

Transcript
Podcast Interview of Dan Mansfield
By Harold Buchanan on Harold on Games

[HAROLD] So we're recording now, can you hear me fine?

Yes, okay, good, good, and I can hear you and we're set and we're dangerously low battery life. But that will be part of the excitement.

[MUSIC]

[HAROLD] Hey gang. It's Harold and here is another podcast.

The San Diego gaming community is full of interesting people who are doing interesting things. This podcast is singularly composed of an interview with fellow gamer Dan Mansfield, who will discuss his YouTube channel providing game reviews in American Sign Language, his work in the games industry, and his guidance on gaming with the deaf and hard of hearing.

Thanks for listening.

[MUSIC]

[HAROLD] Dan has been playing games since he was a kid, mostly card games and the usual kids' games but also backgammon and chess.

He didn't really consider himself a board game enthusiast until about 10 years ago. Now he plays all types of games, including euros and war games. When he's not playing games, he works as an editor, and also enjoys rock climbing and hiking.

Dan and I have been joined today by Daniel, a friend of Dan's who is a certified American Sign Language interpreter. Although Dan usually lip-reads well and voices for himself, Daniel is with us to help ensure that Dan understands me clearly.

So the voice you hear in this podcast is that of Daniel, while the words and thoughts behind the voice is Dan's. Dan is going to sign his responses, and Daniel will voice those comments.

I've been told by Dan that interpreting American Sign Language into spoken English is not an exact word-for-word translation; instead Daniel will use his skills and experience as an interpreter to understand the concepts expressed by Dan in sign language, and then convert those signs into spoken English. Daniel's way of expressing something may not be exactly what Dan would have said if he were voicing for himself. But it will be close.

You will hear some delays as we all communicate through this chain.

We'll start this interview with a question on how Dan got involved in gaming in general.

[DANIEL INTERPRETING FOR DAN VIA ASL] Oh, well, I grew up playing lots of different games, card games, backgammon, chess, and a few other games, and I played Dungeons and Dragons a little bit.

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I wasn't really that great at it, but I played it a little bit. And then some time later, about 10 years ago, I started playing a few different games just with friends of mine, and I became that person who would purchase the games and then teach my friends how to play them, and so because of that, I just started playing a really wide variety of games and now my collection is over 100 games of whole different varieties—card games, euro games, war games, and just social games and things like that in my collection.

[HAROLD] So, a hundred games in your collection, how many of those games have you actually played?

[DANIEL INTERPRETING FOR DAN VIA ASL] I would say about 90% of them. That's pretty good.

There's a few that I'm still trying to learn.

[HAROLD] Do you have a shelf of shame that shows us the games you haven't played?

I do, as a matter of fact, mainly the heavy war games. I just got a few from GMT.

And the rule book is an inch and a half thick, and so I'm gonna have to recruit some friends to get started in those games.

[HAROLD] So what drove your interest in moving from traditional board-based games to war games?

[DANIEL INTERPRETING FOR DAN VIA ASL] I find that when I play war games, I just noticed myself getting more involved in a one-on-one style game. So in four-player games, I tend to more just kind of focus on myself, but with a war game—with just me and one other player—this kind of opponent style head-to-head kind of a thing. It's really just more interesting to me, that dynamic.

[HAROLD] And of the war games you've played, which ones stand out to you?

[DANIEL INTERPRETING FOR DAN VIA ASL] I love Twilight Struggle, really, I can't say enough about it. And A Few Acres of Snow is another one that I really like. Oh, I love those two games particularly. So you and I recently played Twilight Struggle in the first round of the San Diego war gamers tournament and you being...

I did it with an asterisk.

[HAROLD] Well, no asterisk when your opponent is too dumb not to cause thermonuclear war, yes, you could say that. That was a really interesting game. We kept playing after that, and we finished turn 10 and really... Well, I learned a lot about that game during that time, so my next game after that, I just kept playing. I think we got to turn eight.

[DANIEL INTERPRETING FOR DAN VIA ASL] So one year ago, I just started playing that game and at that point I couldn't get past turn two or three, I just got beat too easily. But now I'm learning

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a lot—as we've discussed, that game pays significant dividends to players that have played it a lot.

[HAROLD] Because you learn the deck, right?

[DANIEL INTERPRETING FOR DAN VIA ASL] Yeah, I see the end approaching, the imminent end, I know that the other player has the card and I'm just waiting for it to be played and then that's over... So I'm just trying to survive one more time to get to one more round.

[HAROLD] Now, the second round, I found interesting because it looks like you have tricked out or modified the game with flags and some other fun stuff.

Where did you get the flags? I thought they were terrific.

[DANIEL INTERPRETING FOR DAN VIA ASL] I just buy random things at the store from time to time. I see things on the shelf and I'm just thinking, Okay, that would be perfect for Twilight Struggle or another game.

So if I'm out and I see little prop or something... So, I just love to add different things to the game to increase the atmosphere of the game.

So, just a little thing you can see I have in front of me. This little bird feeders looking icon for Wingspan

Yes, thank you. Yes, I just love to upgrade the different games, especially when you know it's a game you will play many times.

[HAROLD] I enjoy that, and Twilight Struggle for me, like you, is one of those games.

[DANIEL INTERPRETING FOR DAN VIA ASL] Oh, absolutely, yes. I can imagine playing that game, definitely, for the rest of my life, I'm sure.

[HAROLD] Now, you also told me a story that I thought was interesting about Dungeons and Dragons, that early on you were enticed by the temptation just like I was... What was interesting to you about Dunegons and Dragons?

[DANIEL INTERPRETING FOR DAN VIA ASL] So growing up I just had a really vivid imagination, so I like to be creative, I like to create stories. So, I saw Dungeons and Dragons and I played it a few times—solo games—and I got to the point where I just really wanted to play with another player, so at that time, I went to a convention and my mom tried to interpret for me that time but she just couldn't keep up, so because of that I wasn't able to really follow the game. So at that point, I'm 10 or 11 years old, and I thought, "Okay, I'm just gonna leave this convention early. And I was really upset by it... I cried in the car. But in June of this year, I went to the Deaf Board Game Convention in Texas and that was the first time I played a real RPG. It was a Star Wars RPG and I loved it... So, another player was the dungeon master and they were phenomenal, so it was a great experience for all of us who were participating in that game.

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[HAROLD] That's great, and I feel for your mother trying to interpret all of these strange Dungeons and Dragons... words that are not common, that's right, they're not common. And she didn't know the game specifically, herself, so I... Right, that's good.

So, Dan, tell me about the challenges that you face in entering the hobby and playing board games. Primarily the issue for me is trying to learn the rules of the game, of course, and doing that on site is a huge challenge, right?

[DANIEL INTERPRETING FOR DAN VIA ASL] So if another player introduces me to a new game, I was trying to learn it on the fly, and that's difficult to follow.

So normally, I can lip-read fairly well, but if it's a brand-new game where the concepts are unique and I'm not familiar with the context of the game and its vocabulary, that makes it difficult to follow the rules.

So I typically will ask in advance—ask my friends what game we'd be playing, and once they let me know the name of the game, I will... Yeah, take the time to read and get familiar with the game, but I've got great friends who all are happy to tell me like, okay, we'll be playing this game, which I can know ahead of time and get familiar with the vocabulary, with the concepts, and with the rules of the game... the terminology that I'll be seeing. That way when the game is underway ... lip-reading the other players, I can do that more easily.

[HAROLD] Do you play with more people that aren't deaf or hard of hearing, or do you play primarily with others that are deaf and hard of hearing or have a skill for ASL and experience with ASL?

[DANIEL INTERPRETING FOR DAN VIA ASL] Mainly I'm playing with hearing individuals who don't know ASL. There are some that might know ABCs and their numbers, but really nothing beyond that. So their language... use of ASL is limited, but that's typically the people that I play with.

But again, I can lip-read fairly well, and if we are discussing the game, that makes it easier to lip-read if I'm already, as I said before, familiar with the terminology of the game, but if the topic of conversation deviates from the game itself for a moment... we're talking about movies or baseball or something like that. Sometimes I have to hold the train and try to change my thought process a little bit.

My fellow players are like... Okay, well, what are we talking about now?

[HAROLD] Now, our experience in playing together, I've noted that you do like to know the rules before you play a game.

Now, I share that same desire. I like to know the rules before I play. It's hard for me to sit down at a game and play the first time, without knowing the rules and feel like I'm being effective.

But I've also noticed that you have, as you mentioned, very good lip-reading skills. I can also

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understand your voice when we talk, which is very helpful to me.

Is that a common experience while playing with others that are deaf and hard of hearing? Should I expect that?

[DANIEL INTERPRETING FOR DAN VIA ASL] No, as a matter of fact, I would say my experience is a somewhat different. Every deaf and hard of hearing individual has a different background. So, I was mainstreamed in my education early on, where I attended speech therapy lessons a lot, so it was there that I learned to lip-read at a really young age, but that's not true for all. Other people, deaf and hard of hearing individuals, their experiences might be vastly different.

So, some deaf individuals can't voice for themselves, others choose not to, others when they're immersed in a setting where they're around hearing people might prefer to write back and forth with their fellow teammates as opposed to using their voice. It just really ultimately depends on the individual.

[HAROLD] Today, we have Daniel, who is an expert at ASL and when we're talking to a wargame crowd, we have to be careful when we mention ASL because it also stands for Advanced Squad Leader, but American Sign Language in this particular case is what we're talking about.

The means of communication... When you and I play of course, Daniel isn't available or or I'm sure he is, but has other things to do and you and I play and we can manage. It would seem that there have to be other ways to manage playing with someone who's deaf or hard of hearing.

For example, I've heard of people using note pads or texting to make sure that they communicate clearly.

[DANIEL INTERPRETING FOR DAN VIA ASL] Yeah, that's right.

I have friends who prefer to do that in a setting, like I said before. I've got a tablet where I can write back and forth and I know other deaf individuals have used that as well. Also the rule book is printed in English, so that's visually accessible and it just depends on the individual, their level of interest with that particular game as well. If a deaf or hard of hearing player is really intrigued and immersed in a particular game, of course, they're going to pick it up and may be more inclined to play with hearing individuals.

[HAROLD] You and I have learned to play together, and it's been a terrific education for me because there's so much that I take for granted, not having to deal with the challenges you deal with.

So I'm going to ask a series of questions that really are trying... are aimed at trying to help others understand how easy it is to play with someone that is deaf or hard of hearing, and what they might do to make it a better experience for both parties.

The first question I'm going to ask is, when you and I are playing and you're an excellent lip-reader, is it important as to whether or not I make eye contact with you while you are lip-reading? Should I enunciate more than I normally would? If it's just an audible discussion, any advice or thoughts on

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how to do that?

[DANIEL INTERPRETING FOR DAN VIA ASL] My suggestion would be to just speak as you normally would, not to over-enunciate your words... you might change your speech pattern in a way that you're not even aware.

So the first time you know you might be playing with a deaf or hard of hearing person who is trying to understand you, at first it might not be fluid and effortless. I have had that experience in the past where I played a game with someone before, and I wasn't quite easily able to lip-read them in the beginning, but as time went on, I got better and better at reading their lips while they were moving their mouth in a way I think they might not have even been aware of. And I have noticed the same for other friends in that when we're playing a game together and we are communicating one-on-one, they enunciate and move their mouth different with me than they do when they're talking with other players. So sometimes when they're talking with each other, I'm not quite able to understand them, but then they turn back to talk to me, yeah, that little change happens in their mouth movements and then I'm able to understand them.

[HAROLD] So your preference would be not to change the enunciation, to speak as I would normally speak?

[DANIEL INTERPRETING FOR DAN VIA ASL] Yes, I would say so, at first, do that.

And then for me, if I didn't understand you, I would ask you to repeat yourself and the onus would be on me, so to speak. Or if you were to be playing with another deaf player, they might ask you to slow down in your speech a little bit. Make some modifications if they don't understand you initially.

[HAROLD] So one of the first things that I noticed when we played together was basically my assumption on how a group communicates. For example, playing a four-player game, we played Root together, we played Liberty or Death together, and with four people at the table, I never realized how much audible cuing goes on at the table. And so I realized that in order to get your attention, I had to do something different than I would normally do.

Do you have a preference for how I get your attention, or others might get your attention, when you're playing at a big table of players?

Sometimes just hold my hand up in a way that signals that I'd like to talk to you. I hesitate to tap your arm, because I think that's intrusive, but do you have a view on how best to do that?

[DANIEL INTERPRETING FOR DAN VIA ASL] So I would say, first of all, if you are playing nearby it is more than fine to do. Reach across the table to wave our hand to get my attention, flap your hand in front of the other person. It is certainly not rude in deaf culture—that is certainly fine. You also can smack the table, if the person is far from you, too far for you to be able to reach over. It is certainly okay in the deaf world. Just bang on the table—that's actually quite normal—

[HAROLD] which creates a vibration that should be reactive.

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[DANIEL INTERPRETING FOR DAN VIA ASL] Exactly.

[HAROLD] Should players also work to learn ASL when playing over the long term with the deaf or hard of hearing player?

We talked about this once and you mentioned sometimes it may seem flippant if a player tries to learn little bits of sign language. How do you feel about that?

[DANIEL INTERPRETING FOR DAN VIA ASL] Really? I always appreciate the effort if another person really is interested in improving their communication with me, that's encouraging and I love that. They can begin by learning the letters, numbers, and colors in American Sign Language but ultimately it's not necessary. That's not something that would be required, but I do appreciate that. I've noticed that my gaming friends over the years have acquired at least the alphabet in American Sign Language. That way, if there's a word that's really difficult for me to lip-read, they have the ability to spell it to me.

[HAROLD] So are there specific games that are easier for deaf and hard of hearing players to interact with? Are there types of games that are harder?

[DANIEL INTERPRETING FOR DAN VIA ASL] I would say the easier type of games... So maybe the more abstract games, games that require a lot of focusing on your actions as a player that don't necessarily require a lot of communication or negotiation. Those I think would be easier for a group of deaf and hearing people to play together. Other games that require a high level of socialization and communication between players—that can be challenging. So I prefer those types of games to be played with other deaf players. So, with hearing people my preference is to not play those kinds of situational... excuse me... Social games.

[HAROLD] Well, the other thing that we've talked about is, are there certain personality types that are hard for you to play with?

And I think, in general, your answer was no, and we chatted about this but you did also bring up that once someone thought that you were pretending to be deaf.

[DANIEL INTERPRETING FOR DAN VIA ASL] Yeah, that was maybe four, six years ago, I was playing with a group of people and we were just playing a pretty typical game. I was voicing for myself and lip-reading the other players. There was one other person who was not involved in playing the game, was just kind of observing, and he had said something that I had missed initially, so I asked him to repeat what he had said and then one person who was watching the game said, "Well why would you do that? Aren't you deaf now? So why are you lying while you're lying about being deaf? Why are you doing that? That's rude, you shouldn't be doing that."

And I was stunned in that moment. I just remember looking at them being like, "Oh as a matter of fact, I am deaf, so I'm lip-reading and I'm electing to use my voice, but no, I'm a deaf person." And that was really offensive to me that... So, at that time, my whole group kind of stared at that person for a moment and then just decided to ignore them and we laughed about it later, but in that

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moment, yeah that was really something, I couldn't really believe it. Oh, if as a trans paring, I was wondering, "Did this person think... I'm just pretending to be deaf because it's giving me some kind of advantage?" There's really no advantage in a game setting to being deaf, or pretending to be deaf.

[HAROLD] One of the things that I realized I've never asked you, have you played a number of times together, is for any feedback on whether or not there are things that I can do to improve your experience when we play, and I wonder if it would be good for players to ask that. And as I think about it, maybe good for players whether they're deaf or hard of hearing or not really that has a... Yeah, never really come up. In my discussions, there have been times or I have been asked by players, should I learn my alphabet?

[DANIEL INTERPRETING FOR DAN VIA ASL] In American Sign Language? And my response is always, you can if you're interested, but you don't have to know—it's not a requirement. So as for learning the American Sign Language alphabet or learning signs, if that's your motivation, if you're interested in doing that, absolutely, but yeah, it just really... It depends on the individual.

I'm always happy to teach anyone interested in learning. But yeah, that question about feedback is not something that I have broached a lot, but I will say that learning the alphabet does require practice if someone actually wants to learn it.

[HAROLD] So you spend a portion of your time working in the game industry as a freelance editor.

[DANIEL INTERPRETING FOR DAN VIA ASL] That's right. I work as a freelance editor for InsideUp. It's a company that's based in Canada, it's a small company, so they have made a few games so far. I have worked as a freelance editor for them, and I've worked on their rule books. In my day job, I am also an editor. So on the weekends, I read and edit rule books in order for the game to be able to be played better, making sure that the rules are right in a way that they're as clear as they can be. So, that's language and grammar, an area of expertise for me. So yes, I do freelance in that respect.

[HAROLD] Good, is that something you enjoy?

[DANIEL INTERPRETING FOR DAN VIA ASL] I do, I really... I just hate to see excuse me, a poorly made rule book.

I've seen games from InsideUp Games. And at first glance, I thought, Okay, so that looks like a really excellent game. However, the rule book, it needs some improvements. So in that case I reach out to them and offered my services to them and they accepted it, and I was able to help out with the rules in a way that, at least in my opinion, is clear.

[HAROLD] Oh yeah, when you edit, do you work with the game in front of you to ensure that the linkage is tight?

[DANIEL INTERPRETING FOR DAN VIA ASL] Yes, I do, I have a printout, excuse me... Printout of the game board. I have the cards in front of me; that way, I'm able to see them and make sure that the verbiage in the rule book aligns with the actual pieces, and at times, I will have a

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prototype of the game here. I'm able to see all the pieces and the board itself, I get a sense of how the game works and how it moves and flows and then I can help to edit the rule book correctly. If there's any ambiguity or if I'm unclear about how the game is actually played I can always reach out to the game developers at that time, and I have done that in the past where I realize that there's elements of the game that are not always apparent, but it matters to have that knowledge when you are editing the rules.

[HAROLD] In my experience, that's what separates the professional editors are from the... So my professional editors is that linkage to what's happening in the game because an editing process has to be integrated with the game.

So in my experience in design the best editors I've ever had are the ones that change things in the rules, to make the game easier to understand, and play and frequently ask me to change things in the game as long as the editing is done early enough to allow for them.

[DANIEL INTERPRETING FOR DAN VIA ASL] And like I said before, designers should always end up using the same words over and over again.

So if you are reading the rules, you get a sense of the words as they pertain to the game, and that helps to describe it, yes, and so, the game...

[HAROLD] So you also have a YouTube channel where you do videos on board games, reviews analysis using American Sign Language. How did you get started doing that?

[DANIEL INTERPRETING FOR DAN VIA ASL] The first video I did just for fun, and after a few videos that I did, I realized, Okay, there's an audience for this. There are people who want to see these videos in American Sign Language. At that point I started to do my production value a little bit—I worked a little harder at them and polished them up, so to speak.

So now when I make a video, I have a script in advance, I spend about a month considering how I want to discuss the game, what I'll be saying in my video. I'll set up the table in a way that's easy to see, and then I typically will film over a weekend, and I'll do some editing, making sure that I've encapsulated all the rules within the game and, of course, I like to add captions for all of my videos, that way they're accessible to everyone. So I post my videos on YouTube, like you said before, but they're accessible to everyone.

[HAROLD] The one experience we had playing Liberty or Death and filming your video in ASL was quite fun.

And one of the things I remember is that you build a good deal of theater into the process?

[DANIEL INTERPRETING FOR DAN VIA ASL] Yeah, it's a little makeshift, I say. So I am setting up props and my tripod, and sometimes I have to assemble boxes so that I can get the tripod up higher off the ground and setting it up, so you can see it.

So if the video looks good, then that means that there is chaos, just outside of the range of the...

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camera.

So we'll sit down, record a portion of it, get up, turn the camera off, move the set around.

So, really it takes about two hours for me to produce about two minutes' worth of footage after I've done editing out my mistakes. It really is a mess behind the scenes.

[HAROLD] It was good fun. And the thing I remember the most was your... I feel like it was genuine disgust as the British when the French won the war.

[DANIEL INTERPRETING FOR DAN VIA ASL] I remember the end of that game arrived to draw a card, and I think we had... that time we were discussing it, but I realized, Okay, that would be something great to show in the video. So I was like, "Okay, let's put the card back down, let's set this up in a way that I can capture it on film, and it's got the camera rolling and then go live. So we kinda acted it out of the scene we had already done and we knew what was coming. So then I flip the card on film. And we pretended to be shocked, and it was good fun.

[HAROLD] I very much enjoyed it, and have received a very positive response for making that video you have, and I've received that feedback to pass along to you. I think people that love the games that we like are excited that... especially if they have friends or loved ones that are deaf or hard of hearing, that this can become a little more accessible, or they can share something with they're very excited.

[DANIEL INTERPRETING FOR DAN VIA ASL] Yeah, I really want to make board games more accessible for deaf and hard of hearing individuals. It doesn't matter if they are abstract or war games. I want to make games accessible for deaf and hard of hearing people.

My YouTube videos, I like to show a different variety of games, I have done card games, I've done episodes on war games, socialization-based games, and the... hoping that people who watch those videos will find a game that kinda speaks to them, something that they might be interested in, and in that case, if they have deaf friends or family, they can share that video with them and get playing. And I think there are two parts, two pieces of the puzzle. One is, can we make the deaf and hard of hearing more comfortable with the games?

[HAROLD] But also those of us that haven't played with players who are deaf or hard of hearing, how can we make it easier for them to work with that deaf or hard of hearing individual and increase the comfort on both sides?

[DANIEL INTERPRETING FOR DAN VIA ASL] And it's not just me. We have a few other videos that are available on YouTube. There's one called Dibs on Blue. So that is another YouTuber who does videos for games in ASL.

So both of us are producing somewhat similar content; ultimately we are showing interested players how to play our respective games and ultimately, yeah, the goal is like... If you, okay, if you see a game you like... So if you have a game night to plan, and you've got deaf and hard of hearing friends in your circle to play this game, give it a try.

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[HAROLD] I noticed that—Rodney with Watch It Played games.

[DANIEL INTERPRETING FOR DAN VIA ASL] Yeah, that's Stephanie.

[HAROLD] So she also is a YouTuber—she interprets for Rodney, right?

[DANIEL INTERPRETING FOR DAN VIA ASL] It's great, the more the merrier. Absolutely, yes, of course.

[HAROLD] The other thing that you do every year is you go to a board game convention in Austin, Texas, and it is a Deaf Board Game Convention.

[DANIEL INTERPRETING FOR DAN VIA ASL] Sure, so it was last June, it was the third annual Deaf Board Game Convention. I have been every year since the beginning and really, for me, that is absolutely hands-down the best weekend of the year, so I go for about three or four days and I'm just immersed in this environment where we're using ASL to play these games. I'm seeing friends I haven't seen in a year, I'm making new friends while I'm there. So really it is a wonderful experience there. It's a space where there are absolutely no communication barriers.

So I have learned new games from other players there and I've had the opportunity to teach other games, games that I'm familiar with. I've been involved in tournaments there. The sponsors there are really, really generous, like GMT and Renegade. Also, CoolStuff is another one. And really they make it a great experience for any attendee.

[HAROLD] That's great and we'll share some pictures from the convention in the notes to this particular podcast.

So, Dan and Daniel, I want to thank you both for taking the time to talk about—Dan, your love for board gaming. And also how we can improve accessibility and the comfort and playing together.

[DANIEL INTERPRETING FOR DAN VIA ASL] Thanks for having me, I really enjoyed this discussion.

[HAROLD] So that's a wrap for this podcast.

I'll publish some notes and references on my website, conflict simulations dot com joined The Herald on games group on Facebook for discussion of the podcast leave me a comment with your thoughts and ideas, thanks to Adam, Rivera for the intro and alter music.

Check them out on Facebook Spotify and iTunes. I'll close with the special thanks to Dan Mansfield and Daniel Candido. And that's it for me. As always, I'm impatiently awaiting Hollandspiel's next 50 games. And I'll be back soon.

[MUSIC]