

## **A Hawkeye Home Game, 222 Miles Away From Home**

A week ago last Friday, I was walking into the Dekalb Oasis tollway rest stop just this side of Chicago. A guy I didn't know (wearing an Iowa T-shirt saying, "Never Underestimate the Power of Drunks in Large Groups") asked me, "Is there anyone left in Iowa?"

I laughed and looked back at the parking lot that was overflowing with cars, 95% of which had Iowa plates representing almost every county. "Evidently not," I replied.

LuAnn and I (and our nephew Max) joined tens of thousands of Iowans making the pilgrimage to the Iowa/Northern Illinois football game at Soldier Field last weekend. The DeKalb Oasis has a McDonalds and a Starbucks – it's a good place to psych yourself up for the heavy traffic between there and Chicago.

Every now and then on the tollway there are very helpful overhead electronic signs showing the distance to various landmarks, measured in minutes. We drove by one that was indicating it was 22 minutes to the I-290 interchange, and 10 miles later (when we hit the worst of the traffic) we passed another saying it was now 29 minutes ahead. "The interchange is moving faster than we are," observed Max.

We stayed at the Renaissance Hotel downtown for \$309 per night (not including a shocking amount of taxes), where they wanted another \$14.95 per day for an Internet connection. Call me cheap, but even the Super 8 has free Internet. Heck, even the Iowa Interstate rest stops have free Internet.

Friday night we ate at a noisy Irish pub, where I was certain the server told me his name was Chuck. It turns out his name was actually Sean, but he responded to Chuck all night. We ended up liking the name so much that we called all of our servers Chuck - male or female - for the rest of the weekend.

Saturday morning we stopped by the pre-game events at the Hilton Chicago. We started at the President's Club event, which was in a quiet room with great food and an open bar (mistake!). While trying to look nonchalant, I sucked down Bloody Marys almost as fast as an amused bartender could hand them to me.

We then staggered down the hall to the official Hawkeye Huddle that was a lot more lively. “Who Let the Dogs Out,” was blasting over the oversized sound system, everyone had a beer in their hand and we had a great time (from what I remember).

The South parking ramp at Soldier Field was Tailgate Central, and almost impassible to foot traffic. We hooked up with some nurse friends of LuAnn’s and put a moderate dent in their beer supply. One younger-looking guy had been tailgating for a while and was pretty much out of it.

For some reason he decided he needed to move his cooler, so he picked up one end of a blue-and-white ice chest that had wheels on the other end, and started to wheel it away. “Hey dude,” someone shouted, “That’s not your cooler.” The drunk guy insisted it was, and when asked how he could distinguish it from all the others, he said, “It’s full of beer.”

When we popped it open to find it was actually full of bratwurst, he suddenly remembered that the red-and-white ice chest was actually his, so he grabbed the handle on one end and started to haul it away. After he’d traveled about 10 feet, someone yelled, “Hey Einstein, you’d better pick it up. Yours doesn’t have wheels on it.”

All weekend, downtown Chicago was like downtown Iowa City on a home football Saturday night – you couldn’t swing a dead cat without hitting a Hawkeye fan. We decided to have dinner at Harry Caray’s Saturday evening, and I was afraid of a long wait, so I called ahead. “No problem, we have immediate seating,” said the man on the phone.

We asked the doorman at the hotel to hail a cab to take us there, and he asked if we’d rather walk. “I’ve walked enough today, I’m not walking any more,” said LuAnn. We piled into the cab, and I was still looking for my seat belt when we pulled up to Harry Caray’s, which turned out to be exactly two blocks away.

Inside, I gave the hostess my name (her name was Chuck), and she said brightly that there’d be a two hour wait, maybe only 90 minutes. When I told her what the man on the phone had told me, she diplomatically said something to the effect of,

“We have three locations - you must have been talking to one of the others, you idiot.”

Despite these minor annoyances, it was a great - if expensive - weekend. The game itself was enjoyable (from what I remember), and I’m sure we’ll do it again - as soon as I can locate a Super 8 in downtown Chicago.