

# Electronic football champion hopes to keep game alive

By Alex Prewitt

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CLEVELAND — The Walter Payton of electric football entered the hotel ballroom alone, because everyone else was still asleep and champions start early. He looked at the folding tables, dressed in black fabric and lined in rows. He eyed the eight-team bracket taped to the wall, his path to victory outlined in permanent marker. Adrian Baxter had another national championship to win.

He approached the game board on Table 19, a metal surface decorated with orange Cleveland Browns logos and the yard markings of a football field. He grabbed an extension cord and flicked a power switch. The board buzzed, humming like an electric toothbrush. Adrian closed his eyes and rubbed his arms, muscular and exposed by a sleeveless T-shirt.

“I’ve got to get my men on the field,” said the 42-year-old accountant from Landover, Md.

The men are miniature plastic football players no taller than a blade of grass, and attached to rectangular bases with rubber prongs jutting from beneath. The prongs absorb the board’s vibrations. That’s how the players move. Adrian grabbed one player and placed it midfield. He thumbed the switch again. The player zipped straight for a second before swerving and face-planting.

“Doesn’t look like they gonna play today,” Adrian said. He’s a no-nonsense coach with decisions to make. Recently, the Miniature Football Coaches Association, the game’s governing body, named him the greatest coach ever. He’s a shoo-in for the MFCA Hall of Fame and has won 25 tournaments, including two straight MFCA Tournament of Champions. On this first Sunday in August, he was gunning for a third.

“I wouldn’t give this up for anything,” he said, unloading the rest of his 60-man team from a plastic silverware tray onto the sidelines.

Soon the ballroom inside the Holiday Inn filled up, mostly with middle-age men in NFL jerseys and cargo shorts. They converged on Cleveland wearing nicknames with pride, such as Smokestack and Hulk and the Silver Surfer (that’s Adrian). They lugged their families and burned vacation time to feed an obsession, to play a game they never stopped loving, and to hang out with the endangered few who still love it, too.

The scoreboard clocks were set to 35 minutes. The eight quarterfinalists reached across the fields and shook hands.

“Good game,” said Charles Lane, Adrian’s opponent and the bracket’s fifth seed.

“Have fun,” replied Adrian, the No. 4 seed with a bull’s-eye on his back.

A tournament director came over the ballroom microphone. The hotel chapel is open, he announced, and the electric football gods are listening.

“All right,” the director said. “We ready?”

He counted down. Three. Two. One.

BZZZZ.

The weekend before, Adrian invited friends to his townhouse to scrimmage. He’s a Dallas Cowboys diehard living in the shadows of FedEx Field, so after Washington loses he likes watching fans sulk to their cars.

“That’s my guilty pleasure,” he said.

Aside from electric football.

The front door opened into a spacious first floor — his “man cave” — with two boards set up for practice. His shimmering tournament trophies sat on the carpet. Hung on the far wall were 10 framed copies of the Tweak, MFCA’s now-defunct magazine named for the process by which coaches manipulate pieces for strength or speed. Adrian made the cover in 2008. He’s wearing a leather helmet, busting through a brick wall, assuming the Heisman Trophy pose.

Soon, Chris Stringer walked in. Chris, 43, works at a body shop in Waldorf, Md. He coaches youth football and designed his miniature team to resemble the children. Like many coaches, Chris has spent hours working on his pieces, meticulously detailing them with custom paint jobs and accessories. He removed his players from a toolbox and arranged them on the board. The buzz drowned out the soft R&B coming through the speakers.

“We’re playing football, man,” Chris said.

That, essentially, was the original goal: Miniaturize the product seen on television every Sunday so fans could take control, fundamentally no different from fantasy football or video games. In the late 1940s, a toymaker named Norman Sas bought Tudor Metal Products, invented electric football and quickly monopolized the market.

Sas secured the NFL license in 1967 by introducing hand-painted players. As the toy industry boomed and department stores set sales records, electric football powered an assembly line from factories to mailing catalogues to Christmas tree skirts. This is where the game found Adrian.

“It was back in 1977,” he began. Adrian was 7, living in Washington with his mother. He first saw electric football on Christmas morning at his cousin Tony’s house, and soon after Adrian begged his mother for a board, too. So on his birthday that January, Adrian unwrapped his first electric football game.

Like most who grew frustrated with the shoddy gameplay, Tony lost interest. The pieces clumped together and moved in unison. The old editions neither resembled real-life football nor functioned as an independently fun game.

But Adrian kept coming back. He learned that adding weight — usually dabs of putty — increased the blocking ability of offensive linemen, and that flattening the prongs with heated pliers gave wide receivers speed. Eventually, his play came to resemble professional football.

Friday night at the banquet hall, the coaches gathered for opening ceremonies. Adrian had driven six hours from Landover that morning with his girlfriend, Michelle Robinson, 44, and her grandson, Jayden, 4.

Parked at the table nearest to the door, Adrian kept checking his phone. He wanted to stay, but he had promised Michelle they’d go out for dinner. Electric football has come between them too many times. “I’ve got to go,” Adrian said.

Chris slid into Adrian’s empty seat. He had predictions for the weekend and wanted to share. He had read the message boards, where the hive minds of electric football reside between tournaments. Everyone conceded the champion would be either Adrian or Big Jim. “That’s the chatter,” Chris said. “It’s going to be a war.”

Some players see Adrian’s silent intensity as standoffish and haughty. “They hate him,” Chris said.

Big Jim is not one of those people. He is Jim Davis, the massive man who hobbled to the lectern and led a group prayer. Fellow coaches call him “The Hulk,” because he tweaks the strongest players. He had won two straight regional tournaments in Alabama and Maryland, qualifying events for Sunday’s eight-man championship, but wondered when his luck would run out.

Big Jim, 52, comes from Detroit, where he learned the importance of hard work unloading watermelons off fruit trucks at age 12. After college, he joined the Army. Then he managed the Dramatics, a Motown group that toured the country. He also inspected on the assembly line at Ford Motor Co., until one day the machinery malfunctioned and crushed his knees. He retired to focus on his two true loves. Seven surgeries had caused Big Jim's fingers to swell so much that around his neck he keeps two things: his wedding band and his 2009 electric football championship ring.

That ring, like the two Adrian brought to Cleveland, represented the one tangible prize available that weekend. At the podium, a tournament official held up a replica. Everyone leaned forward to get a closer look.

Saturday morning. As other coaches set up for the final qualifying event into Sunday's tournament of champions, Adrian, Michelle and Jayden drove to Canton to see the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Michelle likes to play the lottery on these trips, because electric football always takes them to the small towns that, in her mind, seem to produce winning tickets. If it were up to her, though, they'd be at Disney World.

The car pulled onto a side street, parking next to a deserted football field. Adrian scooped Jayden onto his shoulders, skipping down the sidewalk. Michelle lingered behind. It was her fourth year coming to Cleveland. She knows some coaches by name, others by face. There used to be female coaches, but not so much anymore. A couple of bad seeds, too, coaches too intense for the friendly, trash-talking atmosphere.

"In their little world, it's huge," Michelle said. She supports Adrian's passion. They've dated for more than a decade now, with little desire to marry or have kids, and she knows Adrian could be doing worse things with his time. But between a regimented 9-to-5 in downtown Washington, working out over lunch, attending night classes to earn his master's degree and dividing his spare time between family and electric football, something had to give.

Five years ago, Adrian suffered a heart attack. He calls it his "event." Doctors never found the cause. His memory has suffered in recent years, too. Phase out electric football, he reasoned, until the rest of his life comes under control.

Yet each offseason, as he contemplates quitting, the adrenaline starts to flow. He thinks about winning and those trophies on his man-cave carpet. He wants to do better. So when is enough, enough? Maybe three straight championships will do the trick.

"It's something that found our hearts at a young age, and we don't want to let go," Adrian said. "Because it's entrenched in us in some way, it's hard to let go. We love this game."

"I'm an addict," he said. "I'm addicted."

He laughed.

At first, Adrian's mother, Carolyn Baxter, was like Michelle. She often wondered why her son stayed home huddled under a blanket fort and painting his plastic players with her fingernail polish.

For years, Adrian played actual football, too. He ran fast and hit hard. At H.D. Woodson High School in Washington, he quit sports to focus on classes, but tried out for varsity his senior year and became the starting fullback. Carolyn always wanted him to play something less dangerous, like basketball or golf.

Carolyn, now a 61-year-old business owner, says she raised her children to use their words, but gave permission to fight back if necessary. That's how Adrian wound up in several school scuffles, sending a classmate to the emergency room with a forehead welt, and why he intervened when neighborhood thugs pulled a gun on his friend at the skating rink. Electric football kept him inside, away from trouble.

"It helps," Adrian said. "Even now."

So Carolyn gave it a chance. She still doesn't quite grasp the magnitude of Adrian's accomplishments, and hasn't attended a tournament yet, but sometimes she comes over for scrimmages and brings sandwiches.

"I started to realize it's not some weird hobby," she said. "Whenever you have a child who knows what he likes, you support him any way you can, because you never know what it could lead to."

Adrian has never played chess, but he understands the comparisons. In electric football, illusion is everything. Think three plays ahead, then pounce. It was Sunday morning, and he was walloping Charles Lane. "Pass," Adrian said, because coaches must declare run or pass before the play begins.

He hit the switch. The players buzzed around the field. Adrian spied an open receiver, then stopped the board. He reached toward the sideline, replacing his stand-still quarterback with a tall, monochrome figure in a throwing motion.

This is the TTQB, or triple-threat quarterback. Adrian pinched a felt pill inside the quarterback's claw. Long nails improve accuracy, so Adrian's pointer nail has grown long and thick. He aimed, reared the arm back and flicked the pill, no bigger than a grain of rice. The pill struck the receiver right in the base: a completion, with nothing but open board ahead.

"Yes," Adrian said softly, pounding his chair.

"The excitement," Chris whispered. "It's coming out."

Many coaches liken Adrian to legendary running back Walter Payton. Payton, one coach said, never just went out of bounds. He punished defenders, lowering his head and bulldozing whomever dared enter his path. But he was a quiet force, too, like Adrian.

"When he has you in his clutches in a big game," MFCA president Jerry McGhee said, "it's like watching him do yoga."

On the board, Charles reacted to Adrian's pass by pivoting his defenders toward the intended receiver. Each play unfolded in this start-and-stop manner. The board turned on again. Adrian's receiver, the one who caught the pass, rattled forward with the ball before curling toward the sideline. No board operates the same way, so the smallest dead spot can send a player veering off course. If football is a game of inches, electric football is one of millimeters.

No matter. Adrian scored four plays later, on another pass. He would survive easily and advance to the semifinals. Across the room, Big Jim won by a touchdown. A dream semifinals matchup, between perhaps electric football's two greatest coaches, was up next.

A boy, no older than 10, stared into the ballroom. His family was at the front desk, checking in between the quarterfinals and semis. The boy had wandered away from the pack, drawn toward the shouts blasting through the halls. "Look," he said, to no one in particular. "Air hockey."

The family caught up. The father had never heard of electric football. He wondered how there could be a convention, let alone enough people for a national championship.

As the elevator doors opened, an older man wearing a Harley-Davidson shirt overheard them. "Electric football?" he asked. He remembered it. Had pleaded with his parents to buy the game. Opened it on Christmas. Unpackaged the players and unboxed the stadium. Plugged in the board. And . . .

"It's the lamest game in the world."

The diehards — those who halt life and drive across the country to tournaments — used to worry about the negativity. Television segments focusing on pieces spinning in circles, as if the cameras altogether ignored tweaking. Articles scoffing at men playing a children's game, living out some Peter Pan fantasy, as if it were somehow different from model trains or video games. They hate this. The boxes say 8 and up.

In the early 1990s, small clusters of devotees sprung up in man caves and recreation centers across the country. But they were isolated. "We wondered, does anyone out there play, too?" Adrian said.

Then came the Internet. Miggle Toys, the company that bought Tudor from Norman Sas in 1988, opened its online forums and lighted the beacon. The MFCA formed. Tournaments began. Soon the coaches realized they were never alone.

They call it fellowship, and it binds the coaches together. It allows them to trash-talk one minute, clink beer bottles the next. It weeds out the cheaters who add weight to their players by slopping on extra layers of paint or soaking the bases in baby oil. Fellowship, the coaches hope, can attract enough newcomers to save the game from extinction.

After the old Miggle regime lost the NFL license in 2007, a consequence of its owner's failing health, Doug Strohm bought the company five years later intending to expand. He rebranded it Tudor, to return the game to its glory days, and hopes to integrate electronic elements — iPad applications, digital scoreboards — to attract a more technologically savvy clientele. Sales have doubled since Strohm took over, and recently McDonald's featured Tudor's electric football in a Big Mac commercial.

At Tudor headquarters near Seattle, Strohm knows the target demographic: a lost generation of children growing up on "Madden" video games. The company needs parents to walk through the toy store aisles, shun the video games and buy miniature football for their children instead. Fellowship is nice, but it alone can't keep the game alive.

"I'm sweating like a hog in a slaughterhouse," Jim Davis said, fanning himself before the semifinals. He reached across the table to Adrian, extending his hand. "I love you, bro, for real," he said. "You're a champion, brother, in everyone's eyes."

"Nah," Adrian replied. He removed his glasses and stroked his thin goatee, staring at the board.

Since Adrian began competing in 2003 at a tournament in Harrisburg, Pa., he and Jim have been pretty evenly matched. This time was no different. The lead seesawed until halftime. A touchdown pass from Adrian. A touchdown run from Jim's star player, miniature O.J. Simpson. It turned into a shootout. Adrian returned a kickoff for another score, trimming the lead to seven points. But Jim kept answering. Two more Simpson touchdowns widened the gap.

Adrian never budged. Later, in a moment of privacy, he would diagnose the problem. He had defended passes poorly and had failed to safeguard against runs after the catch. Besides, no matter how he adjusted, Jim would respond in kind. "I felt like I couldn't do anything," Adrian said.

The score was 35-21. Fourth down. Bzzzz. Every receiver either jammed at the line of scrimmage or staggered out of bounds, so one of Jim's powerful defenders sacked the quarterback. Jim clapped once. Adrian shook his head. They bumped fists. The game was over.

Adrian packed his players into the briefcase with a Silver Surfer logo emblazoned on the front and left the ballroom. He would think about losing for weeks and would again ponder the future. A new season was beginning soon, which left him little time to decide.

"All I know is I need to take a break," he said. "It needed to have already taken place."

Lynn Schmidt, too, needed a break. As the sun set on Sunday evening, he slumped against a car bumper. Down the driveway, armies of football fans spilled into Sunday night's Hall of Fame game in Canton. The MFCA always hosts the national championship on the same weekend. After the boards pack up, everyone rolls south to party.

A 52-year-old freelance designer known for dressing up as the Kansas City Chiefs superfan "Weirdwolf," Lynn was the first and only MFCA president until McGhee took over last year. Lynn still runs the website and takes pictures, virtually chronicling the fellowship unfolding in real time.

The coaches, a sliver of the roughly 300 active MFCA members, sipped beers and wondered whether MTV would pick up an electric football reality show. Someone suggested they break out the boards and start playing, right there in the street.

"These guys are gluttons," Lynn said, sipping a Manhattan from a plastic cup. He feels electric football has reached a crossroads. If Tudor cannot attract a younger demographic, "it's going to keep tapering and tapering until we're all dead."

Tournaments, to these coaches, are foremost about seeing old buddies, swapping tweaking notes and sharing stories. No one makes money. Every coach wants to win, but he also wants the game to spread. That's why a traveling salesman named Joe Greco always sets up scrimmages when he visits the West Coast for work; why Chris Stringer's wife talks about founding a neighborhood league for at-risk youth; why Adrian reconciles quitting competition with the prospect of mentoring others.

Adrian arrived late to the tailgate, Michelle and Jayden in tow. After Adrian lost, Jim Davis moved into the championship and beat teenager Will Chalmers, considered by many to represent the future of electric football, on a last-second Hail Mary. The crowd went wild, Adrian among them.

"I wish I could have been there," Michelle said. Jayden was battling a stomachache, so they missed the entire tournament. "Oh, well. Next year."

Maybe. The coaches gathered on the driveway for a group photo. They puffed cigars and stuck their long fingernails skyward, until someone had the idea to pose like their plastic players.

So Chris crouched down and thrust his arms forward, ready to make a tackle. Others clenched their fists at their collarbones, like Big Jim Davis's rugged offensive linemen. And behind them all, Adrian lined up as the triple-threat quarterback, one hand forward and another cocked back, grinning and laughing and frozen in time.