

UNH Sports Media Professor Says Super Bowl Maintains Holiday Status, Reflects Economy and Fall of Dot.Coms

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DURHAM, N.H. -- Forty-two years ago, on a third-and-goal from the one yard line, Baltimore Colt fullback Alan Ameche plowed into the end zone to score the winning touchdown in overtime against the New York Giants in a heart-stopping NFL championship game. Those who watched it on NBC that day hailed it as "the greatest game ever played," sealing the union between the NFL and TV, and making the Super Bowl the most lucrative programming in the history of the medium.

The Colts have since been replaced by the Ravens, setting up a rematch of sorts this Sunday as they take on the super-franchise New York Giants in Super Bowl XXXV. Throw in those highly-anticipated advertisements, top it off with the first episode of "Survivor II," and you have the makings for a major American holiday, says Tim Ashwell, assistant professor of sports media at the University of New Hampshire.

Nearly Half the U.S. Population Will Watch

"I expect audience numbers will be up from last year, because the Giants are a major franchise team with a large fan base," says Ashwell, who admits to being a long-time New York fan. "Despite who plays on the field, though, the Super Bowl as an event is a major national holiday. It attracts the largest television audience of the year -- nearly half the U.S. population."

Nine of the 10 most-watched television programs of all time are Super Bowls. Most viewers watch from Super Bowl parties, making the occasion the top at-home

party of the year.

Ashwell says there are many factors that contribute to the Super Bowl's popularity:

- Football builds a larger fan base because games are only held once per week, and playing on the weekend allows more fans to tune in.
- Television "loves" football. The nature of the game -- eight seconds of action, 30 seconds in between -- allows for plenty of time for replay and commentary, drawing the audience into the drama.
- The date of the "big game" is set about a year in advance. This is impossible for baseball, basketball or hockey, which never know when the final game will be. This allows people to plan social gatherings, and provides the television network and NFL with the opportunity to build the hype.
- People love the finality of the championship game and, because the Super Bowl is always held on a Sunday evening, it fits into most fans' schedules. This guarantees big ratings, and million-dollar sponsors that further advertise the game.

Are Those Ads Worth Millions?

"It's the highest rated program of the year, attracting nearly 90 million viewers of every demographic breakdown that any advertiser wants to reach," says Ashwell. "It's a showcase to premier outstanding new advertising and jump-start a year of sales."

According to the NFL, 68 percent of Super Bowl fans say they pay attention to the ads, and 52 percent discuss the ads the next day. The hype that comes with ad competition, illustrated by things like USA Today's ranking of the ads, further builds audience awareness.

CBS says advertisers paid an average of \$2.2 million for a 30-second spot in this year's game, about what they paid last year. Advertising industry insiders, however, say the price may have actually declined slightly from a year ago, with the dramatic drop of dot.com advertisers. Last-minute time-buyers last year reportedly paid up to \$3 million to get on air.

"Super Bowl advertising mirrors the story of the economy and the dramatic fallout of the dot.com companies since last year," says Ashwell. "While some, like monster.com, will be advertising this year, we're going to see a return to more traditional Super Bowl advertisers like Anheuser-Busch, Frito-Lay, Levi Strauss and Mastercard. There are also a few movie companies that will be plugging upcoming blockbuster films, like 'Hannibal,' the highly-anticipated sequel to 'Silence of the Lambs.'"

As further proof of the Super Bowl's clout, CBS will launch the first episode of the reality-based show "Survivor II" immediately following the game. It's a "great way," says Ashwell, "to capitalize on an already huge audience.

"'Survivor II' has the same pace as a sport," he says. "If you're into it, you have to watch the episodes each week as they're aired. You can't tape them and watch after -- or watch re-runs -- because everyone's talking about it at the water cooler the next day."

As a last note, Ashwell picks the Ravens to win 13-10. "It will be a defensive game," he predicts, "that hinges on the performance of two pretty lack-luster quarterbacks."

Other Super Bowl Fun Facts:

- Most Super Bowls generate more than \$100 million in merchandise sales bearing the Super Bowl logo. The all-time high was Super Bowl XXXI, Green Bay over New England, \$120 million.
- Super Bowl Sunday is the second largest day of food consumption, behind only Thanksgiving.
- Fans spend an average of \$50 million on food during Super Bowl weekend. During the week of the game, average sales of beer and wine rise 34 percent, soft drink sales rise 20 percent, and purchases of chips and snacks rise 29 percent, according to Efficient Market Services Inc., a firm that tracks customer purchases.
- Super Bowl weekend is the slowest weekend for weddings.

- Six percent of Americans will call in sick the day after Super Bowl Sunday.

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