

So just why do we watch these sports anyway?

Millions will watch the Super Bowl on Sunday. Virtually no one knows why.

We understand why crowds will gather to sate themselves with food and drink (They're called pagan rituals. They've been around for centuries). We understand why people place a few nickels on the outcome of the contest (That's gambling. It also goes way back).

We even understand why the winning team's hometown fans will celebrate in the streets (riots are a useful way of telling newspapers or historians that something important is happening). However, the game's the thing. Why do we watch the game?

The meeting of sports and philosophy is an awkward one. Would Nietzsche care about 20,000 people doing the wave and chanting "airball"? Did Sartre try to learn to throw a knuckler or run the wishbone?

The philosophy of sport actually has its own section in any library, but the few books there are mostly self-important, dull

or feeble efforts by professors who realized they could cultivate an area of research with a beer in one hand and a remote control in the other.

Most convenient ways to describe sports don't work. Sports aren't merely a social activity. Watching a game alone doesn't change the game. Millions of kids shoot baskets alone in driveways after school.

Sports could be called children's games for big kids, but one would have to explain why we confer tremendous social status upon athletes, or why athletes help shape ideals of aesthetic beauty and human perfection.

Maybe some truth is found in labelling sports as "entertainment" or "leisure activity." Watching a game can be an escape from everyday life, a means of quelling self-consciousness. We can watch without being watched. We can yell without being yelled at.

Drugs and alcohol may mute self-consciousness also. One hopes that sports exists as more



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than a minor stimulant. Sports, it has been said, is life with the volume turned up.

Sports deliver highs and lows, emotion and drama, all with a minimum of commercial interruptions. Perhaps we like sports because we are given a chance to feel, to react spontaneously and sincerely without judgment. Perhaps this explains the appeal of sport to men that are supposed to be emotionally reluctant or repressed, the guys who put marriage proposals on scoreboards because it's easier than doing it in person.

Dostoyevsky wrote that children make-believe as they awaken to an appreciation of drama and other art. Children may also

exercise imagination in playing sports, but sports can't rightfully be called art. Sports does not seem to express or represent to the extent that art does. The games we watch exist in the moment but rarely impress themselves more deeply.

However, sports does possess a sense of the dramatic. Roger Angell, regular contributor to the *New Yorker* and the nation's baseball writer laureate, called sport the only form of drama that never repeats itself.

Angell said that in no other place do we often see the humiliation of the great and the exaltation of the lowly. The star ages or is outplayed by the rookie. The journeyman emerges from nowhere into instant notoriety.

Battling with failure, earning success, struggling to prove one's self: We see all these. Games, years and careers turn on luck that is indiscriminately clement and cruel. We find all of these in sports and we find them in ourselves. In its own way, sports tells stories.

Sports can be a reflection of who we are, but it also can be better than we are. To watch a Michael Jordan or a Roger Clemens or a Joe Montana is to watch grace under pressure, to see miniature acts of heroism, to know that confidence and courage and achievement are possible in measures that we ourselves may have never known or imagined.

So why do we watch sports? This Sunday, the best answer may still be "Shut up and pass me the bean dip."

Maybe its enough to know that 9-year-olds and 90-year-olds will both be watching. Maybe Bruce Smith or Emmitt Smith or Leon Lett, heaven forbid, will do something sensational or spectacular or just downright odd, and you will be glad you were watching instead of thinking about this. Some things are best reasoned. Some things are better seen and felt.

Scott Simonson is a sports reporter for the Emerald.

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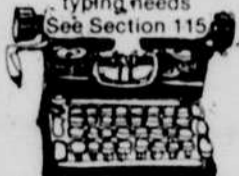
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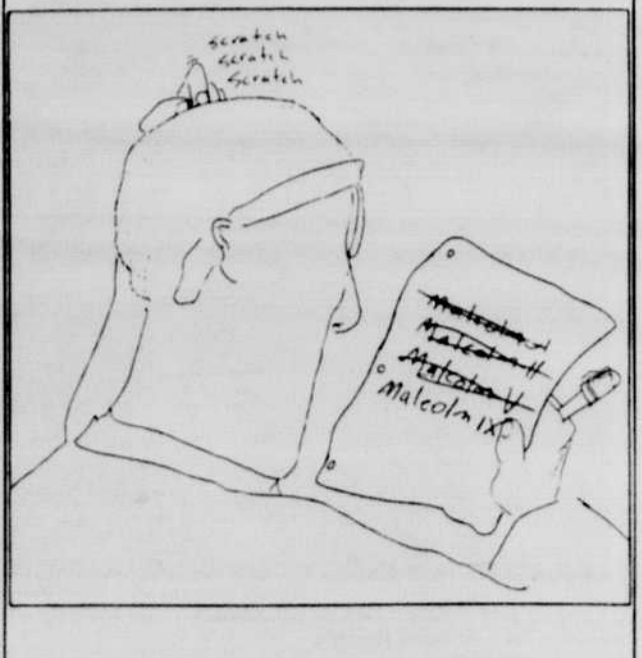
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