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What's the Super Bowl to You?



Sunday marks Super Bowl LX. Almost 200 million Americans are busily planning the entire day around *the* game. Originally, I had meant this Super Bowl **Book Note** to explore football poetry, but discovered there isn't any! Oh, any number of internet sites are littered with mediocre scribbles about the gridiron game, but they only amount to an odd mixture of adolescent-seeming, male musings written by non-football players ogling cheerleaders while mixing envy and disdain for the actual players. [1] If you know any great football poems I missed, please share them with me at roth@jeserie.org.

With poetry cast aside for the moment, why will those millions and millions of Americans gather 'round their flat screen TVs Sunday evening?

The Roman numerals hint at the reason.

But first, why is it called the “Super Bowl?”

When the old AFL merged with the NFL in 1966, the old rivals and now partners needed a name for their new championship game. Then-NFL commissioner Pete Rozelle suggested it be called “The Big One,” the already used “Pro Bowl,” and even “World Series of Football.” For a variety of reasons, these were all quickly dismissed. He landed on the accurate but clunky “The AFL-NFL Championship Game.” It was Kansas City Chiefs owner Lamar Hunt who suggested “Super Bowl” riffing off a kids’ toy of the era, the SuperBall. The owners wanted a spin on college football bowl tradition, while one-upping it. Hence, the name “Super Bowl.” [2]

The Roman numerals came when the game reached Super Bowl V for a simple reason: the regular season was played in one year and the championship game in the next. Which year’s champion was being decided? To eliminate confusion, the owners decided to number the games. It was also Hunt who promoted Roman numerals. He thought they added an aura of grandeur to the game. [3]

Hunt was right. Roman numerals lifted the game out of the present and connected it, or seemed to connect it, to a stream of antiquity and cultural significance larger than a mere single season’s championship. Roman numerals confirmed an aura of specialness and timelessness. Not anchored to a specific “now,” to a specific year, Roman numerals empowered the game to satisfy two innate human yearnings: the need to compete and the desire to transcend one’s own time. Even if it’s only been 60 years, a speck of archeological time, Roman numerals give the game a hint of something larger, a hint of the eternal.

In my *The American Tapestry Project*, which can be found on all podcast sites, I developed a sub-series “Americans and Their Games’: Sports in American History & Culture.” [4] It began with **Book Note #133**, which can be found [here](#), reviewing Randall Balmer’s *Passion Plays: How Religion Shaped Sports in North America*. Balmer never did convince me that religion shaped sports, but he did make a compelling case that in our secular

society for many people, especially white males, sports has assumed a quasi-religious role.

With church attendance dwindling “across nearly all demographic groups” [5] it’s hard to argue that Americans’ obsession with sports has not in part at least filled that gap. Among sports football reigns supreme. Its holiest day is Super Bowl Sunday. If one uses the metric of most-watched TV shows of all time, it is impossible to deny football’s cultural importance. The Top 10 most-watched broadcasts are **all** Super Bowls! [6]

In a polarized and fractious America, Super Bowl Sunday may well be America’s last, shared communal moment.

Why?

What needs does it satisfy?

Why would a couple hundred million people plan their entire Sunday around one game?

Perhaps the easiest way to explain it is this: the Super Bowl isn’t just a sporting event. If popular music, as I have asserted in ***The American Tapestry Project***, is a window into the American soul, then the Super Bowl is not only a window into American culture’s attitudes, values, and beliefs. It is also a kind of mirror in which Americans watch themselves seeing all the things they value and believe compressed into one loud, emotional, and commercial communal night.

How does the Super Bowl do that?

In 12 “notes,” each of which could serve as the topic of its own **Book Note**, let me outline how that happens.

Note #1. Community ritual: an unofficial modern national holiday

You don’t have to watch football to participate in the Super Bowl. Many Americans don’t watch a game all season and still show up for this night. Why? Because it works like a ritual in which people gather, specific foods appear

(wings, pizza, nachos, chili), friends text in groups, strangers talk about it the next day at work.

In a very large, very diverse country, shared rituals matter. The Super Bowl creates a common reference point: “Did you see that?”

Underlying value: Belonging matters, even (especially?) in a culture that prizes individualism.

Note #2: Competition: a kind of national faith

At its core, the Super Bowl is a championship in which the winner takes the crown, and the loser goes home. This reflects a deeply American cultural attitude that admires competition, respects excellence under pressure (Hemingway said courage is “grace under pressure”), and loves a clear-cut outcome.

Even if you don’t like sports, you’ll recognize the broader pattern. Americans often treat life as a series of “big games:” school, careers, business, politics, personal achievement. The Super Bowl dramatizes that mindset.

Underlying belief: Success is earned, and the moment of proof matters.

Note #3: Teamwork and specialization: the “corporate” beauty of the game

American football is not just about talent, it’s about roles. A team is a system that includes head coaches, coordinators, quarterbacks, linemen, receivers, defenders, specialists, and analysts. To an outsider, it can resemble a high-stakes organization where each person has a narrow job, execution must be precise, and mistakes are costly.

This reflects a core American value: the power of coordinated teamwork, especially when built around planning, leadership, and accountability. In my book ***How to Be a Highly Effective Leader: A Primer***, which the Jefferson Educational Society is publishing this March, because no one does anything alone, I identify the ability to build teams as one of leadership’s cardinal principles.

Underlying belief: In addition to inspiration, big goals require discipline, structure, and collaboration.

Note #4: Individualism inside the team story

American culture has a love-hate relationship with individualism. Football is a team sport, but the Super Bowl also builds mythic individuals: star quarterbacks, heroic receivers, legendary coaches, and redemption arcs and underdogs.

It's very American to celebrate both the group effort ("we won"), and the standout hero ("he carried them").

Underlying belief: We want to belong to a team, but we still dream of being the person who changes everything. We still fantasize that we are (or can be) our version of Tom Brady or pick the legend of your own childhood. Growing up in Ohio in the 1950s and 1960s, I still do not believe it is possible to be better than Jim Brown.

Note #5: The celebration of "clutch" performance under pressure

The Super Bowl is famous for defining careers in one moment: one pass, one catch, one missed kick. In Buffalo and western New York, understanding the phrase "wide right" and its attendant pain identifies you as a native.

Americans have a special admiration for people who perform in "the big moment." People who stay calm, take risks, and deliver when everyone is watching.

This is part of our broader cultural fascination with the pressure of job interviews, pitches, auditions, elections, public speaking, those moments when the whole story seems to balance on a single attempt. Somehow, even people who have never heard of Hemingway, intuitively understand what he meant about courage and what Paul Tillich said in a religious context about "the courage to be."

Underlying value: Competence under stress demonstrates courage.

Note #6: Strategy and technology: intelligence is part of the spectacle

The Super Bowl isn't only about strength or speed. It's also chess-like play calling, constant adjustments, analytics, and technology-heavy broadcasting (replays, camera angles, data overlays).

Americans love the idea that smart planning beats brute force or at least belongs in the same room with it. It's not an accident that all sports, football in particular, increasingly feel engineered for optimized execution.

Underlying attitude: Winning is a science as much as a performance.

Note #7: Entertainment and seriousness are intertwined

Many cultures separate "art" from "competition." The Super Bowl blends them.

The halftime show is not a side note. It's central. The commercials aren't just ads. They're a form of national storytelling. The very best become part of American folklore like the Budweiser horses, the 1984 Apple "Big Brother" ad, the "E*Trade baby, and numerous others. What's your favorite all-time Super Bowl ad?

The message is very American: seriousness should be fun, achievement should be dramatic, and even institutions should entertain.

Underlying attitude: If it matters, it should also be exciting.

Note #8: In a consumer culture, the Super Bowl is a festival of buying

If you want to see American capitalism with the lights bright and the volume turned up, the Super Bowl is it. The broadcast is a premium product. Commercials are treated like "mini movies." Brands compete for attention the way teams compete for points.

People genuinely rank commercials afterward like game highlights. This is a telling American characteristic because we don't only consume products, we consume experiences and narratives built around products.

Even if you find it excessive, it reveals the reality that Americans are comfortable with commerce in public life, we expect entertainment to be sponsored, and we often treat big moments as market moments.

Underlying belief: What's popular is what earns attention and increasingly in American culture attention determines what is valuable.

Note #9: Identity, hometown pride, and regional rivalry

Although one country, the United States is also a tapestry of many cultures bringing to life its original national motto of *e pluribus unum*: out of many one. Sports teams become symbols of local identity like a city's pride, a region's style, and a community's sense of itself.

Once, at a luncheon meeting of Cleveland's City Club, a journalist asked me why Pittsburghers possessed such intense community pride. I said because the Steelers (and the Penguins) win. He looked at me askance and replied, "Do you mean if the Browns won all would be well in Cleveland?" I said, "No, but Clevelanders wouldn't have such a hang-dog attitude if the Browns won. And with that positive mindset taking pride in the region, they might be more enthusiastic about civic improvement."

In my years in higher education, one of the central truths that drives some faculty members to distraction is that there is no better, faster, or more intense way to create school spirit than through athletics basketball and football, in particular. Look at Indiana University's new burst of pride after winning college football's national championship. I wish I could tell you it's the band or the chess club or the outstanding chemistry department, all very valuable things, but sports programs build pride faster, more intensely, and with greater staying power than any other community or school endeavor.

That's true even if fans move away. They keep their team loyalty like a piece of home.

Underlying attitude: Place still matters, even in a mobile, modern society.

Note #10: Pageantry and patriotism: a kind of "civic religion"

The Super Bowl often includes the national anthem, military flyovers, flags, and ceremonial language. For many Americans, this feels natural. They are happy with sports as a stage for national unity and gratitude. For others, it can feel political or uncomfortable.

Either way, the culture belief is visible as Americans mix patriotism with mass entertainment. In another time it was John Wayne movies and movie stars on USO tours, but in today's more cynical world sports remains, not the last, but the most visible entertainment medium boosting American patriotism.

Attaching national meaning to big events, we look to athletes as stars to validate our national identity. When they appear to not do so, for some people it can seem like betrayal as in the Colin Kaepernick experience.

Underlying belief: The nation is not just a government; it's a story, and we retell it in public.

Note #11: Escapism with emotional permission

Foreign visitors are often astonished at how hard Americans work, and any number of stand-up comics have made a career parodying Americans' tendency to worry about almost anything, and all Americans now live under the pressure of a constant information overload as their smartphones ding a seemingly constant demand for their attention.

The Super Bowl provides a socially acceptable "off switch" permitting an intense focus on something immediate, emotional release, shouting, cheering, and laughing for a few hours where the stakes are simple.

Even people who claim not to care about the game may care for one night because caring together feels good. It's not the game; it's being together and sharing a moment caring about something that seems culturally important.

Underlying attitude: We need shared escape and we're not shy about it.

Note #12: Contradictions on full display

An honest cultural portrait of the Super Bowl must include its tensions: community vs. commercialism (togetherness sponsored by corporations);

meritocracy vs. inequality (the dream of fair competition inside a society where opportunity is uneven); celebration vs. violence (a physically brutal sport packaged as family entertainment); and unity vs. polarization (one event trying to gather a divided nation, and sometimes failing).

The Super Bowl reveals American culture.

Underlying belief: We can celebrate our ideals even while living with our imperfections.

There are a dozen reasons why the Super Bowl has become America's most popular unofficial holiday. While I remain unconvinced that the Super Bowl qualifies as a religious feast day, its power as a mirror of American life and cultural meaning can be summarized in one sentence:

The Super Bowl is America's biggest shared night of competition, entertainment, storytelling, advertising, and community where Americans turn a game into a national spectacle celebrating performance under pressure.

In closing, trying to answer my beginning question ("Why do millions and millions of Americans set aside an entire Sunday to watch the Super Bowl?"), let's do a thought experiment.

You're visiting the United States for the first time and want to understand the Super Bowl. How do you do that? A friend suggests that the best way to do that isn't by learning the rules of football. It's by watching *people*.

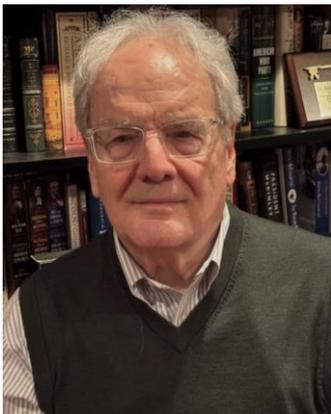
So try this:

Go to a watch party and notice how food and jokes matter as much as the game. Listen for the language of pressure: "This is it." "He's a stud who always comes through in the clutch." "They choked." Watch how commercials become conversations. Pay attention to the emotional rhythm of tension/release/celebration/disappointment. Notice the blend of sincerity and irony as people care deeply, and also make fun of how much they care.

Try it; let me know what you discover.

End Notes

1. A sample of it can be found at **The Poetry Foundation** available at [Football Poems](#) and for the real doggerel go to **Poetry Soup** available here [Super Bowl Football Poems - Poems About Super Bowl Football](#). Curiously, some very good poems about “football” can be found at several sites, but they are about English football, i.e. soccer. Try **Interesting Literature** available at [Five of the Best Poems about Football – Interesting Literature](#).
 2. Frommer, Harvey, “*How the Super Bowl Got Its Name*,” in **Time** (Jan. 15, 2016) available at [How the Super Bowl Got Its Name | TIME](#) accessed Jan. 24, 2026.
 3. Taranto, Steven, “*Why is Super Bowl LIX in Roman numerals? How to read Roman numerals, plus a history of why the NFL uses them*,” at **CBS Sports** available at [Why is Super Bowl LIX in Roman numerals? How to read Roman numerals, plus a history of why the NFL uses them - CBS Sports](#) accessed Jan. 24, 2026.
 4. You can find multiple **Book Notes** on the topic at [Book Notes - Jefferson Educational Society](#) .
 5. Abbamonte, Jonathan, “*The Great Falling Away: The Decline in Religious Services Attendance in the United States Over the Past 50 Years*,” at **The Heritage Foundation** available at [The Great Falling Away: The Decline in Religious Services Attendance in the United States Over the Past 50 Years | The Heritage Foundation](#) accessed Jan. 24, 2026.
 6. “*List of most watched television broadcasts in the United States*,” at **Wikipedia**, the free encyclopedia, available at [List of most watched television broadcasts in the United States - Wikipedia](#) accessed Jan. 24, 2026.
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