

Ain't That America?

The spectacle of the Super Bowl provides a raw look into sports and culture in the United States



BOB LATHAM

Every now and then our country puts forth for all to see the good, the bad and the ugly, the collective focus and the diversity, the high tech and the dysfunction, and the crowning of a new king of the hill. I don't speak of the presidential election, the inauguration or the State of the Union address; rather I speak of the Super Bowl. And this year's

event gave much for a global audience to note.

Alexis de Tocqueville in 1835 gave his prescient insight into our relatively new country after wandering around America for several years and writing "Democracy in America." Alex, if only you had waited until the TV age, you could have gleaned it all from tuning into the Super Bowl for four hours (or five or 10).

You came to the United States originally to study American prisons, thus you no doubt would have noted that some of our most horrific crimes provided an undercurrent to this Super Bowl. This being America, that undertone included the components of resilience and redemption. Jennifer Hudson, who sang with the Sandy Hook Elementary School choir, was discovered on one of the quintessential American products of our time—the reality TV show—was voted off, went on to win an Oscar, lost her mother, brother and nephew in a violent shooting, yet sang a soaring version of "America the Beautiful" in front of the smiling, healthy faces of the Newtown students. And what to make of Ray Lewis? Is he the man who was implicated in the deaths of two men the last time he attended a Super Bowl, who fathered six kids with four different women and who caused us all to question the existence of deer antler spray? Or is he the spiritually inspired, charismatic leader who willed his team to punch above their weight to a Super Bowl championship? As you noted so long ago, Alex, our American heroes are a complicated breed.

You would have seen brother against brother on the battlefield—something you suspected long ago might happen in American history—though the only weapons that the competing Harbaugh coaches used were clipboards. You would have seen rampant commercialism and inspiring creativity—the latter absent, however, in the bewildering play-calling by the San Francisco 49ers on their final set of downs. But then we Americans don't always call the

right plays—just ask the Superdome's electrical coordinator (to put the job description in football terms).

You would have noted that the Superdome itself is a symbol of modern America. It was one of the focal points in the beating we took internationally for the response to Hurricane Katrina, then was rebuilt, had its hometown team win a championship and finally was ready to once again stage the great American convergence of sports, entertainment and culture. But somewhere the ghost of Dandy Don Meredith sang "turn out the lights, the party's over" prematurely, and the world saw that we are far from a perfect operation.

So tell me Alex, are you surprised that a sporting event rather than a government-endorsed celebration is what provides Americans with a single, common focus? It may seem somewhat like the tail wagging the dog for you, a student of government, and that may be exactly what it is. You

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can even use one of our greatest entertainers, Beyoncé, as a barometer for the relative importance of presidential inaugurations versus the Super Bowl. It is apparently fine to lip-sync at an inauguration, but the Super Bowl? That's when you have to deliver the real deal.

You would no doubt have been enthralled by the sport of football itself, a uniquely and distinctly American activity in that it is very much a team game, but yet with prominent individual roles, responsibilities and heroes. I would have enjoyed reading your commentary on the outsized nature of it all—the crowds in New Orleans, the television audience, the size of the players, the cost of advertising, the 45-minute version of our national anthem by Alicia Keys. You would be happy to know that the French Quarter of New Orleans still thrives. Most of all Alex, you would have seen an exciting football game, and I trust that afterwards you would have sat back with your fine cognac and sung along with John Mellencamp: "Ain't that America, something to see." ■

Bob Latham is a partner at the law firm Jackson Walker, L.L.P., and an International Rugby Board member. A compilation of his best columns titled "Winners & Losers: Rants, Riffs and Reflections on the World of Sports," is available in the Media Zone at SportsTravelMagazine.com.