

UNH Sports Media Professor Comments on the Super Bowl

While Teams Compete on the Field, 'Dot.Coms' Duke It out for Top Advertising Spot

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DURHAM, N.H. -- The Tennessee Titans and St. Louis Rams will square off this Sunday for Super Bowl XXXIV, and marketers at ABC -- which will broadcast the game at 6 p.m. EST-- and the NFL are scrambling to build the audience for this holiday event.

There are no super franchises, like the 49ers, Cowboys or Broncos. No major market teams, like the Jets, Giants or Bears. No marquee players like John Elway, Reggie White or Steve Young. Will this affect viewership?

Tim Ashwell, assistant professor of sports media at the University of New Hampshire, expects this year's audience to be as grand as ever.

Nearly Half the U.S. Population Will Tune In

"While audience numbers may suffer slightly, the Super Bowl as an event has become a major national holiday despite who plays on the field," says Ashwell. "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, with the 1996 match-up between the Dallas Cowboys and Pittsburg Steelers -- garnering top honors with 138,488,000 viewers. 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 --

8 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 -- the Super Bowl is the top at-home party event of the year, surpassing New Year's Eve -- 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 \$3 Million?

The competition among sponsors, in fact, has become as hot as the game itself, says Ashwell. Every year, advertising executives turn out their best product for Super Bowl television audiences, paying millions of dollars for the privilege. This year's price tag: \$2.2 million for a 30-second spot. That's an increase of \$600,000 over last year's \$1.6 million. A similar spot 10 years ago cost a paltry \$700,000.

Is it worth it? Ashwell says it's a bargain. 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.

"You've got about one-half of the U.S. population watching the game. I can't think of a better way to get your name out there," he says. "And the hype that comes with ad competition, illustrated by things like USA Today's ranking of the ads the next day, builds audience awareness. People are betting on the ads, as well as the game!"

Expect this year's competition to be among the "dot-coms," says Ashwell, explaining that Internet companies seeking to make a name for themselves have bought up many of the top spots. Companies such as

Autotrader.com, Britannica.com and Pets.com will look to build brand awareness for their sites. E*Trade is sponsoring the halftime show.

Will they be successful?

"Monster.com had a tremendous boost in public recognition after advertising on last year's Super Bowl," Ashwell says. But will name recognition translate to increased revenues? He says the jury's still out on that one.

The Internet itself will also get a boost from this Sunday's game, which ABC will coordinate with its enhanced television site. Fans will be able to check the web site for updated stats, bios and trivia.

"It's a great opportunity to see if they can turn the biggest television event into a successful Internet marketing event," says Ashwell. "If you can find out who is logging in, you've got a great marketing tool."

Other Fun Facts About the Super Bowl:

- Most Super Bowls generate \$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 the four days of the Super Bowl weekend.
- Six percent of Americans will call in sick the day after Super Bowl Sunday.
- Super Bowl weekend is the slowest weekend for weddings.

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