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Super Bowl LVI was a love letter to football and fandom. Here's what I saw at SoFi Stadium.

A father and daughter get as close to the big game as possible.



Rams and Bengals fans dance near the main stage at the annual Players Tailgate event hosted by celebrity chef Guy Fieri prior to Super Bowl LVI in the parking lot of the Hollywood Park Casino prior to Super Bowl LVI in Inglewood on Sunday, February 13, 2022. (Photo by Leonard Ortiz, Orange County Register/SCNG)

I've never been much of a football fan.

So it was a bit surreal when I found myself walking distance from SoFi Stadium, hours ahead of Super Bowl LVI, surrounded by thousands of people at an organized tailgate party.

There was a Bengals fan donning a red velvet tailcoat fit. There was a Rams fan in a rainbow mohawk.

There was a scramble for cigars, thrown into a crowd by celebrity chef Guy Fieri.

Or at least that's how my day began.

It ended the way so many others have, with my dad cheering as he watched football on a television.

But let's start at the beginning.



I don't hate football, to be clear.

I grew up an athlete, though I devoted nearly all of my youth to the beautiful game, the other football.

But at my house, American football always came first. Full stop.

My dad, of course, is the one to blame for that. A lifelong Raiders fan – I know, Rams nation – his loyalty to the team has never wavered.

He watches every game. He always has, for as long as I can remember.

For me, football was background noise:

A routine I had no say in planning. I resented the weekly game nights. Football was always too violent: It required players to knock into each other, and too frequently induced fits of rage in its fans.

I knew it had a soft side, one that made the most stoic weep with joy or grief. One that brought communities together. I had just never been on that side of things.

But then, I got older.

And I realized something: My memories of my dad, always, are accompanied by the faint sounds of fans cheering through the television on Monday nights or Sunday afternoons, which had the extra ambient noise of family friends chattering.

I remember his roars of passion, or anguish, when each play finished.

So as Super Bowl LVI neared, it was a mixed bag.

On one hand, I knew what this would mean for my dad – and that it might be his one and only chance to get anywhere near a Super Bowl.

On the other, I had been tapped to go into the field on game day – and I feared a hostile environment.

I'm a 24-year-old woman, about to enter an extremely male sport-centric environment. It's intimidating, especially when all of that is compounded by alcohol and the pandemic.

But as a reporter, my job is to see and experience things I'd otherwise never really understand.

So on Sunday morning, Feb. 13, my dad and I rolled up to SoFi Stadium together, not to go to the game – but to get as close as we could to the actual thing.

For us, that was the Player's Tailgate: A self-described "legendary" pre-Super Bowl party, hosted by Fieri, who brought along several other chef friends to cater the event.

Several past and current NFL legends – including Joe Hayden, Rashod Bateman and Aaron Jones – attended the event as well, an exciting addition to the roster for someone like my dad.

The draw for me, of course, was the food: Guy Fieri's chicken, barbecue from some of the country's most notorious pit masters and Aaron May's classic Southern California double cheeseburger made my taste buds tingle with anticipation.

We arrived at the party — held in the parking lot of Hollywood Park Casino, adjacent to SoFi Stadium — around 10:30 a.m.

Inglewood's streets were busier than I'd ever seen them.

The sheer numbers gave me the chills. We are still in a pandemic, after all.

It felt strange to re-enter social gatherings in such an extravagant fashion, on such a grand scale.

Mere weeks ago, government officials warned us of overflowing hospitals and worker shortages — and now, thousands of people were in one place. All to party and watch football.

The threat of COVID-19 didn't seem to matter much. Masks were rare, social distancing even rarer, though the event was outside.

But once beyond the turnstiles of the Player's Tailgate, any apprehension I had vanished — thanks to the scene. People gathered, without worry. People who all love the same thing — football.

Take, for example, Steve Thomas, a Bengals fan — straight from Cincinnati.

He'd flown in about a week before the game to visit his daughter in San Francisco and had plans to fly out the day after the game.

Thomas wore a red velvet tailcoat fit with tiger-print cuffs, a hat to match and tiger-print pants so loud they roared. He also wore a pendant necklace featuring a cartoonish tiger's face.

Underneath it all, of course, he donned a classic Bengals T-shirt.

"He loves it because all the girls come and ask for pictures with him," Ingrid Thomas, Steve Thomas's wife, yelled to me as top-40 hits from the last decade blared over loudspeakers.

Steve Thomas said he doesn't wear the outfit to every game — in his own words, that'd be too much. But for the big ones, like the Super Bowl, the bold outfit was a must.

"You must attract some enemy attention with a look like that," I told him.

He laughed.

He'd run into plenty of Rams fans — this was their house — but, Thomas said, there were "no villains" there.

He was right.

There were nearly 2,000 people at the tailgate by midday. And my dad and I must have walked by all of them as we weaved from tent to tent, as the sun beat down on us.

And yet, the football fanatics didn't seem overly competitive with one another. There were no scuffles. No verbal sparring that turned from jesting to taunting. Everyone was having a good time.

My dad, naturally, was in his element: Not needing to report, he had a couple of beers, surrounded himself with fellow fans and basked in the sportiness of it all.

I was sweating. I needed ice water — or air conditioning.

But not yet.

Fieri hadn't arrived yet.

Once he did – late – he scrambled toward the stage.

He gave an impassioned speech, talking about his chef friends and his pleasure in helping coordinate the event – but mostly, he talked about his new company, Knuckle Sandwich Cigars.

Fieri, ever the showman, tossed three boxes of cigars into the crowd.

A scramble ensued. Whether it was love of cigars or free stuff is anyone’s guess.

As kickoff neared, Dad and I decided we’d had enough of the party. So we meandered toward the event’s exit.

Enter Rams superfan Art Carreon.

Carreon said he’d spent nearly \$100,000 to bring a group of his 10 closest family members and friends to the Super Bowl – a cost he described as a “drop in the bucket.”

It seemed Carreon would pay any price to see the Rams, the team he’d supported for decades, take the championship in their hometown – the place, he said, they always belonged.

Carreon’s been to several Super Bowls and watched the Rams lose each time. But this, he said, is different.

“Now we’re home,” he said. “It’s about this city.”

“It’s about not just the game, but LA,” Carreon added. “We just want the championship for the city.”





Once inside Hollywood Park Casino, home of the Century Bar & Grill, I met another person in a crazy outfit.

James Clarke, a native of Rochester, New York, and a die-hard Rams fan, donned an unmissable rainbow mohawk wig that stood out from across the casino floor.

But how did Clarke, an East Coaster, fall in love with the Rams?

Clarke, the jovial sort of person who makes acquaintances feel like lifelong friends, spun a yarn.

But the short story is that as he grew up in the late 1970s, the Rams were the NFL's underdogs. And he fell in love with the team's players, Jack Youngblood, Deacon Jones and Nolan Cromwell.

"I love the underdog," Clarke said. "That's what I do."

James Clarke works as a youth health professional in a group home for teens aged 15 to 19.

He loves the work he does, Clarke said — and he wakes up every day hoping to bring a little light to the people around him, anyway he can.

"You plant love and you hope it comes out right," Clarke said. "I love smiles and I love laughter."

He wanted to end Sunday with a smile as well.

He'd be ecstatic if the Rams won the Super Bowl, Clarke said, but at the end of the day, he just wanted to have a good time, and to connect with the people who share his same love of the game so deeply.

"If I had a good time in this place, that's all that matters," James said. "That's what I teach my kids — as long as we have a good time doing what we're going to, it's a win."

And that's when it clicked.

I finally understood why my dad had spent so many nights in front of the television, yelling at people he didn't know.

It gives him — and others — a sense of belonging. It's about, as Clarke put it, love.

We didn't stick around to see Clarke and Carreon cheer, or Thomas drop his head.

Worried about postgame traffic, we hustled home after kick off.

Back in San Pedro, I sat at my computer to write. My dad turned on the TV and watched the game, rooting for the Los Angeles team in the absence of the Raiders.

When the Rams' last drive ended in a go-ahead touchdown that would decide the Super Bowl, my dad yelled in triumph. A victory neared, for the Rams — and for the LA area.

His cheers, for me, were familiar — but special.

As fireworks erupted throughout Los Angeles, I knew he wasn't cheering alone.