What's so Super about the Super Bowl?

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

I am glad it is over. As football games go, the final minute and one-half of last night’s Super Bowl would be hard to beat. After being down by ten points at the start of the fourth quarter, the Patriots score a go-ahead touchdown, only to find the Seahawks on the one yard line after an improbable catch of a Hail Mary pass. The final interception, by a relatively unknown player, made for great drama. (Except for that nasty brawl: For the amount of money these guys are being paid, we can expect them to behave better than school children.) So, no complaints about the game.

But, the hype is a different story. Of course, we Americans like football. It is now the national game for all intents and purposes. And, every culture finds ways to craft and celebrate tests of will and strength in sport. But, especially in a culture like ours, in which so much time is spent trying to make life predictable, the drama of sport, the not-knowing how it will turn out, is especially refreshing.

The hype is generated not merely by this innate human love of sport, but by powerful economic interests. The league itself is one of the best marketing achievements of our time: Despite reports about brain injuries among athletes and the bad press surrounding some high profile cases of spousal and child abuse, the NFL brand is second to none, and the icing on that cake is the Super Bowl. The millions spent on ads during the game is the outcome of a carefully planned strategy to make us consumers buy into the hype and, just so, become more likely to buy whatever is being sold. The ads actually mimic the NFL itself. They are all about the brand, not so much the actual product. Hint: Budweiser is not longer delivered to your corner store by horses.

We humans like to idolize fellow humans who excel at any given task. Of course, this is best done at a distance. Up close and personal, most sports stars these days lead really odd lives. They spend hours and hours and hours practicing their craft, working out, watching video of the other team. Whether you play
tennis or football, if you want to be a star, you have to be single-minded in the pursuit. The problem is, of course, that the single-minded are dreadful dinner party guests. In the first restaurant I worked at in Washington, the owner was friendly with some members of the Redskins. This was back when they actually won games, so when they came into the restaurant for a party, it was a big deal. I remember two things from those parties, first, that these guys are really large, and that you also have to struggle to have much of a conversation with them.

And if, like me, you attended a Bette Midler concert at which she did her routine on why football is America’s great homo-erotic ritual? and none of the jokes in that routine can be reprinted here in a family newspaper? then you never quite look at the game the same way again.

Last week, E.J. Dionne published a column on why he remains a New England Patriots fan and, specifically, why fan loyalty is a good thing, an instance of a vitally important social virtue. True, without loyalty, a culture quickly becomes degraded. But, I also think loyalty must be mutual if it is to sustain itself. Growing up, my family was more of a baseball family than a football family. And, in those days, Carl Yastrzemski was a Red Sox and Brooks Robinson was an Oriole, and they would be until they retired. Stars were loyal to their fans too. Those days are gone. This past summer, I was flipping channels and there was Jacoby Ellsbury? in a Yankee’s uniform.

Interestingly, college football and basketball, which are with women’s tennis, the best games to watch in person or on TV, maintain a strong sense of fan loyalty for their teams, even though they change personnel every year, or at least every four. I also suspect these swanky new stadiums for pro teams have a negative effect on team loyalty. When I used to go to Patriots games, they were in Foxboro stadium, which was like a high school football stadium only bigger. Now, I couldn’t afford the tickets for their fancy, skyboxed stadium. Same with baseball. Friends have been kind enough to take me to games at the Washington Nationals new park, and it is, in many ways, a great ballpark. But, it sure is not Fenway.

What does it all mean? I don’t know. Maybe hype is not something of which we need be suspicious. But, I am. At nine p.m. last night, I readily confess, I switched to Downton. Only after that drama, did I get back to the one in Arizona.

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