



The Ybarra family gathered for a Cowboys game

photo by Chris Fritchie

## Family, Food and Football

By Tricia Musslewhite

**THE LADIES ARE COOKING** Thanksgiving dinner while the guys watch football. To pass the time before the day's feast is ready, a friend suggests a game of football in the park. Nobody wants the least experienced player on his or her team. Years of sibling rivalry and an overly competitive spirit at the family's annual Thanksgiving Day match up where they play for a makeshift trophy result in a friendly game turning into war.

This scenario, or one similar to it, probably can be found in most backyards and parks across America on Thanksgiving Day. But the story is actually from an episode of *Friends*, a situation comedy originally broadcast on NBC. In this highly-rated episode from season three, the characters, siblings Monica and Ross, and their friends Joey, Chandler, Rachel and Phoebe, are thrown into what has become one of the most popular family Thanksgiving traditions: football.

Even non-football fans are aware that American families like a little pigskin with their turkey. But it might surprise you to learn that football's connection

with Thanksgiving dates back to the mid-1870s. The Intercollegiate Football Association instituted a championship game to be played on Thanksgiving Day in 1876. Traditional holiday football rivalries soon became the nation's premier athletic event and the Thanksgiving Day game marked the beginning of the New York social season.

Even non-football fans are aware that American families like a little pigskin with their turkey.

However, not everyone viewed the marriage favorably. A commentary published in the *New York Herald* the day after Thanksgiving in 1893 criticized, "Thanksgiving Day is no longer a solemn festival to God for mercies given. It is a holiday granted by the State and the Nation to see a game of football." The

outrage was ignored.

The NFL did not waste any time getting into the game. The league's presence on Thanksgiving Day dates all the way back to its inaugural season in 1920. In 1934, faced with a winning team but low attendance, Detroit Lions' owner G.A. Richards took the game to the next level when he convinced the NBC Radio Network to carry the Thanksgiving Day game against the World Champion Chicago Bears on more than 90 stations, taking the game from a local sporting event to a national phenomenon. The tradition of Lions football on Thanksgiving was born.

In the 1960s, after the NFL gained new momentum through television, the league searched for a second team to host a Thanksgiving Day game and create a TV doubleheader. Tex Schramm, Dallas Cowboys' president and general manager from 1960 through 1989, signed up the Cowboys. Other teams considered it a promotional risk and a disruption to their regular game schedule, but Mr. Schramm, known for his visionary thinking, recognized the game's potential to become a tradition

much like the Detroit Lions had already established. The Dallas Cowboys have hosted a game every Thanksgiving Day since 1966, except 1975 and 1977 when the NFL moved the game to St. Louis in response to complaints from other teams. However, the fans complained louder and the Thanksgiving Day game was returned to Dallas.

### NOT JUST ANY GAME

For as long as Little Elm resident Christi Ybarra can remember, Thanksgiving Day has involved one main activity: gathering with the entire family at Grandma's house in Irving to cheer for the Dallas Cowboys. Mrs. Ybarra thinks her family's tradition started with her grandfather, Grady Birdwell, who greatly admired Tom Landry, coach of the Dallas Cowboys from 1960 to 1989. For decades Mrs. Ybarra's aunts, uncles and cousins have gathered together, dressed in blue and silver, to cheer for their team. Now that the family has grown to include another generation and totals between 30 and 40 people, they still gather at the same place. "The tiniest house of all the

family members is where we have our biggest party," says Mrs. Ybarra. "We don't give it up for some reason."

The day's preparations start at home where Mrs. Ybarra, her husband Mark and 10-month-old Nicolas, a.k.a. "Baby Romo," dress in Cowboys' jerseys. Three-year-old daughter Kaleigh has a cheerleader outfit and pom-poms. This ritual turned into a superstition the year Kaleigh took off her outfit mid-game. The Cowboys lost that day.

The family enjoys Thanksgiving dinner at noon. Score predictions are part of dinnertime conversation and sometimes the blessing before the meal includes a request for grace on the Cowboys. Mrs. Ybarra says the men go outside to toss around the football before the game, but

the real action begins inside after kickoff when the cheering, coaching and play predictions start.

Mrs. Ybarra admits that some of her friends think her family's tradition is crazy, but to her the day is about much



Aggie Mandy Black

photo by Chris Fritchie

more than football; it's a time to be together. "We look forward to it," says Mrs. Ybarra. "We take advantage of the fact that it is a holiday because more people are willing to come than for just any game."

### LONGSTANDING TRADITION

Mandy Black of Little Elm is a "Guardian of Tradition." That's what cadets in the Corps at Texas A&M University consider themselves and Mrs. Black was in the Corps from the fall of 1997 through 1999. Because many of the university's treasured traditions originated with the Corps, Aggie traditions became a part of Mrs. Black's life, especially her Thanksgiving.

"Thanksgiving was all about Bonfire,"

says Mrs. Black. Beginning in 1909 Texas A&M University students worked together each year to build a massive bonfire that symbolized the Aggies' burning desire to beat the University of Texas Longhorns in the annual post-Thanksgiving Day game. At a time when most college students are ready to take a break and go home to mom's turkey, dressing and pumpkin pie, Aggie students are on campus gearing up for the big game.

"Nobody went home," says Mrs. Black remembering her Thanksgiving days in the Corps. "Your family came to you. Every hotel was full."

Mrs. Black recalls her freshman year when she spent her Thanksgiving sharing a feast with her father, Larry Fletcher of Midlothian, and members of her Company. Afterward, she stood with her classmates to save her Company's spot at Bonfire for the upperclassmen, another Corps tradition. The football game was the next day.

Mrs. Black's memories of her sophomore year are not as pleasant. The

massive stack of logs tragically collapsed early in the morning of November 18, 1999, killing 12 students and injuring 27 others. The Bonfire Memorial was dedicated on November 18, 2004, to celebrate the tradition, history and spirit of Texas A&M.

Mrs. Black and her husband, Bo, are now sharing the importance of traditions with their own family, daughters Lizzie, 7, Allyson, 5, and 3-year-old Georgia. While Mr. Black gets ready on Thursday for multiple days of football watching, a tradition he has honored since his childhood, Mrs. Black honors Aggie tradition and gears up for Friday's big game. The day after Thanksgiving she puts on her 12th Man jersey and stands ready in support of her team.



## The Thanksgiving Top Five

Here are five of the most popular family Thanksgiving traditions.

### 1. Turkey and Dressing

Travel across the country and you will find more than one way to prepare a turkey. Even in my family there's a debate about whether to deep fry or roast. But 95 percent of us eat turkey at Thanksgiving, according to the National Turkey Federation.

### 2. Football

Whether it is college or pro, football is as big a part of the celebration as turkey.

### 3. Parades

Gimbel's Department Store in Philadelphia organized the first American Thanksgiving Day parade in 1920. The Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade began in 1924.

### 4. Fighting over the Wishbone

You and an opponent tug on either end of the turkey's wishbone to win the larger piece and have a wish come true.

### 5. Giving Thanks

Thanksgiving is about giving thanks for the people and blessings that surround us.

Source: [www.about.com](http://www.about.com)

## TURKEY HUNT

Whenever he had the opportunity Frisco resident Jake Reed wanted to get a turkey leg on Thanksgiving Day, but he didn't want to eat it. As a wide receiver from 1991 to 2002 for the Minnesota

Vikings and the New Orleans Saints he wanted NFL broadcaster John Madden to award it to him as one of the Thanksgiving Day game's six or eight best players. Retired from the NFL, today Jake Reed is the owner/president of the professional indoor football team the Frisco Thunder, who completed their inaugural season in August with an 8-6 record.

Thanksgiving is one of Mr. Reed's favorite holidays and since college his Thanksgiving tradition has involved football and his family of teammates. Mr. Reed graduated from Grambling State University in 1991, so Thanksgiving weekends in college meant the match up with rival Southern University in the annual Bayou Classic. He met his wife, Vinita, at Grambling. Because Louisiana is her home, the Bayou Classic soon became a Reed family tradition.

After he joined the Minnesota Vikings in 1991 Mr. Reed began spending the holiday, if the Vikings were not in a game, relaxing with his wife, teammates and their wives. In this rare opportunity to bond, the friends would eat, play cards and dominos and, of course, watch football. Mr. Reed says, "That was key family time because (the players) may not see each other at the end of the season."



"Baby Romo" Nicolas Ybarra photo by Chris Fritchie

The day after Thanksgiving she puts on her 12th Man jersey and stands ready in support of her team.

Mr. Reed says the opportunity to play on Thanksgiving Day was special. Fans are gathered with their families across the nation watching the game on television and the stadium crowd is even more rowdy than a regular game.

"You know they are true fans if they are at a game on Thanksgiving," says Mr. Reed.

Along with cheering fans, special awards, such as John Madden's six- or eight-legged turkeys, are important to a player. "It's a big deal," says Mr. Reed. "It's the little things like that that mean a lot."

Now that Thanksgiving falls during Mr. Reed's off-season there is more time for family. This year Mr. and Mrs. Reed will travel with their children, 11-year-old Jake ("J.R.") and 9-year-old Jaevin, to Georgia to spend Thanksgiving with Mr. Reed's mother. It is the first time in 20 years he has been able to go home to Mom for

Thanksgiving. Mr. Reed says his mother told him she would believe it when she sees it, but I think she will do more than that. I think she will give him a turkey leg.

Sharing traditions and gathering with friends and family to stop and give thanks for the blessings that surround us are what make Thanksgiving special. For more than 130 years football also has had a place in the day. If you took football out of Thanksgiving, Mr. Reed believes, it would still be a nice holiday. But he adds, "What would you do after you eat?"

Tricia Musslewhite is a freelance writer living in Frisco.