

# *Super Bowl: Mythic Spectacle*

by Michael R. Real

*Analysis of a telecast finds  
in it expressions of values  
and functions of the  
larger social structure.*

What makes the Super Bowl the most lucrative annual spectacle in American mass culture? To answer that question I have used the 1974 Super Bowl VIII telecast on videotape as a para-literary text for exegesis, and emerged with this thesis: the Super Bowl (i) combines electronic media and spectator sports in a ritualized mass activity, (ii) reveals specific cultural values proper to American institutions and ideology, and (iii) is best explained as a contemporary form of mythic spectacle.

By successfully blending electronic media and spectator sports, the Super Bowl has become the capstone of an empire. In its first eight years, the Super Bowl surpassed the 100-year-old Kentucky Derby and the 70-year-old World Series as the number one sports spectacle in the United States (1). Commercial time on the Super Bowl telecast is the most expensive of the television year, surpassing even the Academy Awards presentation. These are figures on Super Bowl VIII:

Live attendance: 71,882

Television audience: 70 to 95 million

CBS payment to NFL for television rights: \$2,750,000

CBS charge for advertising per minute: \$200,000 to \$240,000

Total CBS advertising income from game: over \$4,000,000

Estimated expenditures in Houston by Super Bowl crowd: \$12,000,000

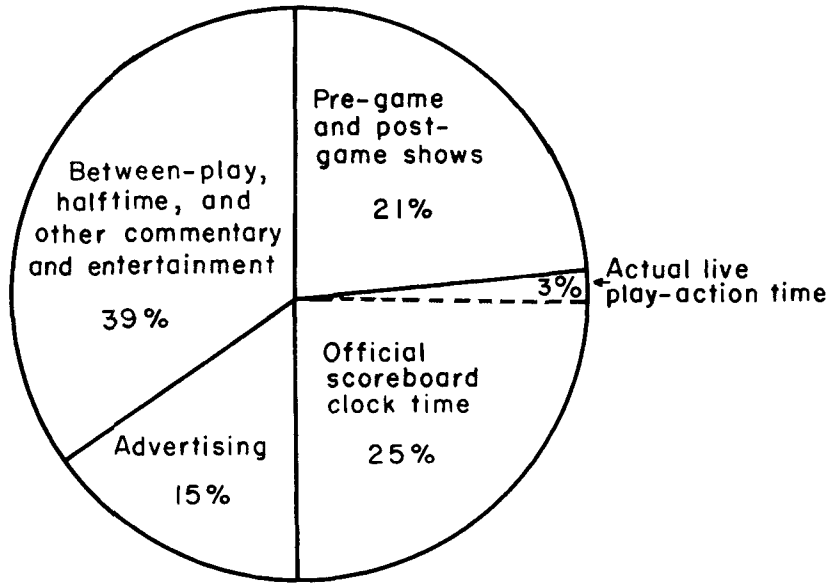
Newsmen covering: over 1600

Words of copy sent out from newsmen: over 3,000,000<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Data summarized and rounded off from figures cited in (1), (12), and (17) and in *Variety* and *Broadcasting*.

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Curiously, this mass cultural impact revolved around a telecast which was composed of the following distribution of elements:



The excitement seemed to be about a football game, but the total play-action devoted in the telecast to live football was perhaps less than ten minutes.

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

The Super Bowl VIII telecast was careful to convey a feeling of larger-than-life drama. Before the game, announcers proclaimed: "We fully believe that this game will live up to its title Super Bowl. . . . We expect this to be the greatest Super Bowl ever." The screen was filled with images of vast crowds, hulking superheroes, great plays from the past, even shots from and of the huge Goodyear blimp hovering over the field. During the game all-time records were set: Tarkenton completed 18 passes to break Namath's record for Super Bowls; Csonka broke Matt Snell's Super Bowl record by gaining 145 yards in his 33 rushing attempts. The actual game was one-sided and boring. *Sports Illustrated* led its coverage with "Super Bowl VIII had all the excitement and suspense of a master butcher quartering a steer" (21). But after the game the one-sidedness itself became the occasion for historic superlatives: "Are the Dolphins the greatest team ever?"

*Why do people watch the Super Bowl?*

Of 100 persons I questioned, two-thirds of the males and one-third of the females had watched Super Bowl VIII. The conscious motivation expressed 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 were to be cancelled, 4 percent reported that they would be happy, while 25 percent reported that they would be very upset.<sup>2</sup>

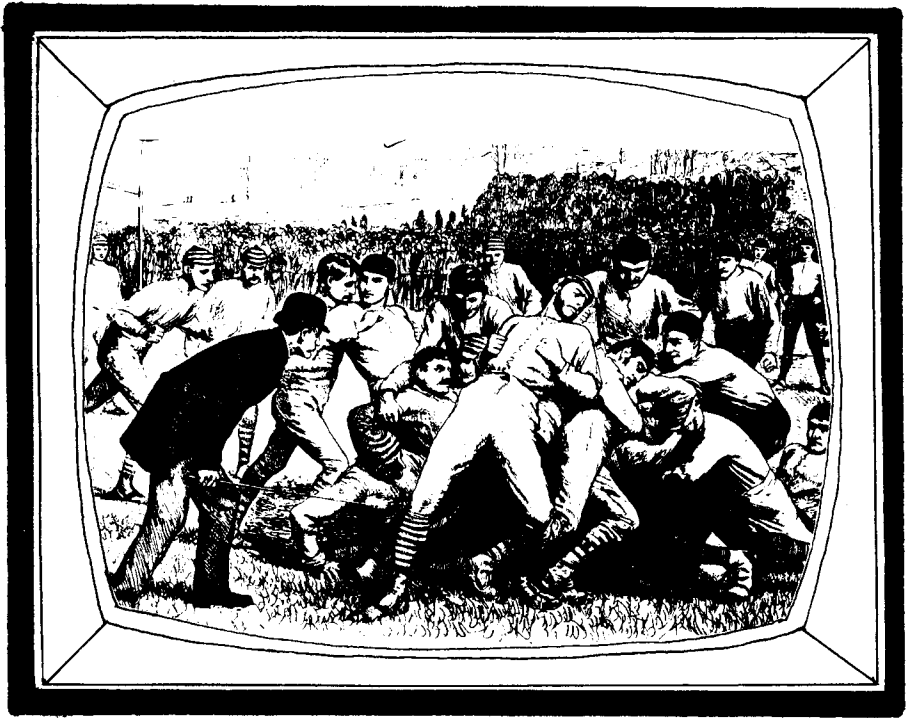
Deeper reflection suggests that the game functions in a manner similar to traditional mythic activities. The symbolic forms of myth provide personal identification, heroic archetypes, communal focus, spatial and temporal frames of reference, and ecological regulatory mechanisms.

*Personal identification.* As viewers are drawn into the role of vicarious participant, they become partisan by choosing one team and putting their feelings and maybe some money on the line. A Purdue graduate picks Miami because Griese is his fellow alumnus; a Baltimore fan picks Miami because he liked Shula as Colts head coach—or picks Minnesota because he resents Shula's abandoning *his* team. Those who favor underdogs side with the Vikings. The seekers of perfection and "history's greatest" bless Miami with their support. Even "trapped" viewers (predominantly females) who watch only by default select a favorite team early in the telecast. The epic and its outcome then take on meaning to each individual. As Jacques Ellul argues, face-to-face relations are substantially displaced by the technological society: the individual, as well as the state, comes to *need* the modes of participation, identification, and meaning given to individual and collective life by what Ellul calls mass propaganda (9).

*Heroic archetypes.* The prototypical role of the sports hero is the most frequently found mythic function of American athletics. Holy places are established to which pilgrimages can be made. The football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio, commemorates the location where George Halas sat with others on the running board of a car and planned professional football almost half a century ago. Levi-Strauss notes how such contemporary historic sites function like primitive mythic foci: "Nothing in our civilization more closely resembles the periodic pilgrimages made by the initiated Australians, escorted by their sages, than our conducted tours to Goethe's or Victor Hugo's house, the furniture of which inspires emotions as strong as they are arbitrary" (13).

*Communal focus.* The feeling of collective participation in the Super Bowl is obvious in interviews with viewers and studies of viewer conversa-

<sup>2</sup> Survey by author and assistants during week of January 13, 1974, at University of California at San Diego.



tions and traffic patterns.<sup>3</sup> 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. Especially for the more than half of the adult males in America who watched the game, it was a source of conversation at work, in the neighborhood, at shops, wherever regular or accidental interaction occurs.

By game time the viewer-participant knows he is joined with people in the room, in the stands, all over the country. As Cassirer and others point out, 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 (3).

*Marking time and space* are functions which sports have partially taken over from nature itself. Cummings observes:

*Nature has disappeared from most contemporary lives, shut out by gigantic buildings, train and walkway tunnels, a densely populated atmosphere. We have restructured our environment and our relations to it, and the artificial turf and Astrodome are physical symbols in the sport realm, a realm which has historically been associated with the "outdoorsman" (6).*

"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, isolated from weather all week by an office or plant, spend Saturday and Sunday afternoons not enjoying the elements but watching ball games. The seasons are orchestrated to provide overlaps, not gaps. As early spring grass begins to stir to life under the last film of snow, denatured American attention turns slowly toward baseball spring training while basketball season peaks toward its NCAA and NBA conclusion. National holidays are as closely identified with sports as with religious or historical meaning. Thanksgiving and New Year mean football; Memorial Day, auto racing; Christmas season, basketball tournaments; and so on. Sports overlies the sacred cycle of mythic time to provide a needed psychic relief from the tedium of western linear time.

In a similar vein, regional markings traditionally associated with family and neighborhood can, in the atomistic absence of such traditions, be regrouped around city and regional athletic teams. The Chicagoan may identify more with the Cubs, Sox, Bears, Hawks, or Bulls *in* a neighborhood bar, a place of work, the Daley fiefdom than he does with those institutions themselves. In these terms, Oakland did not exist prior to 1967, but now, with professional teams in football, baseball, basketball, and hockey, it is clearly on the big-league map.

The fact that all major professional sports are basically American national sports, even when playoffs are called the "World" Series or the "Super" Bowl, may account for more than a small part of the national cohesion and identity. The cycle of games and seasons, culminating in the annual Super Bowl, provides crucial "sacred" markers breaking the "profane" monopoly of secular time and space in our advanced industrial, technological society.

*Ecologically regulatory mechanisms.* Myth-ritual patterns may function as central control systems of the total ecological environment.

One of the directly regulatory functions of the Super Bowl is to move goods. The 1974 telecast, including the pre-game and post-game shows, contained 65 advertisements, of which 52 were 30- and 60-second commercials and the remainder were brief program or sponsor notices. Advertisements occupied slightly more than 15 percent of the Super Bowl VIII air time and were sponsored by 30 different companies. The product categories advertised were automobiles (7 advertisements), automobile tires (7), automobile batteries (4), beers (4), wines (3), television sets (3), insurance companies, credit cards, railroads, banks, NFL (2), and hotels, retail stores, airplanes, locks, movies, copiers, foods (1).

The advertisements for New York Life Insurance and Boeing were constructed on sports themes, as were notices for upcoming CBS sports programs. Tire and battery advertisements emphasized strength and dependability, virtues helpful in both winter and football. Liquor appeals included traditional glamor, gusto, and fun. The fuel shortage was evident in the emphasis of automobile advertisements on economy and efficiency. Consumer unrest

was reflected by promotion of general corporate images as well as specific products. "Don't be fuelish" public service notices were included, in keeping with the Nixon administration's approach to fuel shortages, and a plug was inserted for NFL players going on a trip for the Department of Defense.

*Myths reflect and sacralize the dominant tendencies of a culture, thereby sustaining social institutions and life styles.*

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. Further analysis of the structural and symbolic basis of the Super Bowl as a football game suggests a particular use of territoriality and property, time, labor, management, physical contact, motivation, infrastructure, packaging, game, and spectacle—all functional to the larger society.

*Territoriality and property.* Miami completed six of seven passes and gained 196 yards on the ground; Minnesota completed 18 of 28 passes for 166 yards but were penalized 65 yards to Miami's four. Other figures on total yardage gained, time of possession, kicking games, and third-down conversions were on the air and in the newspapers. But the *essential* datum was Miami 24, Minnesota 7. What those figures meant was that Miami had been able to occupy progressively enough of the 100 yards of the Rice Stadium playing field to move the ball on the ground, in the air, or by foot into the Minnesota end zone for three touchdowns, three conversions, and one field goal, against only one touchdown and one conversion in return.

Football centers around winning property by competition. Moreover, in football the winning of property means nothing unless one wins all the property—that is, backs one's opponent into his own valueless end zone. Points go up on the electronic scoreboard only when the opposition is driven off the field.

*Time.* The scoring drive by Miami in the opening minutes of Super Bowl VIII took ten plays to cover 62 yards. The series used up five minutes and 27 seconds on the official clock but took nine minutes of real time and 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. 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. Professional football is as segmented temporally, and almost as technological, as the frings of a piston engine or the sequential readouts of a computer. The periods of action have an intensity appropriate to a hyped-up, super-consumerist society, far removed from leisurely sun-filled afternoons at an early twentieth-century baseball park. In a society where virtually everyone wears a timer on his arm, one is a clock-watcher not in order to dally through work hours but

because one knows that only a limited amount of time is available to achieve and accomplish.

*Labor.* Male domination of the Super Bowl is total. Of the hundreds of players, coaches, announcers, personalities in commercials, half-time entertainers, and celebrities in the crowd transmitted into millions of homes across the nation by Super Bowl VIII, only two halftime entertainers—Miss Texas and Miss Canada—and a small handful of anonymous actresses in commercials and faces in the crowd were female. The Super Bowl is covered by newspapers whose sports and business pages are both about as predominantly male as women's pages are female.

Racially, dozens of black players and several black announcers (although no black anchormen) were visible during Super Bowl VIII. But, more significantly, no head coaches, no team owners, and few of the super-wealthy Rice Stadium crowd were black. The Super Bowl telecast tended to support the claims of sociologist Harry Edwards of parallels between black athletes and Roman gladiators. From 1957 to 1971 black football players increased from 14 to 34 percent among the professional leagues (7). But the managerial levels remained largely closed to blacks.

*Management.* The organization of personnel in professional football is almost a caricature of the discipline of modern corporate-military society. Teams developed by years of training and planning, composed of 48 men, each performing highly specialized tasks, compete in the Super Bowl. Books by former players stress, whether approvingly or disapprovingly, the organizational discipline on and off the field (2, 10, 11, 14, 16, 19, 20). Meggyesy came to resent his authoritarian coaches; Jerry Kramer idolized his mentor Lombardi; and Pete Gent described his coach, Tom Landry, as a cold technician. Gent emphasized the role of professional football as a metaphor of American society even to the point of employers moving employees—that is, teams trading players—around the country for the good of the corporations without regard for personal preference or welfare.<sup>3</sup> Super Bowl coaches like Shula and Grant appear on television like cool corporate executives or field marshals directing troops trained in boot camp, aided by scouts, prepared for complex attack and defense maneuvers with the aid of sophisticated telephone, film, and other modern technology. In an enterprise in which strict disciplinarians like Vince Lombardi and Don Shula have created the powerful empires, the primers for coaches might be military manuals and for players *The Organization Man*.

According to detailed accounts in *The New Yorker* and *Rolling Stone* (1, 12), top corporate executives from Ford, Shell, Xerox, and other giants of industry inundated Houston for Super Bowl VIII. The Alan R. Nelson Research firm of New York reports that 66 percent of executives earning \$20,000 or more like pro football "quite a lot," while only 42 percent say the same of major-league baseball. The vice president of NBC Sports, Carl Lindemann, Jr., says, "I'd be hard-pressed to name a top executive who

<sup>3</sup> The use of technology and managerial techniques is similar to that described in Ellul's *Technological Society*.

doesn't follow football avidly" (12). Chief Executives Nixon and Ford have typified the affinity corporate managers feel for professional football.

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

In both time and space, the action of football is more compressed and boxed-in than that of the former national pastime, baseball. Both sports are sequenced around a single ball, require large teams, and are regulated by numerous rules and rule-enforcers. But, as even the simplest play diagram reveals, football's temporal and spatial confinement demands the most regimented and intricately coordinated forms of activity.

*Action.* Many sports provide no physical contact between participants. Some sports, like baseball, allow occasional contact. A few sports, like boxing and football, 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.

The television coverage of a typical Super Bowl VIII play showed an average of roughly 7.5 physical encounters between players 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 an extra point conversion, 20 of the 22 players on the field participate in such 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.

Participant observations of and about injuries reveal more of the physical nature of the game. Jim Mandich's broken thumb and Paul Warfield's pulled hamstring did not prevent their playing in Super Bowl VIII, although Milt Sunde's injuries prevented his participation at the last minute. Bob Kuechenberg, Miami offensive guard, broke his left arm four weeks before Super Bowl VII. A steel pin was inserted inside the bone for protection and he played, as did four other Dolphins with metal pins holding various limbs together. For the 1970 Super Bowl, the rib cage of Kansas City defensive back Johnny Robinson was "swollen and mushy" and he was in "misery." His roommate, Len Dawson, reported:

*Wednesday of that week, I was sitting there thinking there's no way he can get out on a football field. . . . He got a local anesthetic just to see what it felt like and it made him woozy. So then they got a thoracic surgeon to go in and shoot him a different way. I don't know how they shot him or where, but they were able to deaden it and leave his mind clear (4, p. 9).*



Jerry Stovall reported, when he retired after nine seasons as a St. Louis Cardinal safetyman:

*In my years in football I've suffered a broken nose, fractured a right cheekbone, lost five teeth, broken my right clavicle, ripped my sternum, broken seven ribs, and have a calcium deposit in my right arm that prevents me from straightening it. I've also had 11 broken fingers. And I hurt my right foot so bad I almost lost it, injured my right arch and broke my right big toe three times. . . . The injuries hurt on rainy days—sometimes even on sunny days (4, p. 8).*

Pete Gent, formerly of the Dallas Cowboys and author of *North Dallas Forty*, says: “My back is so sore I can’t sit still for long. I’ve got arthritis in my neck from butting people with my head, and if I walk too far my knees swell. But I know plenty of guys who are hurt worse” (4 p. 10). Merlin Olsen, defensive tackle for the Los Angeles Rams, described the experience of getting injured:

*I played 12 games in 1970 with a bad knee and I kept aggravating it. I knew it required an operation—both for torn ligaments and cartilage.*

*[Then, in the 1961 Pro Bowl] I was hit directly on the kneecap and my knee bent the wrong way about 15 degrees. The minute that contact was made I could feel things starting to tear.*

*I tried to get the foot out of the ground and couldn't. I couldn't stop my momentum, either. I was like slow motion. I could feel each muscle and ligament popping. Once I was on the ground the pain was about as intense as anything I've ever felt. But the pain was with me only about 30 seconds. Then it was gone—totally.*

*When I went in at halftime the doctors examined me. They'd pick up my foot and the knee would stay right on the table. I got off the table and went into the shower and the knee collapsed backward on its own. A couple of coaches were standing there and they turned white and almost passed out (4, p. 1).*

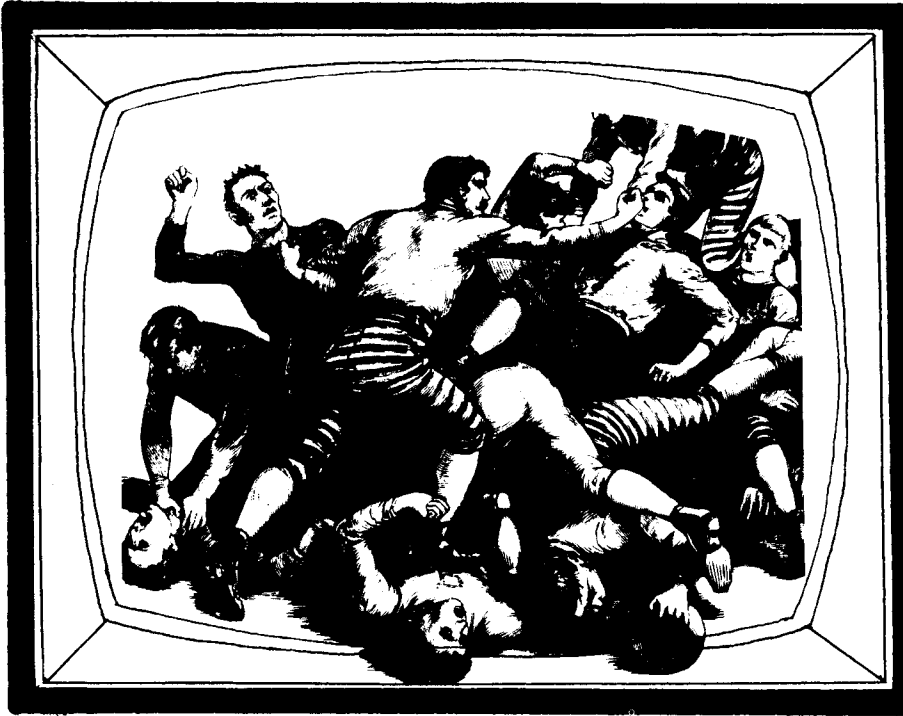
Other professional football knees make equally grisly stories. After four operations on Joe Namath's knees, one doctor estimates. “He'll barely be able to walk by the time he's forty” (4, p. 8). When Dick Butkus, the Chicago Bears's middle linebacker, developed a bad right knee in the 1973 season, he continued to play. In September, he went to one of the nation's most prominent orthopedic surgeons. The surgeon reportedly called it “the worst-looking knee I have ever seen,” and told Butkus, “I don't know how a man in your shape can play football or why you would even want to.” The doctor advised Butkus that, if he must play, he should spend all of his time from the end of one game until ten minutes before the kickoff of the next either in bed or on crutches. The surgeon thought there was no danger of ruining the knee further by playing, because there wasn't that much left to ruin. Butkus, needless to say, finished the season and was reportedly considering the installation of a metal knee after his playing days were over (18).

Such descriptions of injuries bring out, despite immensely sophisticated and thorough padding, how physically brutal football is. Only the low number of actual fatalities preserve it against public outcry and distinguish it from outright warfare.

*Motivation.* In some settings, football is played for fun. But the Super Bowl is far removed from such motivation. Members of the winning team in Super Bowl VIII each received \$15,000; the losers, \$7,500 (15). There may be a surface "thrill of combat," "test of masculinity," "search for glory and fame," and even "love of the game," but underneath there is one motive—money. When Duke Snider, center-fielder for the Brooklyn Dodgers, published an article in the *Saturday Evening Post* in the middle 1950s admitting "I Play Baseball for Money," there was a tremor of scandal that ran through the American public, as if a clergyman had said he did not much care for God but he liked the amenities of clerical life. But when Mercury Morris was asked on national television after the Dolphins' one-sided Super Bowl VIII victory, "Was it fun?" he replied, "It was work," and no one batted an eye.

Even nonprofessional football has a heavily commercial base. Penn State collected one million dollars from televised football in the 1973 season—\$650,000 from the Orange Bowl and \$350,000 from regional and national appearances during the regular season. Oklahoma's NCAA probation that same season cost them \$500,000 in television revenue (5). Ohio State University led the nation with an average of 87,228 paying customers in each of its expensive seats at six home games in 1973. The 630 football-playing four year colleges in the United States attracted 31,282,540 spectators in 1973, averaging over 10,000 for each game played in the nation (1, 12). An unsuccessful coach is more than a spiritual liability to his school. A college player, even if his scholarship and employment "ride" does not make all the sacrifice and pain worthwhile, can hope for a return on his investment by making it financially in the pros. In fact, the feeder system which culminates in the Super Bowl, reaches down to any mobile, oversized high school or junior high player, drawing him on with the dream of fame and the crinkle of dollars.

*Infrastructure.* The institutional organization of professional football is not *like* American business; it *is* American business. Each team is normally a privately owned company or corporation with shareholders and top executive officers, including a president who is frequently the principal owner. Each corporation employs hundreds, including secretaries, public relations personnel, doctors, and scouts, of whom the public seldom hears. Employees, including players, receive salaries and bonuses and are hired and fired. Team corporations enter into multi-million-dollar television contracts and rent stadiums, which may have been financed by publicly voted bonds but leased at moderate fees to the privately-owned football enterprise. A franchise in the National Football League sells for many millions of dollars. The coordinated management of the teams under the superstructure of the League and its Commissioner Pete Rozelle is matched by an increasingly powerful player's union.



The Super Bowl itself becomes a “corporate orgy,” with individual companies like Ford, Chrysler, and American Express each spending up to \$150,000 hosting salesmen and customers through the weekend. A two-page article by Frank Lalli in *Rolling Stone* described Super Bowl VIII’s “\$12,000,000 Businessman’s Special” in awesome detail (12). Lalli quoted Jimmy the Greek, who says that for corporate executives, the Super Bowl “is bigger than a political convention. Everybody tries to be here.” Super Bowl tickets are allocated, and NFL broadcast coordinator Robert Cochran estimates that 80 percent wind up in corporate hands.

*Packaging.* The Super Bowl, as a commodity to be consumed from the television “box,” receives careful packaging via the 21 percent of the broadcast devoted to pre- and post-game shows and the 39 percent between kick-off and final gun devoted to commentary and entertainment. The 1974 telecast opened with a pregame half-hour show featuring Bart Starr’s analyses of filmed strengths, weaknesses, and strategies of each team, and it concluded with a panel of 15 CBS sportscasters interviewing heroes of the day’s game. In between, there were the striking multicolor visuals with rapid, dramatic score opening each section of the telecast, the grandiose adjectives and historical allusions by announcers, the endless reciting or superimposing on screen of statistics and records, the pre-game pageantry, the halftime extravaganzas and “Playbook,” and, of course, the 52 advertisements.

The nationalism of American sports is made explicit by the playing of the national anthem at the beginning of virtually every competition from

Little League baseball to the Super Bowl. Super Bowl VIII offered the ideal middle America popular singer, Charley Pride, who is both black and country-western—working-class America from Archie Bunker to Fred Sanford all rolled into one.

Halftime entertainment is replete with martial music, precision drills, uniforms, and massive formations. Super Bowl VIII featured the University of Texas marching band with Miss Texas playing a hoedown-style fiddle. They were followed by a three-ring circus with Miss Canada as ringmistress. The telecast then cut to the American Express "Playbook," followed by the live, on-field finals of the Ford Punt and Pass Competition for boys from across the country.

*Spectacle.* Mass culture functions at once as a celebration of dominant aspects of a society and as a diversion. Despite all the Super Bowl's overt and latent cultural significance, it is popular as a *game*; the formal competition itself has no overt functional utility. It is apart from the viewer's work, from bills, from family anxieties, from conflicts in the community, from national and international politics. Total involvement becomes desirable because the game is enjoyed for its own sake, unlike most activities in the deferred-reward world of laboring for salaries, home and self improvement, or eternal salvation. 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."

The structural values of the Super Bowl can be summarized succinctly: *North American professional football 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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