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# Cheesesteaks on ice

By Aaron Kuriloff, Special to ESPN.com

MT. WASHINGTON, N.H. -- The cheesesteaks were cooking. The nachos had been served. But Tim Markle was out of guacamole. He'd run out and get some -- if that didn't mean a 6,288-foot plunge to an icy death.

Snack foods can be hard to come by at the top of the tallest mountain on the Eastern Seaboard. Nestled in concrete bunker, with winter's worst howling almost perpetually outside, the staff of the Mount Washington Observatory daily braves some of the fiercest conditions on the planet to gather data critical to accurate weather forecasts from New York to Maine. On Sunday, though, they braved guac-less chips, four hours of television and an extended musical halftime show.

The only way to get to this party was a six-hour climb up the treacherous slopes. Given the climate lurking just beyond the door, there was no way home until morning. Yet for a Philadelphia-native and Eagles fan like Markle, chief meteorologist at the facility, conditions were ideal.

"On a normal weekend, all we get are Giants games," he said.

Even with your team in the big game, it's hard to imagine a less hospitable place to watch football, or a more hospitable place to study the weather. Mount Washington lies at the confluence of three major storm tracks, guaranteeing a steady supply of inclement weather. In addition, its extreme height relative to surrounding peaks leaves winds unobstructed as they roar up the slopes from the valleys below.

On April 11, 1934, two years after the non-profit, membership-run summit observatory opened, staffers measured a wind gust at 231 mph -- the strongest ever recorded. Near this time last year, the crew at the summit recorded four of the coldest days on record -- a fun-filled Tuesday through Friday period in which the daily low hovered between minus 41 and minus 45 degrees, with a wind chill of minus 107. At temperatures that cold, mercury freezes solid in a conventional thermometer. Gasoline turns to slush, so the supply tractor can't run. Water thrown from a bucket turns to ice before it hits the ground. If it hits the ground.

"It really just blows away in the wind," said Neil Lareau, an observer at the facility.

In a section dedicated to the mountain in his book "The Worst Weather on Earth," author William Putnam states that conditions might get uglier "at some forbidding place on Planet Earth, but it has yet to be reliably recorded." The coldest professional football game ever played was the Dec. 31, 1967 NFL Championship at (where else?) Lambeau Field, in which Green Bay beat Dallas 21-7. It was minus-13 at kickoff. To observatory staffers, Lambeau Field sounds like a tropical vacation.

"Every storm that comes up the coast, any storm that comes down from Canada and any storm that comes in from the west all hit somewhere between the Gulf of Maine and the St.

Lawrence Seaway," said Jim Salge, also an observer. "We're the tallest thing in that area, so that means us."

"Us" is a four- to six-person staff, which alternates two-week shifts at the summit. On breaks from their climatology research and near-constant monitoring of several rooms full of instruments, workers here like to amuse themselves by seeing who can stand erect the longest against the vicious winds outside. The reduced barometric pressure at this altitude also provides some entertainment.

"We can really crank a golf ball up here," Salge said.

But Sunday's Super Bowl provided a rare excuse for a staff party. And despite the mountain's location in the heart of New England, this party had an Eagles theme. Markle brought shaved rib-eye and rolls from Philadelphia -- cheesesteak fixings -- and hung a green-and-silver banner inside the observatory's living quarters. The paper plates bore winged green helmets. Markle prepared for game time by donning a No. 81 Terrell Owens jersey.

For once, nature seemed cooperative. On game day, outside temperatures climbed to 41 degrees -- a record high by almost 10 degrees. The ice that usually encases the concrete structure and its various outdoor instruments, necessitating constant removal efforts by staffers, melted away on its own. A few dozen climbers made their way up from the valley to take in a view that stretched more than 100 miles in all directions -- to the Atlantic Ocean, the Adirondack Mountains and Canada. The winds that usually buffet the peak died away.

"In the one-and-a-half years I've been up here, I've only reported calm four times," Salge said. "That includes today."

Though observers have only broadcast television -- a satellite dish vanished in a windstorm never to be seen again -- the calm ensured good reception. "The antenna is pretty high in the air," said Dick Morelli, a volunteer who was on hand with his wife to cook and clean for the staff.

But on this day, good reception just meant Markle caught every play as his team fell 24-21 to the local favorites. Salge, a Giants fan who roots against the Eagles as a matter of principle, recorded Markle's reactions on a digital camera more often used to record spectacular snowfalls or sunsets.

"This is Tim's mad face," he said, passing the camera around the circle. "You get the whole gamut of emotions."

The next morning, the temperature was still abnormally high and the banner still hung in defiance. But Markle was back at work with the others, taking readings, plotting graphs and transmitting data to the National Weather Service, so thousands of Patriots fans could know how to dress for their victory parade.

"Now I've got to watch all the local Boston news channels talk about it all day," he said. "I'm looking forward, though. It's only 13 days until spring training."

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