

November 21, 1993

The day the Theory of Tickets failed the test

The word from Notre Dame is that tickets for the Fighting Irish-Florida State football game are the most difficult to find since the 1965 Notre Dame-Michigan State contest. As in 1993, the winner of the 1965 struggle would be considered the overwhelming favorite for the collegiate national championship.

In Oklahoma, there had been developed after years of research and testing the Dillon-Monahan Theory of Tickets. The theory's central proposition read thus: There are always tickets available at advertised sellouts. The rationale behind the theory was the perceived psychological certainty of two modes of human inaction: one, people without tickets would avoid a sellout, and two, some people who had tickets would not show and their tickets would be available to the daring few who chose to travel to the site of the contest.

There was one other quasi certainty in our minds. Notre Dame University would never, ever keep Catholic priests outside its stadium at the big game of the year! It would be dangerously close to a sacrilege for them to do so, wouldn't it?

We were highly motivated because Tom Sullivan, a graduate of McGuinness High School, was scheduled to start as-an offensive tackle for the Irish. This was to be the crowning game of Tom's career, we thought. The big fellow had led the charge against Southern California the preceding week as Notre Dame smashed its way to more than 300 yards rushing.

As soon as we walked unto the South Bend campus the Theory of Tickets began to wilt. The closer we got to the stadium the more lifeless the theory became.

A ray of sun broke over the theory. Joe somehow got a band ticket. He didn't have to march in with the band, but he did have to wedge himself between tubas and tympani in the band's section of the hallowed Notre Dame Stadium.

Joe headed through the gate to the scene of the war. I and several thousand other rejectees, many surprisingly priests, circled the stadium in an agonizing quest for tickets. Some of us carried signs, others made pitiful verbal petitions. Outcasts collared outcasts in near tearful pleas for nonexistent tickets.

As game time neared, I found myself outside the tunnel which leads up to the playing surface. The locker rooms of both teams open into that tunnel.

As I watched the Michigan State door opened and the white and green Spartan giants poured into the passage. They had their hands taped, and those hands were lifted over their heads, thrusting in unison toward the ceiling as they chanted Go! Go! Go! Go! Go! The roaring chant was amplified by the tunnel.

Then the dark blue and gold Notre Dame team filed out into the tunnel and stood more quietly in place. Afterwards I wondered if the Notre Dame players might have been just a teence intimidated in that tunnel.

With the kickoff the stadium began to rock with explosions of crowd noise. I located a group of men listening on a transistor radio. We were in football purgatory, so close and yet so far away.

Between plays a gentleman said sadly, "I drove all the way from Elkhart for this." (Elkhart is 16 miles east of South Bend.)

I added, " I drove all the way from Oklahoma City." The others turned and looked at me with expressions of fear that they might be too close to a dangerous nut in a Roman collar.

One fellow, no doubt a Samaritan, said to me, "My wife's in the stadium. She doesn't know anything about football and doesn't care anything about it. When she comes out at halftime, I'll give you her ticket. We'll walk over to the Morris Inn and watch the second half on TV."

And that's how I, a probable actor in a future divorce case, found myself in a temporary, ground-level seat in the end zone for one half of a great football game.

Five minutes into the second half, I realized Notre Dame was outmatched. The Irish quarterback was not a good passer and Michigan State's defense overwhelmed the good guys' attempts to run the ball.

Our man Tom Sullivan, a really outstanding collegiate lineman, had the misfortune to play with Bubba Smith on his right shoulder and a more squat but amazingly mobile middle guard named Lucas, on his left. Behind them lurked linebacker George Webster (picked a few years later by Bud Wilkinson as the outstanding college defensive player of the century).

Notre Dame did not back away. The loud crashes of equipment as player smashed into player made one flinch. There was a fellow named Bill Wolski, I think, who returned a kickoff or two for Notre Dame from my end of the field. He caught the kicks about the goal line and ran straight ahead until there was a terrible Splat! Followed quickly by Splat! Splat! Amazingly Wolski managed to wobble off the field under his own power.

Michigan State won 10 to 3.

Dillon and Monahan returned home and threw their Theory of Tickets into the wastebasket.