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Mississippi State fan Eric Vlietstra adores Michigan, but his love for Bulldogs is loud, clear

BY MARK SNYDER
 FREE PRESS SPORTS WRITER

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When Eric Vlietstra was young in the mid-1970s, he was, like many Michigan residents, enthralled by Bo Schembechler's Wolverines.

His father was a U-M graduate, so it was a natural fit for Vlietstra, then growing up in Troy. But then his father and family were transferred to Jackson, Miss., where Vlietstra's northern accent drew a bit of ridicule.

Vlietstra went to college at Mississippi State, forever sealing him as a Bulldog, but his U-M ties remained strong. Fall Saturdays were spent watching Mississippi State and recording the Michigan game to watch later.

For the first time, Vlietstra will have his allegiance tested Jan. 1 when he's in the stands at the Gator Bowl in Jacksonville, Fla., watching his favorite teams square off.

Vlietstra has taken his Bulldogs fandom a step further than just about anyone else, however.

When he got to school in 1988, he bought his first cowbell to ring at the games, joining a then-50-year-old tradition of Bulldogs fans ringing cowbells to distract opponents.

Legend has it that the tradition began in a 1930s or 1940s Egg Bowl rivalry game with Mississippi when a jersey cow sauntered onto the field with the Bulldogs losing handily. After the cow was removed, Mississippi State rallied and won the game. Students continued to bring a cow to games for a while before simply bringing the bell, aided when handles were added by a few Mississippi State professors in the 1960s.

Once Vlietstra moved away from Mississippi State's Starkville campus, however, he realized the difficulty in getting the cowbells. So the man with an engineering degree began making and selling the bells as a side business.

"I started doing that in 2000 as a source of extra income, and all of the income went to a college-saving account for my son," Vlietstra said. "It grew over the years, got bigger and bigger, and I quit my job to sell cowbells at the end of July this year."

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Eric Vlietstra grew up in Michigan but is an alum of Mississippi State. The Bulldogs' cowbell tradition inspired Vlietstra to start selling the noisemakers, and the successful venture is now his full-time job. (SPECIAL TO THE FREE PRESS)

RELATED INFORMATION

Gator Bowl

Matchup: Michigan 7-5; No. 21 Mississippi State 8-4.

Kick-off: 1:30 p.m. Jan. 1, EverBank Field, Jacksonville, Fla.

TV: ESPN2.

Line: Bulldogs by 5.

All-time series: First meeting.

More information: Click on mgoblue.com or gatorbowl.com.

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What began with him buying the steel, cutting it down, finding a welder, painting and distributing the cowbells has become a more refined process, allowing Vlietstra to expand his operation. From his Web site, mycowbell.com, he's shipping to sports teams starting their own cowbell traditions, from high schools to the women's soccer team Washington Freedom to the Syracuse Crunch minor league hockey team.

The biggest boost, though, came from his beloved Bulldogs, who have experienced an on-field resurgence this year under coach Dan Mullen, cranking up the excitement.

It's perfect timing since the SEC finally relaxed its no-cowbell stance in place since 1974 -- an all-game ban on using them as a distraction was enforced beginning in 2003 -- and now applies it only to conference games.

So when the Gator Bowl announced the Bulldogs would play in this year's game, chairman Steve Tremel said in a teleconference that night "we're looking for more cowbell" (referring to the wildly popular "Saturday Night Live" skit from the early 2000s) and that they were welcome in Jacksonville, Fla.

The ripple effect went right into Vlietstra's pocket -- "since the start of December, it's been rockin' " -- and sent shockwaves up to Michigan, where the Wolverines are using cowbells to prep, just as Rich Rodriguez's West Virginia team did before playing in Starkville in 2006.

"To try to prepare for the road game in Starkville, we purchased a bunch of cowbells and were ringing them all week in practice," Rodriguez said. "Our guys were annoyed with it."

Not only will Vlietstra attend the Gator Bowl with three buddies, he'll be setting up shop outside the stadium, looking to move merchandise, primarily to Mississippi State fans -- but maybe adding to the few U-M bells he has already sold. They range in price from \$17.99 to \$23.99, plus \$2.49 for team decals.

He hopes to top his sales from the Mississippi State-Arkansas game in Starkville, where he moved 70 of them.

"It's weird because it's something that I never dreamed of, something I never thought I could do full-time, but I'm really satisfied," Vlietstra said.

As long as Mullen stays in Starkville, he admitted. He's like most fans, praying the team stays competitive and successful, but he has a little more at stake as well.

"They talk about Dan Mullen being a candidate for every other job," Vlietstra said. "If he's gone, who knows, maybe there's less enthusiasm. He's a really good coach, brought a lot of victories to the state."

His approach to his other favorite team mimics much of the U-M fan base.

"The Rich Rod hire was not one that I supported," he said. "When I think of Michigan football, I think of Jim Harbaugh, Tom Brady and Brian Griese.

"My new year's wish would be for (Mississippi) State to pound Michigan."

Which would lead his inevitable bottom line: "More cowbell!"

Contact **MARK SNYDER**: msnyder@freepress.com. Read more in his Wolverines blog at freep.com/wolverinesblog and follow him on Twitter @freepwolverines.

Join Free Press special writer Anthony Fenech for a live blog of the Michigan-Mississippi State game Jan. 1 at freep.com/sports.

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