

CROSS-COUNTRY CONNECTION

BY CECILY FAENZA

There are New England Patriots fan clubs all over the world and one of the biggest is located across the country in Phoenix, Ariz. The New England Patriots Fan Club of Arizona began after Super Bowl XXXI and has grown to over 1,000 members. Club founder Mike Allen started the club as a result of fans calling local radio shows and looking for a place to watch the Patriots take on the Packers. The club began with 20 people and has grown ever since, utilizing the web and social media, a monthly newsletter, local radio stations and a grassroots campaign to build membership.

When members see cars with stickers or magnets for New England teams and colleges, they leave a flier on the windshield. As a result, 95 percent of the club is from the New England area although there are members from all over the United States and multiple countries. Some members have never set foot in Arizona, but joined because they had family members in the club or met the club on the road.

The club began traveling in its inaugural season, going to a Patriots game in Denver. Rather than continuing to go to away games, the club began traveling back to New England to see the team at Gillette Stadium and visit with family. As Media Director Scott Holt says, "It's turned out to be a really good trip every year - we have just made it a ritual." This year, 30-40 members traveled East for the San Diego game and gathered for the club's annual tradition - a Saturday night party at CBS Scene and a pre-game tailgate.

The club's official headquarters is Toso's Sports Bar & Grill in Phoenix. Holt compares games at Toso's to going to games at the stadium. It is not just a game but an event. Fans travel from all over Arizona, sometimes driving hours to hang out and watch the game. There are typically between 50 and 95 members in attendance, with a higher turnout for games that are not televised in Arizona. Club members are on the microphone doing the



The New England Patriots Fan Club of Arizona is one of the biggest Patriots fan clubs.



The club is proud to support Tedy's Team and the American Stroke Association.



Rather than traveling to Patriots away games, the club returns to New England each year to visit Gillette Stadium for a home game.

first down call and the fans are loud. There are third quarter raffles, Boston memorabilia on the walls and a drink, the 'Boston Tea Party,' designed by club members. The club controls all of the televisions in the bar and often turns on division rivals or other New England area teams on the smaller televisions. The club's board of directors has really tried to make it feel as if fans are back in New England on game day.

The club has found connections between Arizona and New England as well. They have aligned with Tedy Bruschi, not just a New England Patriot alumni player but a former Arizona Wildcat as well. The club hosts fundraisers at each game for Tedy's Team with the American Stroke Association. The Patriots game against the Broncos was this year's 'Tedy Bruschi Day' and saw a

season-high 135 members come out in support.

Holt describes the club as, "A very close knit group with people coming from all over New England and getting to know each other. It has become like a second home for a lot of the fans." The club tries to plan offseason events, such as a draft party and picnic. In addition, the club plans events for when the Bruins, Celtics and Red Sox are in the area.

The club's biggest events are when the Patriots are in town. Members throw a big party whenever the team is in Phoenix, with the biggest coming the Saturday night before

Super Bowl XLII in 2008. Robert and Jonathan Kraft were in attendance and raffled off several tickets to club members. Andre Tippett, Patriots cheerleaders and several members of the Boston media were among the 2,000 people in attendance. It is one of the most memorable experiences for one of the Patriots largest and oldest fan clubs. With its 15th anniversary season on the horizon, the club is sure to continue growing.

To learn more about the New England Patriots Fan Club of Arizona, please visit: <http://www.nepfca.com/index.html>

