

# Buffalo's best backers

They love their Bills and Sabres – but from afar



Top photo: Fans in New York City cheer on the Bills during this year's home opener.  
— Photo by Mike Coniaris

Above: The Sabres Road Crew visits the Hudson Grille in Atlanta. Andy Kopelman and Jessica Morse, both UB graduates meet Sabres head coach Lindy Ruff

By Erin Morris

**T**hey may be transplants, ex-pats, displaced or relocated, but for a few hours on any given game day, Bills and Sabres fans gather around the world to support their hometown teams at – where else? – a bar.

Football fans are part of a network – Bills Backers International (BBI) – that's fueled by loyalty, a love of their team and maybe even a dash of homesickness.

Bills Backers claim more than 100,000 Bills fans worldwide. (They are run independently of the Buffalo Bills organization.) Chapters can be found in 37 of the 50 states, as well as Mexico, Italy, Afghanistan, Australia and New Zealand. Some are free to join while others charge membership fees, often used to support charities in Buffalo and elsewhere, as well as member events.

"We're always told that Sundays at McFadden's/Calico's are only second in comparison to actually tailgating at The Ralph," says Matt Kabel, co-founder of

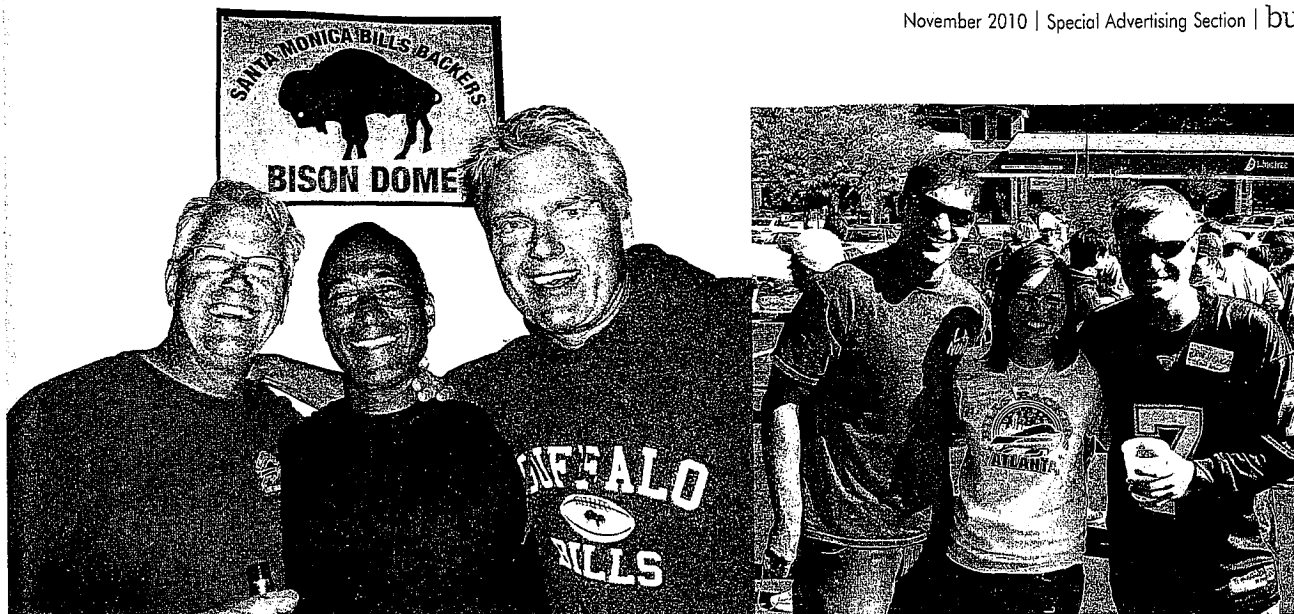
the Bills Backers of New York City and a former Orchard Park resident. "You truly feel you're in Buffalo while inside."

Are Bills fans in other NFL cities at risk when expressing team loyalty?

"What's the toughest job in the world? Being a Buffalo sports fan in the City of Dallas," says Diane "Aussie" Werling, president of the Dallas/Ft. Worth Bills Backers. Dedicated Bills fans living in that part of Texas meet every Sunday to watch the games despite the "grief from obnoxious Cowboys fans."

Deep in the heart of Patriot land, "Bills fans are thick skinned and have a loyal devotion to the team," says Tim Sweeny, planning committee member for the Bills Backers of Boston, and a former East Amherst resident.

"Our chapter raises money each season with T-shirt sales, membership cards and raffles," adds Jared Simmons, president of the Washington, D.C., Bills Backers. "We donate 50 percent to a local Buffalo-based



Far left: Kurt Graves, left, and John Mammoser, right, co-founders of LA Bills Backers of Santa Monica, with George Byrd.

At left: Justin Kleeburg, Atlanta chapter president Ronni Scibetta and Rob Spencer tailgating before a Bills game in Atlanta.

charity and we use the other 50 percent for bus trips to local area stadiums where the Bills have road games scheduled.”

“Our big event at the Harp every year is our charity day fundraiser,” explains Jeff Crump, formerly of East Amherst, and founder of the Bills Backers of Boston. “We’ve raised money for Jim Kelly’s Hunter’s Hope Foundation, Doug Flutie’s Autism Foundation, the Buffalo Bills Youth Foundation, Boston Children’s Hospital and several Bills players’ foundations.”

But being part of the game is the top priority.

“We go to Busby’s in Santa Monica,” says Kurt Graves, founder of the Los Angeles Bills backers of Santa Monica. “They give us our own bar, a slew of high def big screen TVs, and a free buffalo wing halftime buffet.”

“We meet at the Hudson Grille in Midtown Atlanta, and its motto is ‘Home of All Things Buffalo,’” says Ronni Scibetta, president of the Atlanta chapter, who lived in Lockport. “They serve wings using Anchor Bar sauce with homemade blue cheese – and yes, we have taught them that it’s blue cheese, not ranch, and that it is chunky! Several years ago we requested beef on weck [and] this year’s new addition is Chiavetta’s chicken.”

Food is just part of the experience of building a community yearning for a little piece of home.

“I can’t imagine watching a Bill’s game outside of Ralph Wilson Stadium anywhere but Busby’s with the great crowd we get,” says Graves of Santa Monica, CA.

“The cool thing is that not everyone is a Bills fan,” adds Kabel in New York City.

“Many are just Western New Yorkers who are homesick and want to feel at home again for a couple hours on a Sunday.”

“It doesn’t matter how long you’ve known the person next to you,” explains Scibetta of Atlanta. “You’re going to get a high-five and you’re going to sing the ‘Shout’ song together. You’re guaranteed to feel like you’re back home.”

*Bills fans who find themselves on the road on game days can visit [BuffaloBills.com](http://BuffaloBills.com), and click on the ‘fans’ tab to search the map for the closest backer bar to your destination.*

### Sabres and their fans on the road

The Sabres, too, can claim an international following. And since the Sabres play road games in so many cities, ex-pats have even more opportunities to catch a game in person.

“The Harp becomes ‘Little Buffalo’ when the Sabres are in town,” says Krump. “It’s become the place where Sabres fans gather [in Boston] before games.”

“We sell discounted group Sabres tickets for every game versus the Thrashers in Atlanta,” explains Scibetta. “We have taken organized road trips to games in Jacksonville (Florida) and Buffalo, and hold very active viewing parties for all Buffalo Sabres playoff games.”

Recognizing the wide network of their loyal fans, the team launched the Buffalo Sabres Road Crew in 2009, an interactive experience that allows fans from around the globe to share their love of Buffalo hockey.

Free registration at [Sabres.com](http://Sabres.com) gives fans instant access to an international online community where they can discuss the ups and downs of the team, and well as get infor-

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— Tim Sweeney, Bills Backers of Boston

mation on where to catch a road game.

The Road Crew also hit the road last year making “Tour Stops” in different cities where the Sabres were playing.

The Road Crew visited “the day before the Sabres played the Thrashers in Atlanta,” says Scibetta. “We sold out with 300 members in attendance, and there was a two-hour meet and greet with Lindy Ruff, Darcy Regier, Rick Jeanerett, Harry Neale and Kevin Sylvester.”

The event also included Buffalo-style food, drink specials, giveaways and Sabres trivia.

The Road Crew will continue its tour during the 2010-2011 season with stops in Ft. Lauderdale on Dec. 16, Phoenix on Jan. 8 and New York City on Feb. 28. Visit [Sabres.com](http://Sabres.com) for details.

Whether ex-pats are Bills or Sabres fans – or both – it helps to know there’s always somewhere to go on game day to be with others who share their passion.

“The outgoing and friendly nature of WNYers help newcomers feel welcome,” says Sweeney of Boston. “Plus you never know when you’ll run into an old friend from home. Combine that with the food, the atmosphere and the energy of the crowd, for a few hours you feel like you’re back in Buffalo.”

*Erin Morris is a copywriter in The News Marketing Department.*