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The XFL: More X than FL

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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In a world in which the Disney Corporation makes a calculated decision not to honor Super Bowl MVP Ray Lewis with a trip to Disney World only to have Mark Chumura announce that he is going to Disney World to celebrate his escape of prison time for his hot tub romp with high school girls on prom night, one is left to ponder what the XFL will need to do to reach a public satiated with sleaze.

Vince McMahon must lay awake at night conjuring ways in which his cartoon world can outdo the real sporting world in sleaze, sensationalism, and titillation. And of course it can't. He can only hope to "out-market" reality. So far he seems to have done it.

The XFL as sport or as football is a minor league product. The game lacks the level of skill found in the NFL, and the level of on field excitement found in college sport. So what else is there? In sport perhaps not much. But in the faux sports world of Vince McMahon and the WWF one assumes there is much more. Fortunately, or unfortunately, we have not seen much of it in the XFL. Yet!

The decline of both attendance and television ratings from Week One to Week Two had to be somewhat disturbing to the XFL "brain trust." Still and all the numbers in Week Two were quite good for an inexpensive product like this one. In Week Three the decline continued with the first indications showing another twenty-five percent drop in TV ratings, and continuing declines in stadium crowds. The pattern was beginning to replicate that of the USFL.

Even more disturbing to the money sources at NBC was the fact that the XFL proved unmanageable as a TV program. It ran too long, and worse it ran into and delayed the start of "Saturday Night Live" by some forty-five minutes.

No big thing you may think, but in fact it is a very big thing. "Saturday Night Live" is one of NBC's cash cows and a ratings dominator on a slow television night. Nothing can be allowed to put such a package in jeopardy. Things will be changed. The XFL games will start earlier, the clock will run at times it would normally stop, all to make sure this program will end on time. Next, look for an end to "overtime" in the XFL, to be replaced by some three minute happening which features high drama, sex,

and violence. Perhaps a three-minute scrum featuring team cheerleaders in a Vince McMahon choreographed "Cat Fight to the Finish" could decide the winner.

Lorne Michaels, SNL producer, told friends he was "despondent and enraged" by what had happened. He would tolerate this sort of delay for a World Series game, but not for something like the XFL.

These are not encouraging words for the new league which is so dependent on NBC's money and NBC's television network exposure for its existence. The XFL is no more than TV programming and if it can't be managed as such it will not survive. And if it continues to finish fourth in the prime time network ratings for Saturday night it will go the same route that other unpopular programming goes: first to cable then to oblivion. SNL did start on time in Week Three of the XFL.

For a product that was hyped as "Sex, Violence, and football," the XFL has been a disappointment. In point of fact Arena Football has for several years offered such a product and it has done very well, thank you. Part of its success is that Arena football has no major network pretensions or ambitions. It is a small scale indoor game happy to fill arenas with working class stiffs, their girlfriends, and a lot of noise. The game is fun. It is a high action, collision game that looks like human pinball. The crowd is part of the scene and encouraged to be so. Fights, beer throwing, and women bearing their breasts on bikini night or any night, make Arena football a happening.

The XFL has some of this as well. Beer sales in Orlando far outstripped anything seen before in the Citrus Bowl. The same can be said of beer sales at the O-rena for Predator games. Fights in the stands were breaking out all over. The Orlando police were shocked by the levels of violence among the beer saturated crowd. Exhibitionism among female fans was a major feature of the first two evenings at the Citrus Bowl. When asked about the unseemliness of this for his young son, one father simply explained that he and his son always watched this sort of thing together on WWF Television.

There seems to be a misunderstanding in America about the true meaning of family values in WWF Land. Such behavior of course is not generally allowed on prime time network television. Until this little problem is solved NBC and the XFL will have a tough time of it, while in the stands the fun will just keep exposing itself.

Vince McMahon has become rich because he does understand the nature of American popular culture, marketing, and packaging. Some people find this mindless and tasteless but there is more to it than that. Gore Vidal tells us that when he was working as a script writer on "B" movies in Hollywood, he was supervised by the "Wise Hack" of the business who told the writers that they must remember one thing: "Shit has its own integrity."

Vince McMahon understands that intuitively. NBC is still far behind on the learning curve.

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