



8/6/25, 9:11 AM

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LOCAL NEWS

Inside The Jets' Locker Room Series

November 15, 2011 / 3:14 PM PST / CBS San Francisco

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From the backwater roads of the boondocks to the bright lights of the Big Apple, a large portion of the United States believes football is America's national pastime. Any given Sunday, the National Football League's players are elevated by a fan base that often goes deep (across the country) for an opportunity to support its gridiron gladiators.

At Tonic Times Square on Monday night, however, two New York Jets football players provided their fans with a front-row experience during an evening of fun, food, frosty drink and the Packers-Vikings game on Monday Night Football.

In collaboration with CBS Local, Pepsi and Budweiser, Tonic's staff suited up for the inaugural installment of the Jets' locker room series, which allowed Gang Green's supporters to go "inside the huddle" with Jets fullback John Conner and wideout/kick returner Joe McKnight.

"We wanted to have an event that allows fans to mingle with their favorite players," said Tonic's marketing and events director, Randolph Hernandez. "This is a bar where professional athletes come, often unannounced. We are trying to create the world's neighborhood bar."

For three-plus hours, Conner, McKnight and many of Gang Green's loyal followers played trivia, snapped pictures and enjoyed the exciting atmosphere and modern amenities available at the three-floor bar, lounge and restaurant.

"Our fans' support is very important," McKnight said. "I love them. They are the greatest fan base in the country, and they live for us. I am here tonight to give back, and to support them like they support us."

Dan Carr, a Jets season-ticket holder for the past five seasons, enjoyed meeting two men that he has religiously rooted for from afar.

"I was born in New York but moved to San Diego, [Calif.,] a long time ago. I come back twice a season to watch the Jets in person."

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"Both McKnight and Conner were very nice," added Carr. "I interrupted Conner when he was eating and asked him to take a picture with me, and he didn't care. He said 'It is OK. Hey, I am here for you.'"

Conner and McKnight did not block one photo request all evening, smiling with supporters and signing autographs for a group that was predominately positive despite Gang Green's loss to New England the night before.

"Being with our great fans, at such a great venue, it is a great experience," said Conner. "I am very happy to be here tonight."

One fan, however, did not pass on the chance to ask a tough question.

"I asked McKnight how he could fumble the ball [on a botched kickoff return that led to a key New England field goal]. As big as he is, I thought he would kick my ass for asking," Carr joked. "But he answered me. He said, 'It's football, and not everything is going to go your way.' I respected that."

When the Packers-Vikings game entered halftime, McKnight and Conner came off the sideline to support fans during a Jets-related trivia session. Sandeep Satish, a diehard member of the Gang Green faithful, bulldozed through the contest en route to earning the first prize bag of the night.

"I was asked which two Jets offensive players went to the same college, how many postseason wins Mark Sanchez has, and when did Rex Ryan start coaching," Satish said.

"And after answering each question before the other three contestants, I won a football signed by McKnight and Conner, a magazine and some other cool Jets stuff."

What most satisfied Satish, however, was the event's fan-friendly setup.

"I really liked how approachable the players seemed," Satish said. "At a lot of events, they make you wait in long, single-file lines. That was not the case tonight."

As the Monday Night Football matchup entered the fourth quarter, McKnight, Conner and many of the remaining patrons lined up to pose for photos taken by **NYC/NJ Photo Party**, a company that has stepped out of the box (or in this case, the photo booth) with an "interactive on-site photo-shoot experience designed to bring a professional level of entertainment to all types of parties and events".

"We have taken the restrictions off the traditional photo booths of the past by providing an open-style mobile photo shoot that makes everyone feel like they are part of the action," said Ian McHugh, the company's owner.

"Tonight was a lot of fun," said Bronx-native and ardent Jets fan, Roena Williams. "McKnight and Conner seemed really nice, and it was cool how quickly I got my pic."

Fans interested in attending Tonic's next athlete meet-and-greet can follow Tonic's **Twitter account** and **website**.

Zach Finkelstein is a contributing writer for YESNetwork.com and SNY.tv.

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