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Richard C. Crepeau

University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu



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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Bowl games, Peyton Manning, Reggie White
DECEMBER 29, 2004

It seems to me that the parade of bowl games has become endless. It's as if there has been some creeping growth over the past several years forming bowl games in the same way kudzu expands on its own in warm humid climates. What once was the Twelve Nights of Bowl Games has turned into the National Football Coaches Bowl Game Telethon sponsored by the National Association of Insomniacs.

Indeed there has been growth. In 1976 there were a mere eleven bowl games. In 1991 there were eighteen. This year there are a whopping twenty-eight of these little buggers insinuating themselves into television sets across the land. Indeed television is part of the growth pattern. In 1976 there was no ESPN and none of its offspring that now inhabit all hemispheres of the globe. Indeed ESPN and the Deuce will carry twenty of the twenty-eight bowls.

The other major contributor to growth is the ever expanding legion of sponsors. It would seem there is a sponsor for every bowl and a bowl for every sponsor. From the Outback to the Outhouse someone is willing to put their name on a bowl at the cost of a minor king's ransom. One of the first of the sponsors, and in some strange way the best known still, was the Poulan Company of Shreveport, Louisiana, who decided to put the name of one of their products on the Independence Bowl in 1991. Out of such marketing genius was born the Poulan Weed Eater Independence Bowl, a name that will live as long as bowl jokes are told. Now every bowl seems to have a sponsor, and indeed several sponsors, in the cluttered Bowl World of 2004.

Another contributor to the blight of bowl games is the NCAA and its member institutions who simply cannot turn down anywhere from \$500,000 to \$14M to send their football teams off to these games. Oddly though some of these institutions of higher learning lose money going to bowl games as they spend all their rewards on transportation, entertainment, alumni, boosters, political allies, baubles for the staff, and other hangers-on who roam the halls of intercollegiate athletics in search of a freebee.

Then there are the bowl committees who have a bevy of executives, staff, and volunteers whose job it is to put on these grand and grand-less events. Top bowl officials are paid in at least six figures for their strenuous effort, including traveling to college football games to scout teams that might be invited to their bowl, even if there is already a set agreement with conferences as to which teams will actually participate in the bowls.

What in the end makes it all go is money. Sponsorships, television rights, radio rights, and ticket sales, all contribute to the gross revenues. Over the years the sums involved have skyrocketed as payouts to the teams have reached \$160M this year. Last year a midsize bowl in Florida generated revenues approaching \$9M.

When all is said and done the bowls, like all else associated with college football, are awash in money. In the end the reason is fairly simple. People go to the games, bring dollars to the bowl city with them, and others stay at home watching the games on television. Even the most obscure and dismal match-up seems capable of generating a large enough audience to attract sponsors for the telecast, reminding us once again that the purpose of television is to bring a large number of people together to sell them something. Anything capable of doing that will be televised, and when a bowl game is no longer capable of generating a sufficient audience it will go away.

Two other events of note this weekend were on the NFL side of football. Peyton Manning passed Dan Marino's single season touchdown passing record by notching numbers 48 and 49 against the San Diego Chargers. Manning's record setting toss coupled with a two-point conversion tied the game with less than a minute remaining, and the Colts went on to win in overtime.

Like Marino, Manning has yet to win a Super Bowl, despite the spectacular career numbers. Marino's record setting year of 1984 was in fact his only appearance in a Super Bowl. Manning hopes not to repeat that pattern. At the University of Tennessee despite 33 team and 8 Southeastern Conference records he was not able to lead his team to a National Championship, or in fact to a big game win over the University of Florida.

So despite this record the only one that will count for most fans will be taking the Colts to the Super Bowl and winning there. All other records set and held by Peyton Manning will be in the shadow of the Super Bowl issue.

If you have seen Manning at work, and indeed if you saw Marino at work, you know that this doesn't really matter. The athletic perfection, the sheer beauty of both these passers in rhythm, dissecting defenses and hitting their spot is more than enough. The smooth flow of Manning at his best is a wonder of athleticism and no Super Bowl is needed to validate such superior skill and performance.

Finally, there is the story this weekend of the death of Reggie White, The Minister of Defense, at the age of 43. White was another player of consummate skill and one of the best ever to play at the linebacker position. He was a man who was much admired by his teammates and opponents as attested to by the tributes to him this past weekend. I must say I always enjoyed watching White dominate a game from the defensive side of the line.

My only reservation about White, and something that got too little mention this past weekend was his unfortunate comments on homosexuality and his stereotyping of various racial and ethnic groups in a speech before the Wisconsin legislature. He later expressed regret for his comments on race and ethnicity but never backed away from his condemnation of gays. Nor did he ever change his views on female reporters in the locker room, charging that they were "ogling" him. All of which is to say that Reggie White was a great football player but that doesn't make him ipso facto a great human being.

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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