

Sherri Gardner Howell: Marrying wedding party with Volunteer spirit

When it comes to my nephews, they are all Vol. That may not sound like such a great accomplishment, given I'm sitting here in Knoxville, but my nephews aren't. Two were raised in Georgia and one in West Tennessee, where Mississippi and, on occasion, Alabama can creep into the fan base.

My youngest nephew, Mack, spent a year of his undergraduate life at the University of Tennessee Knoxville, then graduated from UT Martin. He got his master's at Southern Mississippi and now works in Mississippi. He met an incredible Mississippi girl, Kelly, and asked her to marry him on New Year's Eve.

So, 2015 has been spent planning a wedding (Kelly) and a UT tailgate party (Mack). According to my brother, this is all my fault. They came to my younger son's tailgate "rehearsal dinner" party when he and Olivia got married in 2013, and Mack loved it. We had a Tailgate Tennessee tent at Circle Park, a bountiful breakfast, beautiful weather, and the Vols were so very accommodating and beat South Carolina.

Today we are back at Circle Park for the Mack and Kelly Tailgate Tennessee Engagement Party. Friends and family from all over will come together to congratulate the engaged couple, eat and party and proceed to the stadium to cheer for the Vols.

Since I have not had to be as frantic about this tailgate party as the previous one, it has been fascinating to watch the excitement. There is more going on than an excuse to gather friends and go to the game. Mack sincerely wants Kelly and her family to see and embrace the whole Volunteer experience.

The bride-to-be and her family are no strangers to football passion. They are diehard Southern Miss fans. They know tailgating. They know tradition. They plan life events around the Golden Eagles' schedules in much the same way Vol fans do.

Mack, however, joins his Aunt Sherri, Uncle Neville, cousins and 100,000-plus fans in believing we have something special here. We are strong in our belief that "football time in Tennessee" comes with a bit of magic in the air. We are resolute in our certainty that other schools may come close, but we take things to a different level.

Maybe we don't. Maybe it's kind of like thinking your baby is the most beautiful baby in the nursery or your first grader is Einstein. I try to think logically about it, to be realistic and look around at my friends who are Alabama, Florida and Georgia fans and acknowledge that they, too, live the Saturday experience.

Then the band forms the T, and the crowd roars, and you put your hopes and dreams in the hands of 18- to 23-year-olds and their coaches. The excitement builds, and the air crackles with Volunteer spirit. Logic goes out the window.

It's football time in Tennessee.

Today, UT, the football team, Smoky, the Vol Walk, coach Butch Jones and all things Orange and White become scrapbook pages in the unfolding story of Mack and Kelly.

Aunt Sherri thinks it's an epic way to start. Go Vols.

Sherri Gardner Howell may be reached at gardners@tds.net.