

Excesses of the Super Bowl

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Excesses of the Super Bowl
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From its modest beginnings in 1966 at the AFL-NFL Championship Game in Los Angeles down to Super Bowl XLIV, it has become increasingly apparent that Super Sunday has grown exponentially and in the process has become a bloated monster. Over the past quarter century or more Super Sunday has illustrated the ability of a sporting event to offer a distorted and exaggerated version of social reality and social values in America and the Super Bowl has done this on a grand, glorious, and obscene scale.

It is difficult to say precisely when the Super Bowl reached larger than life proportions, but certainly by the end of the 1970s it was there. At Super Bowl XV in 1981 the New York Times headline claimed that 70,000 fans made "New Orleans Throb with Super Bowl Mania." Gerald Eskenazi's account described a "gridlock" of people in the French Quarter and an influx of "tens of millions" of dollars into the New Orleans economy. The extravagances of the fans and everyone associated with the game had reached extraordinary proportions. By this time only the vocabulary created by Thorstein Veblen, the Norwegian-American economist who tracked the habits of the rich in the late 19th century, was capable of fully capturing the scene with his brilliant phrases "conspicuous consumption," "conspicuous leisure," and "conspicuous waste."

The fact that all of this takes place around a football game would have delighted Veblen who once observed that football is to education as bullfighting is to agriculture. Indeed Veblen's use of the phrases "predatory barbarism," "pecuniary emulation," and "vicarious consumption" also seem particularly well suited to any description of our distinctive national holiday.

One of the most common measures of excess has been the price of commercial time. At the first Super Bowl in 1967 a 30-second commercial on CBS sold for \$37,500. By the early 80's the price for 30 seconds reached \$400,000, by the end of the decade it was a whopping \$800,000. Thirty seconds of advertising reached the \$1M mark in 1995, climbed to \$2.1M in 2000. In 2007 the price tag was \$2.6M, and estimates for this year range from \$2.6M to \$3.01M.

The first claims of a positive economic impact by the Super Bowl on the host city were made for Miami at the second Super Bowl.

Hotels were sold out for the first time in mid-January, normally a quiet season following the Holidays. Eastern Airlines reported brisk business into Miami as it took part in package tours being offered for the Super Bowl. The best restaurants had waiting lists, while the vendors at the game expected record sales from the sellout crowd.

Super Bowl V in Miami was the first game officially designated by Roman Numerals which for the first time appeared on the Tickets, although on the Official Logo of the Super Bowl Roman Numerals were used for Super Bowl II. In the press, the term "Super Bowl" was used from the beginning.

The Commissioner's party in the Imperial Age of Pete Rozelle became one of the biggest and most opulent events as well as the most sought after party invitations of the festival. After a modest beginning it quickly outgrew the capacity of any mere hotel ballroom. This led to some magnificent venues for the event. At Super Bowl VII in L.A. the Commissioner played host aboard the Queen Mary. At Super Bowl VIII in Houston, the party occupied the expanse of the Astrodome. A giant barbecue, with pigs roasting on spits, dotted the floor of the facility. Commissioner's parties in Miami were held at Hialeah Racetrack and at Miami Airport's International Terminal just prior to its opening. For that venue the NFL hired 600 musicians from fourteen Caribbean nations to entertain.

The cost of the 1978 NFL party was \$75,000, a figure that drew some critical comment. Pete Rozelle responded to the critics and unconsciously proved their point by noting that it may be fashionable to knock money and the Super Bowl but "you think about money all the time with the Super Bowl, more than any other sports event. That's because it's a one-shot event." An Oakland Raider executive was closer to the mark: "the measurement of what it means is this: It's the victory. It's the cult of Number Oneism."

Over the years the number and size of the parties have grown and in some circles the Commissioner's bash has been eclipsed by the ESPN Party, the Playboy Party, and the Maxim Party.

Super Bowl VII in L.A. in 1973 had offered the first major signs of the wedding of business and the Super Bowl. Salesmen were there as rewards for their prowess in what the New York Times called: "the perfect marriage of sports and commerce that the National Football League's Championship game has become."

Product tie-ins became commonplace with, as an example, Sears selling sweaters and pajamas, bed spreads, pennants and posters.

At the public level, excess has always been a part of the scene. At Super Bowl XXII in San Diego a Super Salad was tossed in Tijuana. It was a 14-foot long, 8-foot wide, and 18-inch deep Caesar Salad made from 840 heads of Romaine lettuce, 1,400 ounces of garlic oil, 175 lemons, 350 cups of croutons, 980 ounces of Parmesan cheese and 840 eggs.

Arriving in Minneapolis for Super Bowl XXVI, visitors to the Twin Cities were greeted at the airport by pianists playing on four grand pianos. In downtown Minneapolis, 25 tons of heated sand was dumped in the International Market Square to accommodate 500 people for a beach party. Veblen would have savored this example of the reversal of nature. A sister party was hosted by former Washington Redskin John Riggins in Cancun, Mexico.

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.

Some 200 corporations took part in the Super Bowl XXX celebration. Large corporations flew in hundreds of employees and spent up to \$5M. Smaller companies wined and dined clients at five-figure costs. There were thirty-five corporate tents set up in Miami near the stadium for Super Bowl XXX. When this practice began in 1984 there were 12 tents in Tampa. Bigger is better and better will never be big enough.

By 2001 if you didn't arrive by private jet for the Super Bowl it might be asked, why come at all? It is estimated that over 1000 private jets landed at the several airports in the Tampa Bay area starting on Super Thursday. This represented a doubling of the number of private and corporate jets that arrived for College Basketball's Final Four in 1999.

If private planes and helicopters seemed too plebeian, then "Silent Wings II," offered an alternative. This modest 104-foot yacht featured a staff of four including a gourmet chef. The luxury accommodation offered a Jacuzzi along with "his" and "her" bathrooms in the largest of the suites. This package came with six luxury suite tickets to the big game and a chauffeured Rolls-Royce. The cost? A modest \$100,000. The Super Bowl was

consistently the priciest event in Sportsworld and of course worth every tax deductible dollar of it.

Sex and the Super Bowl are another important pairing 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 machismo and their cash to grateful clients, giving new meaning to the term "half-time show." New Orleans may be the best Super Bowl city in this respect, but places like Scottsdale, Arizona offered twenty-five escort services, and in Minneapolis the escort services offered a ten percent discount for the Super Bowl. South Beach will most certainly not be found lacking in this respect.

A former prostitute reported that "Pimps see the Super Bowl as a moneymaking opportunity sent by God." Indeed members of the world's oldest profession have found the Super Bowl an extremely active venue. From special service in the private suites to the halftime quickie, the demand side of the economic equation is highly active.

By 1978 Social Analysts were examining the rituals of the Super Bowl. Warren Farrell, author of *The Liberated Man*, a study of masculinity in America, found the televised event the centerpiece of the Super Bowl. Males in America would watch, analyze, and critique the game and be ready on Monday to display their expertise in the office. Farrell pointed out a linkage within "a closed circuit effect" which ties "televised professional football, masculinity, anxiety, sexism, patriotism, religion and war," and to question any element in the circuit is to risk having your masculinity questioned. A "mini-all-male club" has been created where women serve as water-boys bringing in the beer and chips.

In times of national crisis, patriotism is put on excessive display. There is nothing else quite like a Super-sized American Flag covering the entire football field while jet fighters or stealth bombers buzz the stadium at the conclusion of the national anthem.

The halftime show is one of the few areas where the Super Bowl has come up short, as it usually features a musical group whose popularity has long since passed its peak. This makes some sense as it provides musical nostalgia for the current generation of successful business executives who populate the Super Bowl scene.

To me the greatest pre-game and halftime combination occurred in 1993 in Pasadena when O.J. Simpson handled the coin toss, and Michael Jackson was the featured halftime entertainment. Who knew then what a marvelous and historic daily double this would be? And of course Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake will live forever in Super Bowl lore for inserting the words "wardrobe malfunction" into everyday American speech.

For those who wonder about the mixing of religious views with the Super Bowl in the form of Tim Tebow's Miracle commercial sponsored by Focus on the Family, it should be pointed out that the only thing new in the mix is that it will now appear on the sacred stage of Super Bowl Commercials.

In the past one of the most interesting web sites was www.gospelcom.net. At this location it was revealed that Dr. Norman Vincent Peale said at Super Bowl X: "If Jesus were alive today, he would be at the Super Bowl." Here you could order your Super Bowl outreach kit so that you could have a Christian Super Bowl party in your own home. The Kit came with a 12 minute video (ideal for the halftime show) hosted by CNN's Fred Hickman and featuring All-Pros Brent Jones and Steve Wallace of the Super Bowl Champion Forty-Niners. Jones and Wallace discuss their close friendship and mutual faith in Jesus Christ. Other players offer testimonies on such subjects as Racial Harmony and Salvation.

All of this was available at The Reggie White Christian Super Bowl Web page and came with pre-game, half-time, and post-game prayer service suggestions. A Reggie White Video was credited with 30 young people being saved in Melbourne, while a reported 4,200 Reggie White Super Bowl parties led to 2,500 decisions for Christ.

Each year thereafter the religious involvement seemed to be one of the largest growth areas of the Super Bowl extravaganza. Tim Tebow joins the parade with his "anti-abortion" or "pro-life" message, depending on which side of issue you find yourself, while CBS strikes a simultaneous blow for free speech and hypocrisy. Tebow is now part of a Super Bowl tradition, and if Reggie White produced all those conversions, the mind boggles at what the Messiah of Gator Nation will beget.

In the end, of course, when all is said and done, much more is said than done, and that is as it should be at the Super Bowl.

In 1925 sportswriter Bill McGeehan called Babe Ruth "Our National Exaggeration." A better descriptive phrase for the Super Bowl would be hard to find.

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.

(You may have noticed that this edition of Sport and Society is about twice the normal length, but that just seems appropriate for the Super Bowl)

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