

# 'Essence of life lived fully and without excuses'

**A**LTHOUGH New England is a lagging indicator, religion is pretty popular in America. We just had a historic election when record numbers went to the polls. But, the only time the entire country focuses on one annual event with absolute attention by nearly everyone is the ritual called the Super Bowl.



**DUO  
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This ultimate explosion of hype has a thorough preparation in the overwhelming college football bowl game marathon seen through December and early January. You can watch as many as five sequential games in one Saturday – back-to-back-to-back-to-back-to-back. Then, the NFL playoffs all through January become the warm-up acts for our national group hug of the flat screen.

Despite our collective embrace of this loud and hearty explosion of sound, fury and Buffalo wings, most who watch it do not know a first down from a tight end. But, they still attend a phenomenon that is now so familiar as a TV show as to be a cultural cliché — the second great excuse for gluttony after Thanksgiving — the Super Bowl party.

For those who feel a little disingenuous for superficially embracing a sport they don't get, or worse, hate, I think an explanation is in order. Having played, captained, coached and spawned a perpetrator, I know that, despite all visual clues to the contrary, football is not a video game.

You do not need to know the arcane lingo ("snaps", "downs", "punts," "clipping") to cut through the bluster of the broadcasters, the media hype machine clichés or even the ridiculous halftime embarrassments to see a few basic truths of the game itself.

Football is, at its core, an athletic opera of extreme effort, triumph and humiliation. It is the only sport I know where on every play 90 percent of those on the field give up their bodies to make others look good. People hurl themselves at one another so someone else runs without getting stopped, or can allow others to gain glory by stopping those seeking to run free. It is the only team event I can think of in which pain and injury are virtually inevitable, and the participants knowingly accept the cost of performing.



It is, therefore, despite all noise to the contrary, the most self-sacrificial of sports — compelling beyond reason to the relatively small group of men in America who actually have played it. Everyone I know who has finished playing, for whatever reason, has flashbacks of its intensity, emotion and purity of violent expression despite decades off the field.

You do not need to know that zone coverage opens up play action passing over the middle to see the extreme emotion of young men who act on the high ideal of suppressing personal expression for a greater good. Unlike the video game, the entire field of play tells a story of collective choreography punctuated by spasms of extreme individual effort. It is virtually a dance at the beginning of every play, which becomes an explosion of improvisation once everyone takes their first few steps.

So, when you see the overwhelming imagery and cacophony, also see the humanity that is the central focus of all the peripheral silliness.

Football has at its core the simple truth of human beings putting the full measure of who they are into their hurtling bodies, padded and protected to allow more bodily expression than any ballet could possibly offer. There is a level of intensity and violence that no other forum can legally harbor. It is for us who love it the essence of life lived fully and without excuses, win or lose.

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