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The media gathered around Jared Allen, who usually has something entertaining to say. But even Allen is looking forward to the end of this dismal season.

- After a long, tough season, many Vikings would just as soon skip talking to reporters ad nauseam.

'Groundhog Day' for media and players

By DAN WIEDERER • dan.wiederer@startribune.com

Two light purple bar doors separate the Vikings locker room from the rest of the team's Winter Park facility. And on many days, those swinging doors can seem a lot like the curtains on "Let's Make a Deal."

Who's behind there? Which Viking will emerge next?

Four days each week for 45 minutes at a crack, the media is invited into the Vikings' open locker room to chat with players. Which might sound like a party to an outsider who never has stood waiting in the middle of a room so big and this empty.

It's called "open locker room" for a reason. On many days, it's just that. Open. Wide open.

Especially during a season like this.

Not coincidentally, during these 45-minute periods, the hot tub, cold

tub and sauna inside the training room often fill to capacity and beyond.

"The old avoiding-the-press trick," said punter Chris Kluwe. "I've seen many occasions when the hot tub is packed pretty tight."

Envision that: hordes of NFL players crammed together like chickens on an overcrowded poultry farm. It's their uncomfortable yet convenient escape from another round of meet-the-press.

"Sometimes you don't have

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Some players make a quick exit

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anything left to say," said Kluwe, one of the most accessible Vikings. "You've said all you can and rather than rehash it over and over, it's kind of like 'I'm going to skip it today.'"

Quick getaway

Back to those swinging doors for a minute, the ones that beat reporters and TV cameramen fixate on day after day hoping for some Viking to barge through to deliver a payoff — a nugget of insight, an original thought or simply a usable sound bite — that will make that day's 45-minute session worthwhile.

Some days, however, the curtain opens and it's nothing but a donkey eating a pail of straw.

Two-and-a-half weeks ago, for example, a day after the Vikings lost 24-14 in Atlanta, 19 reporters stood in the open locker room for 15 minutes with not a single player present.

Moments later, the doors swung open and here came Jared Allen and Chad Greenway.

Jackpot, right? Allen, after all, is one of the most engaging, colorful and witty players in the NFL. Only on this day, he had nothing left. So as reporters sauntered toward him, he showed his All-Pro burst.

Leaving Greenway in his wake, Allen sprinted straight for the parking lot laughing.

"You're not going to catch me today!" he yelled.

The media horde looked around, 19 Wile E. Coyotes coughing out Allen's cloud of dust before stopping Greenway for his thoughts.

"The toughest part is you answer the questions on Sunday after the game," Allen said. "Then on Mondays, it's the



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Reporters interviewed the accessible and affable Percy Harvin while quarterback Christian Ponder tossed a mini basketball into a plastic hoop at Winter Park on Wednesday.

same list of questions. I get it. We understand the media has a job to do. But there are days where it's like 'I just need to get out.' It's no disrespect. It's more a sign that I've already said everything I needed to say. I don't like repeating myself."

Same old story

Yep, seasons like this can have a "Groundhog Day" feel. The media is quickly running out of fresh questions. The players long ago ran out of new answers.

At this point, it's been proven and confirmed then proven again. This season's Vikings are not very good. There are only so many ways to get at that. Players understand.

But that doesn't mean they enjoy the weekly mood checks. *How does it feel to be 0-4? Have you ever been on a team*

that's 1-6?

What's the mood now that you're 2-11?

"It gets repetitive," said guard Anthony Herrera. "A lot of times there's a bunch of dumb questions or questions [reporters] already know the answer to. Other times there are the questions where you're baiting us to try to say some bull that's going to create some kind of negative energy."

Added Greenway: "The one that gets me is, 'How do you respond from this? What do you do to change it?' It's hard in a season like this when you've had continuous failure and you're trying to answer the same questions with the same responses.

"At the same time, we haven't given ourselves much of a chance to change the story line."

'Have fun with it'

It's not that the player-reporter dynamic has grown increasingly hostile. The Vikings media horde would readily admit this team has been quite amiable even as the losses have come five times more frequently than the wins.

Guys such as Brian Robison, Erin Henderson, Jamarca Sanford, Ryan Longwell and Percy Harvin, for example, are almost always willing to talk.

Adrian Peterson does his once-a-week debriefing during open locker room on Thursdays. Quarterback Christian Ponder handles his obligations with a podium session every Wednesday.

But that doesn't mean all players like the media invading the locker room — for three hours every week.

"We don't like you guys be-

ing here," Herrera said. "Just for the simple fact that positive stories don't sell. Negative stories sell a newspaper. That's just the job. It's not that we're mad at you or hate you for it. That's your job. Negative stories sell. So eight out of 10 times you're going to write something that's negative to get people to read it."

Kluwe, on the other hand, explains his constant availability.

"It's one of those things where I really don't have anything else to do," he said. "So for me, hey, this at least helps me pass a couple minutes. If you ask me, this should be when the in-depth profile pieces on the specialists should come out."

Three weeks from now this awkward waltz will end — for this season.

"For me, you better have fun with it," Allen said. "And you better accept the bad with the good. You can't only talk to the press when you play well. You have to talk after bad games, too."

"At the same time, you can dictate what's put out there. If I put my personality out there, I hope that helps. If I'm a jerk, there probably won't be a lot of nice things written about me. So if I have to do it, I'm going to laugh and make jokes. Too many people take it way too seriously."

Even Allen, who enjoys the back-and-forth more times than not, is looking forward to this season's end and a getaway from the press that doesn't require an all-out sprint.

"You see the same people every single day," he said. "Eventually we all need a break."