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COWBOYS vs. FLYBOYS

They share a passion for competition and a desire to win

By Sonny Bohanan
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Hundreds of fans pressed against the chain-link fence, shouting "Emmitt, Emmitt," but the object of their attentions, No. 22, walked past without so much as turning his head.

"They're so arrogant," a woman said as running back Emmitt Smith ignored fans begging for autographs at the Dallas Cowboys training camp. "They wouldn't have these million-dollar salaries if it wasn't for the fans, but they seem to forget that."

Arrogance? There is an ample supply of it each summer in Wichita Falls, where the Cowboys have taken up residence for their past three preseason camps. Not only are the Cowboys among the best and highest-paid athletes in their profession, but America's team is one of the most recognizable sports franchises in the world.

Long before the Cowboys descended on The Falls, the city was home to a group of professionals who rival even the Cowboys in swagger and self-assurance.

Sheppard Air Force Base is a training ground for fighter pilots, the large-living aviators made famous by Tom Wolfe in his book *The Right Stuff*.

Each year, 22-year-old college graduates walk into Sheppard's 80th Flying Training Wing for Euro-NATO Joint Jet Pilot Training. With only a handful of hours in a Cessna under their belts, they will fly their first jets within a couple of months, break the sound barrier six months later, and walk out with their Air Force wings after 13 months.

"So few people enjoy getting up every morning and going to work," Capt. Jeremy Horn said. "But we do."

Between the Cowboys and the pilots, this city of about 107,000 people is knee-deep in testosterone.

Cowboys defensive tackle Chad Hennings, a former fighter pilot who trained at Sheppard, has been on both sides of the fence. A cocksure attitude is a necessity for both careers, he said.

"They're very similar as far as intensity toward their occupation and their self-confidence, almost to the point of arrogance," Hennings said last week after practice.

"In both professions, you have to be very self-confident to be the best at what you do. Only a small percentage have what it takes to make it as a pilot or in the NFL."

The Cowboys get plenty of positive reinforcement in Wichita Falls, where they are treated like royalty. Workers at Tobys, an upscale bar near Midwestern State University, make a separate room available for the Cowboys when they want it so they can "get away from the crowd," said Robert Hendrickson, Tobys general manager.

Though Tobys is closed Sundays, Hennings, quarterback Troy Aikman and about 25 other Cowboys had a private party there a week ago, Hendrickson said.

"Troy likes to play shuffleboard, so we opened the front side for him," he said. Fighter pilots, meanwhile, labor in relative obscurity. But, Hennings said, there is no question who has the tougher job.

"One is life and death. Anytime you put a jet in the air, you're risking your life," said Hennings, who flew 45 combat missions over Iraq during Operation Desert Storm and Operation Provide Comfort.

Capt. Marty Edwards, an instructor pilot at Sheppard who, like Hennings, played football at the Air Force Academy in Colorado, said the football field is a good training ground for fighter pilots.

And playing football is physically more demanding than piloting a plane, said Capt. Tom Maurer, who also played college football with Hennings.

"I think playing football is tougher," Maurer said. "There's more pain on the body, and less time to recover."

But playing football is merely playing at combat, Edwards said.

Most of Sheppard's student pilots eventually will live the real thing, said Edwards, 28, who while based in Saudi Arabia flew more than 50 sorties in an F-15C fighter, patrolling the no-fly zone in Iraq. He wears a patch on his left sleeve that reads, "Kill more MiGs."

"In football, if you miss a block, your teammate takes a hard hit," he said. "In combat, you miss your block, so to speak, and somebody gets killed.

"It's all about consequences."

Arrogance is less evident among the younger players and pilots who are fighting for their jobs. Some even find their swaggering colleagues irksome.

Michael Lies, who was signed by the Cowboys in the off-season, played for the Carolina

Panthers last year as a rookie. The aloofness of some Carolina veterans left him with a bad taste in his mouth, said Lies, 24, a 6-foot, 4-inch, 300-pound guard who played for the University of Kansas.

"It was, 'I'm not even going to look at this rookie.' In the NFL, it's all about 'I'm better than you,' " said Lies, who gladly signed autographs after a practice last week, flattered by the fans' attention.

The student pilots at Sheppard have their confidence stripped in similar ways. They typically are at the top of their classes in high school and college, but they fight to survive at Sheppard, where 10 percent of the 250 student pilots wash out each year.

"The ones who come in here with swagger, we teach them their limitations," said Capt. Horn, an instructor who said his nickname, "Java," derives from the volume of coffee he drinks.

A class of 16 students gathered for a briefing Tuesday before their first jet flight in a T-37 Tweet, named for the high-pitched scream emitted by its engines.

The students were tense as Capt. Dan Scheuermann grilled them, one by one, with technical questions about the craft they would soon be piloting. They stood at attention when a question was fired at them and remained standing if they answered incorrectly.

Second Lt. Janelle Jakulewicz, one of seven women pilots training this year at Sheppard, missed her first question. She answered the second one correctly, but her confidence was visibly shaken. Some students' voices quivered as they answered, and others were barely audible.

"Every day we realize how little we know," said student Joseph Babboni, who has endured many such briefings during his six months in the program.

National Football League players face a similar weeding out. More than 80 players make up the Cowboys' practice squad now, but the number will be trimmed to 60 and eventually to 53 by the start of the season.

Cowboys rookie Kareem Larrimore, a fourth-round draft pick, said the jump from being a star at a small Division II college to trying to make the cut in the NFL is daunting.

"I'm not mentally ready yet, but I'm getting there," he said. "At school, I could react and rely on my talent, but out here I have to think and stay focused."

Confidence grows as skills improve. But the pressure never ceases, Capt. Horn said. "Like a pro athlete, they know this is their one shot," he said of the student pilots. "If they blow it here, that's it. A certain percentage don't make it across the stage to get their wings."

Pilots and pro football players also know their careers are short.

"There's a limited time you can do this," Horn said. "I'm 33 and looking at the twilight of my career already. If you can make it into your late 40s, that's a spectacular career. Very few can do it."

The student pilots who succeed at Sheppard will endure a rite of passage acted out each time one of them flies solo for the first time.

On Tuesday, Italian air force Lt. Andrea Ceni made his solo debut in a Tweet. When he returned from the flight, his classmates were waiting for him. They removed his boots, carried him to a mud pit, dragged him facedown through it, and tossed him into a stock tank filled with filthy water.

Afterward, each classmate shook his hand.

Ceni must have been well-liked by his fellow students, Capt. Maurer said.

"If they like you, they let you take your boots off," he said.

Cowboys rookies also face initiation rites. They are made to stand up and sing in the training camp cafeteria, and they carry the helmets of veteran players after practice. Hennings said he had to take the entire defensive line out to dinner when he was a rookie, an expensive proposition when feeding men who weigh in at 300 pounds or more.

Though the similarities are many, the pilots and the Cowboys have their differences, too.

Size, for example. The biggest athletes typically dominate the NFL. That is not true among pilots, Capt. Edwards said.

"It's been proven over and over again that you can't predict who will be a good pilot," Edwards said. "They fool you every time. Super athletes sometimes can't think fast enough. You have to think at 300 mph here. You see skinny, scrawny guys, quiet types, who strap into a jet and kick your butt."

And the salaries do not compare. The minimum pay for a rookie in the NFL is about \$193,000 a year. The top players, such as Aikman, make millions.

Pilots who finish flight training as lieutenants will make about \$24,000 a year, and an Air Force pilot will max out at about \$120,000 a year, Capt. Horn said.

The fliers know they could earn a six-figure salary piloting commercial jets, or cattle cars, as Edwards calls them. But the fighter pilots who stay in the Air Force do not do it for the money, he said. They are after the adrenaline rush.

In F-15 and F-16 fighters, pilots fly at speeds of 1,400 mph in planes that cost taxpayers \$15 million to \$24 million. They will routinely absorb nine Gs, more than twice the force felt at the bottom of the steepest roller coaster, enough to render the average person unconscious.

Some eventually will move on to become test pilots, and possibly take astronaut training at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

"How boring it would be to drive cattle cars around all day, when you could be flying upside down and pulling Gs," Edwards said.

"And killing people," Horn added.

He was joking, but the comment had a ring of truth. Horn, who flew A-10 Warthogs until three years ago, did not get to participate in Operation Desert Storm, which he characterized as the Super Bowl for his generation of fighter pilots.

"I have mixed emotions about that," he said. "Nobody gets excited about going out to kill people. But it was like being on the scrimmage team and not getting into the game."

So who is the most macho? Pilots or pro football players? A scientific survey of two women at the Bar-L, Wichita Falls' most famous watering hole and home of the red draw beer, ended in a tie.

Georgena Kotulek, a waitress, said she would rather go out with a Dallas Cowboys player than a fighter pilot. Why? Name one fighter pilot, other than Chuck Yeager. "The Cowboys are famous," Kotulek said.

Jennifer Sewell, a Bar-L bartender, said she would prefer a pilot. She has gone out before with airmen from Sheppard, and they were nice guys, she said.

"A lot of the Cowboys, they seem kind of arrogant," Sewell said. "I would go out with one of the Cowboys, but I wouldn't go alone, just because of their reputations."

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