

Game-changers



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By Nate Smelle

Super Bowl Sunday ... is there a more sacred day of the year in the United States?

Some might argue that Christmas holds a greater significance, and worthiness of celebration. However, considering the build up for Super Bowl Sunday lasts 20 weeks, compared to the six to eight week pre-Christmas blitz, it is clear which holiday is of more importance south of the border. For most Canadians, as entertaining of a spectacle as it is, Super Bowl Sunday is one of the best excuses of the year to indulge in as much alcohol and junk food as possible within a 24-hour period.

In my late teens and early twenties, I, like many other young men of that age, had an almost religious dedication when it came to following professional sports. As a gambler wanting to cash in on this dogma, I spent much of my free time keeping track of the stats. At any given time, I knew which players and teams were on a roll, and which ones were struggling. To gain this knowledge, as any true sports fan knows, one must tune into the sermon - in my case, Hockey Night in Canada, Sunday, Monday, and Thursday Night Football - as much as possible.

Of course it wasn't all about the numbers. A keen focus on the health of the players also had its advantages. Every week questions needed to be asked and answered. Who was limping in between plays? Who was slow getting up after being slammed into the boards or punched in the face? Which players were on the injured list, and how long had they been there? How was so and so healing after their surgery in the off-season?

As any serious scientist, philosopher, politician, or sports fanatic will tell you, the more questions you ask, the more your knowledge of "the game" grows. Likewise, the more you know, the more questions you have to be answered. When it comes to science, philosophy, or politics, this cycle can never be broken as long as someone keeps asking questions. Sports on the other hand, is different. Though I still tune into the National Hockey League and National Football League playoffs each year, my dedication to following professional sports has waned greatly over the past decade.

My reason for tuning out: the commercialization of professional athletes and "the game" in general. The first time I noticed this shift in the priorities of professional sports teams was in the renaming of arenas and stadiums. Instead of teams playing at a venue named after a team, Maple Leaf Gardens for example; or, after hometown sports icons such as Joe Louis or Joe Robbie, the venues gradually started being re-named after the corporations that were willing to throw the most money at a team's owners.

With more and more logos decorating these ancient cathedrals of professional sports in the mid to late '90s, the number of athletes eager to sell ad-space on their foreheads also started increasing. At first, this additional revenue helped elevate and expand awareness of the players, teams, and venues on the market. Now, unfortunately the commercialization of sports has taken over and changed the game.

As much as I enjoy playing and watching football, as a Canadian, hockey has always been my sport of choice. That said, whenever I tune into a game now I find the experience to be more frustrating than enjoyable. It is not that the skill level of the players - skating, shooting, passing, checking, etc. - hasn't improved. What is missing in my opinion, is the heart. Sure there are moments of passion where a player or players give it there all to win. But, anyone who remembers watching players like Wendel Clark, Lanny McDonald, Cam Neely, Dave "Tiger" Williams, or Bob Probert, knows when they watch professional hockey today that there is something vital missing from the game. Skilled as they might be, the billion dollar babies taking to the ice these days do not have the same fire in their bellies. While any of the above mentioned players would have gladly lopped off their own ear to hoist the Stanley Cup, 99 per cent of the players today would not risk dropping their gloves out of fear they might break a nail.

Seeing the intensity in the eyes of Kansas City Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes as he hobbled around the field on a throbbing toe during the fourth quarter of the game Sunday evening, I was reminded of the sports heroes I grew up watching and betting on. So many of my friends bet with me as we were growing up, we all had different teams we supported and it made it quite fun to have that competition on the field grow into what we had at home. There is a lot of options nowadays on how to bet, from online [Arizona sports betting](#) to going into a local bookie to put some money down.

Despite Mahomes awareness of the futility of his efforts at that stage of the game, he continued to sacrifice his health, throwing up one hail Mary after another right up until the final buzzer. In my eyes, although it is still early in his career, the fighting spirit he exhibited throughout Super Bowl LV will one day help to earn Mahomes a place among the all-time greats.