

CHAPTER 1: THE ADVENTURES OF STAT MAN

Sometimes passion runs so deep it tells a story about who we are and what is truly important to us. For me, it was hard to find places where I felt free to be completely myself and express my authentic passion.

This is why, when I was young, I loved going to my grandparents' farm outside Milaca, Minnesota. It was a rare break from chronically feeling "out of place." Their couch was a welcomed friend, one where I felt safe from judgment. It seemed by its very sturdy nature to protect me from the embarrassment of feeling weird or oddly quirky. Its deeply colored fabric also protected my history by concealing Kool-Aid spills and food stains.

As a thirteen-year-old, visiting the farm was magical: the cows, the crops, working on jigsaw puzzles, and the pajamas grandma had for us that held so much static we created lightning shows under the covers at night. My brother, Larry, and I liked to run around outside, exploring to see if grandpa dumped anything new behind the barns or trying to set a record for how far we could travel on the hay bales without

our feet touching the ground. I loved these adventures, but some days Larry had to be a solo explorer. No matter how much he begged, how gorgeous it was outside, or even if a bull got loose from his pen, when it was an October Saturday on the farm, I would be watching college football.

I lay on my stomach with my head about a foot away from Grandma's thirteen-inch color television. I was close enough to reach the rabbit ear antennas when things got a little fuzzy, and I had to hold the dial somewhere between channels four and five when the big squiggles came on the screen.

This day was a big day for college football fans like me, starting with Ohio State and Oklahoma, two absolute juggernauts with larger-than-life coaches Earle Bruce and Barry Switzer. Announcing the game was a hero of mine, the incomparable Keith Jackson, whose memorable calls would give me shivers for the next forty years. I wanted to freeze time. Grandma brought me peanuts in the shell and didn't seem to care that I made a big mess as I attacked them like the squirrels outside her window. Grandpa spent his breaks from chores taking naps in his chair behind me. I was usually so concerned that everyone else was happy, but here I was oblivious to anything outside the magic thirteen-inch box that teleported me to college campuses around the country.

I was daydreaming about being in the stadium, not just as a fan but as a student. In my head I pretended and believed this was *my* school, and this was *my* team playing today. I visualized I was wearing *my* school colors and had my face painted too. I was cheering at the top of my lungs

with my fellow classmates rooting for our team. The pep band, cheerleaders... all of us there together focused and passionate about one thing. Our cheering turned to a roar as our team ran through the tunnel and onto the field. Our school song came on, and we raised our voices as one. I could see it like it was happening, and I could feel I belonged.

Grandma returned from her rhubarb patch, her soft humming interrupting my daydream, but I didn't mind. Grandma lovingly shared, "Your Uncle Steve is coming later to watch the Gopher game with you." I was ecstatic! I loved Uncle Steve, not just because I was named after him but because he was so cool.

He was in his twenties and an engineer working at a large company in the Twin Cities, and he also loved football. We were alike in many ways, and he always seemed to get me, which was something I longed for, especially being a new teenager. From my youthful eyes, his life seemed epic. I also knew he respected and cared about me, and that meant a lot. Sometimes he brought a frozen pizza for us to share as we watched the game. I loved this rare and special treat!

The front door opened, and it was him. There was a commercial, so without a thought I ran to hug him. He smiled with a wide grin. He always made me feel truly accepted. He handed something to Grandma, and I fought the urge to ask him if he brought a frozen pizza, but of course I hoped he did.

He turned to go back out to his car, but he knew I hated missing even a single play, so told me, "You better get back

in there so you don't miss anything!" I reached the TV just as the commercials ended.

Now that Uncle Steve was there, I decided to sit on the couch so there'd be plenty of room for him, too, and I was not lying down like a child. It was a great game, and I couldn't wait for the next commercial break to tell him about it.

Uncle Steve sat next to me and handed me something, giving me a big smile. "This is for you." It was a T-shirt from Texas Instruments, the company he worked for. I felt like the most important person in the world, being given a gift by someone I admired so much. Then he asked, "So, what's happening in the game?"

I updated him on Ohio State and Oklahoma and some of the other scores from the top twenty games around the country. We both thought the Gophers didn't have much of a shot against Nebraska, but we agreed you never knew. He asked me questions about my life as if I was an adult and then thoughtfully listened to my answers and asked follow-up questions. Uncle Steve really got me.

Kickoff for the Gopher game was right around the corner as he made his way to the kitchen after casually mentioning he would be right back. A few moments later I heard the unmistakable click and whoosh of Grandma's gas stove. He peeked around the corner, showing just a piece of red and black box. "How does this sound?" he asked knowing fully how I would respond. How could this day get any better? Maybe with a major Gopher upset.

To our great disappointment Nebraska gave our Gophers a world-class whooping, eighty-four to thirteen, in one of the worst losses in college football history. Like true Minnesotans, my Uncle Steve and I looked for bright spots and moral victories. “It could have been worse.” “The offense looked pretty good.”

The positives were hard to find as the announcers went through the final stats, explaining how Nebraska racked up nearly eight hundred yards of offense and another two hundred in kick returns as they scored twenty-one points every quarter. Uncle Steve and I broke down the stats even further in our post-game analysis.

I knew it was just a pipe dream to one day be in a college stadium like that myself, but watching football on the farm brought me into the action of these games like nowhere else. No one at my house was a football fan and certainly couldn't understand my complete obsession with the game and the entire college football experience. During my classes at school, I caught myself humming fight songs of Notre Dame, Ohio State, USC, and Alabama. I probably knew the Michigan fight song better than most of their alumni.

On rare occasions I could watch the Gophers on TV at home, but I was just as happy listening to the games on the radio and keeping my own stats in real time. I did this for both the University of Minnesota football and basketball games. I had notebooks filled with individual game and season-long statistics. One of my heroes was Ray Christensen, the iconic play-by-play announcer for the Gophers. Sometimes I

imagined meeting him and dreamt he loved how passionate I was while also thinking I was cool.

To me Ray had the most amazing job: watching football games and sharing his thoughts with the world as it was happening. I would've been thrilled to do something like that too.

I was only thirteen at the time, but I already felt like a long-suffering Minnesota sports fan. Like every other football season I've experienced, this one ended with disappointment. The Gophers won only one game, and the Vikings missed the playoffs. It seemed cruel our harsh winters happened right as our football teams were closing another disappointing year.

I didn't like the cold, but winters had been a bit more bearable the past few years ever since I turned nine when my mom remarried. Her husband, Doug, adopted me and my brother, changing our last name from Rice to Fredlund. Doug owned two old snowmobiles that Larry and I were allowed to use, even though they broke down a bit too often.

With Doug came a new extended family, where, at first, I felt like an outsider. However, that was about to change. The summer between middle and high school we had attended a picnic with Doug's family. My new Uncle Donn approached me, and at first, I thought I was going to get in trouble for drinking too much of the green sugary sherbet punch.

Instead, Donn said, "I hear you are a football fan."

I nodded as my eyes focused on him. I could tell I had green remnants on my lips, so I wiped them away with the back of my hand. I knew I should have taken a napkin.

“Your mom also tells me you are pretty good at keeping stats.” I tried to verbalize an answer, but nodding was the best I could do. “I need your help. I do the play-by-play for the Cambridge Bluejackets football games on the radio, and it’s too hard to do that while keeping all the stats. Do you think you could help me?”

I think I blacked out momentarily before responding, maybe a little too loudly, “You mean, you do play-by-play like Ray Christensen?”

I didn’t realize how great my new Uncle Donn’s laugh was, even though at first it startled me. “Well, I guess so! I’m not as good as Ray, but I suppose that is correct. He has a full team of people to help him with stats, but I just need one, and I choose you. Are you interested?”

Here was a person who valued that I kept stats on all the games and didn’t think it was weird at all. I held back tears by the time the words formulated. “I would love that.” His smile invited me to share more. “I have stats from every game if you need to see them. I can show you how I do it. Should I bring some to your house?” It didn’t seem like he should just offer this to me without seeing if I was good enough for what he needed.

“That’s not necessary, Steve. You got the job. We have a couple of months before the season starts, and we will figure it all out then. Also, have you heard about the Prep Bowl?”

I was so focused on wanting to know what I needed to prepare to be his stats guy, I barely processed this second question. “Um, no.”

“Now that they built the Metrodome in Minneapolis, they hold all five of the state championship football games there, and they are all on the same day. Would you like to join me next year? “

“Yes, yes! Well, let me ask my mom, but yes. That sounds amazing!”

For the next two years, I was Uncle Donn’s right-hand man as he did the play-by-play for the Cambridge football and basketball games. He even let me share the stats on air a couple of times. We went to two Prep Bowls together, talking about the intricacies of football strategy. No one understood my passion for football like my new Uncle Donn, who even encouraged me to become a sports agent when I got older. He believed there was going to be a lot of money in it, and the best agents were great at numbers as well as understanding the nuances of the sport, just like I did.

It was easy to let my lack of confidence immediately dismiss what he said. It was much easier to believe something like being a sports agent was for people who were a lot smarter and more important than me.

Those autumn Saturdays at the farm and keeping stats for Uncle Donn came to an end as I got busier with high school’s demands like driving, activities, and girls. Well, two out of three were true.

Uncle Steve moved to Texas, and my biological dad let my brother and me know he no longer wanted to see us. Both were tough, but I would be okay. I am certain things like this affect us more deeply than we realize, and we just can't see it until the impact shows itself.

This also seemed like the right time to scale back doing my own stats for the Gopher games on the radio. It was really kind of silly anyway. No one else I knew was doing this, and there was no future in it. The Gophers already had a play-by-play guy and a stats team.

Without Uncle Donn, Uncle Steve, Ray, or anyone else telling me otherwise, the only logical conclusion was that no sixteen-year-old should be wasting time listening to a football game on the radio and writing down how many yards each player gained, especially one who wanted to someday have a girlfriend. I was never going to find someone who thought my dozens of notebooks filled with stats was very sexy. The right thing to do was to move on from this quirky pursuit of my childhood.

But no matter what I changed, I still got goosebumps thinking about what it must feel like to attend a game at Ohio State's horseshoe stadium or Michigan's Big House; to be one of the hundred thousand people all wearing the same color and going nuts together at the game—a sense of true belonging. Maybe it was okay to hold on to these dreams for a little bit longer.