

NCO Overcomes Fear, Lands ‘Dream Gig’ at NFL

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By Master Sgt. Gary Qualls Jr.

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Most Soldiers don't imagine they will be in a dream job, working in a big-time environment, planning and setting up exciting events, bumping into famous personalities, enjoying every minute of the journey along the way.

Staff Sgt. Kyle Richardson knows that feeling. He is living that seemingly distant dream — in an internship with the National Football League at NFL Headquarters in New York.

"To actually be here, it is almost like a dream," Richardson said of his high-profile temporary position. "I'll be walking down the hall and see one of my childhood heroes."

Training With Industry

Richardson wasn't going to apply for the internship, thinking he would never be selected, but Sgt. Maj. Kanessa Trent, then the U. S. Army Pacific Public Affairs sergeant major, encouraged him to apply. Now his place of duty is NFL Headquarters through the Army's Training With Industry program.

The TWI program offers selected NCOs and officers the chance to don civilian attire for a year and work in private industry, observing industry practices, communication tactics and work flow. NCOs who participate in the program say the year not only helps them gain knowledge they will need when they eventually retire from the Army, but also helps them learn tactics that can help the Army. After their year in private industry, NCOs who participate in the TWI program serve in utilization assignments in the Army, using and sharing the knowledge they gained.

Living the dream

NFL headquarters is definitely the “big time,” said Richardson, who works in the NFL’s communication department writing news releases and media advisories, promoting events through social media platforms and ensuring NFL executives have talking points for various public occasions.

“You know what you’re capable of, but so does everyone else there,” he said, adding that many of his coworkers were NFL players for “years and years.”

NFL headquarters is a bustling work environment where crises arise occasionally, and the pressure mounts.



“It’s not national security or life and limb, but you’re involved in projects that entail millions of dollars,” Richardson said.

The closest to NFL greatness Richardson thought he would get was collecting grass stains on his clothing while calling out the names of NFL legends. He said walking into the NFL headquarters for the first time left him speechless. He said there were few feelings greater than walking in the same footsteps as some of his boyhood idols.

“It’s not the building, decor or people that will leave you breathless,” he said. “It’s that single, personal thought of ‘you’ve made it.’”

The sports-laden and inspiring facilities at the NFL headquarters made an impression. Richardson recalled walking into a part of the building where Super Bowl rings were displayed. He marveled at the long line of history, tradition and the amount of sweat that it took to earn each one.

“That’s a lot of greatness in this spot,” he said, as he described the display case. “Each diamond resembled some Sunday-night lights from some game that millions watched and dreamed to be a part of. And just think about it, I’m here now — where millions want to be, and at the end of my year, I will be a part of the NFL’s coveted history.”

NFL experiences

Richardson has had some uncommon experiences outside of the headquarters as well, such as meeting and talking with NFL stars. On one occasion, he worked at a free concert the NFL sponsored

for fans, and Steve Atwater, who earned eight Pro Bowl selections and two Super Bowl rings during his NFL playing days, called out, “C’mon over!” to Richardson. They talked for quite a while.

“He’s a real laid back guy,” Richardson said of Atwater.

The Michigan City, Indiana, native also met and took a photo with one of the greatest quarterbacks of all time — Payton Manning. Manning led Richardson’s favorite team, the Indianapolis Colts, to a Super Bowl Championship.

In addition, Roman Oben — who played in the NFL for 12 years, including on a Super Bowl championship team, and is now the league’s director of Youth and High School Football — often pulls Richardson aside and talks to him.

Most NFL players and former players are approachable, Richardson said.

Changed perspective

The internship has changed Richardson's perspective on the league from that of a fan to that of an employee who can see all the moving parts of the grand production. For example, Richardson said, there's a lot more to working a game than merely watching it, such as ensuring the clubs are following league policies and standards, assessing extracurricular activities both in and out of the stadium, providing feedback on stadium traffic and ease of entering and exiting, and even evaluating the concession stands and staff.

"There's a lot more than glamour and lights when it comes to football," he said.

Although the corporate world seems far distant from military life, there are some similarities, Richardson said.

For example, being at the right place at the right time is important in both fields. However, corporate employees' day-to-day schedules are largely their own, as long as they get their projects completed, but they are expected to be on time for meetings, he said.

"In the Army, though, on time is late. Some of the corporate guys show up at the exact time of the meeting," he noted.

As far as the players in the NFL, they often don't admit it when they get injured, just as rugged troops from line units will "soldier on," despite being hurt.

Richardson also noted that NFL rookies and Army privates are treated similarly.

"Both rookies and privates come straight out of high school or college and join a larger organization that helps them prepare," he said. "The league helps rookies with managing finances, staying out of trouble, health and safety, dealing with the media, planning for their future and just through the whole transition. Army leaders help privates in many of the same areas."

Lessons Learned

Richardson admitted to making a rookie mistake at NFL headquarters. He wore a pullover with the logo of his beloved Indianapolis Colts to work one day. He was quickly and emphatically told to change his shirt.

"You have to be very neutral here," he explained.

Richardson has also noticed some differences between corporate America and the Army.

"Here, they operate by 'big boy rules,'" he said. "They won't follow behind you, whereas the Army is more directed. You don't need permission to take off here."

Another difference is that the work load is spread out more in the corporate world.

"You're not in anything alone," he explained. "Projects are really broken down into teams. You rarely do something from beginning to end on your own. In the Army, though, you take on so much sometimes you are overwhelmed."

Finally, Richardson acknowledged the difference he sees in camaraderie and teamwork between corporate life and the Army.

"Our department is a little better, but a lot of times in the corporate world they don't have time to get to know each other," he said. "They don't have the same kind of camaraderie as we do in the Army."

NFL's perspective

The internship through the TWI program has proved to be a valuable experience in which Richardson has learned a great deal, while contributing to the betterment of the NFL.

“He brings a new perspective, based on his Army experience, to the team,” said his supervisor at NFL Headquarters, Community Relations Manager Melissa Schiller.

“He is very on top of everything he’s given, and he has a great deal of discipline,” she said. “He’s very diligent and very adaptable in a job that’s a new experience for him — and different every day.”

Richardson helps the team at NFL Headquarters in building a better relationship with the military, often asking if the military can be invited to events sponsored by the NFL, Schiller said.

“This is a great experience for us as well as for Kyle,” Schiller said.

Maj. Earl Brown, who also participates in the program as an active-duty Soldier, agreed with Schiller’s assessment of Richardson.

“He’s not only willing to jump in with everyone else on projects, learn and continue to fight, but he seeks out projects,” he said.

Brown, who looks at Richardson as his “battle buddy,” says he and Richardson speak a “different language” than their co-workers at NFL Headquarters.

“We can look at each other, and we know what’s going on,” he said.

Brown pointed out that, “what we bring to the table is a sense of duty,” citing how the leadership at NFL Headquarters didn’t have to worry about Richardson reporting for duty at 4 a.m. for his media team responsibilities associated with the NFL season kickoff in Denver.

He said he and Richardson conduct “backward planning” to the “SP” (start point) on media team projects, and he agreed with Richardson that oftentimes the corporate world doesn’t enjoy the tight-knit quality of the Army.

“We communicate,” Brown said. “We’re definitely a ‘fire team.’”

Family perspective

When asked to compare the NFL experience with Army life, Richardson’s wife, Nancy Richardson, a former NCO herself, quipped, “The TDYs are shorter!”

On a more serious note, Nancy Richardson said another big difference between Army and corporate life is there is really no tie-in to families from the business world.

“At NFL headquarters, there are a lot of single players and employees, and family activities are the last thing they want to be involved with,” she said.

However, Nancy Richardson and other military spouses have tried to start some corporate involvement with families and are hoping those efforts bear fruit soon.

“Sometimes corporate America doesn’t expect NCOs to be that intelligent, so when someone like Kyle shows what he can do, the corporate employees really appreciate seeing that,” she said. “This temporary transition back into civilian life gives him an idea, not just of the work load, but how to look sharp in business attire, how to present himself in meetings, as well as how to network in the corporate world,” adding that it’s reassuring for him to see he can make it in that environment.

“It gives us that spark of hope,” she said.

It also gives him an opportunity to highlight the need to support Soldiers, she said.

Nancy Richardson said her husband was fortunate because he had a good leader in Trent who steered him to the opportunity, but she pointed to a need for wider exposure by the Army of the TWI program.

“We need this program to really help our troops for the future,” she said. “There are incentives for hiring veterans, but not for bringing active-duty Soldiers into these valuable programs.”

Some think TWI leads directly to Soldiers transitioning into civilian life after their training is complete, but — as a former Transition Assistance/Soldier for Life counselor — Kyle Richardson said that is not true. For instance, Richardson’s training with the NFL entailed a commitment of three additional years to the Army.

To Soldiers thinking about applying for a temporary position with the NFL or another industry, Richardson said, “Don’t be afraid. You’ll never know if you can make it until you try.”

“I know that, with this experience, if I were to do something after the military, I would be successful,” he said. “It gives you extra experience and extra knowledge. It’s a resume builder. And they’re not going to allow you to fail.”

Richardson added his Army experience and knowledge has helped his present duty with the NFL.

“I’ve applied what the Army has taught me and, with the skills I’ve learned, it has really set me up for success,” he said. “Now, I don’t fear trying new experiences.”

