

# The Super Bowl

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Here we are once again at the most important weekend in American sport. The Super Bowl is Sunday and that means that Americans across the land will create scenes reminiscent of Thorstein Veblen's classic, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Veblen's original vocabulary describing the rich of the late 19th century is as appropriate now as it was then. Such phrases as "conspicuous consumption," "conspicuous waste" and "conspicuous leisure," seem to have been coined for the Super Bowl.

Over the last XLVIII Super Bowls the pursuit of excess has accelerated with each passing year. By Super Bowl III it was attracting the attention of the media, and within short order the media itself was a leading exponent of the excessive arts. Game coverage increased, the number of cameras used by the networks doubled and then tripled, and the number of reporters and camera crews sent into action jumped geometrically. This year FOX will use 52 cameras to capture the action live and with endless replays that will blur time and leave the television viewers reaching for another beer, preferably one from a game sponsor.

One week of coverage seemed inadequate to an event of such magnitude, and so two weeks were set aside for building the hype. This of course in itself increased the importance of the Super Bowl, as indeed no other sports event was given this excessive treatment.

By Super Bowl V the orgiastic character of behaviors was well entrenched in public practice. Television drove this runaway train that quickly went over the cliff. New technologies offered new ways of viewing the action, and that was important. However it was not the game that the public came to focus upon, but on

the commercials. Two ways of measuring their importance were readily available: the cost of making a commercial and the cost of airtime to show it. Both showed steady growth and as it did the public became more and more intrigued.

Some argue that commercials represent the best film-making in the world today. That might be an overstatement, but not by much. The quality and creativity of production is remarkable and many of these short films can be recalled fondly by those who have watched them over the last XLVII years. The Mean Joe Greene Coke commercial, the Bud Bowl series, and the 1984 themed drama for the Macintosh computer rollout directed by Ridley Scott, are etched in many memory banks.

The commercials are now previewed on the internet and social media, can be viewed indefinitely in post game time, are ranked by viewers, analyzed by sociologists, and deconstructed by film critics. More remarkable is a recent study showing that TV ratings for the game increase during the commercial breaks. Perhaps that is not remarkable at all as the game has become the least important event of the weekend.

As to cost, airtime for a Super Bowl commercial is now running at \$4 million for a 30-second spot or \$133,333 per second. Excess? What Excess! Over the years the cost has moved steadily upwards corresponding to the rise in the rights fees being paid by the networks for the game and the number of people viewing the game. In the last few years each Super Bowl has set a ratings record and has become the most viewed program in the history of television.

For those interested in conspicuous consumption Super Bowl week offers a cornucopia of decadence and waste. It is difficult to

designate one type of event as the pace-setter but certainly the corporate parties are in the vanguard. What began as the Commissioner's Super Bowl Party in 1978 at a cost of \$75,000 drew critical comment for its excessive price tag. Within a few years this party would move out of a hotel ballroom and move into such venues as the Astrodome and the Miami International Airport Terminal.

Others saw the beauty of this event and offered their own parties. Corporations put up tents, ESPN initiated its party as did other television networks. In recent years the most popular parties have been hosted by skin magazines with Maxim and Playboy the leaders.

Arrival at the Super Bowl became another means of display as the number of jets and helicopters at the big game multiplied geometrically. Once there, hotels were no longer adequate for accommodation and were displaced by luxury yachts and mansions.

Excess came in many forms and some were quite ingenious. At Super Bowl XXVI in Minneapolis 25 tons of heated sand was dumped in the International Market Place so that a beach party could be held on the frozen tundra. At Super Bowl XXII in San Diego a Super Salad was tossed at a pre-game party in Tijuana. It was a 14-foot long, 8-foot wide, and 18-inches deep Caesar Salad made from 840 heads of Romaine lettuce, 1,400 ounces of garlic oil, 175 lemons, 350 cups of croutons, 980 ounces of Parmesan cheese and 840 eggs.

Middle class Americans joined the conspicuous spenders by paying anywhere from \$6,000 to \$40,000 for ticket and accommodation packages to take their families to Super Bowl XLII. Home Super Bowl parties were another possibility for display as was proven

by an Ohio couple who annually decorated their home in football décor. Drinks were chilled at this venue with football shaped ice cubes which they starting making just after Thanksgiving. Indeed most of those "watching" the game will do so at some sort of party ranging in size from a few to a few hundred.

One of the unique excesses of Super Bowl XLVIII which is in New Jersey but hosted by New York has been the nearly constant references to the weather forecasts. Will it snow? Will it rain? Will it set a new record low temperature for a Super Bowl? The NFL's idiotic decision to hold Super Bowl XLVIII outdoors in a winter climatic city has produced one of the biggest distractions in the history of this bloated event.

Perhaps that is a good thing or at least a Super Thing.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.