

Game draws an international audience: Marines in Iraq

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SNYDER -- On the first play of the game, Snyder Tigers running back Will Clay took a reverse 62 yards down the sideline for a touchdown against the Lamesa Golden Tornadoes.

Air horns sounded, the cheerleaders hugged and, thousands of miles away, somewhere northeast of Baghdad, 27-year-old U.S. Marine Casey Doyle grinned, leaned forward and, ever so slightly, pumped his first.

"I knew he'd like that first play," said Tommy Doyle, his father and an assistant coach, standing near a small television screen in the press box that showed an image of his son watching in his fatigues.



Nancy Doyle touches a monitor showing her son Casey Doyle, a Snyder High School graduate and now a marine in Iraq. The high school beamed live video of its football game to a military base in Al Asad, Iraq, with help from a foundation that uses broadcasts to connect military personnel with their relatives. When Nancy Doyle saw her son, she kissed her fingers and touched them to the screen. She said she was anxious because last time she spoke to Casey, he told her he had been bitten by a camel spider and had lost 15 pounds.

The bright lights of West Texas football were beamed live to a U.S. military base in Al Asad, Iraq, on Friday night, courtesy of a foundation that uses global Internet broadcasts to connect military personnel overseas to family members.

"A little taste of home," said Jackie Kidd, whose 28-year-old son, Staff Sgt. Quintin Kasparek, is in Iraq. "What says 'West Texas' more than high school football?"

Pro sporting events, college basketball and even the Kentucky Derby have been broadcast to soldiers fighting abroad, officials said. This is surely the first high school football game.



Spectators and Snyder High School cheerleaders wave and hold signs during a live videoconference of the team's football game to a U.S. military base in Al Asad, Iraq.

The action on the field one side and the Marines watching the game on the other. A small tripod-mounted camera filmed the game.

Early in the first quarter, Nancy Doyle, Casey's mom, was brought up to the press box to see her son on the television, though she couldn't talk to him. He couldn't see her on the screen he was watching.

The moment she saw him, her eyes welled with tears. She kissed her fingers and touched them to the screen. Then she did it again.

"He looks good," she said, smiling and crying.

She was anxious to see him, she had explained moments earlier, because the last time she spoke to him he said he had been bitten by a camel spider and had lost 15 pounds.

"I just need to see him," she said. "I just need to actually look at him and know that he is doing all right."

Casey Doyle, a first lieutenant and former Tigers offensive guard, had been looking forward to the game for days.

"Oh, he couldn't wait," Tommy Doyle said. "But it's not just for Snyder kids. There are a lot of others from the area. They're all West Texas kids, and they might like to catch a football game."

The Snyder players were, well, mildly intrigued. Coaches told them a few weeks ago that they'd be playing for overseas spectators.

"They were kind of like ... 'Uh, OK,'" Doyle said. "They probably thought it was a little strange."

The city has no particular ties to the military, except for the handful of graduates from the 750-student school who join every year, said Larry Scott, principal of Snyder High School.

"It's a really neat first: Friday Night Lights for Texas soldiers," said Rick Snyder, president of Tandberg, a company based in New York and Norway that donated the videoconferencing equipment.

Iraq is nine hours ahead of Snyder, a city of about 11,000 between Abilene and Lubbock, so the game was broadcast at 4:30 a.m. there.

The split television screen in the press box showed the

The idea grew out of the Freedom Calls Foundation, a nonprofit organization that allows soldiers to use videoconferencing stations in Iraq to communicate with relatives at video-equipped locations in the United States. Soldiers can see their newborn child or blow kisses to their mother on Mother's Day.

This summer, Suzanne Fletcher, an AT&T communications technician who works with the foundation, was at Snyder High doing a videoconference call for Kasperek and his family.

The calls are usually done in bigger cities, but Kasperek's grandfather was in no shape to visit Lubbock, which is three hours round-trip.

While she was there, Fletcher learned that Casey Doyle was also stationed at Al Asad, as was Bryce Wilkins, a 23-year-old Marine from the nearby town of Ira.

Fletcher called John Harlow II, the foundation's executive director in New York, and suggested they broadcast a Snyder football game.

"John said, 'High school football? Come on, no one wants to watch high school football,'" Fletcher said. "I said, 'Bud, this is Texas. Everybody in Texas loves high school football.'

"He said, 'OK, let's see if we can set it up.'"

They did, with the help of several local companies that donated equipment and antennas so the signal from the football field could be transmitted to the school's video room and on to Iraq.

Snyder football boosters even mailed Snyder Tigers gold and black T-shirts and hats to troops at the base.

Before the game, a tailgate was held outside the stadium for military families. Family members ate hamburgers and hot dogs and shared pictures of their uniformed children, brothers and sisters.

Most were not lucky enough to see their loved ones on the broadcast.

Kasperek was recently transferred from Al Asad to train Iraqi policeman at another base. The 1996 graduate had played the baritone in the band at Snyder High.

"He was really upset he wasn't going to be able to watch," said Kidd, his mother. "He couldn't believe he was going to be the first soldier in Iraq to watch his alma mater play football. But we all know they are in a war zone and have way more important things going on."

Wilkins also did not appear to be watching. A Marine sergeant and counterintelligence specialist, he had told his parents a few days before the game that he was starting a new mission, said his father, Ricky Wilkins. He would be gone for six weeks.

"As a father, you never like to hear that," Ricky Wilkins said. "But he's got some important things to do. It just about tore him up though that he wouldn't get to watch the game."

As the first quarter ended, the game was already a blowout: 23-0 Snyder. The public address announced: "Ladies and gentlemen, this game is being broadcast to our troops in Iraq."

On cue, the Snyder cheerleaders turned toward the press-box camera and held up the sign: "Hello Al Asad! Welcome to Snyder, TX. We Love You!" The announcer asked those in the crowd to face the camera, wave and show the troops their appreciation.

The crowd turned and roared.