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The Other Super Bowl Champions

by Christopher Cussat

February 2006, MERGINET Super Bowl XL meant many things to many people in three cities. For Pittsburgh, it was a long-awaited confirmation of the goals and hopes set by a past team and generation. For Seattle, it was a chance to prove competitive worthiness. And for Detroit, it was an opportunity to rise above a struggling economy and welcome the country and the world to its home with gracious arms and an enthusiastic heart.

But under the radar of the media blitz, quieter than the taunts and promises of professional athletes, beneath the roar of fanatic fans and exaltations of sports newscasters and in the shadow of Mick Jagger's spotlight, a few other teams in two of these cities showed the true meanings of cooperation and teamwork—and something much more amazing than a colossal football game happened.

It all started when University of Pittsburgh Medical Center (UPMC) Health Plan donated six Super Bowl tickets, spending money and hotel accommodations to two patients from Children's Hospital in Pittsburgh. One patient was a 13-year-old girl with spina bifida and the other was a 16-year-old boy with a degenerative connective tissue disease.

Pittsburgh STAT MedEvac offered to fly the children and their families to and from Detroit in style (and with proper medical support). The coordinators knew that the children would need assistance once they landed, so Community EMS in Detroit was contacted. Vice President Diane Witkowski not only offered her team's help for airport pickup, but promised to assist them, at no cost, for the whole weekend.

As a result, two EMTs and two vans were dedicated to the patients and their families for the entire time. They transported them to and from the Super Bowl and even took them sightseeing and shopping around the city. Witkowski recalled the weekend, "In EMS, we are trained to save lives and help people...when we were asked to help these two kids, there was no question that we would do everything possible to make this a wonderful experience for them and their families."



John Chamberlin, director of business relations and development at STAT MedEvac, first contacted Witkowski. He noted, "Our news often reported how Detroit was welcoming any Pittsburgher, but we truly saw it firsthand with Community EMS, especially how they worked with these patients, took care of everything they needed and donated their services for the entire weekend."

Witkowski concluded, "I am very proud that we at Community EMS could be a part of this and bring joy to them all."

Throughout the weekend, the STAT MedEvac crew, Community EMS team, the patients and their families established an incredible bond. Can you imagine what the hotel workers thought about all of these people (who were strangers a day before) in the lobby singing and laughing together? Maybe they assumed that they were the opening act for the Rolling Stones! Or maybe they got a small glimpse into what you do and how much it means to those you help.

Hollee Russell, the Pittsburgh STAT MedEvac flight nurse, explained, "In our field, we do not often get to see people who are having a great day or who are happy; the trip was a unique opportunity to take the kids' and their families' minds off the everyday troubles that they face."

The Detroit EMTs, Gabe Suntken and Rose Papp, do not believe they did anything special. Said Suntken, "We just did what we do everyday." But for the two young patients and their families who will never forget that weekend, what they and the others did was everything that special could possibly mean.

Although the professional dedication and generosity of all the agencies involved are commendable, this story represents the human side of EMS.

Said Chamberlin, "This is what EMS is really about—caring for anybody in need."

In other words, this story epitomizes the way that emergency medical personnel help people whenever they need it (especially during this particular weekend), and how they help people every day with no press conferences, trophies, golden rings or parades—but simply because it is their jobs and because they care.



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