If you notice red and green decorations coming down and orange and blue ones going up this weekend, you will know a Gator fan is nearby. Viewers around the world will be watching a bunch of hard hitting guys move a piece of pigskin up and down a striped field in the biggest collegiate game of the season. University of Florida's Gators play the Ohio State Buckeyes for the National BCS Championship on Monday night.

The Gator Nation of more than 300,000 UF graduates and hundreds of thousands of fans spreads across the globe as graduates live, work and play in various countries around the world. Gator fans of all ages know the University of Florida is in Gainesville, but most are clueless that UF has at least one office in every county in Florida through UF/IFAS Extension.

I just realized I have been associated with University of Florida for more than two thirds of my life! I arrived as a freshman, completed both my undergrad and graduate degrees and then started work in Osceola County as an extension agent fresh from college. I may not bleed orange and blue but I have certainly invested a lot in sweat and tears during my tenure with UF.

The origin of UF dates back before the turn of the last century. The Morrill Act of Congress of 1862 provided federal land to states to sell and use the proceeds to establish an endowment to support higher education. In Florida, funds were used to consolidate Florida Agricultural College in Lake City, the East Florida Seminary of Gainesville, the St. Petersburg Normal and Industrial School at St. Petersburg, and the South Florida Military College at Bartow and establish the University of the State of Florida in Gainesville. There are now eleven universities in the Florida system, but UF is the one with a federal mandate for statewide educational outreach.

UF originally focused on agricultural and mechanical student education as well as general studies when it was established over 100 years ago. The first class graduated in 1906. Since then, UF has expanded its curriculum into many specializations offered through 16 colleges and more than 150 research centers and institutes across the state. Courses offered by the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences now help students learn about such topics as biotechnology, food and fiber production, health and nutrition, economics, as well as human development and environmental protection.

Later, the Hatch Act provided federal funds for research so new technologies could be developed to teach students on campus. Then in 1942, the Smith Lever Act provided for the establishment of the Cooperative Extension Service. This is a partnership with the US Department of Agriculture and land grant universities to provide statewide outreach of new information. The mission was to provide research based information to citizens across the state, not just those able to attend classes and earn a degree on campus. There are now eleven universities in the Florida system, but UF is the one with a federal mandate for statewide educational outreach.

Through UF’s Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, also known as IFAS, new technologies and products are developed to improve our environment, agricultural production, human development, food safety and community interactions. Heart smart low cholesterol potatoes; healthier peanuts; fabulous arsenic, eating ferns; heat tolerant tomatoes and beneficial microbes are all products of UF/IFAS intensive research program.

Our UF/IFAS Extension office in Osceola County is at Osceola Heritage Park at the corner of Bill Beck Boulevard and Highway 192 between Kissimmee and St. Cloud. We are a partnership with Osceola County as well as UF and the US Department of Agriculture. Local volunteers serve on advisory boards and help us determine priority local issues. UF alumni should call us or stop in just to see this off campus branch of UF in your backyard. We can keep you in touch without the two hour drive to Gainesville.

Through UF/IFAS Extension, we have a tremendous amount of University resources to help you improve your quality of life. Whether raising cattle for beef or growing a few tomato plants, dealing with the challenges of raising teenage grandchildren or understanding food labels for better nutrition and health, our faculty and staff
are available to help you and your business be more successful.

Our resources are as close as a phone call to 321-697-3000 or a few computer key strokes away at SolutionsForYourLife.com. We offer free non-credit classes on many subjects, publish fact sheets and help with diagnosis of common problems from mold and mildew to magnolias and mustard greens. Contact our office for a listing of upcoming classes. We have tree care classes that include a free tree for Osceola County residents and a series of meetings that will help landowners understand methods of transferring property to heirs with least tax implications.

My Mom will again be asking, "Is this the year of the Gator?" With a national basketball championship behind them and this game around the corner, I hope so. But, championship football is just one aspect of the University of Florida that affects people around the world. Let us help you here at home. Go Gators!

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Date: December 24th, 2006