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Only Hawks' most rabid fans sit in 6th Man Section

By: Helena Oliviero

Monica Norman takes the word "fan" back to its roots.

She cheers loudly for the Atlanta Hawks — every minute of every game. While others might engage in some small talk at Philips Arena, Norman puts on a full court press of "Let's go Hawks! Let's go Hawks!" and "Defense! Defense!"

She's a fanatic.

In past seasons, some sitting near Norman didn't share her level of passion. Some would ask ushers to move them to quieter (and more dispassionate) seats. Others would just leave.

But Dorothy Sampson had the opposite reaction. She suggested Norman move — to the 6th Man Section. Reserved for the most rabid Hawks fans, the section embraces powerful vocal chords and a reliably rowdy demeanor.

"I told her, 'As crazy as you are, you need to come over here,'" Sampson said.

And that's how Norman, a 47-year-old elementary school teacher who lives in Marietta, joined the 6th Man Section at the start of this past season.

If you've been to a Hawks game during the past six years, you've probably noticed the 6th Man Section, a bastion of hyped up, roaring fans hoisting the big blowup faces of Jeff Teague, Mike Scott and Kyle Korver.

Wearing red-fringed boots, zebra costumes and lots of Hawks garb, they wave flags and foam Hawks, and they cheer with everything they've got. (And yes, many of them do lose their voices by the end of the game and then go home to soothe their throats with honey and ginger tea.)

"ATL! ATL! ATL!"

"Their job is to scream their heads off," said Drew Frank, a game presentation coordinator for the Hawks who helped launch the 6th Man Section when he interned in the spring of 2009 as a senior at Georgia Tech. "We want the most rabid fans."

When the section first started, with the goal of bringing energy into Philips and delivering steady, reliable support for the players, there were formal tryouts. Now, the open seats are filled mostly through word out of mouth.

Even so, each fan in the section participates in their first game on a trial basis, and their spot (and free seat) is never a given. Frank has a stable of 200 super fans to fill those 92 seats, plus about 75

applications in his inbox. He ranks them and gives preference to the most rabid fans in filling the seats. Many of them, including Norman, are regulars at just about every game.

There was a time, not too long ago, when these fans were an island of rabid enthusiasm. When Sampson auditioned for a spot in the 6th Man Section about five years ago, she recalled a quick audition process in a practice court. Her daughter pulled out red lipstick from her purse and wrote “Hawks” on their foreheads — and they were in.

But things are different now during a magical season when the Hawks are stacking up wins playing beautiful, unselfish basketball. The 6th Man seats in the lower 118 section are prime seats, and nearby seats can go for well over \$100 a ticket.

During a February night game when the Hawks (the best of the East) squared off against the San Francisco Warriors (best of the West), the super fan section almost blended into the enthusiastic sold-out crowd. With the two teams tied at 52 at the half, a sea of fans jumped to their feet, filling the arena with deafening cheers.

David Allen, a 21-year-old aspiring actor — and a Hawks fan “ever since I could say the word Hawks” — said that while the coveted 6th Man seat is free, he has to earn it every game.

“You can’t fake it. I know it’s competitive and a lot of people want to do this,” he said.

There are a few requirements for being in the 6th Man Section — you must stand the entire game; must wear Hawks gear (the more colorful, the better); and must be able follow the organist’s lead and stay in sync with other ardent fans.

Not surprisingly, many super fans have pre-game rituals to get them ready to perform at their best. Allen tries to sleep in when he can on game days and, like others, drinks water throughout the day to be properly hydrated. He also tries to limit the use of his voice on game days.

When he woke up on a recent Friday before a game, he felt nothing short of euphoric.

“I just had this feeling — it’s that feeling on game day,” he said. “It makes me happy.”

Before going to school that day, Norman laid out her game clothes on her bed — a Hawks T-shirt, gray jeans adorned with red rhinestones on the pockets, and red-and-black sneakers. She sipped water throughout the day and coated her throat with a spoonful of honey before heading to the game.

“Atlanta is my home,” Norman said. “I remember Hank Aaron (when he broke Babe Ruth’s all-time home record) and I remember the Braves winning the World Series, and to see the Hawks thrive is one of the best things ever. This is so fun. So awesome.”