

Don't Forget the Game

The NFL's signature event would be better served by focusing more on the fans and less on the celebrities



BOB LATHAM

For the second straight February, Jerry Jones tried to set an attendance record at an American professional sport: the NBA All-Star Game last year at Cowboys Stadium and the Super Bowl this year. For the second straight February, Diddy decided to grace Dallas with his presence to host a celebrity-filled bash in the days before the

game. And for the second straight February, uncharacteristic, crippling winter weather descended upon Dallas. God does not like Jerry Jones or Diddy, or both. But don't worry—Jones paid his penance: He had to live for a week with the logos of the dreaded Steelers and Packers on his cathedral.

The gaffes associated with this year's Super Bowl have been well-documented. In addition to the monumental ones, such as some ticket holders being turned away, there were silly little annoyances as well, such as the only exit from the main souvenir shop requiring a complete exit and re-entry to the stadium. Equally as puzzling was a "martini bar" inside the stadium that was supplied only with vodka, no vermouth. Perhaps it took its inspiration from Diddy's Super Bowl party where the only nutrition was vodka-infused lemon cupcakes, as an homage to Diddy's favorite drink (or so I was told): vodka and lemonade. Who knew?

These issues disguise the more fundamental problem of what the Super Bowl has become. Of the four leading American team sports, football is the only one for which we know exactly where and when the champion will be crowned. This leads all those who crave an enhanced cultural profile to flock to that place and create an orgy of celebrity that dwarfs the actual game. The other problem is that the Super Bowl exists for the 111 million TV viewers rather than the 100,000 fans who actually attend the game. If you don't believe that, do you think the military flyover above a domed stadium was for the 100,000 fans in attendance? I can assure you that we were unmoved by it, since we didn't see it.

This is not new. It's been this way since the first Super Bowl, when the Packers were forced to kick off a second time to start the second half because the TV production had not returned from a commercial in time. (If you wonder why Vince Lombardi agreed to such an intrusion by television into the actual football competition, the Kansas City Chiefs had secured fairly good field position on the initial kickoff.)

Amid all the inane events surrounding the game, such as Media Day (Joe Namath makes a bold statement 42 years ago, lightning is captured in a bottle, and now we devote an entire day to trying to make the same thing happen again?), there were many pleasant surprises and rewarding moments, all of them football-related. I may have been one of the few out of 103,000 who actually had a good time at the game. The Packers and Steelers proved to be a great match-up, and it was inspiring to watch Aaron Rodgers establish himself as the real A-Rod, not the guy who was up in a box having popcorn placed into his mouth by Cameron Diaz.

Once the game started, Cowboy Stadium was a dramatic place to watch the action. I had always thought that the Hol-

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lywood glitterati and corporate guests who attended Super Bowls would sit on their hands, ruining the ambiance of the game. For this one at least, I was wrong. Regardless of which team had the ball, there were tens of thousands of real supporters in the stands, including Carol,

the Packers' season ticket-holding grandmother in my section who warned me before the opening kickoff that she would scream her head off throughout the game. She did. She also confided that she had been on five "Packer cruises" to the Caribbean and confessed, "I've played bingo with Aaron Rodgers." If she knew her bingo as well as her football, Aaron was in trouble. Carol paid her way to the game by winning her fantasy football league.

These are the fans that make a Super Bowl. And these are the fans that seem to have gotten lost in the NFL's Super Bowl planning. Perhaps the substantial screw-ups and the disenfranchised ticket holders at this year's game will refocus the NFL on the real fans out there who want the Super Bowl to be about football, not pop culture. When our tendencies arise to blow the game out of proportion, the words of Cowboys' running back Duane Thomas before the 1972 Super Bowl in response to a question about whether this was the ultimate game come to mind: "If it's the ultimate game, how come they're playing it again next year?" ■

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