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## Embedded with the Timbers Army for 1 night: A lesson in line culture

*By Jamie Goldberg  
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It's 4 p.m. on Friday.

From the corner of Southwest 20th and Morrison, I can already make out a line of six small, multicolored tents and nearly a dozen empty blue camping chairs outside Gate 3 at Providence Park. Four fans, dressed in their comfiest sweat pants and T-shirts, lounge in their own camping chairs as they animatedly talk in front of the gate.

Wristbands for Saturday's match won't be handed out for another 16 hours. Fans with tickets in the [Timbers Army](#) section won't be allowed into the stadium until four hours after that. And kickoff for the pivotal game between the [Portland Timbers](#) and Cascadia rival Vancouver Whitecaps won't be until 2 p.m. Saturday — a full 22 hours from now. But I'm already late to the show.

Megan Fraly, 23, and Jordan Womack, 35, were the first to arrive. They drove into Portland from their home in Rockaway Beach and set up their tent Thursday afternoon. It's become a home-game routine for them to camp out.

Rodger Klingsporn arrived shortly afterward, spreading his reclining camping chair down on the sidewalk before leaning back to leisurely puff on his cigar. Megan Whitaker, 30, also joined the line Thursday and set up a large, white canopy to sleep under.

As I survey the cold, hard sidewalk, I can't help but wonder whether I'll get any sleep tonight.

At least I won't be alone. By the time the Timbers diehards finally fell asleep on the Morrison Street sidewalk Thursday night, there were at least half a dozen people staking camp outside the stadium. On Friday, dozens more will come out in shifts to join the line.

The Timbers Army line culture — or "line clutter" as Whitaker endearingly refers to it throughout the night — started in the summer of 2012 when the 107th Board and the Portland Timbers management agreed to hand out numbered wristbands before matches.

Up until that point, the gates would simply open 90 minutes before kickoff, and fans with general admission tickets in the Timbers Army sections would pour into the stadium and scramble for their preferred seats.

The wristbands were an effort to create a more controlled and safer process. Now, numbered wristbands are distributed three to eight hours before kickoff. After getting their wristbands, fans return to the stadium and regroup in numbered order before being allowed inside two hours prior to the game.

After the new wristband policy commenced, fans began camping out to ensure that they would get their preferred spot next to their friends in their favorite Timbers Army section. Over time, people started setting up tents earlier and earlier — sometimes as much as three days before the match.

The night before the game, the sidewalk on Morrison Street turns into a party of supporters standing under dim streetlights near their makeshift campsites and bonding over their love and devotion to the Timbers. For many, the experience of watching a match is inextricably connected with line culture.

"It's like a spiritual experience for me," Whitaker says.

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I've curiously walked past the tents and camping chairs more than a dozen times over the past year, always wondering what would provoke a group of fans — who already have tickets — to sleep out on the city sidewalk.

So, armed with a tent and sleeping bag, I finally gave in and joined them.

The majority of the group that I'm camping with calls themselves, "Drunk Crew 108." At least some of them camp out every week of a home game to get the first wristbands, ensuring them their spot in the first row of section 108. They even created group T-shirts that look like altered Jack Daniel's logos.

At 4 p.m., only a handful of people sit near the front of the line. The extra camping chairs lined up on the sidewalk are for friends who will join them after work.

The Timbers' website [says that fans can save one seat for one friend](#), so camping out is not a necessity for the entire group. Still, the only-in-Portland oddity that is line culture isn't just about getting a seat.

"It's a big adult campout," says Timbers fan Kory McWain. "It's a chance to be with friends. I do it because it's a cultural thing."

McWain arrived to the line shortly after 4 p.m. Friday. It would be just his second time camping out. He hardly even followed soccer until April, but a friend introduced him to the Timbers' fan culture, and after he attended a match against the Vancouver Whitecaps on June 1, he was hooked on the whole experience.

Near McWain, Whitaker sits in a camping chair, busily typing into her phone — careful to leave enough room for pedestrians to walk by. When she camped out last season to buy Timbers playoff tickets, she learned about the wristband line culture for the first time from a fellow supporter. The part-time nanny has camped out before every home match this season, staying on the sidewalk between one and three nights each time.

"It's about passion, commitment, obsession, stalking," says Whitaker with a sly grin. "They all mean the same thing, right?"

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Setting up my tent becomes more of a problem that I anticipated.

As I untie the borrowed tent, I immediately realize that there are no poles. I stand embarrassed over a piece of tarp and tell the group, who may or may not be listening, "Worst-case scenario, I'll have to just cover myself with this tarp and curl up near the side of the stadium."

Whitaker invites me to sleep under her large white canopy. A whole group of the "Drunk Crew" will be sleeping under there tonight. But I'm determined to get the full line culture-tent experience, so I call a friend with camping gear.

My friend drives up in a gold Toyota Camry a little later and gets out to hand me a tent bag the size of a small child. "How big is this tent?" I ask. He tells me it has two rooms. I'm surely going to stand out with this castle, but I have no other choice, so I start setting up the gray and blue fortress. It takes the help of three other fans in line for me to finally get it set up.

By this time, it's 6 p.m. and the line extends half a block from Gate 3 to the ticket window on the corner of 18th and Morrison.

Things are pretty quiet at this point. Around 20 people are sitting in line, some talking, some playing Catch Phrase, but many more have left briefly to get food or beer. Uno Mas, a taqueria nearby, appears to be the favorite spot.

Time passes surprisingly quickly in line. 6 p.m. turns to 10 p.m. as fans migrate back and forth from the line to different restaurants and others get ragged on by the group as they apologetically head home to their comfy beads for the night. Some never leave the line, remaining in their chairs eating takeout pizza and playing a variety of games.

Sitting in line, the group continually fields the same question from passersby: "What is the line for?"

It's become a running joke inside line culture. "We should say we're waiting for Jesus," McWain says.

At 10:30 p.m., Timbers fan Chanti Dahl, 37, pulls out a handful of signs that she printed out earlier in the day and starts to hang them up with blue duct tape on the stadium wall. The posters list tongue-in-cheek reasons why the group has come to camp out. One poster reads, "We are here for the new iPhone 7.2."

Michelle DeFord, 30, takes some of the extra printer paper and starts to write other reasons. "We're here for the pandas," she writes before sticking the poster on the wall above her head.

DeFord has compulsively camped out for nearly every match this season.

"I feel guilty the whole time when I'm not there," DeFord says. "It's weird going to the match well rested. After a while, it feels like being there is something I have to do."

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A cop car pulls up at 11:30 p.m. and a police officer steps outside and surveys the line, truly surprised.

"What are you guys doing out here?" he asks.

For the last half hour, half a dozen people have been standing on the sidewalk in the warm night, mingling with one another in small groups and intermittently breaking out in raucous laughter over inside jokes. Many more are clustered in camping chairs further down the line.

"Are you new?" says Megan Wilmarth, 32, who proudly wears her Drunk Crew 108 shirt. "Do you normally work around this area?"

The police officer nods and continues to look perplexed until someone finally explains that they are lining up for the Timbers match. He shakes his head in amazement. Soon another cop car shows up and a second police officer steps outside his car. After someone explains the line to him, he simply blurts out, "This is insane."

But the police officers aren't here to tell anyone to pack up their tents. There has been a noise complaint from a resident in the apartment building across the street and the two cops kindly ask if the group can quiet down. Before getting back into his car, the first officer hands a fan a handful of "Scruff McGruff, Jr. Crime Fighter" stickers.

As the police officers leave, the group decides to make its way over to the Cheerful Bullpen for a nightcap. They're not ready to quiet down just yet. It's Friday night, after all.

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Infected by the line culture and no longer apprehensive about sleeping on a city street, I climb into my tent around 1 a.m. There are 12 tents set up on the street and at least 30 people who have decided to actually dig in for the night.

I lie down on my sleeping pad, which is really just a cushion from an IKEA armchair, but is surprisingly comfortable. I zip myself into a sleeping bag and then quickly unzip it. It's a beautiful, warm summer night. I'll quickly fall asleep, wondering how Whitaker survived camping out for playoff tickets in a much colder Portland November.

At 4:30 a.m., I am jolted back awake by the sound of people talking animatedly behind me in line. Outside my tent, I see that someone has set up barriers around the first two tents in anticipation for tomorrow's wristband handout.

Klingsporn, who had ducked out to catch a few hours of sleep, has just burst back into the line. He takes his appointed spot in a camping chair near the front.

Further back, other people are gathering in the predawn darkness. The line begins to snake around the corner onto 18th Avenue. There is no end in sight.

Sleep is hard to come by in the next few hours. Inside my tent, it almost feels like I'm out in the woods as I securely lie in my sleeping bag. But outside, the din of urban life reminds me where I really am. The garbage trucks start rumbling down the block after 5 a.m., harshly reminding me of the grating sound of a car backfire.

At 7 a.m., I wearily open my tent to survey the line. It wraps around the block past the ticket counter and down 18th Avenue, with the last person queuing up all the way near Southwest Taylor Street. And more people are rapidly descending on the scene in clusters.

[Fans line up before Portland Timbers vs. Vancouver Whitecaps match: Video](#) By 7 a.m. on Sept. 20, 2014 a line for wristbands ahead of the Portland Timbers vs. Vancouver Whitecaps game wrapped around the block. Many fans camped out to ensure they would get their preferred seat at the match.

DeFord stands near the front of the line with a cup of java in hand. Every week, a group of Timbers Army campers religiously saunters over to Starbucks when it opens at 5:30 a.m. to buy coffee and use the only restroom open in the neighborhood.

As I yawn, I ask DeFord how they manage to sleep out here each and every week and still enjoy the game through bloodshot eyes and sore backs.

"By the time we get to the match, it's been like three days of camping out and preparing to go and we're so deliriously tired," DeFord says. "It almost makes us more excited."

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Soon after I take down my tent, people from the back of the line start anxiously walking up to the front to ask if any of the diehards know when the wristbands will be handed out.

At 7:58 a.m., three women finally open the gate to Providence Park and the front of the line lets out a throaty cheer. Fans clothed in full Timbers regalia stand up and clear away the few remaining chairs in anticipation.

Then the line starts to move, as the volunteers try as quickly as possible to put the precious blue wristbands on the right arm of every fan. I'm the 15th person to reach the front of the line.

As I turn away, the fans with wristbands stand in small groups buzzing with anticipation for the epic contest to come, and talking about what they could possibly do to fill the remaining four hours before they have to fall back in line. After hours and hours of waiting for their wristbands, they seem to be struggling to leave.

It's less than six hours before I'll witness the Timbers [beat the Vancouver Whitecaps 3-0 in a pivotal match](#), and watch my fellow line compatriots ritually sing and dance in the front rows of the Timbers Army sections. For now, though, I make my way home. I have just enough time to nap.

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