

1-24-1997

Super Bowl Excesses

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "Super Bowl Excesses" (1997). *On Sport and Society*. 222.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/222>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
January 24, 1997

There is always one little item that catches the eye; the one that both embodies and summarizes the excess. This year for me it is the Little Penny Commercial. Here in Fantasyland they have been touting the making of this little obscenity of American excess for the past several weeks. Celebrities have been rolling in and out of town, in and out of their limos and private jets, to be seen in this year's breathlessly awaited Super Bowl commercial. The parties have been numerous, the celebrity watching prime, and the press coverage worthy of the outbreak of World War III.

There is no word on the cost of producing this commercial, and one can only speculate if it will be more or less than the cost of airing it. The one minute drama pushing the virtues of Phil Knight's low budget shoes will be a mere \$2.4M.

The Fox Network has sold out its fifty-eight commercial spots for the game at \$1.2M each, for a nice bottom line of \$69.6M. Throw in the pre- and post-game commercials and Fox will reel in something in the neighborhood of \$90M.

Nike's expenditures may seem steep but they are really quite modest. Over the past six years Nike has spent only \$19.3M on Super Bowl commercials, while Pepsico Corporation has dropped \$69.7M and Anheuser-Busch \$49.6M.

At the first three Super Bowls commercials sold for \$85,000 per minute, four years ago they were selling for \$850,000 per half-minute, and this year the \$1.2M level has been reached. These numbers are reflective of a corresponding growth in ratings and viewers. Last year a record 138.5M people tuned in to see Super Bowl XXX.

I am sure that no one could find a better way to spend all this money. Surely there is nothing in American society which is needed more than a Little Penny commercial or the annual renewal of the Bud Bowl. Surely nothing speaks more eloquently about the value system of this society. Well, don't be too sure.

Social values can be found in other aspects of Super Bowl life. Thorstein Veblen's triple threat of conspicuous consumption, conspicuous leisure, and conspicuous waste have been the staple of Super Bowl week for quite some time.

The Commissioner's Party originated by Pete Rozelle, the Caesar Augustus of this Imperial Age, has become one of the biggest and most opulent of events. It quickly outgrew the capacity of any mere hotel, and moved into increasingly ostentatious venues. Before Super Bowl VII in L.A. the party was held on board the Queen Mary. Before Super Bowl VIII in Houston, the party was in the Astrodome, where a giant barbecue, with pigs roasting on spits, dotted the floor of the facility. Miami in years past hosted the Commissioner's parties at Hialeah Racetrack and Miami Airport's International Terminal. What Caligula has to offer at Super Bowl XXXI remains to be seen.

The tone having been set, Corporate America followed suit with its parties and tents. In 1985 at Super Bowl XIX in Palo Alto, California, twenty-six of the nation's largest corporations set up tents for pre- and post-game parties costing from \$250 to \$350 per person. At Super Bowl XVIII in Tampa the Nissan Corporation spent two million on a five-day Caribbean cruise before the game for 300 dealers and guests. In Minneapolis truck loads of sand were brought to a downtown mall for a late January beach party displaying a reversal of nature in classic Veblenesque fashion. Nothing even comes close to the party thrown by Barron Hilton which makes all the rest pale in comparison.

Sex and the Super Bowl are another important pairing especially in this year's conspicuous marketplace in New Orleans offering a full range of delights to the corporate elite. The high-priced hookers love this scene as successful executives on corporate expense accounts display their macho to grateful clients. Professional wisdom says that football fans are the best clients among fandom, and they give new meaning to the half-time show.

New Orleans may be the best Super Bowl city in this respect, but places like Scottsdale, Arizona, offered 25 escort services last year, and in Minneapolis the escort services offered a ten percent discount, as well as a warning to beware of the Rolex girls.

Unfortunately the television coverage of this excess has been in decline. We really do have a right to see our tax dollars at work where the revelers use the Super Bowl as a tax write-off while denouncing welfare cheats over subsidized cocktails.

It is one of the beauties of decadent capitalism in the late 20th Century and a lovely balance of Sex, Money, and Power.

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