

Why I'm Glad I Watched the Super Bowl

by Jeffrey Breshears

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I watch NFL games occasionally, but I'm no ardent fan. I'm familiar with some of the players, but I don't know, nor do I really care to know, most of them. Furthermore, I've never cared for the whole corporate NFL image – a carefully crafted but very incongruent mix of conservative martial values and ultra-liberal Political Correctness. And when it comes to the grandiose spectacles that are Super Bowls, I have no interest whatsoever in watching commercials advertising the latest-and-greatest techno-gadgets and other superfluous products of corporate America, and I sure-as-hell am not going to subject myself to the glitzy, cheesy, trashy pop culture extravaganza that is the half-time show. I didn't even watch Paul McCartney when he performed several years ago.

All that aside, I *did* want to watch the game this year because of its connection (at least in my mind) to the culture war that is raging in America today. Not that I cared one bit which gang (excuse me: *team*) won the game. But I *did* care about how the quarterbacks performed. In football the quarterback is not only the “field general” who directs the fortunes of his team's offense, but he is often the “face” of the franchise who represents the team's public image.

I've always admired Peyton Manning, the Denver Broncos (and former Indiana Colts) quarterback, one of the greatest quarterbacks in NFL history and a future Hall-of-Famer. Manning



is an intense competitor, as anyone who succeeds at that level must be. But he is also the consummate professional who has always conducted himself admirably. He has been an exemplary team leader, a role-model for kids, and an athlete who personifies the best in sportsmanship. As a result, he has earned the respect of his teammates and opponents alike.

In stark contrast is the Carolina Panthers quarterback, Cam Newton. A gifted athlete for sure, but when it comes to personal character, Newton is the poster boy for much that is wrong in professional sports today. Notorious for his on-field antics – strutting, preening, prancing, dancing – even an insipidly stupid “Superman” pose after scoring a touchdown – Newton comes across as the prototypical narcissistic showboat. (It's hardly coincidental that he wears number “1” on his jersey.)



In that regard, Newton certainly distinguishes himself from virtually all previous NFL quarterbacks. We have become accustomed to many players in the NFL behaving like uninhibited exhibitionists, taunting rival players and celebrating themselves after making even routine plays. But such behavior has usually been very rare among quarterbacks, who are expected to be the cool, calm, intelligent team leader on the field. Newton, however, is just the opposite, and he has earned the animosity of many around the league.

As far as their performances in the Super Bowl, Manning, who is at the end of his career, was anything but the dominating force of years past. He was, at best, a serviceable field manager in the game, playing only well enough not to lose. Hopefully, he'll announce his retirement soon, before his skills erode even further or he suffers a debilitating injury that incapacitates him the rest of his life. In the post-game interviews, he was his typical gracious self, praising his teammates for a great victory over a team that was highly-favored coming into the game. As for Newton, he played a generally miserable game as the Denver defense successfully contained him for the most part. But that wasn't the end of his night's work. After the game he appeared reluctantly before the media in the obligatory post-game press conference, slumped over with his face barely visible beneath a hoodie, responding to questions with mumbled, often one-word utterances before getting up and walking out. Absolutely classless, in keeping with his reputation.



Now, lest anyone whose been infected by the virus of Political Correctness assume that all of this is “racial,” let me assure you that I couldn't care less that Manning is white and Newton is black. I would feel the same way if I were referring to Russell Wilson and Johnny Manziel. Wilson, the black quarterback of the Seattle Seahawks, has a well-earned reputation as a person of character and decency, while Manziel, the white quarterback (and now, former-quarterback) of the Cleveland Browns, is known as a self-indulgent, immature jerk. Race has nothing to do with anything. As Martin Luther King Jr. taught, it's all about the content of one's character, not the color of one's skin, and at least in this context it's also about that old antiquated (and apparently passe) ideal of sportsmanship.

Regardless of their athletic skills, I have little respect for players who act like spoiled, immature prima donnas – players who show no apparent

respect for the integrity of the sport, the fans, opponent players, or oftentimes even their own teammates. This is becoming more common in sports, and it's one reason why my interest continues to wane over the years. All the trash-talking and narcissistic exhibitionism should be appalling, and it's a wonder that any team owner, general manager or coach (or teammates, for that matter) would tolerate such behavior. But sports is a microcosm of our society and culture, and when we observe just how crass, crude, and rude our culture has become (for example: note the current state of political discourse), we shouldn't be surprised when such behavior becomes normative in sports, too. Apparently, the end justifies the means, and character and sportsmanship have little to do with it.

An aside: When a rookie running back for the Green Bay Packers in the mid-'60s scored a touchdown and was a little too exuberant, after he came over to the team's sideline, Vince Lombardi walked over to him, grabbed him by the facemask and barked, “Act like you've been there before!” In other words: act like a professional. This is what I miss in professional sports today. I know “the times, they are a-changin',” but it looks to me like most of the changes are for the worse.

I rarely get emotionally invested in sports. It's just show biz and a product of the entertainment industry, and as far as I know, games have absolutely no cosmic significance or transcendent value. But the stark contrast between the character of a Peyton Manning and that of Cam Newton does matter. In the midst of a culture that is descending into moral chaos, it's gratifying to see good guys win. As I watched the game, my wife wondered (a) why I was even interested in seeing a game between the Denver Broncos and the Carolina Panthers, and (b) why I seemed to care. I tried to explain, but it wasn't obvious to her until the next day when she saw the video replay of the post-game press conference with Newton. Then she understood. But having said all that, I should add that I still muted all the commercials, and during the half-time show we switched over to *Downton Abbey*.

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