

Terror threat dampens mood on NFL opening day

Times Square was eerily quiet. In a smaller city it would have seemed noisy, but for one of the biggest tourist attractions in New York City, it was spooky.

At Hurley's, a sports bar near Times Square, the mood was much more mellow than your typical tailgate party. Despite Sept. 11, 2011, being the National Football League season opener, it was also the ten year anniversary of the attack of the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and the day a plane went down in Shanksville, Pa.

Hurley's is the fifth bar listed if one does a Google search for "Steelers' bars NYC." Aside from Sunday being the regular season opener, the Pittsburgh Steelers were playing the Baltimore Ravens on the Ravens' turf (also, later in the evening, the New York Jets were playing against "America's Team," the Dallas Cowboys, in New York).

The Steelers/Ravens rivalry is one of the most bitter in the NFL. The players openly admit to trying to injure their opponents badly enough to remove them from play. It's a game that fans of either team make a point to watch, making use of every superstition one has to ensure a win for the favorite team, and screaming at the television to instruct players and coaches and referees.

But the bar was calm. When a commercial featuring the Budweiser Clydesdales and the New York skyline aired, the responses of two smart alecks could be heard throughout the room ("Never forget and drink Budweiser." "But if you want to forget, drink Budweiser.").

Zak Sommers, a Pennsylvania State Trooper, and Krissie Verenna, an attorney, on vacation from Pittsburgh, sought out Hurley's. They packed Steelers' shirts in their luggage (which was late, they said; they left their hotel for Hurley's in regular clothes, but once informed that their suitcase had arrived, they went back to change and were late for kickoff).

The couple started planning their trip to New York in March 2011; they planned to watch the game, but Sommers, who served in the Army, also wanted to be in the city for the anniversary of 9/11.

"On Tuesday we're going down to check out Battery Park, we have reservations for the 9/11 memorial," said Sommers. Verenna added they had considered going after the game, but decided it would be disrespectful to mournful families if they went in their Steelers' gear.

Verenna's family tried to convince her not to visit New York. As their flight drew near, she said she started ignoring the news and phone calls from family, to keep herself from worrying. But as she and Sommers walked the city while waiting for their Steelers' gear, they were attuned to the affect of the threats on the city.

"This morning it seemed extremely quiet," said Verenna, who was visiting New York for the first time.

Bartender Stephen McChrystal, who's worked for Hurley's for five years, noticed a difference from other first-game Sundays.

"It was slow," McChrystal said, attributing the atypical day to the Times Square terror threat. Which makes sense - if less tourists are out and about, wouldn't it stand to reason that less would notice the Steelers' flag proudly waving outside?

But one of the bar's regulars disagreed. Avi Bonime, who works in publishing operations at Random House, thought it was the fact that the Steelers versus Ravens game was nationally televised on CBS made it easier for people to stay home.

"I was on the fence," he said. The Pittsburgh native who has lived in New York for 16 years, had a Roethlisberger jersey on for gameday. While he had been tempted to watch the game at home, he wasn't tempted to go to the memorial site or watch any of the specials on television, despite having been in the city on Sept. 11, 2001.

"I don't need to watch the specials or go to the site to remember," Bonime said.

Later on in the evening, as the Jets, the home team were getting ready to eventually beat the Cowboys, the crowd was a mix of uniforms: two sailors sat at the bar in uniform; nearly 10 members of the Boston Fire Department walked in; and a few stragglers from a private party for the New York and Coronado Fire Departments came downstairs. Country band Lady Antebellum sang "The Star-Spangled Banner." And the bar was quiet.

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