year after year.

Game time approached and after an afternoon enjoying the Florida sunshine, we packed up and headed for our seats. Scalpers were everywhere and all were looking to buy tickets. Prices had soared to over \$2,000 for our section and they were not slowing down. We discussed selling our two tickets if someone were to offer us more than \$3,000 . . . but quickly decided we had traveled to enjoy the spectacle and see the Tigers win. We were not going to sell our tickets. I asked several people that I had seen working the lots looking for tickets if anyone was selling, and the answer was no. The fans wanted to see the game.

We were psyched to see the teams come out to warm up, the bands playing, the fight songs being sung. Beer was ridiculously priced at \$12 a can for a Budweiser. Because we had already paid an arm and a leg to get to the game, we limited it to a one-time purchase—and we had plenty at the tailgate anyway.

Clemson has a cadence cheer that all fans and alumni know and if it starts, all join in. It simply starts with a count off twice of 1-2-3-4 and then spelling the team name and mascot: C-L-E-M-S-O-N-T-I-G-E-R-S, FIGHT TIGERS, FIGHT TIGERS, FIGHT, FIGHT, FIGHT. I think that cheer must have been used several hundred times or more and dates back to the old days of the military student body of the university.

Fireworks erupted to kick things off, followed by a performance of the U.S. Army parachute team, the Golden Knights, bringing in the flag—and they, too, had special effects shooting off from their backpacks. Then a squadron of Ospreys flew over and sent the crowd cheering. Best of all, it signaled the game was finally going to start.

Alabama got off to a great start and a 14-point lead, but the Tigers fought back, and it became a back-and-forth contest. Going into the fourth quarter, Alabama was ahead 24 to 14. I later learned that Alabama had won 92 straight games when they were leading by 10 or more points at the start of the 4th quarter. Not this time—but I must say it was the best 4th quarter I have ever seen in any game.

Down by a score of 31-28, with exactly two minutes on the clock, Clemson got the ball and executed a perfect two-minute drill to go up 35-31 with one second left. The crowd erupted in celebration as a stunned Crimson Tide looked everywhere for a sign that the touchdown would be overturned, but it was not to be.

(Continued on page 19)



Atlantic
Wealth Management

THE FREEDOM TO LIVE INSPIRED

HOW CONFIDENT ARE YOU IN YOUR FINANCIAL FUTURE?



Greg Patterson

- Investment Management
- Retirement Planning
- Insurance Strategies
- Tax & Estate Planning
- Risk Management



James Allen Canady

Contact us today for your complimentary copy of our
"10 Common Retirement Mistakes" booklet.
Call 252-510-7800 or visit us at 712 Borden Street in
Morehead City and online at www.myatlantawealth.com

*Securities and advisory services offered through Commonwealth Financial Network, Member FINRA/SIPC a Registered Investment Advisor. Fixed insurance products and services are offered by Atlantic Wealth Management, LLC.