



NIGHTHAWKS NIGHT

Omaha Embraces New UFL Team

by Brandon Vogel

Even the moon was perfect. It began as a curious orange sliver peaking from behind the bluffs in Iowa. It rose until it was full-on silver against the black sky over Rosenblatt Stadium as Jeff Garcia threw a game winning touchdown pass in the waning seconds of the Omaha Nighthawks' first game.

If it had been a movie any person with an ounce of cynicism would've hated it.

Here's the scene: Set in football-mad Omaha, a United Football League team comes to town. The league, falling somewhere between the NFL and the Canadian Football League on the scale of national importance, lost a reported \$30 million in its first season and could use a big draw. They get it when 23,067 people pack an old baseball stadium for the first sellout in league history. Things are looking up.

On the field the grizzled 40-year-old quarterback has spent much of the second half scrambling for his life behind an offensive line that has yet to gel. The hometown hero running back has found little room to run since two bruising first quarter carries. And now with six seconds left, trailing by six, it's fourth down and the team is 12 yards from the end zone. Things are looking bleak.

But that's the beauty of sport. Occasionally it punches cynicism right in the mouth with an uppercut of reality. And the truth here is that the Omaha Nighthawks got the dream ending last Friday, beating the Hartford Colonials 27-26.

Just the way they would've imagined it when the journey started at a press conference six months ago.

Beginnings

You knew the UFL was serious about Omaha when team officials called on George Toma, the so-called "Marquis de Sod," to help them turn Rosenblatt Stadium into a

football field. The 80-year-old turf guru has groomed World Cup pitches and prepared every field in Super Bowl history. He's the sort of person who can lend legitimacy to an organization going head-to-head against the most popular professional sports league in America.

And as serious as the league is about Omaha, our city is serious about football. More than 1,500 people attended the Nighthawks public unveiling at a mini-camp in July. Two months before the home opener and fans were already making an impression.

"So far, everything has exceeded our expectations," Rick Mueller, Nighthawks general manager, said after the first practice. "I think [Omaha] is going to be one of our model franchises."

Enthusiasm grew as summer wore on. Ahman Green, the former Omaha Central, Nebraska and Green Bay Packers star, was on board as the hometown anchor. Garcia, a four-time Pro Bowler, added a little more star power. The team's front office built the most experienced, NFL-heavy roster in the five-team league. From May through June the pieces fell into place. Now, people just needed to show up. This being Nebraska, they did in force.

Three full days before last Friday's debut, Nighthawks officials announced the game was sold out. Pat Lawlor, owner of Lawlor's Custom Sportswear, said he was printing the stealth fighter logo on just about every black shirt he had in his inventory to meet demand. Metro Omaha announced a partnership with the team, providing new bus routes to get the estimated 24,000 people to and from the stadium and ease the parking crunch.

People were showing up. Nelly, Grammy Award winning rapper, was showing up to perform at halftime. With so much fervor surrounding the debut the only question was whether the Nighthawks could deliver.

Kick Off

In the parking lot south of the stadium, local act Hifi Hangover is ripping through a surprisingly good cover of the Kings of Leon hit "Sex On Fire." Beer garden patrons are nodding along and so are the kid citizens of the inflatable city that's arisen here. A bouncing castle, some sort of bungee based attraction, a football toss, it's all part of the "UFL Experience." Nearly three hours before game time and everything surrounding the Nighthawks is puffed full of air, big and proud.

Across the street, the yard parking business is brisk. Most spaces at Rosenblatt are occupied by the 9,000 season ticket holders, team officials, media members or the fan

attractions, but \$20 gets you a spot in someone's South Omaha lawn. If you're from Omaha it looks and smells a lot like the College World Series.

If you're head coach Jeff Jagodzinski the scene was redolent of Green Bay.

"You got people in lawn chairs, parking, guys with grills, sticking them off the back of pick-up trucks, it looked fun," said Jagodzinski.

Inside the stadium it looked a little like Green Bay, too. With the field wedged along the first base line, the back of the end zones aren't far from the seats. The setup seems to beg for Lambeau Leap-like touchdown celebrations.

"There's no memo that we wrote that says you have to jump into right field," joked Brian Melekian director of team business for the UFL. "But we anticipate that our players are going to take to this community the way the community has taken to our players. I think that's going to happen organically."

It didn't happen on the Nighthawks first touchdown, a 10-yard pass to fullback Rendrick Taylor. It didn't look likely to happen at the end of the third quarter, the Nighthawks trailing 23-10 and seemingly unable to stop a Hartford passing game that had completed 20 of 24 passes.

Then things started happening. Strange things. Facing 3rd-and-4 from the Hartford 48, Garcia missed wide receiver Robert Ferguson on a slant. After the play Ferguson scuffled with Colonials linebacker Danny Lansanah. Hartford was flagged, Omaha wasn't. The drive stayed alive.

Six plays later Garcia threw what looked like a back-breaking interception inside the 10. Game over? Not yet. A roughing the passer penalty returned the ball to the Nighthawks. Two plays later Devard Darling caught a 2-yard touchdown pass to cut the lead to 23-20.

Eight minutes later the Nighthawks were down to their last chance. With six seconds left, needing six points, Garcia lofted a change-up over what three weeks ago was home plate.

"I didn't make the greatest of throws," Garcia said later. "It was one of those throws where I just wanted to give him a chance to make a play."

This time it happened. The pass dropped over Hartford cornerback Marty Collins into the arms of Ferguson. Seconds later he made the leap, jumping onto the backstop wall to be embraced by the fans, to be embraced by Omaha.

“That’s the way to start a franchise if you’re going to do it,” said Jagodzinski. He was talking about the game, but he could’ve been speaking about any mile marker along the organization’s road, from announcement to the team celebrating under a full, Nighthawk colored moon.

It could have been scripted but it happened organically.

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