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Barton: Two class acts

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By Tom Barton

The last time I saw Vince Dooley in action, it was from the upper deck at the old Gator Bowl in Jacksonville in 1989.

That was back when the University of Georgia football team owned that rectangle of turf near the St. John's River. This New Year's Day was no different: Georgia 34, Michigan State 27.

The last time I saw Sam Nunn on the job was in early 1996, when I was in Washington, D.C., with other editors. I remember Georgia's Democratic senator

fretting about something. I can't remember what. But I do remember the framed editorial cartoons hanging in his office. It proved you can ponder nuclear Armageddon yet retain a sense of humor.

Both Georgians were and are class acts. Both were named Georgia's newest trustees last Saturday night by the Georgia Historical Society, the state's repository and guardian of all things worth knowing and keeping for future generations of Georgians.

And a fine evening it was.

Dooley, 78, may have switched from coaching football to coaxing calla lilies. But the author of a new book on gardening sounded as pumped and knowledgeable as ever, although he seemed misty-eyed when he admitted that his son, Derek, the head football coach at the University of Tennessee, will make more dough in two years than he did in 20.

(Personally, I'm waiting for Steve Spurrier to retire and write an inspirational, non-football book: "The Spurrier Way: Do Unto Others, And Do It First. Then Keep Doing It Again And Again And Again.")

Nunn, a spunky 72, looked like he could go toe-to-toe with Republican senators who aren't buying the latest plan to reduce nukes. With more Dems like Nunn around, Georgia would be a bluer shade of red.

He spins anecdotes like a pro, too.

Nunn, who attended Georgia Tech but graduated from Emory, told the crowd that he owed a huge debt to Savannah attorney and Uga the Bulldog owner Sonny Seiler for helping him score an upset victory in his first U.S. Senate race in 1972.

It seems Seiler got Nunn between the hedges at Sanford Stadium at halftime, when a photographer snapped a shot of Nunn posing with then-mascot Uga III. The photo was splashed above the fold in the next day's statewide Atlanta Journal-Constitution. "Voters thought I was a big Georgia Bulldog fan," he said. When the Bulldog Nation turned out for the underdog from Perry, it put him on a path to become a top dog in D.C.

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But the biggest winner Saturday was the Georgia Historical Society.

The Savannah-based non-profit organization was founded here in 1839, yet doesn't get the attention it deserves. The event at the Hyatt, which followed last year's gala that honored Georgians Hank Aaron and Ted Turner, helps prove the society's value to a state that's often too Atlanta-centric.

You know that Georgia. It's the one that's too busy to learn from the past because it's stuck in the traffic jam from hell.

This year's festival chairman, Savannah's Robert Jepson Jr., hails from Virginia. That state does history right. So should Georgia.

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