

Tailgaters tap Bills tradition to honor Wilson

Pay tribute in best Bills fashion: with tailgate party

By Jonathan D. Epstein | News Business Reporter | @jdepstein | Google+ on March 30, 2014 - 4:10 PM



Tailgating for Ralph Wilson



Hundreds of Buffalo Bills fans turned out Sunday afternoon to celebrate the life of Ralph C. Wilson Jr., honoring the memory of the team's only owner in what many said was the best way they could think of: by tailgating. The overnight snowfall didn't stop the crowd from gathering in a muddy parking lot owned by Wings Flights of Hope and partying for hours, as if it were a Sunday during the fall.

Decked out in Bills colors and the usual outfits, the fans pulled out grills, sat in lawn chairs, drank beer and mingled – just as they do before a Bills game – as they remembered the man many credit with bringing football to Buffalo and keeping it here.

“This was a great way to come out and celebrate the man who brought us the Bills,” said 28-year-old Katheryn Lanigan of Buffalo, who described herself as a lifelong Bills fan. “He'd want us to be out here celebrating, and not mourning him.”

Fans danced and sang to the music of the band Hit-N-Run inside an open pavilion while partaking of pizza, wings and other food served by a host of food trucks and vendors outside, including the Roaming Buffalo and Just Pizza. Posters and placards bearing Wilson's likeness were everywhere.

“It's quite an experience. I didn't expect to see this many people,” said Jake Gauda, 32, of North Tonawanda, who called himself “Billsfoot” and wore a helmet and red, white and blue face paint. “This is awesome. It's what the Bills family is all about.”

Most of all, they reminisced and enjoyed the afternoon. “This is the city in a nutshell,” said 28-year-old West Seneca season-ticket holder Marc Deschamps. “Ralph Wilson died and Buffalo fans get together to celebrate his life. It's a great way to remember him.”

Midway through the rally, fans were surprised and delighted when Bills President and CEO Russ Brandon took to the stage to thank them for their dedication and support. “I never get to tailgate,” Brandon said, with a cup in his hand. “I love this.” In brief remarks, he noted how another tribute to Wilson in the late owner’s hometown of Detroit highlighted “his passion, his commitment and his loyalty to this community and this team. I worked for Mr. Wilson for 18 years, and what he loved the most was the fans and their passion,” Brandon told the crowd. “Many people have asked how they can honor him. How can we honor him? One word. Win!”

Holding his smartphone high in the air, Brandon videotaped the screaming crowd, which was shouting “Let’s go, Buff-a-lo!” and rooting for the team. Brandon then said he was emailing the video to Wilson’s wife, Mary. “On behalf of Mary Wilson, and Mr. Wilson’s daughters, you guys are the ones who have gotten us through things these last few days,” he called out, to more cheers.

In a subsequent interview, Brandon said Wilson “would have loved being in the middle” of Sunday’s tailgating. “The outpouring of support has been unbelievable. The tribute and response to Mr. Wilson’s legacy is incredible,” he said. “Our fans are incredible and passionate, and it’s very therapeutic. I’ve had a smile on my face this entire time I’ve been here.”

Wilson, who founded the team in 1959 with a \$25,000 investment, died last week at age 95 after a life that included not only his ownership of the Bills, but also military service in the U.S. Navy in World War II and a business career. Although he lived in a tony Detroit suburb, he always expressed his commitment to Buffalo and to keeping the Bills in Western New York.

“It’s special because it’s his life,” said Jamar Petty, 22, of Buffalo, who said he attends five or six games a year and tailgates before each one. “He lived 95 long years, kept the Bills in Buffalo, and now we have the future.”

Sunday’s four-hour fan-driven event – a day after the Detroit tribute – was created and promoted by the Buffalo Fam Base club, under the name #BillsMafia. Club president Del Reid said organizers were expecting 30 to 40 cars, and had originally planned to hold the event at the Hammer’s Lot on Abbott Road.

“We wanted to do a celebration, instead of a candlelight vigil,” Reid said. “We thought it would be good to give people a chance to get prepared and come on out and do what Bills fans do best: tailgate.”

But the strong response to the promotions on Facebook, Twitter and the group’s website led them to reach out instead to Wings, whose seven-acre lot on California Road behind Ralph Wilson Stadium can handle up to 600 cars, with additional room for overflow. It also has a pair of pavilions, where part of the event was held.

“We thought it would be great to be part of the tribute,” said Wings founder Joe DeMarco, a volunteer pilot for the organization, and also a volunteer sheriff’s deputy. “There’s just so many people here in our community grateful for what Ralph did. This team could have been gone long ago, but they’ve been tied to Buffalo and stayed here.”

All parking proceeds and 10 percent of the food truck sales benefit Hunter’s Hope Foundation, the charity created by former Bills quarterback Jim Kelly and his wife, Jill, for their late son. Kelly himself was a beneficiary of Wings Flights’ help recently when the all-volunteer medical flight service flew him to New York for cancer treatment.

The event was scheduled from 1 to 5 p.m., but cars started arriving as early as 10 a.m. By mid-afternoon, the lot was getting full, and organizers were expecting to have about 1,000 people. Fourteen Erie County sheriff’s deputies were on-site – two mounted on horseback – but attendees had been cautioned in advance to behave responsibly.

“This is family. In a time of difficulty, when you lose somebody, you come together. We just happen to come together in a parking lot,” said a 37-year-old fan from Port Jervis in Orange County, who was decked out in Bills colors and costume, and called himself “Captain Buffalo.” “This is what we know. We’re tailgaters. Buffalo is a tailgating community.”

email: jepstein@buffnews.com