

February 3, 2008

Big Game Is No Place for the Average Fan

By KATIE THOMAS

PHOENIX — Come Sunday at 2 p.m., [Ryan Seacrest](#) will grab his microphone, put on a smile and step onto the red carpet.

Before long, his friends will be there, too, alighting from limousines and grinning in the glare of television lights. Seacrest, the host of the Fox television show “American Idol,” will probably banter good naturedly with the usual array of movie stars, reality-show regulars and socialites.

The scene on Sunday, of course, will not be a prelude to the Golden Globes or the Academy Awards. For the first time in N.F.L. history, Fox’s [Super Bowl](#) coverage will begin with a red-carpet show that seems more at home in Hollywood than as a lead-in to a game celebrated for its sweaty, bone-crunching displays of brute force.

All through the fall and into the playoffs, football is the domain of ordinary people. Watching the Sunday game with a cold beer in hand is a ritual celebrated by factory workers, middle managers and lawyers alike, a release after a long week of work.

So how is it that a sport with such populist roots has as its climax the Super Bowl, a weeklong extravaganza that is now the latest stop on the celebrity circuit? Even at their face value of \$700 and \$900, tickets are so out of reach of most fans that the Super Bowl has become one giant luxury suite, dominated not so much by die-hard [Patriots](#) and [Giants](#) fans as by corporate executives, team employees, players’ families and celebrities.

“We shouldn’t fool ourselves into thinking that this is an event for the average fan,” said Peter Roby, the athletic director of [Northeastern University](#) and the former director of the university’s Center for the Study of Sport in Society. “The average football fan will be at home with their friends, at a sports bar, huddled around a big-screen TV.”

Unlike the World Series or the N.B.A. finals, the culmination of the N.F.L. season is a single game, played in a single stadium. Who gets to attend the Super Bowl, then, comes down to a question of supply and demand. And because of the way the N.F.L. distributes tickets, only about a third will go to season-ticket holders or the general public. The rest are given out free to corporate sponsors, employees of the N.F.L. and individual teams, and friends and family of the players.

“All of a sudden it creates a funnel, where not everyone can come to this,” said Chris Robichaud, president of BNC Marketing and Public Relations, a Los Angeles-based agency that planned several corporate events in the week leading up to the Super Bowl. “You really are getting the crème de la crème of the corporate world, the sports world and the entertainment world that is coming here.”

The Super Bowl was not always super. In its first year in 1967, tickets went for as little as \$6, and the halftime entertainment consisted of marching bands from the Universities of Arizona and Michigan. The event had the feel of a cheerful parade, recalled Steve Sabol, who is now president of NFL Films but was a cameraman during the first Super Bowl.

But as the game's popularity grew, so did the fanfare surrounding it.

The turning point for Sabol came in 1984, when the Super Bowl arrived in Tampa, Fla. He said he was checking camera positions on the field before game day when he overheard someone say, "What are we going to put on the elephants' feet so we don't destroy the playing surface?"

At that moment, Sabol said, "I realized this had gone far beyond a football game as I knew it, and this was a spectacle."

Although Super Bowl week has long been punctuated by raucous parties, public concerts and other events, something intensified in 2001, when the championship again took place in Tampa and the number of corporate and celebrity events mushroomed, Robichaud said. Until then, entertainment journalists who came to town had little to do aside from covering the halftime show. By throwing parties with high-profile celebrities, "we tried to create different ideas that met their needs as well as the clients' needs," Robichaud said.

In 2003, the Super Bowl was in San Diego, a short drive south from the entertainment capital of the world. "That year, it really took off," Robichaud said.

Now, the Super Bowl as a live event is primarily a perk for the nation's elite, and an opportunity for companies to sell their products to a coveted demographic of influencers and decision-makers. This year, Audi, one of Robichaud's clients, transformed a nine-acre estate into an invitation-only retreat designed to shelter athletes, celebrities and other V.I.P.'s from the "chaotic social landscape" of the Super Bowl, according to a news release by Robichaud's company.

Even some celebrities acknowledged that the hype surrounding the game has gotten out of hand. Jerry O'Connell, an actor in television shows like "Crossing Jordan" and "Las Vegas," recalled getting invited to a party thrown by a lingerie company. "Everyone's saying you have to go to this party," he said. "It's going to be the biggest party of the Super Bowl. And I'm thinking to myself, what does lingerie really have to do with the Super Bowl?"

While they are not all famous, Super Bowl attendees are generally wealthier and better educated than fans at a regular-season game, said Kathleen Davis, the chief executive for the Sports Management Research Institute of West Palm Beach, Fla. She studied the demographics of Super Bowl visitors to South Florida in 2007 and found that the average visitor to the Super Bowl had a household income of \$222,318 a year and spent \$669 a person a day while in town.

This stratification worries some academics, who say that sports stadiums used to be one of the few places where classes mixed and rooted for the same team. But with the growth of luxury suites and the escalating price of Super Bowl tickets, "It's not the public gathering place that it used to be," said Bill Morgan, a

professor at the [University of Southern California](#) whose specialty is ethics in popular culture and sports.

The N.F.L. offers several free or low-cost events to local residents and the thousands of out-of-town visitors who show up even though they cannot afford a ticket to the game. A ticket to the NFL Experience, a mini-amusement park next to the stadium, costs \$17.50, for example.

And Greg Aiello, an N.F.L. spokesman, noted that the game is broadcast on television free of charge. "The Super Bowl is an extraordinary event that is enjoyed by 99 percent of the audience via television," Aiello said.

Even among those lucky enough to attend the Super Bowl, the stands are still divided into the haves and the have-mores. Marc Snyder, who owns a sports bar in Cliffside Park, N.J., flew to Phoenix with little more than wishful thinking and a love for the Giants. When he found a motel willing to charge him \$500 a week, he said he overlooked the fact that it is the kind of place where you have to put a quarter in the ice machine. By Friday, Snyder said, he had found a guy willing to sell a ticket in the upper tier for \$1,500.

The inferior seat was not a concern. "That's where you find, I think, the real fans," Snyder said. "Down below, everybody's got the money you can spend. Up top, that's where scavengers go like me. But you know what? As long as you're with your people, there's nothing better."

[Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
