



The Super Bowl at 50 or L

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ABSTRACT

In the short span of a half-century the Super Bowl has grown from a modest championship game between two football leagues into an outsized mid-winter holiday co-produced by the National Football League and the combined efforts of the American advertising and television industries. It has grown from a one-day into a two-week festival featuring a vast range of events, parties, and a championship football game. Fifty years on, half of the population of the United States and a worldwide television audience participate in Super Bowl activities and festivities either live or virtually. Television, marketing, and a wide range of media platforms have aided and abetted the growth of this celebration of football and consumption. Although there are many ways to describe the Super Bowl it is the nineteenth century vocabulary of the economist Thorstein Veblen that best captures its essence. In Veblen's words it is a case of 'conspicuous consumption' now running on steroids.

KEYWORDS

Super Bowl; National Football League; American Football League; television; Thorstein Veblen

For those of us who remember the first Super Bowl it seems a bit surprising that the National Football League championship game has reached age fifty. Even more surprising may be the fact that this championship football game has morphed into a mid-winter national celebration on a scale that dwarfs all other sporting events in this country and rivals the biggest events across the globe. There are several stories within this development. First there is the narrative of growth, which resembles a tidal wave across a wide swath that engulfs and subsumes all in its path. Second there is a question of how and why this happened and involves obsessions over football, marketing genius, and the power of television. Third is the meaning of the Super Bowl as a cultural phenomenon that has risen to the level of national holiday.¹ Where does the story begin?

In the 1960s the challenge presented to the National Football League from the newly formed American Football League led to a costly war between the two organizations. The war ended with a merger of the NFL and AFL, an act of economic necessity and survival. One of the first fruits of the merger was the 'AFL-NFL World Championship Game' between the Green Bay Packers of the NFL and the Kansas City Chiefs of the AFL. This official yet awkward name was quickly replaced in the press by the term 'Super Bowl' and in some cases 'Super bowl'. The *New York Times*, *Sports Illustrated*, and the *Chicago American*, used 'Super

Bowl'. On the Packers home turf, the Milwaukee papers, the *Journal* and the *Sentinel*, used 'Super bowl' with the latter referring to the victorious Green Bay Packers as 'Supermen'. If that was not enough, 'Super' someone erected a sign at the Green Bay airport identifying the city as 'Super Titledown U.S.A.'²

Where the name Super Bowl originated is obscured by differing although not necessarily mutually exclusive stories. One version attributes the name to Lamar Hunt, founder of the AFL who suggested the name at a meeting of league officials after seeing his children playing with the 'Super Ball', a ball that bounced higher than normal balls and was popular with children. No one in the league meeting, including Hunt, cared much for the name and NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle hated it. Whether the press picked up the name from Hunt or some NFL official, or whether someone just started using it is difficult to say, but what is known is that the press picked it up quickly. The following year, Super Bowl II, the name appeared on the Official Logo for the game, although not yet on the tickets. The game programme for the third Super Bowl did use the term on its cover and the term appeared on game tickets for the first time at Super Bowl IV.³

As for the use of Roman Numerals that practice too had a chequered beginning. Roman Numerals first appeared on the Game Logo at Super Bowl II, appeared on the game programme for Super Bowl III, was used in the press for Super Bowl IV, but did not appear on the tickets until Super Bowl V. The term 'World Championship Game' remained on the tickets though Super Bowl IV.⁴

Why Roman Numerals? Clark Haponstall of the Sports Management Department of Rice University claims that Commissioner Rozelle's decision to use Roman Numerals was made to avoid any confusion over the year of the game because the NFL season crossed two calendar years. Rozelle also thought 'it kind of gave that gladiator feel and was something that made the game special'.⁵

Perhaps Haponstall was correct and it was as simple as an attempt to avoid confusion. Whatever it was it seems that, particularly in retrospect, it was a perfect choice. Commissioner Rozelle would develop a reputation as a boy genius, a marketing wizard, and, above all, an all-powerful ruling figure over the league, a kind of Caesar Augustus in the imperial age of the NFL and America. He was after all the builder of an Empire that became the envy of the world of sport. In practice the Roman numerals became a marketing signifier of distinction that has set this game off from all other sporting events.⁶

It would have been difficult at Super Bowl I to foresee what a huge event the Super Bowl would become. First, the venue itself was not the first choice of the NFL. Rozelle wanted the game played in the Rose Bowl but college football forces prevented it, insisting that the amateur purity of college sport could not be associated with the crassness of the professionals who played the game for cash over glory. Instead the game took place at the Los Angeles Coliseum where the 90,000-seat facility would only attract two-thirds of its capacity. Television ratings were an impressive 65 million viewers, but not in the same stratosphere as they would subsequently be. The blackout of a 75-mile radius around Los Angeles, one of the largest television markets in the country, no doubt decreased the size of the TV audience. Perhaps more important was the fact that both NBC and CBS televised the game, and they had little difficulty selling out their commercial time at a modest rate of \$80,000 per minute.⁷

The party scene in Los Angeles got little mention, although the game did attract a number of Hollywood celebrities. Among those sighted were Bob Hope, Jack Lemmon, and Henry

Fonda who were seated adjacent to the Packer fans led by Marie Lombardi wearing a gold-striped dress.⁸

The sight of over 30,000 empty seats at this first World Championship Game did not please Commissioner Rozelle. On the flight back to NFL headquarters Rozelle told his top aides, 'Never again is there going to be a championship game that isn't a sellout'. With time for serious planning for the second championship game in Miami the NFL built the foundation on which the Super Bowl would stand and expand over the course of five decades. The basics were to define target audiences, develop group sales, and to market the game. The targets would be 'television advertisers and sponsors ... along with media organizations, sporting goods manufacturers, and anyone else with business ties to pro football'. The game was promoted as a 'big mid-winter, "must attend" media event ... and a gala celebration lasting for an entire weekend'.⁹

Alvin 'Pete' Rozelle was a master marketing man with many contacts in New York City. A week before Super Bowl II the game was declared a sell-out. All tickets were sold, none given away. The price structure was changed slightly with the middle level price lowered by \$2, making the prices 12, 8 and 6 dollars. Not simply the game was marketed. 'Basically we were following the college bowl game pattern selling the warm weather, the beach, the golf, the restaurants, and the entertainment of the host city. It would be a gala weekend no matter who played'.¹⁰

Indeed, it was, as Super Bowl II had very high ratings and favourable media comment. There was pageantry with an Air Force fly over and a halftime show featuring the Grambling University band. Another Packer victory rounded off a near perfect day.¹¹

Super Bowl II in Miami foreshadowed a number of the markers of 'Superness'. The first claims of economic impact for the host city were made at Super Bowl II. Tourism in Florida in January usually went through a post-New Year's lull that picked up at the end of the month. Not so for Super Bowl II on January 14. By Super Bowl III hotel rooms were becoming dear as hoteliers reported selling out their accommodations. Eastern Airlines flights to Miami were fully booked. Travel agents were selling Super Bowl package tours. Miami restaurants were full with waiting lists for those who had not booked far enough in advance. An estimated \$50 million was poured into the Miami economy. As for the game a sell-out was expected and achieved. Something clearly was beginning to happen around this game and the mid-January weekend as the corporate world became a major participant in it.¹²

It was Super Bowl III that sealed the appeal of this new American sports attraction. Again the game was in Miami and this time the new media star of pro football, Joe 'Willie' Namath, was the major attraction. On Thursday of Super Bowl Week at the Miami Touchdown Club, Namath was being honoured as the Player of the Year. He thanked the single girls of New York as other players had thanked their wives. Then from the back of the room someone shouted to Namath, 'we're going to kick your ass'. Namath's response turned out to be prophetic and therefore memorable: 'Hey, I got news for you. We're gonna win the game. I guarantee it'.¹³ The Super Bowl now had its first major piece of folklore and it is quoted multiple times in every week prior to each Super Bowl since.¹⁴

The game was now big enough to capture the attention and elicit a comment from Marshall McLuhan, the internationally acclaimed media analyst and academic. He described the Super Bowl as 'a world theater ... The world is a happening. In the speed-up of the electronic age, we want things to happen. This offers us a mosaic that the fans love – everything is in

action at once'. He added that the games of every culture hold up a mirror to that culture while instant replay offered every fan another chance at participation.¹⁵

In the game itself the New York Jets dominated the Baltimore Colts and Joe Namath emerged as the toast of the town. Many observers of the NFL considered this game a key to solidifying the place of the Super Bowl in American sport as for the first time an AFL team had defeated the NFL team. Others argue that this did not happen until the Super Bowl IV when Kansas City dominated the Minnesota Vikings demonstrating that Super Bowl III had not been a fluke.¹⁶

For Super Bowl IV there was a change of venue. The league decided to move the game from city to city as long as the host site featured warm weather. As the party atmosphere during the week was growing, what better place for the big game than the city known for its decadence? New Orleans was a natural. Sportswriter George Vecsey saw this as a great matchup of 'Old New Orleans and nouveau riche football' with the French-Spanish city 'a perfect backdrop for the gaudy spectacle the barkers are trying to create'.¹⁷

The levels of display and spectacle were growing. There were 3,000 pigeons and one turtle dove released during pre-game ceremonies; a tableaux of the Battle of New Orleans and a Mardi Gras parade; Pat O'Brien read the words to the national anthem, backed by a chorus and band from Southern University and the trumpet of Doc Severinsen. It was called the second largest bash in America, second only to Mardi Gras. Halftime pageantry included many acts from the Ed Sullivan show, and the opera singer Marguerite Piazza offered her rendition of 'Basin Street Blues'. Astronauts, baseball stars, and celebrities were there to be seen, brought in to validate the importance of the event.¹⁸

The only downside was the weather, rain and cold that turned the outdated Tulane Stadium into a bit of a quagmire. There were shortages of hotel rooms and transportation. The pre-game pageantry had issues when a hot air balloon Viking failed to go upward and instead drifted into the stands. Despite these setbacks the party atmosphere was sustained, for it was after all New Orleans.¹⁹

Looking back on the game over 40 years later New Orleans residents remember it somewhat differently. Some talked of the neighbourhood feel of Tulane Stadium, people parking cars in their yards, and the nuns parking cars to raise money for the Ursuline Academy. There was no media frenzy or corporate dominance of tickets as a large percentage of the fans were locals and ticket prices low. There was very little tailgating and no security at the gates. In the press box the writers fought wind, cold, and the leaks in roof.²⁰

Don Weiss, one of the leading architects of the modern Super Bowl as the NFL's public relations and operations guru from the late 1960s through the early 1990s, pointed to another sign that the Super Bowl was increasing its status:

As if we needed it, one more reliable indicator proved to us that we had a hit on our hands. The instant the Super Bowl's drawing power become clear, celestial personalities swarmed around the game like moths lured to a dazzling light: entertainers, media moguls, corporate moguls, scions from the advertising world, sports heroes, and 'groupies' of every persuasion. Every time we turned around, people were clamouring to be part of our great January celebration.

In addition, there were agents who were trying their best to get their clients or companies into the Super Bowl mix. Weiss hit the mark when he wrote: 'The Super Bowl was more than a sports event. It was more than a media event. It was one big party. And everyone wanted to be there, even if some of them didn't have game tickets'.²¹

This was how it all began and by the end of the 1970s the Super Bowl had reached its position as a burgeoning national holiday, and a ‘must see’ and ‘must be seen at’ festival. In every aspect of the week-long event, the Super Bowl had achieved ‘Superness’. From the 1970s onward it continued to grow geometrically. All now was simply multiplication and elaboration. At the Monday post-mortem with the press following Super Bowl IV, Commissioner Rozelle underlined the reality, pointing out that 23 million households were tuned in to the game and that the audience share was 69 per cent of sets in use. ‘More people watched yesterday’s Super Bowl game than watched Neil Armstrong walk on the moon last July’, Rozelle added.²²

Each year the show got bigger if not better, and by the time the Super Bowl reached its ‘L’ edition the NFL had set out the formulas and requirements for the mid-winter celebration. The dimensions of the Super Bowl have never been laid out in such detail as they were in ‘Super Bowl LII-Host City Bid Specifications & Requirements’. This 154-page document reveals, among other things, the scope of the event. No detail is too large or too small to be laid out for potential bidders, and the demands made on host cities are on such a scale as to indicate the magnitude of the Super Bowl.²³

The governing rule is set out at the start in clear terms. The NFL Events Department is the ‘lead entity’ responsible for ‘the planning, management and execution of the Super Bowl, working closely with many other NFL departments, including Communications, Broadcasting, Football Operations, Finance, Security, Legal, Marketing & Sales, and Consumer Products’. The NFL was in control of this event in all its multitudinous dimensions. All commercial operations are owned or controlled by the NFL including rights and licensing.²⁴

All aspects of stadium operations are handled by the NFL including parking, concessions, ATM machines, merchandise, credit cards, programmes, ticketing, staffing, and a host of other details. The Super Bowl ATMs must take only the debit and credit cards that are approved by the NFL. The NFL takes 100% of ticket revenue and handles all ticket distribution and allocation. Tales of NFL Commissioners and team owners scalping tickets are not mentioned.²⁵

The NFL requires a tax exemption from state, county, city, and any other local taxes. Any NFL transactions that are not tax exempt must be paid by the Host Committee. The host city must create a Clean Zone, essentially a Super Bowl DMZ around the stadium that includes the NFL Experience sites and the headquarters hotels used by the NFL. The police for this operation will be supplied by the host city – at the city’s cost. And, of course, the police will be at the command of the NFL. Among their law enforcement duties will be to work on the anti-counterfeiting unit whose major concern is suppressing counterfeit official NFL merchandise.²⁶

The NFL also requires three golf courses to be supplied for the NFL Foundation Golf Classic, and two bowling alleys to be provided for the NFL Celebrity Bowling Classic. If the game is held in a winter climate, the NFL reserves the right to use the golf courses at any other time of the year. If there is cost involved in any of this, the host will pay the bill. All the rooms in at least one hotel will be taken over by the NFL, and all meeting and conference space provided without cost. All hotels are required to offer room rebates to the league.²⁷

In the ‘Transportation’ section of the document, as well as in many other sections, there is one recurring phrase: ‘at no cost to the NFL’ or some variation thereof. This seems to be the ‘Super Bowl Mantra’ of the NFL. Similarly, the phrase ‘exclusive use’ and variations

on it are found across the length of the document. The needs for limos, shuttle buses, and school buses as well as secure and exclusive parking facilities are listed for these and other NFL vehicles.²⁸

The official NFL regulations require that the Host City 'will be responsible for providing' practice facilities for the participating teams equivalent to what is normal for the NFL team located at the host site. There are detailed specifications for these facilities down to water, ice, laundry, and catering. This section rambles on for several pages covering all imaginable items, and some that exceed the limits of the imagination.²⁹

The requirements and lists of needs spread over the 154 pages reveal an insatiable appetite for freebies for the National Football League. If this seems excessive it also is a tribute to the power of the Super Bowl and the ability of a \$9 billion business to masquerade as a sport. It was not hyperbole when the NFL referred to the Super Bowl as an unofficial holiday.³⁰

The halftime show became another measure of Superness and it took a leap forward when the Walt Disney Company took over the role of halftime director. In the summer of 1976 Bob Jani, Disney's director of entertainment called Don Weiss, set up a meeting, and made a presentation for the halftime show at the Rose Bowl for Super Bowl XI. His pitch was impressive and incredibly enthusiastic. Weiss and the NFL accepted the Disney pitch. Jani put together a card show for 103,000 people in the Rose Bowl that was part of 'It's a Small World' theme for the show. Disney cast members, some 1,500, would help energize the crowd. From this point on halftime was a blockbuster entertainment of its own.³¹

The change in halftime entertainment from marching band shows to choreographed mass spectacles really began the year before, at Super Bowl X in Miami. The theme was the kick-off of America's Bicentennial. The Bicentennial logo appeared all over the Orange Bowl and the Super Bowl logo also reflecting the patriotic theme. 'Up With People,' a singing and dancing troupe sponsored by the conservative group Moral Re-Armament to counter the 1960s and 1970s 'counter culture,' put on the Bicentennial extravaganza – the first of four shows that the organization staged at the Super Bowl.³²

The NFL reached out to fans of all ages. In 1975 during the Bicentennial observance, the NFL tied itself to the patriotic celebration by sponsoring an essay competition for high school students. All those from the ages of 14 to 18 were eligible to enter the competition on the subject, 'The Role of the NFL in American History'. First prize was a \$10,000 scholarship and an all-expenses paid trip for themselves and their parents to Super Bowl X. Second prize was a \$5,000 scholarship. Ten runners up received a \$1,000 scholarship.³³

The next big show came at Super Bowl XXII in San Diego when Bob Jani, now at Radio City Music Hall, brought the iconic Rockettes to halftime. They danced onto a stage that was designed to look like a grand piano, with 88 white grand pianos ringing the field. The 1960s pop star Chubby Checker was featured at the keyboards. Logistics were difficult, but at the Super Bowl that was never an obstacle, only a challenge. At Super Bowl XXVII there was a change of style with a big headliner replacing the choreographed groups. Pop music superstar Michael Jackson provided the half-time show along with 3,500 youngsters from Southern California. A card section at the Rose Bowl did an encore.³⁴

Pre-game festivities also evolved over the years. The National Anthem was joined in 1969 by the Pledge of Allegiance, an oath led by the astronauts from Apollo 8, the first manned-flight to orbit the moon. Military flyovers also became standard and soon served as a climax for the national anthem.³⁵

The National Anthem was from the beginning a means for the NFL to tie itself to patriotism and performing the anthem at the Super Bowl was an honour coveted by many. As time went by and the Super Bowl approached the status of a national holiday, football-field sized flags were spread across the gridiron for the anthem. What is generally considered the greatest of these performances came in 1991 at Super Bowl XXV in Tampa on the eve of Operation Desert Storm, the US-led invasion to retake Kuwait from Iraq during the Gulf War. The NFL took the occasion to turn this Super Bowl into a patriotic storm of their own. The featured singer was Whitney Houston who delivered a national anthem that electrified the stadium and the television audience. It has such power that Houston's record company issued it as a single and it moved immediately to the top of the charts. After the September 11 attacks ten years later, Houston's recording returned to the charts.³⁶

Television played a major role in the growth of the Super Bowl and at the same time reflected that growth. There are any number of ways to measure this. In terms of the deployment of the technical hardware in production the networks quickly escalated their coverage. At Super Bowl II, CBS used twelve cameras including one in the Goodyear Blimp, along with four video machines for isolated replays and highlights including stop-action and slow motion in colour. At Super Bowl XXIII, NBC deployed 23 cameras and 12 replay machines while for Super Bowl XXV in Tampa, ABC had 22 cameras operating around the stadium. On and on it went. Ten years later, CBS used 34 cameras while introducing freeze-frame technology.³⁷ The coming of flat screens and HD television added yet another dimension to the technology, and the Super Bowl has stimulated sales of these TVs. Consumer Electronics Association surveys have found that almost a quarter of television purchase are made specifically for the Super Bowl.³⁸

Television, of course, remained the true gauge of the NFL's popularity. With the Super Bowl wrapped into contracts, the league drove the price of the contracts and of commercial time ever upward. The cost of thirty seconds of commercial time for the first Super Bowl telecast was \$40,000. By 2010 the price jumped to the \$3 million level. At each and every turn television was both growth engine and the measure of growth.³⁹

Television generated money and interest and more money. 1981 was a record year for television ratings and it coincidentally was the year for contract renegotiation between the league and the networks. It was a year in which CBS made \$25 million from its NFL operations. In 1982, CBS, NBC, and ABC signed a record five-year \$2 billion contract with the NFL. In 1985, the Commissioner decided to bring ABC into the Super Bowl rotation. In the end ABC agreed to pay the NFL \$650 million for the rights to Monday Night Football which included special prime time games on Thursday or Sunday, and \$17 million for Super Bowl XIX. NBC followed agreeing to a deal at \$590 million. CBS, after some hesitation, signed for \$730 million.⁴⁰ The rapidly escalating prices were driven because the networks wanted the plum prize of the package, the Super Bowl.

Across five decades, television ratings followed an upward trajectory with only a few exceptions. In 2016, the game drew 111.9 million viewers and that was down for the second consecutive year. On the other hand, this was the third largest audience in history, with record audiences for six of the previous seven years. Four million others streamed the game, making up the difference. The largest TV audience for a Super Bowl was in 2015 with 114.4 million viewers. The second largest was in 2014. Network and NFL officials point out that Super Bowl audiences get undercounted because they do not calculate the number of people watching the game in large groups at parties and at sports bars. Nearly

17 million tweets were sent during the game by nearly 4 million different authors during Super Bowl 50(L). Over 72% of television sets in use were tuned to the game. To round out the story, *Sports Illustrated* reported that the top seven rated television shows in US history were Super Bowls.⁴¹

Television commercials provide another window on the growth of the Super Bowl – first reflected in the price of commercial time as it skyrocketed, then in production costs and quality, and finally in the fascination that television viewers developed for the commercials. In some ways, the commercials became the centerpiece of the Super Bowl as they were much anticipated by the viewing public. This led to various informal voting on the ‘best’ commercials and the posting of them online when that technology emerged, first post-game and more recently several days and, in some cases, weeks before the game. Sneak previews were also developed for the commercials. Some believe that these short films are the finest quality of film making extant, and advertising agencies used them to exhibit their creative and marketing skills.

The commercial that is now considered the most powerful as well as of the highest artistic quality was the 1984 Ridley Scott production that introduced the Apple Macintosh to the nation. *Forbes* offers this description:

The commercial showed the future in a monochromatic hyperindustrial gray. Uniformly expressionless humans are assembled before a giant screen as big brother delivers a monotone about ‘the great body of the state’ and ‘the unification of thought’. In the midst of all the dread, a young blonde woman (a model and former discus thrower Anya Major) wearing red shorts and a white Apple Macintosh t-shirt sprints through the assembled storm troopers and human drones to fling a sledgehammer at the screen. Over the sudden blast of glare, an announcer intones, ‘On January 24th, Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And you’ll see why 1984 won’t be like “1984”.’⁴²

All subsequent Super Bowl advertising has been measured against this path-breaking commercial. The product was in the stores on Tuesday and sales reached \$3.5 million in short order. Over the next three months, \$155 million worth of Macintosh computers were sold.⁴³

Less profound but quite influential have been a series of Budweiser commercials produced for the Super Bowl. On set features the Budweiser Clydesdales and over the years they have appeared in many different settings. These are much anticipated each year and warmly and fondly received. Another set featured the ‘Bud Bowl’. This was a faux football game between bottles of ‘Bud’ and ‘Bud Light’ that first appeared during Super Bowl XXIII. These proved so popular that they went on over several years and the Las Vegas odds makers put a line on the game. Overall there were eight Bud Bowls and some of them used Roman Numerals.⁴⁴

The Super Bowl became an important vehicle not just for advertisers but for the networks themselves. Each network used it to promote its own programming. In the case of FOX, it used the NFL and the Super Bowl to raise its status to the level of ‘major network’ and in the process overpaid for the TV rights driving up the prices the networks must pay even further.

The coming of cable television in the 1980s offered expanding revenues to the NFL and, of perhaps greater importance, expanding coverage. This expansion added to the size and scope of the NFL’s reach, and in turn enhanced the importance of the Super Bowl. Indeed, everything Super Bowl was swept up into this ascending trajectory of popularity and growth. Bigger is always better and every aspect of the Super Bowl came to reflect that reality.

One of the innovative start-ups that appeared with the advent of cable, Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN), used the NFL to capture an enormous audience

and turn this experiment in twenty-four hour sports telecasting into a success. ESPN's contribution to Super Bowl madness beyond the 24/7 promotion of the NFL was its decision to saturate the network with Super Bowl programming during Super Bowl Week. This culminated with the practice of showing non-stop highlights of all the previous Super Bowls leading up to the start of the major network pre-game coverage some three or four hours before kick-off.⁴⁵

Competing television networks have tried counter programming to attract an audience by offering block-buster movies and other programming to attract non-football fans – to no avail. Other networks created programming to ride the wave of Super Bowl popularity. The most successful and enduring of these is 'The Puppy Bowl' shown on the Animal Planet Network. The first airing was in February 2005, and it has become a standard part of Super Bowl Sunday viewing for dog and cat lovers.⁴⁶

Another of the staples of Super Bowl week is the Commissioner's Party, first held at Super Bowl I. Not exactly a smashing hit, the first rendition saw the executives from the AFL line up on one side of the room, and those from the NFL on the other side. After this awkward start, it did not take long for the event to become the centrepiece of activities on the Friday night before the game. Like everything else associated with the Super Bowl it grew quickly and soon expanded beyond the capacity of a hotel to host it. The last hotel venue was in New Orleans at the Roosevelt Hotel for Super Bowl VI. The following year the Commissioner's Party was held on board the Queen Mary in Long Beach. 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.⁴⁷

The cost of the Super Bowl XII party in New Orleans was \$75,000, a figure that drew some critical comment. Responding to critics who found this excessive Commissioner Rozelle countered by saying that money in fact is the whole point with the Super Bowl implying that was a large part of its attraction. He added that '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'.⁴⁸

The guest lists kept growing and gate-crashers became a problem. Among the 2,000 invited guests for the Super Bowl IX party were the media, the Commissioner's immediate family including the League office staff, league management and executives from each team, television executives, and sponsors. Players were not invited. Wives of the elite were. In addition, competing teams brought an entourage of staff and friends.⁴⁹

The Commissioner's Party initiated more parties which grew in number and kind over the decades. Sponsors and television networks held their invitation-only events. CBS appeared to be the industry leader until the advent of ESPN whose party became the 'must be seen at' event. Various corporate sponsors staged parties during Super Bowl Week. Some used these to entertain clients while others offered them as incentive rewards for employees. The first to move in this direction were the major television sponsors such as Ford, General Motors, and Coca Cola. Eastern and National Airlines put together packages for early Super Bowls in Miami and the NFL was, according to Don Weiss, delighted to supply all the tickets they needed.⁵⁰ At Super Bowl VII in Los Angeles, 267 Chrysler dealers were rewarded with a trip to the game. Ford flew in 650 of its best people from their national convention being held in Las Vegas. By the time of Super Bowl XIX in Palo Alto, California, twenty-six

corporations were active in the party scene. At Super Bowl XXX in Miami, 200 corporations took part in the party scene, and the large corporation spent up to \$5 million to bring over 100 employees to the Super Bowl.⁵¹

As the Super Bowl has become basically a corporate event, the corporate tent became a common sight. At the scene of Super Bowl XXXV in Tampa in 2001 there were 17 huge tents, compared to nine in the same city in 1991. The first tents appeared in Tampa in 1984. Executives and their guests used the tents for pre-game and post-game bashes. The largest in 2001 was 100 × 360 feet and accommodated more than 1,500 people. The carpeted, climate-controlled structure contained everything from big-screen TVs to a giant ship's mast. In addition, the 800,000-square-foot corporate hospitality area was being transformed into a pseudo-beach populated by 10-foot-tall macaw statues, twenty-five-foot-tall lifeguard chairs, and a sandcastle.⁵²

A tent complete with food and entertainment cost a company as much as \$750,000, while added features could run the price to \$1.5 million. Coca-Cola, Ford, and Prudential are noted for the opulence of their tents. The NFL keeps details under wraps because big corporate sponsors, unlike individuals, often do not want shareholders or customers to know how much they are spending. And no wonder. At one tent in Tampa, a staff of 500 served such entrees as Lower Keys Conch Chowder, prime rib and salmon along with upscale brands of liquor and such treats as Maryland crab cakes or leg of lamb. Several tents featured high-priced performers such as the Spinners and the Classic Rock All-Stars, a band that included Bernie Leadon and Randy Meisner, former members of the Eagles.⁵³

For the largest companies, a four-day Super Bowl trip could cost as much as \$10,000 per person, so if a company brings 150 guests, the cost would be about \$1.5 million. It was one of the priciest events in the sports world and, of course, worth every tax-deductible dollar of it.⁵⁴

Not to be overshadowed in the excess sweepstakes, for Super Bowl XXXV the City of Tampa dropped \$350,000 into flowers and other landscape enhancements for public properties; while the county paid Team Sandtastic of Sarasota \$628,000 to build a Super Bowl Sand Montage in Sand Key Park. Two thirty-foot tall NFL helmets with logos of the Ravens and Giants on either side of the Lombardi Trophy were surrounded by 29 other helmets 6-feet in height. All sculpted of sand, of course.⁵⁵

Beyond the corporate jets, the skies were filled around the Tampa Bay Area producing an air traffic controller's nightmare. A B-2 Bomber provided the fly over while Ray Charles sang 'America the Beautiful' and the Air Force Thunderbirds graced the skies during the national anthem. A bevy of banner-towing planes, a brace of blimps, and fourteen helicopters provided shuttle service for the Fortune 500 fans, jammed the air corridors around Tampa at Super Bowl XXXV.⁵⁶

If private planes and helicopters were too plebeian, 'Silent Wings II,' the modest 104-foot yacht featuring a staff of four including a gourmet chef was available for hire. The luxury accommodation featured a Jacuzzi along with 'his' and 'her' bathrooms in the largest of the suites. This package featured six luxury suites for the big game and a chauffeured Rolls-Royce – all of this for a modest \$100,000. Indeed, the yacht may have been the best means of assuring a ticket to the game, if that really mattered to anyone. Most game tickets go to NFL officials, corporate sponsors, and politicians and are freebies.⁵⁷

At Super Bowl XXXV, the corporate party took on another dimension with the emergence of The Playboy Party, The Maxim Party, and The Penthouse Party in the Battle of the

Soft-Porn Magazines. In recent years, the Maxim Party seems to have become the choice of the discerning in these matters. Through the first years of the twenty-first century, Rolling Stone, DirecTV, various celebrity hosted parties, the Leather and Lace Party, Ditka and Jaws Cigars with the Stars, the Player's Super Bowl Tailgate, and many, many more have joined the list. The one certainty is that this list will continue to grow.⁵⁸

This party atmosphere of high rollers inevitably attracted practitioners of the world's oldest profession. A former prostitute reported that 'Pimps see the Super Bowl as a moneymaking opportunity sent by God'. From the services provided in the private suites to the half-time quickie, the laws of supply and demand were never better illustrated.⁵⁹

It is at the grass roots level that the full sweep of the party scene can be observed. Neighbourhood and office groups offer a good measure of the ubiquity of the Super Bowl. In 1996 at Super Bowl XXIX, five friends from Chicago held their twelfth annual Super Bowl Party in Las Vegas. They use the same hotel and the same room, dress in the same pink warmup suits, and carry the same travel bags each year. No wives make the trip and no other men have ever been invited although some have asked. The 'Five Guys' do the usual Vegas things; drink, gamble, and of course watch the Super Bowl in their room, which is filled with all the party essentials one needs.⁶⁰

Another variation was created by Bob 'Moose' Morrison of Fairfield, Ohio. This party is by invitation only for 100 guests, and you cannot buy your way in. Preparations go on year round. 'Moose' begins freezing ice cubes in the form of footballs at Thanksgiving storing them in a large freezer in his garage. Two seven-foot tall plywood helmets are bolted to the front of the house and painted in that year's team colours. The doorknobs are in the shape of footballs. Each room has a television and the carpet in the house is taped to look like yard lines.⁶¹

Many people share the viewing experience with the same group of friends or colleagues each year. Some people set up bleachers in their home to enhance the authenticity of the experience. For those not in the United States for this major holiday there are gatherings in many of the major cities of the world. London pubs offer the late night Super Bowl for the large American community there. Moscow kick-off is at 2 a.m. and in 1993, 600 people gathered in a Moscow hotel ballroom for a watch party. American servicemen around the world gather for the game, and in recent years some have been featured on the telecast of the game.⁶²

For Super Bowl XLIII friends from Florida gathered with their children, grandchildren, and a crowd of 200 others at the Bourbon Street Inn. This was not in New Orleans but rather on a dusty side street in Bangkok 9,000 miles from Tampa. The party began at 5:30am, necessitating a 4:30 wake-up call. The establishment run by a Louisiana native was decked out in the colours of the Pittsburgh Steelers and Arizona Cardinals, and the patrons were dressed in the colours of their favourite team. The Black and Gold of the Steelers dominated as it did in the game itself. Richard Turkiewicz described it this way:

There we had a choice of New Orleans style breakfast price fixe or an alternative breakfast price fixe which included all the beer or 'Bloody Mary's' you wished to accompany your breakfast. All the meats for the breakfast are flown in from New Orleans and you think you are actually in New Orleans. The restaurant has that much flavor. The main difference is that all the waiters and servers are Thai and there is no lack of either.⁶³

The NFL did its best to encourage the parties and the emergence of the tents near the stadium. Another aspect of the party atmosphere was the inauguration of the NFL

Experience in 1992 prior to Super Bowl XXVI in Minneapolis. This is essentially an NFL theme park with football fun and games set up in a central location in the week prior to the game. There are inactive experiences, the opportunity to meet the great players of the past and present, exhibits of the Super Bowl rings and the Lombardi Trophy. Perhaps most important is the Super Fan Shop where the NFL helps fans dispose of their excess income on the largest offering of official NFL limited-edition merchandise and the latest in authentic NFL products. The NFL Experience generally has a sponsor and for Super Bowl 50 Hyundai was the chosen one.⁶⁴

In recent years the Super Bowl experience has broadened via the internet and social media. The NFL has expanded its activities for the day and the week with a strong PR effort to instil a social conscience into the festivities. The Super Bowl website was created to promote the game, the activities of the week, and provide yet another outlet for sponsors and advertisers. The Super Bowl website quickly became a centre for sponsors. In 2000, the lead Site Sponsor was Miller Lite. Joining the list of major sponsors was Web MD, VISA (where you could acquire an official NFL credit card), RCA's Direct Satellite System, U.P.S., E*Trade (which offered web visitors their Knowledge Center), Hotjobs.com, and Mel Gibson's latest movie.⁶⁵

At Superbowl.com, nearly the entire Super Bowl experience was available. There were highlights of past games; live shots of host city hot spots and other important landmarks; and a RealSlideshow of all the championship games. There were diaries by players and the wives of players each offering a variety of insights on the weekend. However, the highlights of Superbowl.com are Tips for Throwing a Super Bowl Party, animated Super Bowl greeting cards, an Electric Football Game, NFL for Her, and the Miller Lite Beer Pager. If you needed more ESPN.com sent Dan Patrick out on patrol for Celebrity Sightings in Atlanta. In point of fact there was no end to the variety of things that eventually turned up at Superbowl.com. One year, Dan Marino was featured at the Kraft Foods sponsor link where he served up the Kraft Party Playbook with fourteen appetizers, seven main dishes, and eight desserts, including the Super Bowl Cake. Marino was happy to send you all the recipes via email.⁶⁶

To mute the garish character of the mid-winter celebration the NFL began placing a heightened emphasis on social action and social conscience. Taste of the NFL had its start in 1992 in Minneapolis and it grew rapidly under the slogan 'A Party with a Purpose'. NFL stars Kurt Warner and Donovan McNabb took part in the distribution of a donation of 10,000 cans of soup to the Second Harvesters Food Bank of Greater New Orleans in 2002. The NFL starting in 2000 partnered with Campbell Soup in the 'Tackling Hunger Program' as part of a 500,000 can Super Bowl donation and the six million cans donated that year as part of the 'Tackling Hunger Program'. NFL fans were invited to participate in the programme all year long by going to www.chunky and clicking on the helmet of their favourite team. Each click produced a one-can donation.⁶⁷

One of the most interesting web sites was www.gospelcom.net. At this location 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 twelve-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 San Francisco 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.⁶⁸

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.⁶⁹

The Super Bowl has come to permeate all corners of American life. Sermons are given in churches on Super Bowl themes. Super markets push Super Bowl themed food in the weeks heading into Super Sunday with special snack packs, cakes in the shape of a football, cupcakes covered with icing in the participating team colours. The beer merchants are not among the largest advertisers on the game telecast, but their displays in supermarkets establish a clear identity between their product and the Super Bowl.

It may be difficult to put all of this into any sort of perspective and perhaps only the vocabulary created by Thorstein Veblen, the insightful Progressive Era economist and sociologist, is capable of fully capturing the Super Bowl scene. Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* coined those wonderful phrases, 'conspicuous consumption', 'conspicuous leisure', and 'conspicuous waste' to describe the habits of the rich in late-nineteenth-century America. Along with 'predatory barbarism', 'pecuniary emulation', 'vicarious consumption' and 'conspicuous waste', Veblen's colourful vocabulary is ideally suited for describing this distinctive American midwinter holiday. The difference is that the habits of the rich in the late nineteenth century have trickled down the social order to those riding the wave of corporate wealth and consumption in the second half of the twentieth century. This includes those middle and working class fans and non-fans who emulate those who actually attend the Super Bowl.⁷⁰

All this has been cultivated by the marketing geniuses of the NFL, the advertising agencies in service to the consumer economy, and aided and abetted by the media in all its shapes and forms. The media no longer covers just the Super Bowl. As Mike Tanner wrote in the *New York Times* in 2010 'it covers itself covering the Super Bowl, self-referentially glorifying in the excess while gorging on television hours and column inches.' So after all this growth of excess 'hype has become metahype; excessive analysis of excess itself'.⁷¹

'Enough' is a word seldom heard in America, and never heard in connection with the Super Bowl. Indeed, too much is never enough. The snowball rolling down the hill for fifty years has become larger than the Alps and shows no signs of abatement.

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