

When Cecelia Gunn met Sonny Seiler during the University of Georgia's annual "Stunt Night", the two could never have predicted the impact their meeting would have on the university they both so dearly loved.

Wed on a fall Saturday in 1955 in Columbus, Ga., the Seilers celebrated their nuptials by flying to Florida for the Georgia-Florida football game. "Georgia lost and it nearly ruined the honeymoon," Cecelia reveals.

A few months later, in April 1956, a family friend of Cecelia's named Frank Heard called the couple and told them he had a wedding gift for them: a solid white English Bulldog puppy. The Seilers accepted the gift, moving him into their cramped apartment. They named the dog Uga – an acronym for the University of Georgia -- at the suggestion of one of Sonny's law school friends, Billy Young. Sonny recalls that for many months Uga was a gangly pup. "He looked more like a Boxer than a Bulldog." However, by fall, he had begun to fill out his frame with the classic Bulldog stockiness.

That September, on a lark, the couple took their young pup with them to a pre-game party at the Sigma Chi house where Sonny had been a member. It was the day of Georgia's first home game that season. Wearing a child-sized t-shirt with an appliquéd letter "G" that Cecelia had made for him, Uga was the hit of the party. He proved so popular that the Seilers decided to take him to the game. According to Sonny, a few sportswriters saw the dog in the stands and soon photographs of the adorable Bulldog pup with the cute clothes and the perfect name made their way into local papers. And so, a family pet was on his way to becoming one of the most recognized and beloved icons in the history of football.

Fifty years later the tradition set in motion that autumn day proves stronger than ever. A brand new documentary called "Damn Good Dog" celebrates the life and accomplishments of the six Bulldogs named Uga, following the history of the Seiler family and their canine companions. Likenesses of Uga abound, from figurines to wall art, stuffed animals to your basic college sweatshirt. Despite whatever your own college affiliation may be, if you live in Georgia, there's no escaping the presence -- or impact -- of Uga.

But what is life really like for this family dog turned celebrity mascot? If Uga VI, the current University of Georgia mascot, could talk, he'd probably tell you that life is good and being Uga is a pretty good job...if you can get it.

Each of the six Bulldogs from Uga I through UgaVI has been raised and treated as a family pet, living at the Seilers' home, napping on the couch, playing with first their children and now their grandchildren. Because the dogs are their pets, the Seilers have always been responsible for their care and upkeep, from food to vet bills. And, as Uga's managers, so to speak, they have also always been responsible for getting him to the games, driving from Savannah to Athens for home games and ensuring he's available to travel with the team to away games.

The Seilers continued to take Uga to games throughout that first fall. Soon, the university's Sports Information Director, Dan Magill, became aware of the solid white Bulldog. When the time came to make an official selection of a new mascot, Magill recommended to Athletic Director Wally Butts that Uga receive the job. The fact that Uga was a direct descendant of the team's Rose Bowl mascot from several years prior helped seal the deal. Sonny Seiler, who worked in the Athletic Department ticket office, recalls being called to Butts's office. "My first thought was 'What have I done to get fired?'" When he actually spoke to Coach Butts, Seiler was relieved to find out Butts simply wanted to ask him his thoughts on having his dog become the football team mascot. "I was honored," Seiler says humbly.

The Seilers took their commitment to the university seriously. When the time came for them to move back to Savannah at the end of Sonny's third year of law school, Sonny met with Coach Butts to explain how much Uga meant to their family and to suggest that the family be allowed to keep the dog, with the commitment to be at every game. "Our oldest daughter Swann had come along at that point. So I explained to Coach Butts that this dog had become an integral part of our family. I said, 'He and my little girl are growing up together and I would like to propose that you let us keep him and I promise I will have him at every game.' Coach Butts just smiled and said, 'Sounds like a good idea to me, Sonny.'"

From that point on, a succession of Seiler family pets have served as the University of Georgia mascots, sharing in the triumphs and glories, as well as in the more challenging times. Each dog – hand-picked by Cecelia Seiler from pups born of the same bloodline extending back

to Uga I – has had his share of accomplishments. Uga I launched the legacy, earning the epithet “Damn Good Dog” when the crowd spontaneously erupted into that chant at his retirement ceremony. Uga II had the briefest tenure, but enjoyed two SEC titles (1966, 1968). Uga III, who served from 1973 until 1980, seems to have brought the team the most success, with two SEC titles (1975, 1980), a National Championship (1980), and the most victories over ranked opponents (12). Uga IV became the first team mascot to attend the Heisman Trophy awards in 1982, when he flew to New York aboard Delta Airlines along with teammate and eventual winner of the award, Herschel Walker.

Yet, it was Uga V who gained the most notoriety of any of the dogs. Although the Ugas have always been beloved icons within the state, symbolizing the gumption and determination of the school’s Bulldog Spirit, Uga V was cast into the national spotlight the day in 1996 he lunged at Auburn running back Robert Baker. On the final play in the first quarter of the game, Baker scored on a six-yard pass that put Auburn ahead. As Baker ran out of bounds into the end zone, Uga V lunged at the player’s groin, standing on his hind legs and straining to reach Baker. According to Charles Seiler, Uga’s handler and the Seilers’ only son, the dog was merely being playful. To Georgia fans and the nation at large who saw the scene replayed over and over again on ESPN and in photographs printed in countless sports pages, the image of Uga going after an Auburn player represented the relentless spirit with which Georgia takes on one of its fiercest rivals every season. The dog’s popularity soared even further when Sports Illustrated named him “America’s Best College Mascot” in April 1997. His appearance playing his dad, Uga IV, in the Clint Eastwood-directed thriller “Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil,” also added to his fame.

Still, each dog has been “treated just like a dog at home,” according to Cecelia. And of course, each family member has had his or her own favorite. Oldest daughter Swann grew up with Uga I and recalls that he followed her everywhere. To her, he was “the most loving of all the Ugas.” Mom Cecelia favored IV for his “perfect” looks while proud papa Sonny says that he does not have a favorite. “I loved them all and miss them all. They’re pets and they’re all very dear to me,” he says.

Over the last fifty years the family has loved and been loved by six truly great dogs, each adding his own unique contributions to the Uga legacy. They have stood beside each dog, loving and nurturing them through health crises, like Uga II’s near-death experience with heatstroke following Picture Day and the battle with leukemia that ultimately took his life. Uga III suffered

from dry-eye, a condition common among English Bulldogs, and required surgery to place a saliva gland in his eye for tear production. Charles Seiler recalls, “Uga III would cry whenever he smelled food.”

Thanks to the University of Georgia School of Veterinary Medicine and medical advances, each successive Uga has enjoyed better health. Thanks to the Seilers they, like many modern dogs, enjoy the finest in creature comforts. The last several Ugas have enjoyed the comfort of their own air-conditioned doghouses. Uga VI, the reigning mascot, even rides in ease with his own custom-designed luxury golf cart, thanks to EZ-Go Golf Carts. According to Sonny, Uga recognizes the sound of the cart’s engine and starts barking excitedly, ready to go for a ride.

Sonny Seiler vows that his family will carry on the tradition of raising and caring for the school mascot as long as the university welcomes it. The family receives no compensation for its efforts and donates all royalties from Uga’s activities and endorsements to the University of Georgia. In fact, they even buy their own season tickets to football games. Clearly, this is a family truly committed to its dogs and its alma mater.

Long live the Seilers! Long live these Damn Good Dogs!