The Florida primary battle between Mitt Romney and Newt Gingrich has been bloody.

The two frontrunners for the GOP presidential nod have ripped into each other repeatedly and enthusiastically, calling each other liars, dishonest about their past political positions and evasive about how they made their money.

Romney has called Gingrich "Goldilocks," saying the former U.S. House Speaker is a complainer, unhappy with the political bed he made for himself in the past and a whiner when he is challenged on his record. And Gingrich has labeled Romney a liberal, which in GOP-speak is equivalent of the Big Bad Wolf.

But campaigns are almost always nasty. The crucial questions are: Is this year any worse than other primary years? And will the attacks leveled by Romney and Gingrich -- and by the other GOP hopefuls this primary season -- hurt the GOP in its attempts to unseat President Obama in the fall. Will the wounds still be bleeding in November?

"Every four years people say, 'This is nastiest campaigning ever,' " says Kevin Wagner, political scientist at Florida Atlantic University. "It really isn't. Campaigns are always rough and whether it's Democrats or Republicans, the party tends to unite behind the winner in the general election."

Sean Snaith, economist and political commentator at the University of Central Florida, says history supports those expectations.

"When you have a family feud there are going to be harsh words exchanged," he says. "But in time they rally and join together to defeat a common enemy, in this case President Obama."

But both Wagner and Snaith voice caveats.

"I will say this, unlike other primary opponents, Gingrich and Romney really do seem to dislike each other personally," Wagner says.

And Snaith sees this primary season as extra ugly, downright primal.

"It's gotten more and more bare knuckles," he says. "It's more like ultimate fighting. There are no gentlemen's rules."
But "gentleman's rules" have always been fleeting when the presidency was on the line.

A presidential opponent of Abraham Lincoln once called him "a horrid-looking wretch." Lincoln was also accused publicly of having smelly feet.

In the 2000 GOP primaries, anonymous supporters of George W. Bush accused John McCain of fathering a love child, whom they said he was passing off as his adoptive daughter from Bangladesh. The charge had no basis in fact.

The nameless attackers also labeled McCain "The Manchurian Candidate," after the 1962 movie thriller, implying that McCain, a former prisoner of war in Vietnam, had been brainwashed by his captors and turned into a robotic operative in the service of communism. Not a nice way to treat a war hero.

But Republicans don't control the market in campaign slurs. In the 2008 Democratic primaries, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton exchanged personal criticisms, including the Obama camp accusing Clinton and her husband, Bill, of racism. Hillary Clinton is now Obama's secretary of state.

But some observers think the GOP does have to worry about the wounds inflicted this primary season. An ABC/Washington Post poll taken Jan. 18-22 showed 49 percent of U.S. voters had an unfavorable opinion of Romney and only 31 percent favorable. Gingrich's was even worse, 51 percent unfavorable to 29 percent favorable, and the two have only continued to hammer at each other since.

At the same point in 2008, the eventual GOP candidate, John McCain, had a 61 percent approval rating and only 31 percent negative and he ended up losing to Obama.

In 1976, Ronald Reagan took his fight against then-President Gerald Ford to the convention, a battle that contributed to Ford's defeat to Democrat Jimmy Carter.

With Romney ahead by double digits in Florida in recent polls, he is the favorite for the nomination, and any wounds he has suffered in the primary campaign could become issues. Former candidate Rick Perry, governor of Texas, called Romney a "vulture capitalist" and Gingrich accused him of "looting" companies and leaving many people jobless during his time at the takeover firm Bain Capital.

"I think it's kind of strange that Republicans would attack him on his wealth," says Snaiith. "You would expect that to come from Democrats. It's like the Republican party's immune system turning on itself."

Joseph Uscinski, University of Miami political scientist, doesn't see that issue hurting Romney.

"I think people who are skeptical of capitalism aren't going to vote for a Republican candidate anyway," he says. "We shouldn't overplay the importance of those attacks."

But Wagner sees the possibility that the issue could hurt Romney.

"Romney has an issue with people who have negative feelings about Wall Street," he says.

Many political observers say one important change in this primary season has been the birth of Super PACS, which allow, corporations, unions and individuals to donate unlimited amounts of
money to political action committees, nominally independent of specific candidates. Those Super PACS, which are the result of the 2010 Citizens United decision by the U.S. Supreme Court, are flooding the airwaves with campaign ads, many of them negative.

"The PACS can be more vitriolic in the ads they run," says Snaith. "They are a little less traceable to a specific campaign. There is no candidate at the end saying, 'I approve this nasty message.' " 