

# Lessons Learned From The 2017 Super Bowl



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There are few certain occurrences that sports fans can look forward to. One that takes place early in every new year is the Super Bowl, the National Football League's season's finale of American's most violent life threatening, life shortening, commercial-laden TV sporting extravaganza.

The next Super Bowl will be number LII. It will be held at U.S. Bank Stadium in Minneapolis on Feb 4, 2018. The teams will be the New England Patriots and the Philadelphia Eagles. But to the National Football League brass, sports marketers and TV network executives the score of the game is not the most important element of the mega event. Much more important are the success of TV commercials, the conduct of the players and TV ratings. And so it will be this year and forever as long as there is a Super Bowl

As always, the lead-up to last year's game of carnage between the New England Patriots and Atlanta Falcons actually provided some lessons that could benefit all Americans, regardless of their interest in the sport. One of the most important lessons learned was to be wary of a sales pitch accompanied by numbers and charts provided by a merchant trying to sell you something, because as people in our business know, statistics do not necessarily tell the entire story.

*(Editor's Note) Unless otherwise indicated, all dates below are from 2017 occurrences.)*

On Jan. 26, The NFL's annual report regarding injuries proved that numbers provided by a merchant can be misleading. The NFL said that there were 11.3 percent less concussions in 2016 than in the previous season. But as Michael Powell wrote in his Jan. 27 New York Times column, it's true that there were less concussions but "...that's because concussions the previous year reached a five-year high of 183..." His column also detailed how other serious injuries continue to remain high in the NFL. And Matthew Futterman reported in the Wall Street Journal that the stats show that playing football in the NFL "remains a dangerous endeavor."

While it has been obvious for decades that the NFL's vaunted shield doesn't protect players from injuries on the field, an important PR lesson learned for marketers spending millions of dollars for the right to say that they are official sponsors of the NFL is that the shield is equally ineffective against ambush marketing efforts of savvy non-sponsors.

Heinz brands might have had the most successful ambush marketing effort in the lead-up to the Super Bowl, when USA TODAY, on Jan. 27, highlighted a story about Heinz giving employees the day off after the game. It should be a national holiday, said Heinz in a humorously worded petition, because 16 million people don't show up for work the day after the game.

The analysis by journalists regarding the NFL injury report, which showed how misleading statistics can be, and the Heinz ambush marketing ploy might have been the two most important lessons learned from last year's Super Bowl. But there were many others.

**Here are a few:**

Media coverage to the lead-up of the Super Bowl always brings

into the spotlight the serious consequences associated with football.

- On Jan. 15, the NYT ran a full page story detailing results to a player's brain after a hit.

- On January 19, the NYT reported that Mark Gastineau, the New York Jets pass rusher in the 1980s, said that he believes various brain problems he now has was caused by playing football.

- Last year's Super Bowl also proved that despite what the IOC claims, politics and sports do mix:

An important lesson learned by the NFL and its sponsors is that the days when they could control players from opining on subjects, that the NFL and sponsors would rather they not, went the way of the ridiculous deflated football brouhaha. Comments by players regarding politics and social issues are now a permanent part of Super Bowl week.

- Martellus Bennett, the New England Patriots' tight end, was probably the most forthright of any player, saying if the Patriots won the Super Bowl he most likely would not go to the White House if invited, "Because I don't support the person in it."

Bennett's remark probably couldn't have made Robert Kraft, the Patriots owner, happy considering his friendship with Donald Trump. We know it made the NFL unhappy because, the Times reported, it was omitted from the official NFL transcript.

- New England's Devin McCourty also said he wouldn't go to the White House because of Trump's prejudices, as did teammate Dont'a Hightower (although he didn't mention politics).

- The NFL Players Association said that it was opposed to temporarily banning refugees and immigrants from seven Muslim-countries.

- Shahid Khan, owner of the Jacksonville Jaguars, who is a Muslim, spoke out against Trump's ban, even though he voted

for him.

Another lesson learned is that political and sports journalists have much in common: Political media helped elect Trump by playing up the uniqueness of his calling in uninvited to TV programs and by treating his every tweet as a major proclamation while largely not exploring his actual policy statements for almost two years before the election.

Sports reporters still, too often, glorify players, coaches, managers, team owners and execs. It is most evident in football coverage during the lead-up to the Super Bowl.

**Three prime examples of the above from last year:**

- A USA TODAY feature on Jan. 29 concerning a Bill Belichick press conference. The non-news story was how the New England Patriots coach conducted himself during the presser.
- A Jan. 30 column in The Record of North Jersey detailing a "heartwarming" story of how proud Phil Simms is to have two sons with NFL connections.
- A USA TODAY feature on Jan. 31 about how twin NFL brothers avoid watching each other's games.

The stories were reminiscent of those that Hollywood fan magazines used to feature in the days before TV. (Members of the Public Relations Society of America must be envious and wish they were as proficient in gaining major media coverage for their clients when pitching none news fluff.)

But all the PR-like media coverage that passes for serious journalism during Super Bowl week couldn't conceal the problems facing the NFL, as detailed in a page one WSJ Feb. 1 story. The article said that the league is searching for ways to combat a decline in TV audiences and that officials say a better product is necessary. And a NYT's story on Feb. 2 emphasized how the NFL tries to stay clear of political issues, even though the Super Bowl "is infused with national politics like never before."

Of course, marketers and their ad agencies talked up the success of their commercials, as they do every year, even though the cost and effectiveness of Super Bowl TV ads costing millions of dollars has been questioned for the past several years. So was the 2017 cost – about \$5-million for a 30 TV commercial and about a million dollars more to promote the ads.

On Jan. 29, the NYT reported that Mary Scott, a president at UEG, a sports and entertainment marketing agency, recommended that clients spend an amount equal to at least 25 percent of the cost on promotions related to their Super Bowl ads because, “ Even though the spots have incredible viewership – as much as the game itself – you never know.” In the same story, Berta De Pablos-Barbier, vice president of marketing for Mars Chocolate, said, “Television advertising continues to be an important part, but on its own it’s not enough anymore.” An Advertising Age article on Feb. 1 pointed out other opportunities that might be more prudent than spending \$166,667 a second on a Super Bowl ad.

(While not directly related to the Super Bowl, three stories toward the end of the 2017 raised red flags for sports marketing execs. The October 30-November 5 issue of SportsBusiness Journal, the bible of the industry, headlined an article, “Study shows drop in fans receptive to sponsors.” And the NYT and WSJ, on December 12, both mentioned declining NFL TV viewership in a story about a mobile streaming deal with Verizon.)

### **Politics may also have influenced some TV commercials.**

USA TODAY, on Feb. 1, ran a story, saying that the political climate affected TV commercials. It highlighted an ad from 84 Lumber that welcomed all good employees. But the original ad was turned down by Fox because it included a border wall and Hispanic actors, which was too controversial for the broadcaster, according to the ad agency.

Perhaps the most interesting Super Bowl ad was Budweiser's "Born The Hard Way," which chronicled the "story of our founder's ambitious journey to America in pursuit of his dream: to brew the King of Beers." Interesting only because many thought the ad took a swipe at Trump's anti immigration policy.

Other commercials that were deemed to have political messages were Coca-Cola's, Airbnb and Audi. For the last few years, I've asked a Super Bowl party host of about 20-plus people if watching the TV commercials is still an important part of the gathering. Each year the answer is, "No,". Nevertheless, one sure bet is that all of the TV sponsors will say publicly how happy they are with the results of the ads and promotions. (As an individual who has worked on many national and international mega sports marketing campaigns, I can assure you that what clients say publicly is not always what they say privately.)

The most intelligent comment I heard about the Super Bowl was from WFAN-AM, N.Y.'s Mike Francesa, who once said that he doesn't get to the football news until after he's finished watching the early morning political programs, "because that's more important." (In my opinion, Francesa, who recently retired from his daily show, ran the most intelligent of all sports talk programs because he never thought that hits, runs, errors or TDs and three pointers were always the most important element of his program. He would delve into issues like the Penn State sexual abuse scandal, the NFL trying to discredit concussion studies and other subjects that deserved to lead broadcast and print reports.)

For political junkies the most interesting aspect of this year's Super Bowl will not be the commercials or the game. It will be how the president is received. Your corner bookie will probably take bets on whether there will be football players protesting during the national anthem or if Trump will agree to a half-time interview, as other presidents have. (Note:

Since I don't bet on sports events, all my wagering consists on the ups and downs of stocks and all my bookies have legal status, making book on the New York, American and Nasdaq exchanges.)

During my 35 years managing or playing key roles in national and international sports and none sports PR accounts, which included traveling the world as a media advisor to high-ranking foreign government officials, I have worked on, read and listened to countless hours of commentary regarding the Super Bowl, Olympics and Major League Baseball's most prestigious events and give the following advice to sports fanatics: Relax. Don't take the outcome of the events so seriously. The leagues, teams, players and sponsors look at these events as a part of doing business. So should you.

***About the Author:** Arthur Solomon, a former journalist, was a senior VP/senior counselor at Burson-Marsteller and was responsible for restructuring, managing and playing key roles in some of the most significant national and international sports and non-sports programs. He now is a contributor to public relations and sports business publications, consults on public relations projects and was on the Seoul Peace Prize nominating committee. He can be reached at [arthursolomon4pr@juno.com](mailto:arthursolomon4pr@juno.com)*