

The View from the Press Box

“Ladies and gentlemen, please remember that this is a working press box . . . cheering is not permitted.”

This announcement is given prior to each Florida State home football game by the press box’s internal public address announcer. It is a warning given to the hundreds of newspaper and magazine writers, photographers, television and radio broadcasters, guests of the athletic department, sports information employees, electricians, scoreboard and warboard operators, food service workers, and to us . . . the stat crew.

Most listen halfheartedly, unconcerned. They are here to do their job. They are here to write their story before the deadline or to describe the game to a television audience or to capture the great plays in a photograph. When the game is over, they’ll move to another game in another stadium on another campus, where they’ll listen halfheartedly to the same warning given by the local internal public address announcer.

But, for me . . . I have to listen. I have to listen and remind myself of this warning several times during the course of the game. Since standing and performing the warchant is frowned upon in the press box, and singing “F-L-O-R-I-D-A S-T-A-T-E, Florida State, Florida State, Florida State – Woooo” is strictly forbidden after touchdowns, and since the wave only breaks out at halftime . . . when the entire press box simultaneously rises to visit the restroom, I’ve been forced to design my own cheer.

In games where the Seminoles are favored to win comfortably or in the latter parts of blowouts, my touchdown cheer is a muffled “yes” accompanied by a brief hand slap on my knee under the desk and then back to business. In big games, however, where a national championship may be on the line, a tight-lipped, semi-restrained “mmmmmyyeeeeeahhhhhh!!!” is released very quickly, several fist pumps are performed above the desk, and a veritable celebration is set loose in my imagination, complete with the stat crew dogpiling on top of members of the ESPN Gameday crew with writers from Sports Illustrated writhing underneath. When the celebration in my mind calms down, I’ll steal a look at my fellow statisticians to confirm that they never left their seat and that my cheer wasn’t loud enough to be noticed. In monotone voices, we’ll discuss the greatness of the last play and its effect on our national championship aspirations, then we’ll continue with our jobs.

Job, however, is not a word that I would use to describe what I do as a part of the stat crew for the Florida State home football games. In fact, it wasn’t until last year that I even collected a pay check for these duties. I was happy to work as a volunteer from 1996 to 2000, and would do it still if asked (oops . . . maybe I shouldn’t have mentioned this).

My “job” on the stat crew consists of spotting and providing an electronic backup to the official NCAA program. Spotting is simply watching the game closely through binoculars and announcing the play results. The spotting I do is tracking defensive tacklers for both teams, but occasionally crosses over to other game action as needed. I have devised an Excel spreadsheet which I use on a laptop computer as the primary backup to the official stats program.

Our crew is composed of six members including myself:

Joey is the internal public address announcer. He broadcasts the play results and other announcements over the press box loudspeaker.

Tommy is the primary spotter. He announces the play results to the stat crew and makes

decisions on down and distances for statistical purposes. He is also our rules guru.

JB is our data entry person and expert on the NCAA computer stats program that we use. He enters the results of the play into the computer, and generates the reports.

Pat keeps a written backup on a notepad. In case of a computer malfunction or electrical blackout, we can recover the stats using his notes.

Elliot is our computer support technician. He sets up the computers and maintains the release of the game stats live over the world wide web via the fansonly.com web site.

Though the crew has suffered some turnover since I began in 1996, we have mostly been intact for the last few years. In my first year, we had about the same sized crew, but we were each responsible for manually tracking a slice of the overall game statistics pie. My duties were: time of possession, 3rd and 4th down conversions and punt yardage. I remember how nervous I was at kickoff of my first game in 1996. It is amazing to think how much I have learned, and how much our procedure has evolved in 6 ½ years.

Our game day begins two hours before kickoff. Though arriving that early makes for a long Saturday (or Thursday) at the stadium, we are offered several perks to compensate.

The stat crew is allowed to park in the media parking lot, which is located at the old Florida High baseball field. We park for free and have a short enough walk to the stadium that even Keith Jackson hasn't complained.

Before the game, we are given tickets to the media buffet line. During the game, we are offered popcorn, peanuts, soft drinks, cookies and other snacks. After the game, we are loaded into wheelbarrows and carted to our cars.

When it rains, we are covered. When it is hot, we are air conditioned. When it is cold, we are heated. When it is an absolute perfect day for football, we long to be outside in the atmosphere.

The stat crew members are given a Florida State Athletics golf shirt, which identifies us as Sports Information staff. I have now accumulated seven such shirts . . . one for each day of the week. My wife is happy that the most worn can be retired next year.

The reason we are asked to arrive two hours before kickoff is not because of the exorbitant amount of preparation that must be done beforehand. In fact, we can be ready for the game in about 30 minutes. I suppose the reason that our bosses (Rob Wilson and Tina Thomas) ask us to arrive early is to make sure that we are not caught in a Tennessee Street traffic jam ten minutes before the kickoff. This makes sense as each member of the stat crew is important to the overall game day operations. Usually, after eating at the media buffet line and setting up my laptop for the game, I'll take a walk downstairs and visit friends who are tailgating (most of whom arrived hours before I did). However, I make it a point to be back in my seat about thirty to forty-five minutes before the kickoff. I enjoy watching the players warmup, the Marching Chiefs' pre-game show, the teams' grand entrances, and the tradition of Chief Osceola and Renegade.

The stat crew is joined in our room of the press box by the scoreboard operator, the official clock operator, a few sports information employees, and representatives from the networks covering

the game. These representatives are in radio contact with their broadcast crew and relay the official play results. They also pass along pertinent statistical information to their cohorts.

Between Tommy spotting the plays, Joey announcing them over the internal PA, the scoreboard operators verifying downs and distances, the network representatives communicating over their headsets, me calling out tacklers and JB repeating the plays as they are entered, it can get quite loud and hectic in our room. But, this is what makes it exciting to me. Moreover, with all the noise, no one is likely to hear my “mmmmmyyyyyeeeahhhhhh!!!” following a great play by the Seminoles.

Over the years, our crew has gotten to the point where the game proceeds rather smoothly for the most part. Occasionally, however, an unusual play does happen and we are forced to defer to the statistical handbook provided by the NCAA for guidance. These occurrences are rare and usually only stump us temporarily. JB and I verify our totals many times during the game, but especially at the end of each quarter. We can easily identify any discrepancies and correct them during the television timeouts. At the conclusion of each quarter, a “quickie stats” sheet is printed, copies are made by the sports information employees and they are passed along to the media. This procedure is usually done before, or shortly after, the commencement of the following quarter.

At the game’s conclusion, packets are printed which detail any conceivable statistic about the game just played. These packets are assembled by the sports information employees and passed along to the media. Of course, they are verified before they are released by the stat crew. Tommy and JB are usually able to spot anything that looks suspicious. I also compare my final statistics to those being released to the media. If everything looks good, we are done. We can usually pack our equipment and be on the way to the elevator within 15 minutes of the final play, and can be in our cars just in time for the traffic jam.

As with any job, there are pros and cons that come with the territory. I do miss the appeal of being a “fan.” I miss the all-day tailgate parties . . . complete with adult beverages. I miss the atmosphere inside the stadium, and the free will to cheer loudly for the Seminoles. I have two young children with whom I want to experience Florida State football like my parents did with me.

There is some pressure that goes along with this job. The stat crew must be alert and focused on each play of the game. With the two competing universities, the NCAA, the sports media and college football enthusiasts around the nation counting on correct and timely statistics, there is absolutely no room for error. Though very rare, tempers have been known to flare in the press box.

Despite this, the job I do as a sports statistician is a dream-come-true for me. To do it for the premiere college football program in America is unreal. I am thrilled to perform this job for my alma mater, my full-time employer, and the school I love. It is serious, yet exciting in the press box. I sit among real football fans who know every aspect of the sport and I value their opinions and knowledge of the game. We do have an enjoyable time before and during the game.

I am able to get a dose of being a “fan” at a couple of Florida State away games each year. So far this season, my family and I went to the Iowa State game in Kansas City (over 1,000 miles each way in the car with a 4-year-old and an 8-month-old), and my wife and I attended the Hurricane game in Miami (we returned to Tallahassee sunburned, hoarse, and heartbroken).

With the seats, the parking, the food, the shirt and the prestige, I don’t see myself relinquishing my duties anytime soon. I’ll just have to ask Joey to reword his warning to: “Ladies and gentlemen, please remember that this is a working press box . . . muffled “mmmmmyyyyyeeeahhhhhhs,” quick fist pumps and imaginary dogpiles are permitted, but please hold the warchant, the singing of the fight song, and all cheering to a low roar.”