

Real comments on Super Bowl

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"If one wanted to create from scratch a sport that reflected the sexual, racial and organizational priorities of American social structures, it is doubtful that one could improve on football."

"In the classical manner of mythical beliefs and ritual activities, the Super Bowl is a communal celebration of and indoctrination into specific socially dominant emotions, life styles and values."

On January 13, 1974, somewhere between 70 and 95 million people watched the Miami Dolphins defeat the Minnesota Vikings 24 to 7 in Super Bowl VIII; 71,882 were in attendance in Rice Stadium in Houston, the rest watched the game on television. One of those paying special attention to his television set was Dr. Michael Real, an assistant professor of communications in the Third College at the University of California, San Diego.

Real, whose special interests lie in propaganda, symbolic behavior, myth and consumer research, was interested in what makes the Super Bowl the most lucrative annual spectacle in American mass culture. To answer that question, he videotaped the entire four-hour broadcast, including the pre-game and post-game shows. He then spent the next several months, stopwatch in hand, studying and restudying the playback.

What he emerged with was this thesis: the Super Bowl (1) combines electronic media and spectator sports in a ritualized mass activity, (2) reveals specific cultural values proper to American institutions and ideology, and (3) is best explained as a contemporary form of mythic spectacle. His research has been written for publication in the winter issue of the *Journal of Communication*.

According to Real, by successfully blending electronic media and spectator sports, the Super Bowl has become the capstone of an empire surpassing, in just eight years, the 100-year-old Kentucky Derby and the 70-year-old World Series as the number one sports spectacle in the United States. In addition to the live television coverage, over 1,600 newsmen, spewing out over 3,000,000 words of copy, covered the game.

Real sees Super Bowl VIII as "only a recent climax in the sacred union of electronic media and spectator athletics. The courtship began," he said, "with Edison's film of the Fitzsimmons-Corbett fight in 1897 and was consummated nationally in 1925 with the network broadcast of Graham McNamee's description of the World Series and in 1927 when the first cross-country radio hookup carried the Rose Bowl."

Curiously, the mass cultural impact of the Super Bowl, witnessed by more than half of the adult males in America, revolved around a telecast that, in reality, showed very little actual football. According to Real's calculations, 39 percent of the telecast came between the kickoff and the final gun and was devoted to commentary and entertainment including halftime entertainment. In addition, 21 percent of the telecast was taken up by pre-game and post-game shows, 15 percent was taken up by advertisements (65 in all) and 25 percent was taken up by the game itself.

One startling fact that Real determined through the use of his stopwatch was that actual playing time - from the snap of the ball to the whistle on each play took only 3 percent of the entire telecast!

"The scoring drive by Miami in the opening minutes of Super Bowl VIII took 10 plays to cover 62 yards," Real said. "The series used up five minutes and 27 seconds on the official clock, took nine minutes of real time but only 42 seconds of actual play action."

"Football consists of very brief bursts of physical activity interspersed with much longer periods of cognitive planning and physical recuperation," Real said. "It is strictly regulated by an official clock and ends, not organically when the last batter is retired as in baseball, but through external imposition when the clock runs out."

Real and several assistants questioned 100 persons following the game to find out why they watched Super Bowl VIII. The reasons, he said, varied from fanatic enthusiasm to bored escapism. Of those who watched: 40 percent said they watch football regularly; 18 percent said there was nothing else to do; 16 percent said this one is the big game; 12 percent said they were fans; 10 percent said they had bets on the game; 2 percent said it was the in thing; and 2 percent said their boy or girl friend would be watching. If the game was cancelled, 4 percent reported that they would be happy, while 25 percent reported they would be very upset.

Through his intensive study of the Super Bowl telecast, and using his background in behavior and consumer research, Real has come up with some observations that could explain the phenomenal popularity and success of the game.

According to Real, viewers achieve personal identification when they are drawn into the role of what he calls vicarious participants. They become partisan by choosing one team and putting their feelings and maybe some money on the line. Some viewers traditionally go with the underdog, others back the coach because he used to coach at their school. In a technological society, Real said, the individual comes to need some form of participation, identification and meaning which backing a team offers.

Heroic figures are provided by the sports hero, the most frequently found mythical function of American athletics.

Community focus is provided by the feeling of collective participation in the Super Bowl. According to Real, the majority of viewers saw the game in a group setting, used it as a social occasion, talked and moved at prescribed times during the telecast, and discussed the Super Bowl with acquaintances before and after the game.

"By game time the viewer-participant knows he is joined with people in the room, in the stands, all over the country," Real said. "The essence of mythical belief and ritual activity lies in the feeling of collective participation and sharing of concerns and powers beyond the potential of the individual human."

According to Real, sports have partially taken over the marking of time and space functions for many people. "Football season," "basketball season," and "baseball season" are now commonly spoken of as much as summer, fall, winter and spring. Far more newspaper space and broadcast time is given to sports than to weather, even in rural areas of the United States. Many males, Real said, isolated from weather all week by an office or plant, spend Saturday and Sunday afternoons not enjoying the elements but watching ball games.

The "action" of a sport is what many viewers seek and thus thrive on such sports as boxing and football which have physical contact as their base. In the Super Bowl, two opposing teams with members averaging roughly six feet two inches and 225 pounds repeatedly line up facing each other to engage in various kinds of body-to-body combat.

According to Real's calculations, the television coverage of a typical Super Bowl VIII play showed an average of roughly seven and a half physical encounters per play. The extremes for any one play were a minimum of four and a maximum of 14 of what ranged from short-range physical contact to head-on full-speed collisions.

On the extra point conversion, Real found, 20 of the 22 players on the field participate in physical contact, normally exempting only the kicker and his holder. When Jake Scott fumbled a Mike Eischeid punt in Super Bowl

VIII, at least 14 separate physical encounters took place on screen before all the blocking, downfield coverage, and scrambling for the ball were completed.

Despite all the Super Bowl's overt and latent cultural significance, it is still popular as a game, Real said. Unlike wars or family problems, the viewer is aware that he can enjoy or even opt out of the Super Bowl with the same free choice that he entered into it because "it's only a game."

But, Real said, it is a special game.

"The Super Bowl parallels the spectacles of the Coliseum in Rome where the spoils of imperialism were celebrated. As a human and collective experience, the Super Bowl is a 'spectacle.'

"North American professional football," Real said, "is an aggressive, strictly regulated team game fought between males who use both violence and technology to gain control of property for the economic gain of individuals within a nationalistic entertainment context. The Super Bowl propagates these values by elevating one game to the level of a spectacle of American ideology collectively celebrated. Rather than mere diversionary entertainment, it can be seen to function as a propaganda vehicle strengthening and developing the larger social structure."

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