



## **Soldiers, families linked by game**

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LOUISVILLE (AP) -- Jennifer Sanders wore green on Saturday. Her husband, a Marine stationed in Iraq and a huge Kentucky basketball fan, would have it no other way.

"I had a red outfit, but he wouldn't let me wear it," Sanders said, as she prepared to watch -- along with her husband -- the annual Kentucky-Louisville game, played in a sea of Louisville red at Freedom Hall.

The couple, from Taylorsville, were among about 20 families reunited by technology on Saturday, through a program called "Freedom Calls" provided by the Freedom Calls Foundation in Brooklyn, NY.

Through interactive videoconference technology -- arranged by Freedom Calls Foundation contributor Kentucky TeleHealth Network -- troops at Camp Fallujah and Camp Cooke in Iraq were able to watch the ESPN telecast of the game between No. 9 Kentucky and No. 13 Louisville and hear the cheers of the crowd.

"I'm really, really excited that the soldiers can watch the game," Louisville coach Rick Pitino said. "Anything we can do to entertain or distract them in any small way is awesome."

Inside Freedom Hall, fans were able to see and hear the troops on the arena's video board. Gov. Ernie Fletcher, who earlier had spoken to the troops and their families, led the crowd before the game in wishing a loud "Merry Christmas" to the troops.

Before and after the game, family members were able to have a private video conference with the soldiers. The family members also stood on the court with players from both teams during the pre-game performance of the national anthem.

In Iraq, the soldiers stood at attention during the national anthem.

"No matter who wins here," Fletcher told the troops and the crowd, "we all know that all across the globe where our troops serve, we're all winners because of your service, dedication and unbridled spirit."

Technology -- such as Web cameras and e-mail -- has made it easier to communicate with loved ones in Iraq, but that didn't make Saturday's video conference any less special for soldiers' wives.

"It's more personal," Rachel Ratliff of Pikeville, who's married to Marine Lance Cpl. Paul Ratliff. "This is the first Christmas we've been separated."

Ratliff, who is more than eight months pregnant with the couple's first child said it's hard for her, but she prays a lot.

Meanwhile, Sanders smiled when asked what she thought her husband, Lance Cpl. Derek Sanders, most looked forward to on Saturday.

"He's probably more excited about the game," she said. "But I'd hope he'd also be excited about seeing me!"