

Gators Win NCAA Championship Final and the Town of Gainesville Celebrates

GAINESVILLE, Fla. — It is April 7, on a Monday night, and the streets of Gainesville are nearly empty and eerily silent. The few pedestrians passing by are sporting smiling faces and merch featuring a scowling green alligator.

A single-file line of people pounds at glass doors beneath a giant sign reading “Gate 4,” trying to grab the attention of those inside. They continue knocking and yelling. All of them are wearing University of Florida swag in orange and blue. All of them are waiting to be let into the Gainesville watch party for the men’s NCAA national championship final at the Stephen C. O’Connell Center.

At Gate 3, it’s the same scene. A crowd is lined up against the center’s glass doors. Some are standing; others sit on the sidewalk, which is littered with flattened beer cans and plastic bags.

“I’ve been waiting out here for three hours, and they won’t let anybody in,” said Haley Growisk, a third-year student at Santa Fe College. “I know someone who waited five, but they gave up and went home.”

At Midtown, a crowd overflows the sidewalks of nearby bars and spills into portions of the street. Outside Cantina Añejo, a Mexican-style casual bar, spectators gather to watch multiple television screens streaming the final. A barricade separates bar patrons from onlookers on the sidewalk.

“They said we have to pay \$50 to watch from inside,” said Joshua Reeves, a freshman at the University of Florida.

“The cover is crazy, but we might as well watch from here anyway,” Reeves said, gesturing to the overflowing crowd.

As more people — some clearly intoxicated — gather outside the busy bar, the game starts to heat up. A flurry of power plays from both teams dominates the first half. The game starts off close, with both teams tied at 21 points. But the Houston Cougars, known for their elite defense, begin to push the Florida Gators back, forcing nine turnovers.

With star point guard and All-American Walter Clayton Jr. scoring zero points, Gators guard Will Richard steps up instead, sinking four three-pointers and scoring 14 points to keep Florida in the game. Houston leads at the half, 31-28.

With about 16 minutes left in the second half, Florida trails by 12. But Clayton Jr. finally finds his rhythm and sparks a furious comeback. A miraculous 15-3 run puts Florida back in the game. The final minutes turn into a battle of wills as both teams fight tooth and nail for the title.

Then, the buzzer sounds. The final score: Florida 65, Houston 63.

The University of Florida Gators defeat the University of Houston Cougars by two points in the men's NCAA national championship final, securing the school's third national title — and first since back-to-back championships in 2006 and 2007.

The streets erupt. People pour from bar rooftops and balconies onto the sidewalks and roads. Fans cheer, wave flags and even rip down bus stop signs in celebration. Roads are closed off as Gainesville fills with standing-room-only revelry.

A sea of orange and blue lights up the night. Deafening cheers and screams replace the earlier silence. In what can only be described as a “giant party,” Gainesville was wide awake by 11:00 p.m.