

## Charley Pell's Hall of Fame legacy of fighting depression keeps giving

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By



Charley Pell celebrates Florida's win over Florida State in 1981 that sent the Gators to the Peach Bowl. In 1994, Pell tried to kill himself. He lived to tell his story of depression to others.

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama -- The football accomplishments that make Charley Pell worthy of induction this week in the Alabama Sports Hall of Fame fill his ASHOF biography.

There was the All-SEC career as a two-way lineman at Alabama under Bear Bryant. The second-place Division II national finish at Jacksonville State. The building blocks established while coaching Clemson and Florida.

Here's what's not mentioned.

The phone call Pell received from a stranger saying the ex-coach had saved his son's life. As described by Pell's widow, Ward Pell, the stranger was watching "Dateline NBC" as Charley discussed his 1994 suicide attempt and coping with depression. The man went to get his depressed son to watch and found him on his bed with a pistol in his hand. The son got help.

The letter Pell got from a California doctor thanking him for better understanding his father's suicide. The doctor had hated his father for killing

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himself. He returned his dad to a pedestal after hearing Pell explain the abyss he sunk to before trying to take his life.

The impact Pell still makes in the mental health community 11 years after dying of cancer.

Four years ago, the Alabama Department of Mental Health made a 17-minute film on Pell's life to show depression is a treatable illness. Ward Pell, who now lives in Lexington, Ky., still hears from people about the film, particularly high school coaches who show it to players. Ward makes about 10 speeches a year on behalf of mental health organizations.

"I had always thought, like probably 85 percent of this world, that (suicide) is a selfish act," she said. "But at that point, you're not thinking rationally. That's something I've been concerned about with mental health laws. You can put someone in a mental treatment center for 72 hours, but they don't have to stay unless they choose to. Well, they are in there because they have not been making rational decisions."

Ward believes Charley always bailed on promising jobs because of low self-esteem. He once worked at four different universities over a seven-year period in the 1970s.

"He was not able to reap the awards of one's worth," Ward Pell said. "When it got to that point, he felt he didn't deserve the fun so he would take his workaholic self and off we go again."

Charley led the Gators to prominence in the early 1980s but was fired in 1984 amid highly-publicized violations of NCAA rules. They came at a time when several colleges were breaking NCAA rules.

"There was a difference in the NCAA then and now," Ward said. "They decided to become the white knights on charging horses. One of the investigators told us after the fact he had a choice (where to investigate). They had a school in the North and a school in the South and it was January. So where do you think they would go?"

The NCAA cited Florida for many violations, including spying on practices of seven opponents and providing cash and loans to players. Florida was barred from bowl games and TV for two years. Charley later said he made mistakes as the leader and trusted people he shouldn't have.

"It was his choice to save people and save their jobs," Ward said. "And he saved some darn good football coaches."

Today, Ward can see her husband inside grandchildren Anne and Buddy Pell, students at Mountain Brook High School. Anne is the organizer, just as Charley was noted as a master planner. Buddy, a sophomore linebacker at Mountain Brook, "is Charley Pell made over," Ward said.

Ward had hoped for for this induction day. Charley would proudly tell everyone he was from Sand Mountain, Alabama.

"He would just be so appreciative and he would realize, as I realize, he wouldn't be in if not for all the wonderful players, boosters and universities where we had been," Ward said. "He never thought he was worthy of it."

Worthy? That the strongest of men could talk about a widespread and still taboo illness defines the very word.

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