



Sterling Heights resident Hans Steiniger, center, hams it up with fraternity brothers Anthony Jordan of Lake Orion, Jamin Mahan of Milwaukee and Dante Davis of Lake Orion during a Green Bay Packers game at Lambeau Field. Steiniger is nearing the end of his "Quest for 31," a mission to visit every National Football League stadium in the nation.

Pigskin pilgrimage winds down for Sterling football fan

By Cortney Casey
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When Crystal Steiniger imagined how she'd become engaged, she pictured a quiet proposal over a candlelit dinner.

But given her now-husband's penchant for football, it shouldn't have come as a shock to her when Hans Steiniger popped the question at an Arizona Cardinals game, complete with scoreboard announcements, a hovering mascot and strategically placed acquaintances snapping photos from every angle.

"He was definitely James Bond that day," she laughed.

It's one of the many memorable moments Hans has experienced over the last three years as part of "Quest for 31," his mission to visit every National Football League stadium and cavort with each team's fans while there.

Now his journey is nearing an end. After hitting up Denver, New York, Washington and Baltimore this season, he'll conclude the quest Dec. 27 with a New Orleans Saints game at the Louisiana Superdome.

A native of Buffalo, N.Y., Hans spent most of his early days in what was then Rich Stadium as a rabid fan of the Buffalo Bills.

"To me, it's a culture thing," he said. "It's something that was bred into me."

In Buffalo, revved up fans began tailgating on Friday night in anticipation of Sunday's match-up, and stores and streets were desolate on game day afternoons. Whether the Bills won dictated Monday's mood at the workplace.

"You go to church on Sunday, and the priest is praying that the Bills stay injury-free," he recalled.

After moving to Sterling Heights a decade ago to work for a locally based defense contractor, Hans began visiting other stadiums and found himself surprised — and inspired — by the varied football cultures, with each facility's ambience influenced by environmental and geographic factors.

The vast differences, he said, prompted him to wonder what it would be like to be a fan of every team.

"It was just really intriguing to me how different the tailgating culture or ... game-day atmosphere is in every stadium," he said. "It's almost like the team reflects the community."

Since embarking on his journey three years ago, Hans has averaged 10-12 games annually, several of which represent "Quest Games," treks to new stadiums, others constituting repeat visits.

In each city, Hans dons the home team's jersey and goes straight to the source — local fans — to ascertain the area's can't-miss aspects.

"I generally call ahead and try to find tailgating groups that are in the parking lot every week," he said. "I think my focus of going to all these different stadiums is to appreciate the stadium and the cities as the locals would appreciate it."

In Miami, "you see lots of pig roasts and Hispanic food and Hispanic culture in it." In Oakland, Calif., "it's like an Oz Fest," with die-hard fans donning spiked arm guards and black-and-silver garb, he said.

Dallas' atmosphere reflects the football fervor that permeates towns down to the high school level, and Green Bay fans, though "they understand that Lambeau Field is the mecca that you go to if you want to understand football," are "very welcoming," he added.

He's used the mission as an excuse to visit friends in far-flung cities, including high school buddy Jermain Baker, who now lives in Charlotte, N.C.

"Me being a huge NFL fan, I think it's a very worthy endeavor," said Baker, who's accompanied Hans to multiple games. "I wish I had the time and money to do it myself."

In conjunction with the quest, Hans launched a Web site, www.nflfootballstadiums.com, chronicling his experiences with reviews, photos and details about each city.

Though he struggled to pinpoint his favorite stadium, he said he especially likes the University of Phoenix facility, home of the Cardinals, where the field itself rolls outside to get sun and water; Seattle's Qwest Field, where concessions range from standard fare to sushi and clam chowder; and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers' Raymond James Stadium, which boasts a pervasive pirate theme.

Hans drove to the bulk of the stadiums, wracking up 243,000 miles in his trusty Ford Explorer before swapping it out for a Hummer H3 earlier this summer.

As the vehicle bears his Web site URL and a telltale flag, Hans said he often gets recognized at stadiums — and elsewhere. When he and Crystal visited the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Ohio after their wedding, she recalled, a fellow Sterling Heights resident left a note on their windshield.

For Crystal, acclimating to all football, all the time, after growing up in a household devoid of it, was an adjustment. She was "a little taken aback," she said, when she realized Hans had a "football room" upon her initial visit to his condo.

"No one devotes a whole room to football when they don't even play," she said.

Now, Crystal — along with the Steinigers' 9-year-old daughter — is a "converted" fan who's accompanied Hans to about eight different stadiums and countless games.

They even had a football-themed wedding this June, with an NFL ticket as the invitation, a game-style program, and football centerpieces perched on slabs of Astroturf. After the ceremony in Shelby Township, they headed to Ford Field for photos, posing on the 50-yard line and running plays in their formal attire.

The concept worked so splendidly, said Hans, that they're working with a graphic artist on another venture, www.sportsthemedweddings.com, to assist other couples in throwing athletic-inspired shindigs.

It'll be something to keep Hans busy after he fulfills his quest — though he has plenty of return trips planned for the future, when he'll reunite with the local fans he's encountered over the years.

"It's amazing how welcoming strangers can be," he said. "Each time I go, I'm able to find just lots of really interesting, genuine people."

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