

He's not planning on a Super Bowl party

PETER JEDICK

We're heading into Super Bowl Weekend. Pardon me if I choose not to celebrate. Football used to be my favorite sport. The Browns were my favorite team. Then Art Modell filed for divorce, and we have not been on speaking terms since.

It is not the hype that offends me. Who doesn't enjoy the Super Bowl parties, the Super Bowl gambling, the Super Bowl drinking? But the NFL has done me wrong, and no matter how hot the product, I refuse to make any more support payments. Call me a deadbeat fan.

As a youth in the pre-Super Bowl era, I studied the sports page every Monday morning, following the exploits of full-back Jim Brown and quarterback Frank Ryan. Back then, the Browns ruled the NFL.

I even attended one of the last NFL Championship games, the 1964 Browns 27-0 victory over the Baltimore Colts. It was the last time that a Cleveland team was a world champion anything. (I may be overlooking the Cleveland Crunch, but soccer

doesn't count.)

When I was 15 years old, I put \$6 cash — an Abe Lincoln and a George Washington — into an envelope. It was money I earned shoveling snow. I sent it to the Cleveland Browns, and they sent me a bleacher seat to the NFL Championship game. I wish I had sent \$12 for two seats, but I could not afford it.

How many driveways would a kid have to shovel today to buy a Super Bowl ticket? Throw in airline tickets and a hotel room. About half a million. The only ones who can afford Sunday's Super Bowl are movie stars, CEOs and lottery winners.

Younger fans might not believe it, but there was a time when the NFL Championship game was played on one of the teams' home field. Never mind the cold, the snow and the wind off the lake. No one even imagined a dome.

My father dropped me off on the bleacher side of old Cleveland Stadium and said "good luck." I knew where the bleachers were from Indians games. I had never been to a Browns game before.

The bleachers were not

known as "the Dawg Pound," but they were just as wild. A guy sitting next to me pulled out a briefcase and set it on his lap. I thought he was going to study the Plain Dealer sports page or finish some last-minute work from the office.

Wrong. The briefcase was filled with liquor bottles.

"Hey kid, you want a shot? It'll keep you warm. It's going to be a long game."

He freely shared his stash. By the end of the game all of the fans sitting near us were my new best friends.

Maybe it was the booze, maybe it was the lopsided victory.

Frank Ryan threw three post-pattern touchdown passes to end Gary Collins and the legendary Lou Groza kicked two field goals. Meanwhile the Browns defense stonewalled the Colts Hall of Fame quarterback, Johnny Unitas. How sweet it was.

Funny thing, though. It was not even televised in Northeast Ohio because the NFL blacked out all home games within a 75-mile radius. They replayed it on a local channel the following

night, and I was able to watch it again from the comfort of my living room (without the portable bar.)

It would be a couple of years before the NFL discovered the corrupting influence of the boob tube. Today, television controls the sport like an addictive drug. Vast fortunes are spent on a minute of Super Bowl advertising. The half-time show features entertainment superstars. Everyone is making out but the fans.

The loyal troops who cheered the best two teams in the nation throughout the season are left holding the bag for the big finale. It is like being engaged to a beautiful woman for a year and then ending up the best man at her wedding.

The NFL gave the Browns back to Cleveland's fans, but until we can watch a Super Bowl in person, I refuse to add my number to the ratings game. That is, unless there is a blizzard outside and nothing better on the Disney Channel.

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