

# The 12th Man

Writer and long-suffering Seattle fan, John Stern, explains how it felt to witness what was once unthinkable – a Super Bowl victory for his Seahawks

It wasn't until linebacker Malcolm Smith started chugging towards the endzone, on his way to becoming one of the most unlikely Super Bowl MVPs, that I started to believe.

My Seahawks were 22-0 up against the Broncos in what was shaping up to be one of the most one-sided Super Bowls in history. Even the reassurance of my pal Matt Sherry, the editor of *Gridiron* magazine, in the lead-up to the NFC Championship game and then in Super Bowl week itself had failed to puncture my innate

scepticism.

"They'll win it, mate, no danger," Matt said repeatedly through the season. It just didn't compute. Rationally I could see his point, but emotionally I just kept querying the offensive capabilities, worrying that the Legion of Boom would suddenly go quiet or that excitable head coach Pete Carroll would internally combust.

A lifetime of following the fortunes of the England cricket team and West Ham United FC had left my glass perpetually half empty. And 25 years of supporting the largely anonymous Seattle Seahawks kept the prospect of ever lifting the Vince Lombardi Trophy –

the 2006 Super Bowl appearance notwithstanding – well out of reach.

Following the Seahawks felt like a private perversion. They were hardly ever on TV over here and I didn't know anyone else who had fallen for the 12th Man. I was beside myself when I spotted a bloke wearing a Seahawks T-shirt in my local Hertfordshire pub recently and gutted I didn't manage to go and corner him.

Why the Seahawks? It was an utterly random selection made in the late 1980s at the suggestion of a school friend who was a Bears fan. Maybe I liked the blue and silver they wore back then.

In the few seconds it took Malcolm Smith to travel the 69 yards into the Broncos endzone my Seahawks life flashed in front of my eyes in a weird vertiginous surge that told me my team was about to reach the summit. All these memories flooded to the front of my mind: the crackly American Forces Network coverage of the crazy final game of the '88 season when the Seahawks beat the Raiders 43-37 to win the AFC West; the over-sized Dave Krieg No.17 jersey I used to own; the endless Ricky Watters juke moves on *Madden* and my single visit to Seattle – there and back in a weekend to see, by chance, Fun Lovin' Criminals in a tiny club, drink large amounts of craft beer and watch Jon Kitna lead the 'Hawks to a futile win over the Chargers in the old Kingdome while the rain teemed outside.

Super Bowl XLVIII was an emotional experience, confirmation that the other-worldly exoticism of the NFL meant I cared more about the Seahawks than any of my other sporting loyalties. This devotion was reinforced when I found myself



**"I found myself watching a live stream of Seattle's homecoming parade and wishing to be there"**

watching a live stream of the team's homecoming parade and desperately wishing to be in Seattle.

But the climax of the NFC Championship is the one play from last season that still makes my palms sweaty, "Kaepernick... endzone... Crabtree... broken up! Picked off! This game is over..." was Joe Buck's perfectly metered commentary as the 49ers quarterback saw his do-or-die pass tipped out of his receiver's hands by Richard Sherman into the hands of the soon-to-be-famous Smith.

And so on to this season. Could they do it again? Well, after

dismantling the Packers in Week 1 and scraping past the Broncos in a Week-3 Super Bowl rematch, it felt like they could. But those wins sandwiched a shaky outing against Philip Rivers' Chargers, when Super Bowl XLIX looked a long way off. The Seahawks mantra last season was "Why not us?" This year it's "What's next?" The answer is: who knows? 🍷

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