After several gray, damp days that had city officials and host committee members wringing their hands, Sunday, February 6, 2005, dawned clear and bright in Jacksonville. As the sun rose over northeast Florida, the curtain soon would come up on the city’s performance in the world’s biggest show—Super Bowl XXXIX. In a few short hours, attention would shift from the parties and celebrity sightings, away from
the lingering questions about whether Jacksonville had what it needed to host the event, and onto the game itself.

But, while the world waited for the kickoff, another equally important performance unfolded backstage. The players in this drama did not wear cleats and helmets; in fact, many of them had no unique uniforms. They included the hundreds of professionals from the FBI and more than 40 other law enforcement and public safety agencies charged with safeguarding the security of the game and the surrounding events. And, by the time the smoke from the final fireworks cleared and the last of the weary fans caught their flights out of town, the efforts of these behind-the-scenes heroes would prove a resounding success.

TEAMWORK
Building a Partnership

Representing the smallest FBI field office ever to face the responsibility for coordinating counterterrorism efforts related to such an event, agency personnel in Jacksonville knew a big job lay ahead. Fortunately, some personnel had gained pertinent knowledge. Having visited San Diego during the 2003 Super Bowl, agents from Jacksonville learned even more during their trip for the 2004 game in Houston; they went to the FBI’s field office and the city’s central command post, observing the joint law enforcement effort and learning from everyone they could. They left with some important ideas and also a grasp of the considerations presented by the different circumstances in Jacksonville. Clearly, they faced a challenge and knew they had to do more with less; the FBI office in Houston devoted about 40 special agents to prepare for Super Bowl XXXVIII, more than the entire agent complement in Jacksonville.

Personnel began contacting counterparts at various FBI offices and other agencies to ensure coverage of all pertinent areas. For instance, they coordinated maritime and airspace security with the appropriate organizations, helped establish the intelligence and information teams that would be on the ground at the various Super Bowl-related venues, and worked with personnel at outside agencies and FBI Headquarters to handle other security issues. Of course, finding lodging for over 200 FBI personnel proved challenging as well.

Many agencies would become partners, including, of course, the Jacksonville Sheriff’s Office (JSO). As the lead agency with the primary responsibility for overall event security, JSO was on task from the start. And, in the months leading up to the game, more than 150 attendees from dozens of agencies would crowd into the planning sessions at the Fraternal Order of Police’s banquet hall to strategize, compare notes, and work out details.

"...the success of Super Bowl XXXIX can be measured as much by what did not happen as by what did."

Special Agent Westcott serves with the FBI’s Jacksonville, Florida, office.
Working Together

Because the FBI’s mission would overlap those of numerous other organizations, establishing liaison with key players proved critical. As the special agent in charge (SAC) of the FBI’s Jacksonville office stated, “Our mission was twofold. First and foremost, we had the responsibility to plan for—and prevent—potential acts of terrorism. Second, we had to take the lead in collecting, analyzing, and disseminating any intelligence involving potential threats to the security of the Super Bowl and the city of Jacksonville.” These responsibilities would cut across FBI programs and functions and would involve SWAT teams, bomb technicians, maritime and aviation operations, and WMD specialists. To some extent, other agencies shared each of these functions and had concurrent jurisdiction. This presented no difficulties—the FBI and its partners worked together effectively.

One instance involved the cruise ships that the Super Bowl host committee had contracted to provide the minimum number of hotel rooms required by the NFL. These ships presented security challenges, including the need to conduct underwater hull searches for bombs and other hazards. Working together, the FBI and the U.S. Coast Guard got divers from the Environmental Protection Agency in Miami—which routinely handles inspections of cruise ships and other international vessels—to handle the job with some help from JSO.

Aviation security represented another area highlighting interagency cooperation. A committee chaired by FBI and U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) personnel decided to request a temporary flight restriction zone with an unprecedented 10-mile radius around the stadium (zones in previous Super Bowl cities extended only 7 miles). Better yet, after conferring with Transportation Security Administration officials in Washington, D.C., the FBI obtained a 20-mile-radius “positive control airspace” designation, which required pilots entering that zone to contact air traffic control and identify themselves. The responsibility for implementing these restricted zones fell to the Federal Aviation Administration, and CBP handled the coordination of all federal law enforcement air assets.

Another key partner, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE)—the state’s primary investigative agency—already had a close working relationship with the Jacksonville FBI office through their combined efforts in counterterrorism. When it became clear that neither the city of Jacksonville nor the FBI had adequate space to house a multiagency command post, FDLE offered its downtown training center as a site. By the time Super Bowl week arrived, representatives from more than 30 agencies—everyone from surrounding sheriff’s offices to
firemen and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) personnel—had set up in the joint operations center (JOC) that FBI technicians had wired, secured, and equipped with high-tech telecommunications and computer gear.

Using lessons learned from past Super Bowls and working within the constraints imposed by both space and budget concerns, law enforcement personnel in Jacksonville developed a unique command structure. The city’s downtown operations facility, renamed the event operations center (EOC) for the week, housed the heads of the primary public safety agencies—Jacksonville Fire and Rescue, JSO, the U.S. Coast Guard, and the FBI—and key operations personnel from a number of other city and state organizations. The lower level of the facility contained the joint information center, where public information officers and media representatives from JSO, the FBI, and several other agencies fielded calls from the media, ensuring a unified, consistent message.

A mile to the north, at the FDLE site, the JOC served as the nerve center of the FBI’s intelligence and counterterrorism mission. Out front sat “Big Blue,” manned by a team from the FBI’s Technical Response Unit. Big Blue served as a mobile facility affording the requisite security for the physical handling of classified documents, and it also provided a backup platform for satellite uplinks and secure communications in the event the systems in place suffered a massive failure.

Inside the JOC, agents, analysts, and supervisors from all major FBI components—intelligence, investigations, legal, information technology, tactical, evidence, technical, administrative, and media—compared notes, staffed telephones, and worked closely with representatives from the more than 30 other agencies sharing the space. In one corner, a team from the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency busied itself by generating and printing poster-sized photos and graphics of the various Super Bowl venues. The JOC had more than 150 telephone extensions, a multitude of computer workstations, and an electronic projection screen that showed an event board listing the status of any security-related incidents. Several wide-screen plasma televisions displayed local and national news channels and—on Sunday night—the game itself.

Next door to the JOC was the Intelligence Operations Center (IOC). Inside, analysts from joint terrorism task force agencies continued their work from the past months: collecting and analyzing intelligence and making appropriate dissemination decisions. By the time game day arrived, analysts had performed more than 30,000 background checks—including some 9,500 requested by the Super Bowl host committee—on volunteers, cruise ship crews, port workers, and taxi and limousine drivers. The
IOC analysts also processed dozens of real-time checks on data coming in from intelligence and information teams on the street, which comprised 120 officers from eight different agencies.

SUCCESS

The partnership’s efforts proved a resounding success. As Jacksonville’s SAC said, “The level of cooperation was incredible. Fortunately, we had no major incidents, but even if there had been, I am confident we had the proper infrastructure and lines of communication in place to address them.”

Throughout the week, agency heads held daily meetings at the downtown EOC followed by press-availability sessions. Stories that received the most attention included a nearly tragic boating accident in which two JSO marine officers sustained serious injuries and the police pursuit of a stolen limousine that ended in a fiery crash.

Police easily handled the expected increase of incidents of disorderly conduct, pickpocketing, and prostitution, and JSO detectives and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents teamed up to make several arrests of individuals selling counterfeit tickets and souvenirs. The Florida Highway Patrol played a crucial role in assuring safe passage on area highways and over the many bridges of this “river city.”

Bomb technicians from the FBI, ATF, and several other agencies responded to calls concerning suspicious packages, and when a student pilot strayed into restricted airspace on Sunday morning, CBP pilots quickly escorted him out of the area and forced the student to land before questioning and releasing him. SWAT, HAZMAT, and evidence response teams were able to focus the bulk of their time on training opportunities, and crisis negotiators had little to discuss except the relative strengths of the Eagles and Patriots.

The more than 3,000 members of the media did not have much to report pertaining to security and public safety, despite the thorough coverage. Crews from the national networks fanned out across the city, capturing images of everything from U.S. Coast Guard patrol boats to bomb-sniffing dogs. Reporters from the national media shot footage at the EOC during halftime of the game and interviewed law enforcement personnel as part of a tour of the JOC.

The reports were almost uniformly positive, and they served to showcase the combined efforts of all agencies involved. As Jacksonville’s sheriff told reporters, “This was the Pro Bowl of law enforcement.”

CONCLUSION

Overall, law enforcement’s coordinated response to this event showed what such a cooperative effort can accomplish. Fortunately, not many people—except a few cynical sportswriters—had much to comment on but the area’s hospitality, golf courses, beaches, and natural beauty.

And, the combined response to the few minor incidents that did surface further proved the success of the plan. As is always the case in the behind-the-scenes world of intelligence and counterterrorism, the success of Super Bowl XXXIX can be measured as much by what did not happen as by what did.