



A few minutes from Iraq before tip off

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by Jeffrey Murray/ AP Writer

LEXINGTON, Ky. (AP) -- Several minutes into an emotional videoconference Saturday that let Army Sgt. Joshua Fields interact with his parents, Fields learned such high-tech meetings also have drawbacks.

"It looks like your hands are dirty, Josh," ribbed his father, David Fields, of Richmond, Ky. "Don't they have any soap?"

"My hands can't get clean, no matter what I do," the soldier explained.

For the second year in a row, the Louisville-Kentucky rivalry game was an even bigger event for some 50 families who headed to Rupp Arena before the game for a chance to see and hear their loved ones stationed in Iraq.

Kentucky beat Louisville, 73-61.

For many, it was their first chance in months to really interact. Phone conversations and e-mail just aren't the same, they said.

"What was so wonderful about it was that we could see him and he could see us," said Linda Gorton of Lexington, whose son, staff Sgt. Clayton Gorton, is at Camp Fallujah. "I actually hugged the screen."

Gorton and her husband concluded the call by singing "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" to their son.

Families from across Kentucky were treated to lunch and a chance to watch the game from a banquet room while the soldiers watched from Iraq. Throughout the day, families also scheduled private 20-minute meetings with their loved ones in three conference rooms.

Just before tip-off, Gov. Ernie Fletcher paraded the families onto the Rupp Arena floor, where the Wildcat fans gave a roaring ovation to the soldiers, who were patched in live on the scoreboard screen. Even the soldier who was a Louisville fan got cheers -- until he predicted a Cardinal victory.

"This is the best Christmas present they could receive," Fletcher said. "It's a good way for the commonwealth to thank our soldiers for their service."

The program, known as Freedom Calls, had most of its equipment donated from the Kentucky TeleHealth Network, which uses similar technology in a university program that links doctors with rural patients.

The concept of teleconferences on game day started last year from Freedom Hall in Louisville, where about 20 families participated. Organizers say they plan to make it an annual event.

On Saturday, Cpl. Patrick A. Kidd of Springfield, Ky., got to talk by web cam with his parents and four siblings.

His mother, Mary Kidd, called the experience "gut-wrenching."

The soldier, however, did have one gripe: his dad, Michael Kidd, was wearing a red sweater -- the color of Louisville's uniforms. Dad insisted it was an honest mistake.

Vicki Wright and 12 other family members were waiting to talk with Wright's son, Lance Cpl. Matthew Wright.

"He has great news to tell me, and I had to wait until today," she said. "I'm hoping he's getting ready to come home, but I don't want to get my hopes up."

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