

Gators view Georgia Dome as someplace like home

By Dave George

The NCAA says the Georgia Dome is a neutral site for tonight's championship game.

Funny thing, though, how the front-lobby display case that Ohio State center Greg Oden walked past on the way to Sunday's interview sessions included the following items:

- A No. 44 basketball jersey former University of Florida star Matt Walsh once wore in this arena.
- A photograph of UF coach Billy Donovan cutting down the Georgia Dome nets at what could have been any of two of the last three SEC tournaments.
- A photo of Gator quarterback Danny Wuerffel celebrating a touchdown pass at what would have been any of the four SEC football championship games he won here in the 1990s.
- A souvenir football signed by coach Urban Meyer from the 38-28 win over Arkansas in the dome in December, the victory that propelled the Gators into the BCS title game against Ohio State.

The point is clear. Staging the Final Four in Atlanta, where Florida fans know every hotel, bar, restaurant and alley and have claimed squatters' rights to each on so many occasions is just one more reason the 2007 NCAA tournament has seemed perfectly customized for a historic Gator national championship repeat.

If this metropolis isn't exactly Gainesville North, it's certainly in the neighborhood, something like the Jacksonville Municipal Stadium, the site of Gator football glory against Georgia for most of the past two decades.

"We've played here a lot," Lee Humphrey said Sunday before taking the floor for a practice session in the same homey dome where he made nine of 19 three-point shots in last month's SEC tournament. "It's something like 10 games or so for me.

"It's not like playing in the O'Dome in Gainesville, where all 12,500 fans are screaming for us, but we do enjoy playing here."

Of course, at this point, almost any building with a roof and two buckets would do for the 34-5 Gators, who meekly entered March 2006 with no national basketball championships but come roaring into April 2007 with a shot at two in a row.

Florida is 23-1 at neutral sites during these past two seasons, including last year's 73-57 title game win over UCLA at the RCA Dome in Indianapolis. The lone exception is an 82-80 overtime loss to Kansas in November, a game played in Las Vegas before a juiced-up Jayhawk crowd that really didn't care about some little football game being played that same day in Tallahassee between the Gators and Seminoles.

Well, the headline sport tonight is hoops, and it matters greatly to the multitude of Florida fans who are burning up Interstate 75 on the way to what they expect to be another orange-and-blue confetti drop.

Gator fans probably outnumbered UCLA boosters 4-to-1 last year at Indianapolis, flying in and swooping up scalped tickets at whatever rate was necessary. Many drove all night to Indiana. Many more will make the easier trip to Atlanta.

Of course, Ohio State is a gigantic university, with an enrollment of 57,000 that outnumbers even Florida.

The Buckeyes have a proud basketball tradition, and their fans are bruised by a 27-point loss to the Gator football team in January's BCS championship game. Put this all together and what you will get is a large turnout by Ohio Staters tonight, but surely the orange-and-blue crew will maintain a large and noisy advantage all the same.

Call it 2-to-1 Florida, with the understanding that it could be more lopsided than that. Call for truckload after truckload of championship souvenir T-shirts and gear, too, because every Gator is greedy to add to his collection, if only to save up for rainier days ahead. You know, like finishing No. 2 in something someday.

"The Georgia Dome has been good to us," said Corey Brewer, who hit his career high of 22 points here against Ole Miss in last month's SEC tournament. "I wouldn't say it's like a home court, but it's a good place to play."

And a great place to soak up a confetti storm.

Florida fans may not get that tonight against an Ohio State team that finished the regular season No. 1 in The Associated Press poll, but they sure expect it every time they come to Atlanta.

That's why the Georgia Dome was the peachiest Florida pick possible for this Final Four.

It's a building seemingly built for grand Gator coronations, a place where the Florida basketball team has won nine of its last 10 games and seven in a row.

Oh, they say the Olympic Dream Team once played here too. A crowd of 34,600 saw them win the gold medal basketball game in 1996.

Not bad, but the Georgia Dome seats more than 53,000 with tonight's NCAA title game configuration, and way more than half of those will be rowdy reptiles.