

The New York Times

October 21, 2013

Maker of Animated GIFs Waits for Offbeat Moments

By **SARAH LYALL**

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — At 2:44 p.m. on a recent Sunday, Tim Burke took a moment from monitoring numerous N.F.L. games for the sports Web site Deadspin to post something that had nothing to do with football: a smidgen of a clip from an English rugby match he also happened to be following.

He stitched together still-frame images captured from the broadcast into a short, continuous loop that showed a player built like a cement mixer [strong-arming an opponent to the ground](#) by the unfortunate man's throat. The GIF, or Graphics Interchange Format, showed a vivid moment, the kind that has become standard currency for online sports journalism. That Burke had time to produce it at all reflects the vacuum-cleaner-like way he approaches his job.

The sports editor at the Web site BuzzFeed, Ben Mathis-Lilley, could only observe in awe.

"It's hard enough to watch one or two games at once and to actually get the stuff people think is great," he said. "It's hard enough to monitor all the American sports. But Tim is so good at coming up with stuff from all around the world, and from sports like minor league hockey, that no one else is watching."

Burke, 35, is known among sports journalists for his ability to capture the moment — whether as a still, a video clip or in his favored format, a GIF — better, faster, more frequently and from more sports events than just about anyone. How he does it is a matter of wonder.



He works from home here, in what his colleagues call the “Burke-puter,” for its seamless integration of man and machine. It is less an office than an organism: a flashing, beeping, glowing, thrumming assault of screens, wires, remotes, tuners, phones, receivers, computers and general electronic effluvia wrapped around a person (“the monitor situation up there is insane,” said Burke’s wife, Lynn Hurtak.). Burke sits here alone in the dark day after day, for about 100 hours a week, watching dozens of sports events simultaneously.

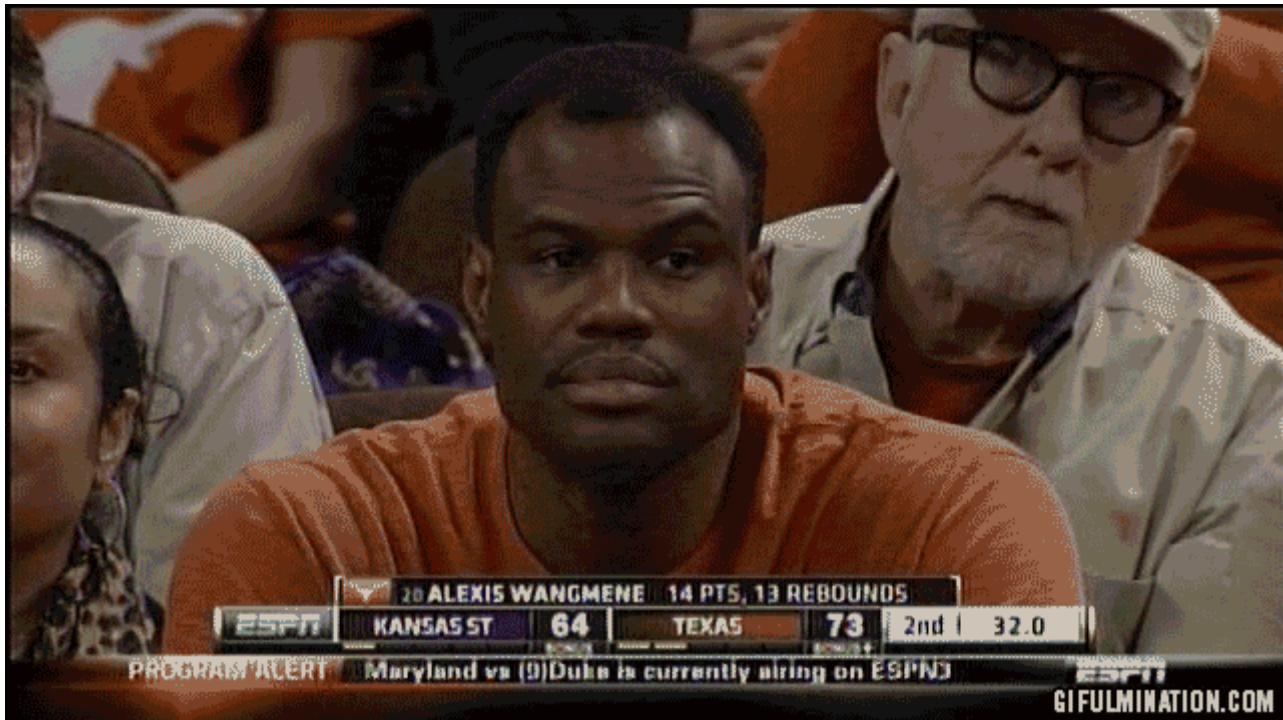
“My job is to know at all times what’s happening in every game,” Burke said in a recent interview in the Burke-puter.

Some of his 10 functioning monitors are programmed to split into eight or more miniscreens, and he can record from 28 sources at once. This time of year, he is watching a lot of football. On Oct. 6, he watched the New Orleans Saints versus the Chicago Bears; the Philadelphia Eagles versus the New York Giants; the New England Patriots versus the Cincinnati Bengals; the Baltimore Ravens versus the Miami Dolphins — a dozen N.F.L. games in all — as well as two Major League Baseball games, four Premier League soccer matches and a ragtag assortment of other events, starting at 10 a.m. and finishing at 2 a.m. the next day.

“I am not able to do many other things,” Burke said of his life in general.

To people who follow sports news, Burke is known as the person who helped unmask Manti Te'o’s fake dead girlfriend. But it is his particular talent for GIFs — which he posts on Deadspin, Twitter and his own Web site, [30FPS](#) — for which he is known. Not only are his GIFs considered to be of high quality, but he also seems to have a sixth sense for identifying the exact moments

to capture.



“He’s made GIFs the standard for sports highlights,” Mathis-Lilley said.

A GIF, [pronounced jif](#), is a compressed image file format invented in 1987. In the last decade, the animated GIF has become popular. Burke has figured out a way to use it in the service of sports reporting.

“It has to be small, it has to be shared quickly, you want it on Twitter and Tumblr, and he’s great at realizing which moments are best for it, which tiny slices are indicative of something larger,” Mathis-Lilley said.

Burke also posts elegant screen captures, and some video, though he tends to use it sparingly and only in situations that lend themselves to it, like the last, roller-coaster day of the Premier League season earlier this year, or the idiotic reports delivered by some television journalists, as he saw it, [during the hunt](#) for a suspect after the Boston Marathon bombing. Video is problematic, though, because most platforms will not support the new technology he likes, and because the N.F.L. periodically issues stern letters to Deadspin’s editors ordering them to take things down.



The league has not made much of a fuss over the animated GIFs, which are perfect at capturing instances of embarrassment and absurdity — a baseball player [tumbles over a fence](#), ESPN’s football score box shows one team leading another [by 975 points](#), a [spectator swears](#) or a football player [mows down another](#) before the play starts. The charm of animated GIFs is in the content — those clumsy moments captured, and repeated again and again. Unlike videos, which provide a smooth stream of action, a GIF is like a digital flipbook, a choppy rendering that adds to the silliness of what happened in real time.

“Video requires a reader’s intervention to play, whereas a GIF adds itself forcefully,” Burke said.

He added: “It’s an art object. You’re taking this little moment and making it exist in perpetuity, because it constantly loops,” as in a GIF of [a fumble by Bears running back Matt Forte](#).

“A lot of stuff I do here — nobody’s done this stuff,” he said. “How did I learn to do it? I messed around with stuff until I found something that worked.”

To start his day, Burke organizes his desk. He then organizes the games he wants to watch on the various monitors. He makes sure his three Mason jars are filled with water so he will not have to leave the room on the account of thirst. He keeps track of Twitter feeds, Deadspin and breaking news on a monitor he has programmed so he can keep abreast of the many things he needs to keep abreast of.

On one of his computers, he has nine hard drives, which he uses to store the data that he has amassed. He built it himself, “out of components,” he says vaguely.

He starts watching. He fiddles with his monitors. He finds his moments, converts them to GIFs, video snippets and screen capture stills, and feeds them to his colleagues or posts them himself. Since he joined Twitter in 2008, he has written more than 56,650 Twitter posts.

“He’s so encyclopedic,” Mathis-Lilley said. “If you can get something that Tim didn’t pick up, it’s a triumphant moment, kind of like beating the eye in the sky.”



Alone with his equipment, Burke mutters to himself, to his screens and to his colleagues, who cannot hear what he is saying but whose incessant instant messages irritate him, each message announcing itself to the room with the opening tenor guitar chords from Neko Case’s “[Stinging Velvet](#).”

“Those are intrusions into my personal workflow,” he said.

Watching the St. Louis Rams versus the Jacksonville Jaguars, he spots a GIF-able moment.

“I’m doing a GIF of,” he starts to explain, and then is distracted by something happening in the Bengals game. “Andy Dalton, what are you doing!” he says, before finishing his earlier sentence, “an interception in the red zone.”

Eventually, Burke’s wife comes in to gauge his lunchtime mood.

“When do I want lunch?” Burke asks. “Whenever you want lunch is fine.”

Hummus is mentioned.

“That’s right, hummus,” he says. “Thank you. Where did that interception go?”

This is the way things go in Burke-world. Hurtak, 36, who edits reports for nonprofits and is working on a book about venture philanthropy in Uganda, tries to remain calm.

“I’ve done a lot of personal growth this past year,” she said.

When she met Burke at a party about six years ago, he was 50 pounds lighter; a professor of communications and speech who lectured on media theory; and was working on his dissertation on feminist theory and poker, which he has not finished.

At the same time, he was posting screen captures and clips on the free-for-all Web site 4chan and on Twitter. His contributions attracted the attention of the Web site SportsGrid, where he worked for a time, and finally of Deadspin, which hired him about two years ago.

“It totally changed the site,” said Tommy Craggs, the editor of Deadspin. “He was finding stuff quickly and getting it up fast.”

He mentioned the startling second in the Super Bowl last year when the singer M.I.A. suddenly [gave the crowd the finger](#).

It was a blink-and-you’ll-miss-it moment. “Everybody thought, ‘Wait — did that happen?’ ” Craggs said. “And then there it was on Deadspin.”



The more Burke works, the more Hurtak spends time by herself or with friends. She and Burke play shuffleboard together one night a week, and they take the 12th day of every month off — they got married on Dec. 12, 2012.

They usually eat together, go out to Tampa Bay Rays games and enjoy gardening. Burke's specialty is growing exotic peppers, and he is partial to his Tabasco-pepper plant. Otherwise, she said, "he doesn't have time to do anything."

"I'm very committed to this," Burke said of his job, "but also I'm always in the house."

Back at the Burke-puter, Burke notices something that excites him in the Jaguars-Rams game: the broadcaster is showing a picture of a player over the words "Player Name."

"That's a problem — his name is not Player Name," Burke says. "We call this a chyron fail because it was a fail in the chyron," or the lower explanatory graphics on the screen. Burke first used the term in 2009 when Fox displayed a shot of Tim Tebow but identified him as Khalil El-Amin.

Burke recognizes that his job can seem less serious than it might be, but he said he was performing a kind of metacriticism that was an extension of his old job teaching media theory.

“I’m engaging in the media in a more hands-on way,” he said. “I’m observing through the lens of how I watch it. I know about how the media works, as well as being self-aware that I’m also a member of the media.” His GIFs’ very inanity makes them profound, in a way, he said.

“This is going to sound really pretentious if I give any more value to it, but there’s a reason people like seeing these things,” he said. “I think mundane is human, and we’re capturing people being human, and anytime we can make someone feel smarter — even if it’s vis-à-vis someone else being stupid — that’s something that appeals to people. People like to feel smart.”