

# Super Bowl XLII and the culture of excess

2-1-2008

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## Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "Super Bowl XLII and the culture of excess" (2008). *On Sport and Society*. 787.  
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/787>

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE  
Super Bowl XLII and the culture of excess  
FEBRUARY 1, 2008

"Nothing succeeds like success."

"Nothing exceeds like excess"  
(Except perhaps avarice and greed)

Or in the case of the National Football League:

"Nothing succeeds like excess."

As we enter Super Bowl weekend we are reminded of these self-evident truths.

So here we are once again at America's mid-winter festival, the national holiday for the national pastime; Super Bowl XLII where Thorstein Veblen's characterization of the leisure class in the twilight of the 19th century seems more appropriate than ever. Conspicuous consumption, conspicuous waste, and conspicuous leisure are phrases as apt now as they were then to describe the antics of those with more disposable income than they know what to with. I have searched far and wide for a more accurate or colorful vocabulary, but in the end I keep coming back to Veblen.

One of the great things about the United States is that you don't have to be obscenely rich to deal in excess. Not only the rich but also the comfortable American middle and working classes can practice these virtues at a level appropriate to their income.

At the National Football League, the television networks, and the advertising agencies, this reality is understood and celebrated for the profits it produces. It is also appreciated in many quarters, not least of all the political, where a distracted public can be easily hoodwinked for whatever purpose is needed. In Rome they referred to this as Bread and Circuses. In the United States we prefer to think of it all as a natural phenomenon, if not a natural right.

Welcome to Glendale, Arizona, where Americans gather this week to pay tribute to themselves in this annual ritual and celebration. Each year there seems to be some new wrinkle to the week. Perhaps the most notable difference about Super Bowl XLII is that many people actually care about the game. The fact that

the New England Patriots are seeking a perfect season has caused many revelers to focus on the game.

The spotlight is on the NFL's odd couple, Bill Belichick and Tom Brady, the yin and yang of New England. Belichick is one of the worst dressers in NFL history, while Brady is a perfect example of what was once called a "clothes horse." Belichick has the personality of a slug, while Brady is bright and witty. Belichick is a poster boy for middle age lethargy, while Brady is the young glamorous stud on the make. What they share in common is the quest for perfection, not just for this season but game by game and play by play. Neither has ever betrayed the slightest note of panic or loss of control. They embody two types of cool, the quiet and the smooth, both of which are admired in this culture.

This interest in the game is so distracting that some have forgotten the real purpose of this weekend. It is time to fuel the money machine.

As usual, the quest for tickets is producing some marvelous tales of excess. Stub Hub, one of many Internet scalping services, had tickets priced from \$2,450 to \$19,446 with the average being \$4,300. Face value of these tickets is \$700 and \$900.

A retired New Jersey truck driver and Giants fan for most of his 71 years is heading to the Super Bowl. He and his wife have rearranged their vacation plans and have tickets costing \$2,800 each. This will allow them to "see" the game from the upper tier in the corner of the end zone.

A Massachusetts man purchased a package deal on-line from RazorGator. He got three nights at a hotel, breakfast included, and three tickets for himself and his two sons, for a mere \$29,385. A post-game stop in Vegas will complete this little venture in conspicuous consumption and conspicuous waste.

Another enthusiastic Giants fan is spending more than \$40,000 for a package that includes four tickets on the 50-yard line, hotel stays, and pre- and post-game parties. He is taking his three sons, who are 9, 11 and 14. Presumably they will not be attending the Maxim party. The rationale for this venture in the irrational is simple, "I see it as a once in a lifetime event, so the stars are aligned and we're off." There is apparently a new element in the American Dream.

Ticket prices have been increasing on the open market at a rate mirroring the rise in advertising prices. Stub Hub reports that starting in 2004 tickets went from an average of \$2,290, to \$2,659 the next year, \$3,009 the next, and last year they jumped to \$4,004. There is no indication that this market has contracted in what is essentially a recession free zone in the American economy.

In the most democratic of spending zones, the gambling venues, the numbers are in some ways even more mind bending. Last year, bettors in Vegas put down \$94.5M and this year they will take it over \$100M on Super Bowl betting. In the wider market across the United States and the world estimates are that \$10B will be bet on this marvelous little game.

The most Veblenesque bets are found in the category of props, or proposition bets. These include such things as who wins the coin toss, the over/under on the elapsed time for the national anthem, and who gets off the team bus first when it arrives at the stadium. There are over 300 betting options on prop bets available to those who seek to spend most conspicuously.

And so on Sunday across this great land of opportunity, cities and towns will roll up the sidewalks, and fans will retire to a public watering hole, to someone's home party, or simply to their own den with a few friends and family. Here they will work out their own version of Veblen's vision on this our mid-winter national holiday.

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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