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Johnny G crashes the Super Bowl

Posted Monday, February 7, 2011 9:23 am

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Sunday February 6, 2011

PITTSFIELD

During a night of revels at the Jolly Roger campgrounds on the Florida Keys in January 1979, Johnny "Pepe" Giardina looked blearily over the flames at his two mates, Robbo and Beaner.

"Guys, let's go to the Super Bowl!" "How?"

"No brainer," said the persuasive Pittsfield native, then 25 years old. "We thumb a ride to Miami, take scrubs from a hospital there, and get into the Orange Bowl pretending we're EMTs. Piece of cake!"

His two pals embraced Johnny's harebrained scheme and they got in, without a hitch, enjoying the Steelers beating the Cowboys, 35-31. But the trio's adventures fell on skeptical ears upon their return home, Johnny having lost his camera that would've validated their outrageous claim.

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"Yep, no one believed us," lamented Johnny G, proprietor of Pepe's Wings and Dogs on Wahconah Street, sharing his story with me during a fundraiser held at his tavern last Sunday for the Community Italian American Organization. His daughter, Jenna, an All-Berkshire striker and MVP at Taconic High School between 2001-2004 under coach Bill Lyon and assistant, Johnny G, is a nominee for the CIAO Berkshire County Soccer Hall of Fame.

"I was ready to hang up my scrubs," Johnny continued his unlikely tale, "but the Patriots made it to the Super Bowl in 1986 to face the Bears in New Orleans. I called Beaner, and with my younger brother Long Tall, we hopped a red-eye to Mobile, hitched to the Superdome and stormed the Bastille once again."

"How did you go about it?" I asked the affable bartender.

"We hit the gates like real EMTs, like somebody's life was truly at stake. But we scouted out our entrance beforehand, avoiding the Rambo wannabes and went for a jolly fat woman at her turnstile, probably a volunteer. I didn't lose my camera that time, but the bummer was the Pats got trounced, 46-10."

Brazen with success, Johnny G and with six friends successfully invaded Super Bowl XXII at Jack Murphy Stadium in 1988. Johnny G's Super Bowl achievements became legendary, and a Who's Who of Pittsfield wanted to enlist in his forays. An engaging character with a big heart and winning smile, "Pepe" led his faithful troops on one last campaign -- a triumphant return to the Superdome via Bourbon Street, where Joe Montana and the 49ers stomped the Broncos, but good.

Little left to prove, Johnny hung up his hospital garb and raised four children with his lovely wife, the former Donna King, and opened Pepe's in 1995. All remained tranquil until 1997 when Johnny's Uncle Rico, a retired city police officer, pulled a stool to the bar.

"Johnny, Pats versus the Packers at the Superdome. You've done it twice, so do it again, and count me in. I might be 72, but I won't slow you down, promise." Johnny looked at his uncle, wiped a tear from his eye, and told him he was in.

"But security was tough in '97," Johnny explained to me in his festive bar. "Police were everywhere, and no more volunteers on the gates. We charged the turnstiles yelling 'Emergency,' but security chased after us, with Uncle Rico strolling in during the confusion. Two pals got nabbed, but five of us made it. I got revenge at the Orange Bowl two years later, when I rented two Winnebagos for seven couples. Yep, seven co-ed teams of EMTs. And we all slid through without a whistle being blown."

"What did you do once you got in?" I asked him.

"We wore clothes beneath our scrubs, changed in the rest rooms, and mingled in the standing areas. After the half-time show, 20 percent of the stadium emptied out, mostly corporate seats, so we sat in those. People sometimes ask if I felt bad sneaking in. No way. Big corporations have ruined it for your average Joe, and unless you're a season ticket holder of a division winner, you're looking at 5,000 bucks to attend the Big Game.

"Next was 2001, when the Ravens faced the Giants in Tampa. Heck, I could've filled a Greyhound bus for that game, but I kept my number at 14. Then came 9/11, and everything changed, or so I thought. Next thing I know it's 2004 and the Pats are facing the Panthers at Houston's Reliant Stadium. Well, who strolls in again but Uncle Rico. 'Johnny,' he says, 'we got ourselves a challenge. They've got three perimeter fences set up before we even see a ticket booth, and they're using face recognition scans for terrorists. I'm 79, but I still want in.' I look at my uncle and can't believe it. But off we go again.

"At that time, supermarkets in Houston were handing out one-sided replica tickets, and Rico picks one up. Nine of us are wearing scrubs, right, but Rico is in plainclothes leading the way. We get through two perimeters, but then Rico is stopped by security. He hands them his ticket but they tell him it's bogus. He looks heartbroken, saying he paid big money for it to a scalper outside. That sends the guards -- all six of them -- in search of that culprit. Rico gives us a nod and we're in on his heels, the nine of us."

Johnny pauses and smiles: "That was the greatest game of all time; the Pats finally winning the Super Bowl on Adam Vinatieri's 41-yard field goal with four seconds to play!

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"But everything comes to an end," sighed the barman, dropping his head. "Super Bowl XXXIX, Pats versus Eagles, Jacksonville, 2005. I'm through two fences and ready to throw up my arms in celebration, when a female cop comes out of nowhere and asks for my ticket. I end up in a Jacksonville slammer, listening to the game on a crackling radio, and bailed out for \$250. Yep, Patriots win it, back-to-back, and I missed it!"

"So, that's my story. A total of eight Super Bowls, 57 friends in, five stadium seat cushions and hundreds of photos for souvenirs. Not too shabby, hey?"

Jenna G whispered into her dad's ear, and Johnny made an announcement." Jenna has informed me that we've raised over \$1,300 tonight for the CIAO Scholarship Fund!"

After the celebration, Johnny turned to me. "Stop in next Sunday for the big game because many of my fellow gate-crashers will be here, including Uncle Rico. He's 85 now, but he'd love to tell you firsthand how he outwitted those beefy security guards in Houston. Heck," Johnny laughed, "he might even convince us to take a crack at Super Bowl XLVI in Indianapolis!"

Kevin O'Hara is an occasional Eagle contributor.

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