



FIELD OF VISION Susan Sherer takes a breather at Ford Field.

TASK MASTER

Host honcho **SUSAN SHERER** sweats the details

BY NANCY NALL DERRINGER

LAST FEBRUARY IN JACKSONVILLE, FLA., just before setting off from her hotel for another day of studying the city's Super Bowl preparations, Susan Sherer, the famously detail-oriented executive director of Detroit's host committee, forgot one. It had nothing to do with her jam-packed schedule, the countless meetings or any of the thousand tasks she juggles as the woman in charge of getting the Motor City ready for the big game. It was just something that popped up during small talk with a TV crew from Philadelphia.

"And Susan asked, 'So, what brings you people down here?'" recalls Ken Kettenbeil, the committee's vice president of communications. So focused was Sherer on her job, on what it takes to stage the game itself, she had failed to take note of which teams were playing — the New England Patriots and, of course, the Philadelphia Eagles. "It's sort of funny to consider that the person in charge of the host committee is absolutely not a sports person," he says. Sherer admits the truth: "The only football game I pay attention to is Ohio State and Michigan." And she roots for her alma mater: the Buckeyes.

In Wolverine country, Sherer can be forgiven her misplaced collegiate loyalty and lack of interest in pro football when one considers her field is considerably bigger than the turf on which Super Bowl XL will be played. She's now in the homestretch of a four-year run preparing southeast Michigan to host one of the biggest events in North America. It's a job that's required coordinating players across the region with a mix of no-nonsense management, diplomacy, tact, grace and leadership. "It's one of my favorite things — to be a facilitator," she says. "This has the potential to change the conversation about Detroit."

She won the job as the first woman to ever run a host committee after overseeing the bid that won Detroit the Super Bowl in the first place. That project

alone took a year and half of full-time work and was precisely the sort of intricate, detail-oriented task that her colleagues say she is legendary at accomplishing. The job involved tying up thousands of loose ends, gathering contracts from businesses and government, tracking down hotel rooms and rental cars and assuring the NFL that there would be enough to go around, should they decide to award the big game and its \$300 million in economic impact to the city.

But that was only the documentation. The coup de grâce was a 15-minute show on a 36-foot revolving stage, presented for the NFL's team owners. It featured then-mayor Dennis Archer, who stepped out of a moving pair of People Mover doors to speak his lines under a spotlight, before the stage revolved and Roger Penske delivered his piece, and so on. About the only thing missing was the ghost of Marvin Gaye. The other cities made their case with PowerPoint presentations. When the show concluded, "[Dallas Cowboys owner] Jerry Jones jumped up and started hugging Roger and Dennis," Sherer recalls. "He said he'd never seen anything like that." Sherer took the top job within a few months.

Since then, she's tackled that Herculean task the way Hercules tackled his — with creativity and flair, but mostly with plain old nose-to-the-grindstone work. "She and Roger [Penske] are alike — they're both worker bees," says David Steinke, Sherer's husband of 14 years. "She loves the details. She doesn't do it for the rewards. She just likes to get things done."

The two met shortly after Sherer moved to Michigan from Columbus, Ohio, where she grew up and went to college. A communications major, she was lured into the hospitality business at Columbus' Hyatt Regency, and, at 25, jumped at an opportunity with the company in Flint. She was eventually transferred to Dearborn, got her first apartment in Indian Village and set about falling in love with her new hometown. About that time, Steinke fell in love with her. Fixed up by a mutual friend, their first date was quintessentially Detroit — a Tigers game.

"She always had a pretty positive outlook on the world," he says. "Who in the mid-'80s was driving downtown to work and loving it?"

There are much easier jobs than working [in hospitality] in this city. It's much easier to go to Chicago and tell people on the phone all day, 'The hotel's full.' She not only accepted Detroit, she embraced it." Before long, Sherer was hired to sell the city by the Detroit Metro Convention and Visitors Bureau (DMCVB).

"If Susan balances her checkbook and is off by a penny, she has to find that penny," says Larry Alexander, CEO of the DMCVB and Sherer's boss while the bid was being prepared. It was only natural, then, that Alexander would choose his underling to prepare the Super Bowl bid, and, after its success, leave her to carry it out for the host committee. "Her attention to detail is amazing. That's exactly the skill set I was looking for. I knew that if there was one unanswered question in that proposal, she wouldn't rest until she'd answered it."

Despite the demands of the Super Bowl, Sherer is careful not to let it overwhelm her job at home, being a devoted mother to daughters Harriet, 11, and Muriel, who turns 6 on Super Bowl Sunday. For all the hours she puts in, sometimes leaving for work before 7 a.m. and BlackBerrying e-mail until past midnight, "I've never missed a school play. I've never missed any of that stuff. What that means is, it just pushes the job I'd be doing [during the school play] somewhere else." She also cleans her own house, although "Dave does everything in the kitchen." As a co-owner of Joe Kool's, a Troy restaurant, Steinke works his hours around his wife's and those of their daughters. Her job wouldn't be possible, Sherer says, "without the love and support of my family."

And as the clock ticks toward March 31, the day the host committee officially ceases to exist, Sherer has another concern to turn her famous focus on — her future. How do you top being stage manager of a Super Bowl? She doesn't know, but she does know a few things: She has no interest in leaving Detroit. Her husband has a career to consider, and besides, Steinke says, "Detroit is a pretty big pond." The family owns a cottage on Lake Huron and an architectural gem of a house in Grosse Pointe Park. Life is good. "I see her staying put, but maybe hooking up with a corporation next time," Kettenbeil says. "She'll have a title, but she'll be doing many other things." ■

Derringer is a Grosse Pointe-based freelance writer. E-mail: editorial@hourdetroit.com.