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Super Bowl XXXI

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If the Carolina Panthers and the Jacksonville Jaguars meet in Super Bowl XXXI Pete Rozelle will come back to present the trophy. He will do so not only to symbolize the extraterrestrial character of the event, but also to symbolize how deeply Rozelle's legacy of parity has become ingrained into the fabric of the National Football League.

What Rozelle thought he understood was the concept that competitive teams and competitive games up and down the standings would be good for team attendance through the long season. Fans would not lose interest if most every team had a shot at the playoffs deep into the season. What he didn't understand, was that if parity really did come most teams would come to look the same, the margins of difference would be small, and mediocre teams could qualify for the playoffs, and then if they got hot could move to conference championships and perhaps even the Super Bowl.

This is not to say that the Panthers and Jaguars or any other feline teams are not good football teams. Clearly the Carolina Panthers are a good team having won all of their home games, and then defeating the defending Super Bowl Champions in the playoffs. The Panthers, because the expansion draft allowed the new teams to get quality players, and because limited free agency allowed them to get more quality players, were able to build a good veteran team quickly. That they could move to the top so fast how ever is a tribute to the mediocrity of the league.

As for the Jaguars they are a younger team which picked up some quality free agents and a very good quarterback via the trade route, but they are not a great team. They are a team that with a mediocre schedule got hot at the end of the season, built some confidence, and in a series of strange plays mixed with moxie and good coaching managed to make the playoffs, pound the aging Buffalo Bills, and shock a Denver team plagued by mistakes and the bizarre, while being out hustled.

So now we have the spectacle of two expansion teams two years into their existence reaching the finals in both conferences of the NFL. No team had done that before with the Bengals reaching the playoffs in their third year and the Bucs reaching the conference finals in their fourth year.

The Panthers and Jaguars are now one win away from the Super Bowl. They are one win away from making the National Football League the laughing stock of professional sports.

At the same time it is a wonderful development for those in the expansion cities. Fans who thought they might wait for years to experience the joy of victory, have moved with glee away from the agony of defeat. Thirty to forty thousand fans were at the stadium to welcome the team home at 1:30 a.m. as the Jaguars returned from the mountains while remaining a mile high even though they were back at sea level.

As for the Carolina fans they were able to scream themselves silly at the Big-E in Charlotte while their team pounded the Cowboys into submission.

For others the consequences of these developments have been less than euphoric. The Buffalo Bills will likely move to overhaul an aging team, with an aging coach, in the wake of their loss to Jacksonville. The Broncos will remain in shock throughout the remainder of the winter and into the summer, and they may be several years trying to recover. The Carolina Panther's rivals in the Western Division of the National Conference will be involved in some very serious reassessment of their franchises and personnel.

We have already seen the heavy toll this year in the coaching ranks, and one suspects that General Managers will pay a similar price. Fans and owners are asking, and rightly so, why their team has taken four, six, ten or more years to move to the top of the league, while Carolina and Jacksonville achieved excellence in only two years. Of course it's not excellence, only a slight edge among equals, but that has been more than enough.

Heads have already rolled. In the western division of the NFC New Orleans said good-bye to Jim Mora before the season was over, while Atlanta and the Rams dismissed their coaches at the end of the regular season. In the AFC David Shula was gone from Cincinnati half way through the season. Rich Kotite "was not fired and did not quit" as the Jets coach at the end of the season, but he is gone. Mike White was fired the day before Christmas by the Raiders in an Al Davis special. Back in the NFC Dan Reeves is out as Giants coach and Wayne Fontes, after several years of miracle finishes, is now finished in Detroit. Bobby Ross has gotten the axe in San Diego over those all too familiar "philosophical differences."

The coaching bodies are strewn everywhere and General Managers will be next. Meanwhile the Panthers and Jaguars slip off into the finals of the playoffs never looking back on the wreckage they have left in their wake.

Pete Rozelle is gone, but the parity lingers on.

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.

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