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Thorstein Veblen Explains the Super Bowl

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The Harvard Economist John Kenneth Galbraith once observed that the rich are among the least understood social groups in America. Unlike the poor who are studied intensely, constantly surveyed by social workers and graduate students, the rich have gone largely uncharted. The only real exception to this is to be found in the works of Thorstein Veblen, the Norwegian American economist from Minnesota, who wrote several books on the social habits of the rich, the best known being *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. It was in this work that Veblen coined those wonderful phrases, "conspicuous consumption," "conspicuous leisure," and "conspicuous waste." Veblen was tracking and describing the habits of the rich at the turn of the century, but if he found himself in Minnesota this week he could just as easily track them during the Super Bowl.

The levels of conspicuous consumption and conspicuous waste have reached new and dizzying heights at the Super Bowl in the last decade and a half. There are already signs that this week in the Twin Cities the rituals of conspicuous consumption, leisure and waste will reach new levels of excess.

At the airport arriving Super Bowl visitors to the Twin Cities are being greeted by four grand pianos. What this has to do with football is yet to be established.

At the Hyatt-Regency Hotel in Minneapolis a sand sculpture of the Rose Bowl will be shaped by Greg Glenn of Sand Sculptures International. The Rose Bowl will be the site of next year's Super Bowl. And speaking of sand, 25 tons of heated sand will be dumped Sunday in the International Market Square in Downtown Minneapolis to accommodate 500 people for a beach party. A sister party will be hosted by former Washington Redskin John Riggins in Cancun, Mexico. The sponsor of this extravagance is a tequila company. Most everything has a sponsor at the Super Bowl.

Not to be outdone the St. Paul Hotel where the Buffalo Bills are staying has stocked 750 pounds of Buffalo meat. Even crime takes on an air of luxury as the Bloomington police are warning men to beware of Rolex women. The name comes from the fact that they seduce men wearing expensive jewelry, drug them, and steal the jewelry and fancy watches after they are out cold. This was once called, "getting rolled."

Clearly the centerpiece of the Super Bowl is the not game, the real action is at the parties and banquets put on by the corporations of America for their executives, their clients, and their employees, and filled with celebrities from show business, sport and politics. It is here that conspicuous consumption and conspicuous waste has its finest hour.

In 1985 at Super Bowl XIX in Palo Alto, California, 26 of America's largest corporations set up huge tents for pre-game and post-game parties costing anywhere from \$250 to \$350 per person. The Ford Motor Company was one of the biggest spenders paying about \$1M to bring 750 of its leading dealers and their guests to the big event. Gladys Knight provided the entertainment at a Saturday night party at the Ford Tent and Neil Sedaka entertained at the Ford dinner on Monday.

The Burrough's corporation rewarded 70 of its salespeople with Super Bowl trips for reaching 130% of their sales quotas. The previous year the Nissan Corporation took 300 dealers and their spouses on a five-day Caribbean cruise before the game in Tampa, the cost running into the \$2M range. In addition 800 private jets were cleared for landing in the Bay area for the big week.

In an uncharacteristic show of candor the NFL revealed this week that 25% of all the Super Bowl spectators are owners of their own companies. This is not a game for the fans. And all of this fuss would not be created for the average fan, or even the Washington Hogettes.

In 1988 in San Diego there were concerts by Frank and Lisa, comedy from Whoopi and Jay, and a Super Salad was tossed in Tijuana. It was a 14 foot long, 8 foot wide, and 18 inch deep Caesar Salad using 840 heads of Romaine, 1,400 ounces of garlic oil, 175 lemons, 350 cups of croutons, 980 ounces of Parmesan and 840 eggs. This could be what is meant by Super Sunday. In addition an estimated 2,000 limmos were used in San Diego at Super Bowl XXII..

Another indicator of the big numbers and high interest in the Super Bowl can be found in the gambling figures. Legal Super Bowl betting in Nevada was in the neighborhood of \$50 million last year, while world-wide the estimates are that somewhere in excess of \$250 Billion, yes Billion, will be wagered both legally and illegally on Super Bowl XXVI.

But then one should expect excess at an event that marks itself with Roman Numerals.

There was a time when the extended two and one-half hour pre-game show covered the rich at play very well, or as well as they could, as the big corporate parties would not allow the TV cameras near them. I can remember Joe Namath and Phyllis George out schmoozing their way around Miami, New Orleans, or LA, going to the parties, the extravagant tail-gate events, and the local watering holes. For some reason the networks stopped this coverage several years ago. It's time to get back to it. Afterall, most of the corporate and business spending done on Super Sunday, represents our tax dollars at work. Most of this will be written off as business expense on the 1992 tax form.

Proving once again that Welfare for the rich can be fun. Perhaps it should be called the Super Dole.

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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