

SUPER BOWL XXXV - RAVENS VS. GIANTS

Much more than a team, much more than a game

Spirit: To fans across Baltimore, it's a matter of respect -- for their Ravens and for their city.

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Life hasn't exactly been kind to Stan Sutherland lately. Nineteen years old. Not long out of Southern High School. Unemployed. Down deep in South Baltimore, where it's hard to see the future.

Four months from heading off to boot camp, he's anxious about his decision to join the Navy. "School, man, that's what I need," he says quietly, chewing on a mangled cocktail straw and staring at his shoetops in the Chug-A-Lug Bar & Grill on Patapsco Avenue. "I gotta get an education, do something with my life. There's a whole world out there I ain't seen.

"Some days I look around, I just don't know. ... "

Then, "Crack!"

On the ancient, dusty TV over by the cigarette machine, Ray Lewis - the menacing middle linebacker of the Baltimore Ravens - bolts through the Oakland Raiders offensive line and unloads on a running back. The percussion resonates over the airwaves from the other side of the continent. And Stan Sutherland snaps abruptly to attention.

"Yeah, baby!" he whoops. "That's what I'm talking about! Bam! Right in the face! God! Did you see that?"

He's lunging from his seat now, pumping his fist at the TV screen. He's stalking the floor of the Chug-A-Lug, bobbing his crew-cut head. Chest out, he spins and preaches to the old-timers down the bar nursing their 50-cent drafts and bourbon shots.

"That's our team out there - The Ravens! From Baltimore! - and the whole world said we couldn't do it!"

The sentiment was nearly universal Sunday night. Young and old. Black and white. The well-off and the way-behind. East and west. In neighborhood joints with names like the Gin Mill and Bill's Holiday Bar and the Jolly-O Tavern. In the cell-block tiers of the Baltimore Detention Center. Long into the crow-black of a frigid misty night and Monday morning.

They came loaded for bear, demanding respect. For their team, and for their city.

They wanted the sports guys on ESPN to shut their mouths about how Baltimore can't win. They wanted Jay Leno to take back all those bad jokes about syphilis. And they wanted credit for coming together to elect Martin O'Malley - the smart, golden-boy mayor with the knack for making people believe in the city again. Never mind the odds.

And the longer they talked about it, the more everyone realized that this isn't just about football anymore.

'We need this'

"People don't quite know what it all means yet," said Tosha Lebine, 24, an east-sider who works as an auditor for a bio-med firm, struggling for words to describe all she felt standing on the corner of Broadway and Aliceanna Street in Fells Point amid a mob of dancing fans.

"We've all gotten so used to hearing the bad that we have a hard time believing in anything good. But this isn't just good. This is the Super Bowl. Baltimore is going to the Super Bowl! That's going to take a while to sink in."

"We need this," chimed Danyell Wright, 24. "Baltimore needs this. I need this."

The faithful came early to PSINet Stadium - more than 8,000 strong - to watch Sunday's game on the giant end-zone screens, cheering loud enough to be heard on Pratt Street, if not all the way to the Pacific time zone.

"Goooooose!"

"Raaaaaay!"

"Deeeefense!"

"They're the perfect team for this town," decreed Kevin Dayhoof, 28, a Timonium gas station manager in ghastly purple face paint and grape combat fatigues. "We win the unconventional way, the hard way."

Up on the club level a few minutes later, Dave Stein, 44, beheld the splendor of Jermaine Lewis tearing a punt return 38 yards up the Raiders' gut as lawyers at leisure high-fived the kitchen staff and kids in rubber helmets mimicked Jermaine's moves across the carpeted indoor terrace.

"If they lose 10 minutes from now, it's been so good for this city, economically and spiritually, that they'll still come home heroes," said Stein, not the first Baltimorean to get moist around the eyes on this day. "We've been so beaten up over the years, and this team has shown everybody that we're not done yet."

Once more, the gathered tribe erupted.

"You can't do that!"

"No you can't!"

"You can't throw over the middle like that against us!"

All eyes turned to the wide screens and a dozen lesser televisions to watch the instant replay of defensive back Robert Bailey logging the day's first interception - followed scant moments later by linebacker Jamie Sharper dropping another bomb on Oakland's hapless quarterback.

The purple and black heart attack was striking early and often.

First quarter score: 0-0.

Nowhere to go but up.

Just the way Ravens fans like it.

Wearing purple, feeling fine

In South Baltimore - in the bluest blue-collar wards in the city - the kids were out on the streets by halftime, having chalked up a 10-0 score as a sure Ravens win. The sun had sunk like a rock. And the lights along Wells Street are few and far between. But it's never too dark for a game of touch football in the lee of the I-95 overpass.

"We're the Ravens!" yelled 11-year-old Chris Taylor. "You guys are the Raiders!"

It took a dozen boys five minutes to sort out the insult to home-team pride. Under no circumstances, they agreed, will anybody be called upon to be the Raiders.

"The Ravens are the best," said Chris. "Everybody is wearing purple and feeling good. That's nice."

The narrow rowhouse streets channeled the noise of the ensuing game like a concrete megaphone, sending it rolling between the boarded-up warehouses and back into the neighborhood, where the grown-ups were making some noise of their own.

"All that [stuff] about guns and AIDS and murder, that's all garbage now," barked John Alston, 47, manager of Nick's Seafood in the Cross Street Market. "Look at our football team! That's what I have to say about that. Where are the Redskins, I ask you? Spit-too! That's where. To their fans, I say: `Come on up to Bawlamer, welcome aboard!'"

Up on Eager Street, the city's real outlaws were rattling the cage of the city jail with play-by-play commentary that could be heard on the abandoned block outside.

"Let's go defense!"

"Take it away, boys!"

"Nobody in the NFL wanted to see this team, or this town, in the Super Bowl," said Stan Poole, a 42-year-old tractor-trailer driver from East Baltimore, minutes later at Bill's Holiday Bar at Rose and McElderry streets. "All season long, they been beating us down. All the national media, especially ESPN. Well, here we come, baby. Like it or not.

"Win or lose, though, let's all hope we know how to act. Don't go tearing the town apart, because we don't have much town left."

Mark Andreasik, 42, a tanning parlor masseur built like a mailbox, nodded in agreement and drained his bottle of Colt 45 malt.

"Now let me tell you a little story," he said sagely. "The Giants beat Minnesota today, 41 to nothing, right? All I can tell you is, they don't want to play us right now - beat up as they are and pumped up as we are. Everybody better start thinking, like right now, about what they're gonna do when we win the Super Bowl. This town is going to go nuts - and I can't wait to see it."

Minutes later, the game ended, and Andreasik's hometown put on a preview of what might lie ahead.

Within half an hour, Fells Point was jammed with cars and shirtless young men and women hoarse from screaming. A din of horns and feral chants rang the ears. Someone set fire to the trash can in front of the Broadway Market and scorched the overhang before a passing police officer put it out with a shot from an extinguisher.

"I been out here two years, and I never seen anything like it," offered Joe Knight, 50, a laborer who became homeless after losing his job in 1995 and now routinely panhandles in these streets. "They're not being any kinder to me, but they'll come around. We're going to the Super Bowl."

Four hours later, the fans were still cheering, this time at the Ravens training center in Owings Mills. As they waited for their victorious carrion birds to return home from their 16-3 feast on the once-fearsome Raiders - yet another team the Ravens weren't supposed to beat - the gathered pilgrims tuned car radios to WJFK-AM 1300 to hear the post-game interviews.

"Nobody gave us a chance," wept tight end Shannon Sharpe, whose 96-yard touchdown gagged Oakland's ill-mannered followers. "Except for Baltimore ... the fans of Baltimore."

Grown men cleared their throats at that and felt the sudden urge to blow their noses.

It was 3 a.m. when the buses finally pulled in from the airport. But whole families still lined the highway in the dark, hoping for a glimpse of the men who ground out the "impossible" wins, one at a time, to bring the AFC championship trophy home to Baltimore the hard way.

"They've been great for our city," said Diane Dandy, 57, a Safeway deli clerk from Darlington, bleary-eyed, cold and wet from the marathon celebration. "They've brought everybody together in a way I've never seen before - young people, old people, families with kids, all races, everybody - at 3 in the morning in the rain.

"They showed us we can do it."

And when coach Brian Billick rolled past in his SUV, shooting a long, lingering thumbs-up to the crowd, they about lost their minds. The police tape came down. And all the barriers fell. And the hometown faithful surged across Owings Mills Boulevard toward destiny's team.

"Baltimore believes in itself again," Mayor O'Malley said later, in the dim light of a new, rainy day. "This team symbolizes what the city should be about. It's persistent, and it never gives up."

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