Holiday shopping: For some, bargain hunting becomes a sport, tradition: Call it crazy, but fringe shoppers say the wait is worth the payoff.

Arielle Kass

For four days, they waited in the parking lot of the Best Buy.

While others prepared for Thanksgiving, they planned for the day after. As most people put together grocery lists, they put together shopping lists. Two months of strategy resulted in several tents and a 32-inch TV, set up in the back of a pickup and powered by extension cords draped over the roof of the Dollar Tree next door.

Friday was the payoff: For the second year in a row, Eric Heath's group was the first in line at the Acworth electronics store, awaiting the doorbuster deals promised by this day in retail lore.

"I love the absurdity of it," the 22-year-old Heath said of the day commonly referred to as Black Friday. "We enjoy it, but the majority of people look at us with confusion."

As many as 147 million people were expected to help kick off the holiday shopping season by buying in stores and online Black Friday weekend. Still, only the shopping fringe sets up tents in parking lots and eats their meals surrounded by asphalt.

It's people like Heath who have made Black Friday tailgating a tradition among his friends. It's also people like James and Sara Mellars, newlyweds who needed to save an expected $1,250 on two televisions and a DVD player to justify buying them at all.

The couple, who went to the Kennesaw Best Buy on Tuesday to check out the TVs, quickly realized that, if they wanted the deals when the store opened at midnight Friday, they had to get in line. So they went around the corner to Play It Again Sports and spent $40 on a tent. They plan to use it again next Black Friday.

"It is weird. It is crazy --- there's no denying that," said James Mellars, 23. "But the amount saved divided by us, divided by the days we're here ... it's more than my salary."

There are two groups of people who will forgo their beds in search of deals, said Ken Bernhardt, marketing professor at Georgia State University's Robinson College of Business. The first group of
shoppers has more time than money and generally has a specific item in mind that makes the wait worthwhile. The other views the experience as a sport.

Bernhardt likened it to camping out for tickets to a concert or sporting event, or standing in line at a new Chick-fil-A for a year's worth of sandwiches.

"It's not just the prize at the end, but the sense of accomplishment," he said. "If the reward's big enough, which it is for some people early in line, it's a smart thing for them to do."

When Sean Li and several other friends arrived at the Target Greatland in Atlanta at 7 p.m. for a 9 p.m. opening, he expected the lines would be long. Instead, they were the first to get there. As the line grew, they found out they were waiting a few yards on the wrong side of a barrier. So they ended up second in line.

Tiffany Price, who usurped Li’s number one position by stepping into the cordoned-off area, said she also thought there would be more people. After entering the store 20th last year, Price was thrilled to be first in line for a television.

"It was exciting," she said of her No. 1 position. "I couldn't believe it."

The excitement that a row of tents outside Best Buy generates for the store is worth renting portable toilets for the shoppers and letting them come inside to charge their cell phones and laptops, said Phil Reid, general manager of the Kennesaw Best Buy. As more people line up, it brings increased visibility to the store, said Marshal Cohen, chief retail analyst for NPD Group.

Marco Malvaz arrived at the Acworth Best Buy where Heath and his friends set up camp earlier on Monday, but left because he was embarrassed to be the only one there. He came back to join the line once there was a line to join.

Cohen said the concept of waiting in line for a deal is a fairly new one, as sales have focused on doorbusters instead of simply large discounts on overstocked items. But he expects long lines will diminish as retailers start to offer waves of deals at different times of the night and day.

Natalia Deineka and her son Ignat accidentally found themselves first in line at the hhgregg electronics store in Kennesaw. They got there before 6 p.m. for the 10 p.m. opening. Shortly before the doors opened, the pair was surprised to see how long the line had become.

The deal that brought them out was a TV for half price. If not for the discount, Natalia Deineka said, she wouldn't even look at it. But with the sale, it was worth the line.

Sometimes the line itself is the draw. Each year, Heath said, he comes up with something new to enhance the wait. He'd like to fry a turkey on the sidewalk, just to say that he had done it. This year, he
donned a purple costume from the television show "The League" and played Guitar Hero and Call of Duty with friends in the parking lot. Friends brought an inflatable futon and a WiFi hotspot. The 32-inch TV has been a stalwart, but this year, they asked permission before running extension cords to the back of the building.

Some of his friends were talking about retiring from the Black Friday line, but Heath, a University of Georgia law student, said they will be drawn back in.

"I think they might take a break, but that bug is always going to be there," he said.

Joe Wright, who had met Heath and his buddies in line on a previous Black Friday, skipped the campout for the first time in more than a decade after deciding on Saturday that there was nothing in the Best Buy ad that he needed to purchase. Still, Wright came by the store on Thursday night.

Expecting to wait at the Best Buy all week, Wright, a bank manager, had taken the days off of work. Instead, he spent time with his family, eating Thanksgiving dinner and watching football.

"I woke up this morning in my bed," he said. "It was nice, comfortable. But I don't think I'm going to get too used to that."

Wright expects to be back out with his 16-year-old son or 12-year-old daughter in the next year or two.

Those who joined the line at the Perimeter Best Buy after eating their turkey dinners couldn't understand spending nights in front of a store.

"Nothing is worth that," said Garfield Collins, a Sandy Springs resident. "They are lunatics."

But Ryan Price, 26, who is not related to Tiffany Price, pushed Heath and the others to be the first in line in Acworth after missing out on a laptop for his mother two years ago.

Now he tries to make sure that those who have put in the most time in the parking lot get what they came for. Sometimes that means taking a claim ticket for an item in short supply and passing it to someone behind him.

Those in line often look out for each other, sharing food and making friends that they won't see again until the next Black Friday.

"We're all family," said Van Travis, a Sandy Springs resident.

As midnight drew closer, the line in Acworth was long, but even those at the end were hopeful they would get the deals that drew them there.
Minutes before the door opened, Heath and his friends did stretches and bounced on their toes, like runners readying for the starting pistol. They re-positioned themselves, so Price could be the first one through the doors.

The doors opened. The friends held hands. They jumped through.