

PETER JEDICK

Super Bowl Brownout

AS SUPER BOWL weekend approaches, pardon me if I choose not to celebrate. Football used to be my favorite sport. The Cleveland Browns were my favorite team. Then, in 1996, team owner Art Modell moved the storied franchise to Baltimore (where they became the Ravens) when the Ohio city fathers would not replace “the mistake by the lake,” Depression-era built Municipal Stadium. It was like the whole city of Cleveland was being served with divorce papers. We have not been on speaking terms since. The National Football League did me wrong, and no matter how hot the product, I refuse to make any more support payments.

Besides, I have soured on the whole Super Bowl extravaganza anyway—and not because of the Ravens success since abandoning the shores of Lake Erie. Football’s premier contest was not meant to be played at a warm-weather neutral site where the average fan no longer can watch the big game in person. It was not always that way. When I was a boy, in the pre-Super Bowl era, I studied the sports page every Monday morning, following the exploits of fullback Jim Brown and quarterback Frank Ryan. Back then the Browns, whose roots were in the old All-America Football Conference (the team is named after its first coach, Paul Brown), were among the NFL elite, and I dreamed of attending one of their games.

So, in December 1964, when I was 15 years old, I put six dollars cash—an Abe Lincoln and a George Washington—into an envelope. It was money I had earned shoveling the snow out of my neighbors’ driveways. I sent it to the Cleveland Browns and, lo and behold, they sent me back a bleacher seat to the NFL Championship game against the Baltimore Colts.

How many driveways would a kid have to shovel today to buy a Super Bowl ticket—plus airline tickets and a hotel room? The only ones who can afford Super Bowl ducats nowadays are movie stars, CEOs, and lottery winners. We now have millionaires in the stands watching millionaires on the field—talk about income inequality. That is a hot topic with many of our presidential candidates. So, why aren’t they out protesting on Super Bowl Sunday? Maybe because they are sitting in the expensive suites watching the game with the rest of the one-percenters.

Younger fans might not believe it, but there was a time when the NFL Championship game was played on the home field of one of the teams vying for the crown. In 1964, we could not care less about the cold and the wind off Lake Erie. No one even imagined a dome (well, at least until four months later when the Houston Astrodome opened). My father dropped me off on the bleacher side of old Cleveland Municipal Stadium and said “good luck.” I knew where the bleachers were from Indians baseball games.

The bleacher section was not yet known as the “Dawg Pound,” but the fans were just as passionate. By the end of the game, all the bleacher bums sitting near me were my new best friends. The Browns came into the contest as underdogs but left the field without a doubt as to who the real champions were, having beaten Johnny Unitas and the Colts, 27-0.

That was the last time the Browns won an NFL title—ironically against a team whose city eventually would snatch our beloved franchise. (Remember, the Colts abandoned Baltimore for Indianapolis, necessitating the hijacking of the Browns.)

Ryan threw three post-pattern touchdown passes to end Gary Collins and legendary Lou Groza kicked two field goals. Meanwhile, the Browns defense stonewalled Unitas and his charges all day long. How sweet it was.

You also could make an argument that the Browns success contributed to our city’s race relations. Two of our star players, running back Jim Brown and end Paul Warfield, were African-Americans. They were both future Hall-of-Famers. Another African-American, rookie kickoff and punt returner Leroy Kelly, also is enshrined at Canton—and a bunch of my new friends in the bleachers were African-American as well. That was the beauty of having affordable tickets in the home team’s stadium: it brought people together. So, it was no surprise two years later

when Cleveland elected Carl Stokes as the first African-American mayor of a major U.S. city.

Yet, the most amazing thing about that game was that it was not even televised in parts of Ohio because, back then, the NFL blacked out all home games within a 75-mile radius to help increase ticket sales. Can you imagine that? However, the game was replayed on a local TV channel the following

night, and I was able to re-watch my beloved Brownies win the championship from the comfort of my living room.

It would be a few more years before the corrupting influence of television would take hold of the NFL for good. Today, TV money controls the sport like an addictive drug. Vast fortunes are spent on a single minute of Super Bowl advertising; the halftime show features entertainment superstars; everyone is making out except the fans. The loyal troops who cheered for the best two teams in the nation throughout the season are left holding the bag for the big finale. It is like being engaged for a year to a beautiful woman and then ending up the best man at her wedding.

The NFL eventually gave Cleveland’s fans a new Browns team—even taking the unique step of allowing the expansion franchise to retain the old team colors, records, and name—but until we hometown fans can watch the Super Bowl in person in our own city, I refuse to add my numbers to the ratings game. Of course, as any football trivia nut knows, I really have no choice but to pass on the Super Bowl—no matter where it is played—since the Browns are the lone AFC club among those involved in the 1970 NFL-AFL merger never to have reached the big game, although they have come within one victory of a trip to the Super Bowl an unprecedented five times. Oh well, if I really want some compelling viewing come Super Bowl Sunday, I can always pray for a blizzard and a clear signal from the Weather Channel.

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