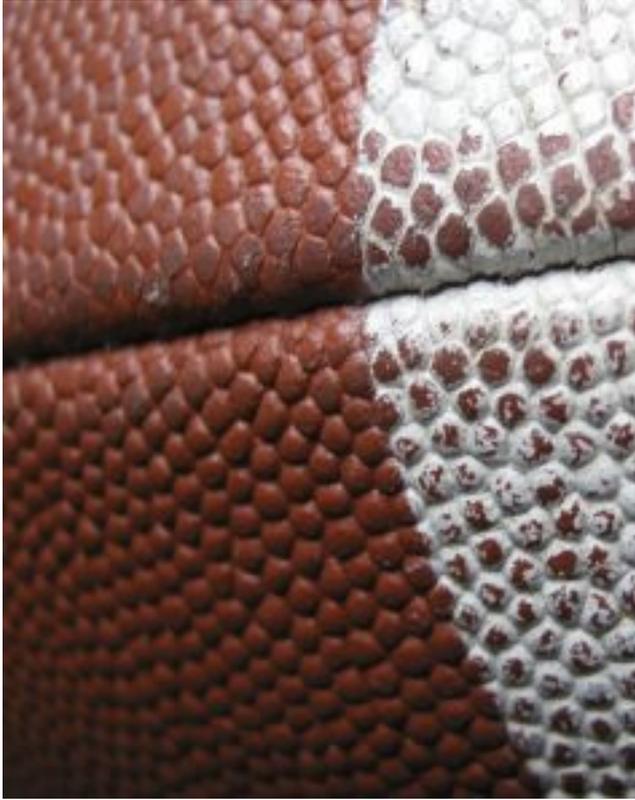


## So what makes Super Bowl Sunday so Super?

Written by Dr. Irma McClaurin  
Monday, 06 February 2012 16:17

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February 5, 2012, I spent the day at a sports bar for almost five hours trying to discern what attracted so many to the event known as “Super Bowl Sunday?” In some ways this article is a tribute to a late colleague, Dr. Walter Dozier, who was both a professional journalist and anthropologist, specializing in—you guessed it, the anthropology of sports

When you’re told that each company that had an ad played during Sunday’s Super Bowl game paid \$3.5M for a 30 second spot, and that 1.25 billion portions of chicken wings were eaten during this game weekend, or that some people were willing to pay \$4,000 for a ticket to the game, you gotta wonder, what’s the allure.

We anthropologists tend to build upon Aristotle’s thesis that “Man is by nature a social animal;” we assume the human species (men and women) to be social and study how humans operate individually and in groups. The need to belong, to be part of a social group seems to be structured into our DNA. While I did not conduct a scientific study, I did use one of the primary methods of cultural anthropology—participant observation.

When I arrived at one of the local sports bars in the North Hills area of Raleigh around 4pm, all

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was quiet. For a moment I was caught off guard and disappointed, but my friendly bar mate told me to wait, and sure enough around 5pm the place instantly filled up. I noted groups coming in: men and women, all men, all women and those of us holding ringside seats at the bar.

When I asked, “why the Super Bowl?” one fan, a New York transplant, said he came to cheer for his home team. It made him feel part of something, and relieved his sense of homesickness. He also liked the air of competition and rivalry—a big thrill in football. And, finally, he would have “bragging rights” if his home team won.

For some of the women sitting at the bar, they said they liked the commercials—a few of those shown were more creative than anything you regularly saw on television, and at \$3.5M a shot, they should be (I pity the ad agencies whose ads bombed). Other women were there to admire the quarterback—sort of like vicariously experiencing things through a romance novel. But I couldn’t help but notice that what happened around the bar and throughout the room was that people eventually began conversing with someone they didn’t know. It would start out casually with a question—who are you cheering for? And regardless of whether they were on the same side, or even not, that query would spark conversations.

At a time when most of us are glued to cellphones and Ipads, conversation has become a lost art. And somehow, folks seemed more interested in talking to a real person than hanging out on their phones during this event. That is not to say they weren’t connected.

Mark, the Bio-Tech guy was multi-tasking and having a phone/text conversation with his brother who had a bet on the score during the first quarter, while guiding me through the game. His brother didn’t win, but it was interesting watching Mark’s dilemma. He needed to have the Pirates score a touchdown after the Giants had accumulated 9 points. So there he was, a NYG fan to the core, rooting for the other side—just enough so his brother could win the pot, but with hopes that the Pirates would not outdistance his beloved NYG team in the end.

Spectacle watching is also part of the allure—the half-time show. Most of us who remembered Madonna in her heyday recognized that Lady Gaga is deeply influenced by the Queen of pop. While internet reviews of the extravaganza the next day critiqued Madonna for lip syncing—come on, she’s in an open-air stadium of 75,000 people; for being stiff in her dancing—she looked pretty good at 53+ to me; and for not pushing the envelope and being more risqué—she has children now, they watch—I found myself “Voguing” and singing along with her, as did another grey-haired woman seated down the bar from me.

In his 2009 blog on “Why Men Watch Football,” Bob Andelman suggests that football appeals to the “little boy” in men who imagine themselves running, throwing and catching passes against all odds. It is also a game where mostly men bond—though there were some women cheering ferociously in the bar, and it was not for the cute quarterback.

From my brief observations, I would suggest that football is an opportunity for people to relate to each other at the most basic level of camaraderie and competition. Within the group camaraderie, we know when we scream at least half of the 75,000 in attendance will join us, not to mention a portion of the 111 million people that Nielsen says watched from home. On the

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competition side, we join in a collective desire to see the other side tackled, blocked, and we revere the occasional gifted steals. Football is where we can beat someone fiercely and without regret—after all, it's only a game.

And there are core American values at play in football, with the Super Bowl being the pinnacle of these values on display. We recognize the hierarchy of coaches, quarterbacks and others in the game, and the glimmer of hope that the underdog can emerge victor despite all odds (the Horatio Algiers myth of success in the face of adversity). Since all the players are supposedly equally talented, somehow the football field begins to look like the level playing field that we wished existed in the real world. And the Super Bowl is the best example of a true meritocracy. Everyone is equally talented, and the best players/teams win because they are just slightly better. And finally, we admire the radical individualistic player who makes brash decisions that can put the team at risk, but also send them over the top. So few of us are willing to risk the wrath of the group to prove our exceptionalism. We see it all the time in football, and in the Super Bowl we pray that certain players will be on point so we can bear witness to their bravery, even at the risk of head and body injuries—which can be severe and damaging (but that's another story).

I'm not sure if I've got it right about what's super about the Super Bowl, but I now know it's a great opportunity to have a real conversation, meet interesting people, and be part of a group. After all, sociality is what it means to be human.

For more information:

<http://anthropologyworks.com/index.php/2011/02/03/football-and-basketball-as-american-rituals/>

[http://www.amazon.com/Meaning-Sports-Michael-Mandelbaum/dp/1586483307/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1296253052&sr=1-1](http://www.amazon.com/Meaning-Sports-Michael-Mandelbaum/dp/1586483307/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1296253052&sr=1-1)

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Dr. Irma McClaurin is the Culture and Education Editor for Insight News. She is an anthropologist and writer living in Raleigh, NC and a former university president. ( [www.irmamcclaurin.com](http://www.irmamcclaurin.com) )  
(@mcclaurintweets)