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'Super Bore': The Canadian Media and the Grey Cup-Super Bowl Comparison

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ABSTRACT

A closer look at football illuminates some important truths in the Can-Am experience. Central to this discovery is the notion of the Grey Cup as Canada's anti-Super Bowl. Complete with folksy traditions and understated pageantry, the Grey Cup is emblematically Canadian and has historically served as a sharp rebuke to American cultural imperialism and excess, represented so perfectly by the Super Bowl. Like many aspects of Can-Am relations, however, the Super Bowl experience is not a simple narrative. Many Canadians have not only integrated the Super Bowl into their sporting calendars but prefer it to the domestic product. The growing cultural influence of the Super Bowl north of the border made national headlines in 2015 when ratings revealed that more Canadians, per capita, watched the Super Bowl than Americans. Traditionally the attitudes reflected in Canadian media demonstrate a clear bias that favoured the Grey Cup over the Super Bowl. The Super Bowl's prominence in Canada was written by Canadian sports scribes as regrettable and undeserved while the virtuous Grey Cup, they asserted, went under-appreciated, not just globally but increasingly domestically. This chauvinistic rhetoric supports and adds to the existing research that focuses on Canadian reaction to American mass culture.

KEYWORDS

Super Bowl; Grey Cup; Canada; media; Canadian Football League

The United States and Canada have enjoyed a largely harmonious relationship and, while meaningful differences exist, common traits prevail and bond the neighbouring nations. Shared experience of these peoples extends to the realm of professional team sport and three (National Hockey League, National Basketball Association and Major League Baseball) of the 'Big Four' leagues have club representation on both sides of the border. What much of the rest of the world calls the 'gridiron' version of football to distinguish it from association football and rugby football, remains the last holdout, segregated with a domestic league in each country – the National Football League (NFL) and the Canadian Football League (CFL). The CFL briefly had American franchises from 1993 to 1995 but historically this expansion effort was considered misguided. At different times, Vancouver, Montreal and Toronto were rumoured destinations for NFL franchises but nothing materialized past the speculation stage.[1] On some level, this separation appears curious. Football, at least

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in the North American context of the word, does not enjoy the global presence of hockey, basketball and baseball. Instead, football remains mainly the preserve of Americans and Canadians. If ever two nations were joined together by a sport, football in the Canadian-American (Can-Am) context appears a likely candidate, particularly when the origins of Canadian and American football share an embryonic experience in 1874 before evolving along different paths.[2]

Aside from the geographical settings, differences persist between the Canadian and American brands of football. The Canadian field of play is larger, for example, and a handful of rule variations serve as a point of distinction – most notably the Canadian version employs a three-down system compared to the four-down method in the United States and fields 12-man teams instead of the American version of 11-man squads. In order to preserve Canadian content, the CFL limits roster spots for foreign players.[3] Of course, the financial fortunes of the two leagues differ drastically. The NFL is the picture of economic might while the CFL has struggled where money is concerned. [4]

A closer look at football illuminates some important truths in the Can-Am experience. Central to this discovery is the notion of the Grey Cup as Canada's anti-Super Bowl. Complete with folksy traditions and understated pageantry, the Grey Cup is emblematically Canadian and its place within the national psyche has historically served as a sharp rebuke to American cultural imperialism and excess, represented so perfectly by the Super Bowl. Like many aspects of Can-Am relations, however, the Super Bowl experience is not a simple narrative. Many Canadians have long been fascinated with the American entertainment industry, of which sport is part, and have not only integrated the Super Bowl into their sporting calendars but prefer it to the domestic product. The growing cultural influence of the Super Bowl north of the border made national headlines in 2015 when ratings revealed that more Canadians, per capita, watched the Super Bowl than Americans.[5]

Traditionally the attitudes reflected in Canadian media demonstrate a clear bias that favoured the Grey Cup over the Super Bowl. Canadian sports journalists have sanctimoniously championed the competitive drama of the Grey Cup, the purported superior design of the Canadian game and applauded the off-field festivities. They characterized the Super Bowl, by contrast, through its lack of excitement, supposed inferior rules and flawed commercialism. The Super Bowl's prominence in Canada was written by Canadian sports scribes as regrettable and undeserved while the virtuous Grey Cup, they asserted, went under-appreciated, not just globally but increasingly domestically. This chauvinistic rhetoric supports and adds to the existing research that focuses on Canadian reaction to American mass culture.

To understand the historical treatment of the Super Bowl by Canadian media, it is important to explore prevalent attitudes that explain how American mass culture has been absorbed north of the border. Media scholar Richard Collins argued in *Culture, Communication, and National Identity* that Canadian intellectuals were negatively predisposed towards American mass culture.[6] In part, Canadian intellectuals judged American culture in unflattering terms as a means of maintaining national superiority. Historian Paul Rutherford wrote that from a Canadian's eyes,

> Americans were seen as excitable, even 'childlike', 'money-mad', lawless, 'more-corrupt', and 'less moral', boastful and 'less cultured,' although they were credited for being 'daring and enterprising' or generous. By contrast, Canadians appeared more honourable, law-abiding, and conservative, and their society, 'quieter, slower, in tempo and saner in quality'.[7]

Aniko Bodroghkozy, media scholar, argued this distaste of American mass culture extends to the Canadian leftist press that view domestic cultural products as undeservingly disadvantaged to the mass culture sourced from the powerful United States.[8] Consistent with the concepts described above, through the examination of Canadian media treatment of sport, American mass culture (represented by the Super Bowl) was denigrated as corrupted by commerce, backward by design, and dangerous to Canadian culture (represented by the Grey Cup) through its powerful popularity. Canadian sport writers described the Grey Cup, contested in 'manly' weather and under high-minded rules, as a better, but unfairly endangered, product.

The Canadian media's rejection of the Super Bowl relies on a long-rooted anti-American sentiment. Renowned American sociologist Seymour Lipsett remarked, 'Canadians are the world's oldest and continuing anti-Americans'.[9] With such a mighty neighbour, Canadian nationalists were concerned about being suffocated by American influence on their economy and culture, or worse, invasion and annexation. In 1812 Americans made an attempted invasion, and though they failed to capture Canada, notions that their northern neighbour belonged within their sphere of 'manifest destiny' persisted in the United States. In 1869, shortly following Canadian Confederation, US Senator Zachariah Chandler fulminated that Canada was 'a mere speck on the map', a 'nuisance,' and 'a standing menace … that we ought not tolerate'.[10] While open animosity was reduced over the years and yielded to friendship, the past cannot be forgotten.

For the sake of context, it is also critical to understand that rejection of American sporting culture by Canadian media did not begin with the Super Bowl, but instead is part of a deeper tradition. Baseball in Canada was met with hostility in certain circles in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, largely because of its ties to American culture. Canadian baseball promoters seldom drew notice to the sport's privileged place within American society, but its detractors' criticism often mentioned the game's Americanism. As baseball's popularity in Canada surpassed that of cricket and lacrosse, those who saw baseball as an unwanted American influence and voice of an unruly working-class culture questioned the game's respectability. Rowdiness, gambling, thrown games, and the consumption of alcohol by fans and sometimes by the players themselves were among their concerns.[11]

The Canadian media often led the charge against perceived American cultural intrusion. In the early twentieth-century, influential newspapers such as Toronto's *Mail and Empire* as well as the *Toronto Globe* were apprehensive about the heavy influence of American news and society on Canadian culture and suggested that it was destroying any domestic culture. They lamented that American culture promoted lesser morals.[12] In all likelihood, some of their anxiety stemmed from their own industry's bleak economic outlook. American publications dwarfed those of Canada and, by 1912, imported American and British periodicals outsold domestic publications in Canada ten to one.[13] Nevertheless, some Canadian newspapers saw it as their duty to assail cultural infringement from the south – of which baseball, they believed, was a key element. The *Hamilton Spectator* warned about Canadian baseball's subservience to American leagues and the *Hamilton Times* complained about the American-style professionalization of the Canadian game when it remarked:

> The question of the championship was a mere question of dollars and cents, and by this manner London [Ontario] has come to the fore. Baseball is meant to develop the muscle of the youth, and not the gambling speculation for roughs. Cricket has steered clear of this. Why shouldn't baseball?[14]

The negative press suffered by baseball, however, had little impact on the sport's momentum. Its popularity, to some, seemed unstoppable. The *Victoria Times* remarked: 'In sport, the continent is rapidly becoming "Americanized". It would appear to be useless to attempt to stem the tide, even if it were desirable to attempt such a thing.'[15] While some newspapers bemoaned the game's prominent presence in Canada, others were key players in the dissemination of baseball's happenings. Samuel Moffett, American intellectual and journalist, declared in *The Americanization of Canada* (1907):

> The Canadian newspapers print fuller telegraphic accounts of the great baseball contests of the National, the American and the Eastern Leagues than they do of the proceedings of the British Parliament. The American baseball language, which would be entirely unintelligible to an English reader, is fully familiarized in the Canadian press.[16]

For their part, some Americans seemed glad that their sport had been successfully transplanted beyond their borders. In an attempt to demonstrate the existence of genuine American culture around the world, legendary baseball promoter, sporting goods tycoon and nationalist, Albert G. Spalding, toured the New York Giants and Chicago White Sox across the western United States, Japan, China, Hong Kong, Manila, Australia, Egypt, Italy, France, and Britain from October 1913 to February 1914. In 1924 the Giants and White Sox made a smaller, less successful tour.[17] The American press portrayed the ballplayers as semi-religious figures. The magazine, *Time*, commented, 'Instead of Bibles and hymn-books, these missionaries carry with them balls, bats, mits [*sic*]. Instead of love and light, these missionaries shed baseball fanaticism all over Europe'.[18] American enthusiasm for the global spread of baseball, real or imagined, mirrors the modern day aspirations Americans have for the Super Bowl as a global sporting phenomenon.[19]

While baseball's global success was the ultimate goal for promoters and patriots such as Spalding, Americans had cheered baseball's presence in Canada. Moffett proclaimed:

> It is no trivial matter that baseball is becoming the national game of Canada instead of cricket. It has a very deep significance, as has the fact that the native game of lacrosse is not able to hold its own against the southern intruder. 'It has not one player in Canada', regretfully observed the Toronto *Mail and Empire*, 'where baseball has a score. Thousands of people will quit work of an afternoon to applaud two contending gangs of salaried aliens at Diamond Park, while as many hundreds would not be induced to attend a lacrosse match'.[20]

These laments were echoed decades later when America's Super Bowl emerged as prominent fixture in the Canadian sporting calendar. The *Globe and Mail's* Scott Young, whose son Neil went on to musical fame and fortune in the United States, was a leading opponent of Canadian glorification of an American football championship. In 1977, Young criticized undue media attention devoted to the Super Bowl.

> It is a dumb, overplayed U.S. sports story that no Canadian news organization should spend five cents, or more than 12 inches of type, to cover …. That's okay for the Americans if they want to punish themselves that way …. The Super Bowl is the sport world's greatest fertilizer factory.

Young was adamant that media coverage of the Super Bowl was based on false assumptions about Canadian intrigue.

> I'm convinced that if a survey were done, it would return an overwhelming answer that the Canadian public thinks the Super Bowl is grossly over-covered in all media, and should be cut down considerably in coverage, or eliminated. Anyone interested, let'em watch it on U.S. TV. Let'em buy the *New York Times*.

Young concluded that overdone coverage of the Super Bowl was 'cheating the youth of Canada' and that the resources should be directed at covering Canadian sport. Young stopped short of a demand that restricted all coverage of American sport because, in his mind, the World Series, big prize-fights and horse racing were at least entertaining.[21] Still, Young's column represents a common Canadian nationalist's plea to ignore the Super Bowl.

Young was far from alone. Among the Canadian sports media cohort, the Super Bowl was reduced to rubbish, particularly when compared to the Grey Cup. Jim Taylor's column in the *Vancouver Province* placed the Grey Cup upon a pedestal.

> It is not the Super Bowl. For this, we make no apologies. The Super Bowl is a football game dropped in the middle of a week-long party-cum-brainwashing, a marvellous melding of marketing and technology screened around the world for fees that could bankroll emerging nations. Some day they'll forget to play the game. Hardly anyone will notice. The Grey Cup game is … well, ours.

Taylor went on to lambaste Canadians who refused to get behind his message and wrote that it was a 'national curse' not to properly support domestic inventions. He finished his column, locked in-step with his Canadian sport reporter fraternity as the last bastions of a noble tradition against those who would ignore or export the CFL brand. 'Canadian football as we know it is over. Oh, we'll fight, some of us. We'll stand on the ramparts throwing editorial darts while the people who run our game continue to sell it down the river'.[22]

Canadian media depicted the Grey Cup as an important national event with unifying properties for a country split along cultural and linguistic lines. Located in the nexus of French–English divide, the *Montreal Gazette* remarked that the Super Bowl, 'supposedly the *ne plus ultra* of professional football' was meaningless to Canadians while the Grey Cup was culturally relevant: '… but trite as it sounds, the East-West Grey Cup rivalry has contributed to national unity'.[23] Beyond its ability to bring the country together in shared experience, the Grey Cup had a particularly nationalistic flair in an increasingly globalized world. In an editorial, the *Windsor Star* remarked:

> Despite the changes that will happen anyway because of the economy and our evolving society, the Grey Cup will remain one of the times during the year when, as a nation, we can let our hair down and just celebrate our uniqueness, and yes, maybe our silliness … Anything that faintly smells of American imperialism gets Canadians riled up faster than it takes a wide receiver to run a post pattern. … The Grey Cup is, was, and always will be our game, even if most of the players are American, and even if both teams, heaven forbid, someday are American. It's all ours and we'll keep it, thank you very much.[24]

Canadian roots and sentiments of vaguely or non-defined 'pure Canadiana' peppered many of the articles and columns that addressed the Grey Cup's value to national culture and served as powerful persuasion that it was more than simply a football game; more than simply a trophy. This loaded messaging was an appeal for Canadian sport fans to embrace the CFL, and by extension, the Grey Cup, for the sake of the league's survival. The implication was to value Canada's meritorious sport and to avoid the dazzling deception offered by the Super Bowl's glitz. Chris Zelkovich of the *Toronto Star* contended that

> while the fact that almost every Grey Cup is a thriller is a major factor in drawing viewers, there's another factor at work. In an era when Canadian institutions are crumbling, it's still comforting to take part in a game that is played nowhere else in the world. It's truly ours.[25]

What could cause the CFL and the Grey Cup to crumble? The obvious answer from the Canadian sport media was NFL-aligned Americans with aspirations of expansion

into strategic Canadian marketplaces.[26] It was a familiar narrative, as old as the American Revolution. American concepts were inherently threatening. A significant reason why the NFL, and by extension the Super Bowl, was met with hostility by some Canadians was that it appeared as a threat to the CFL. As early as 1960, concerns of NFL expansion into Canada were publicly reported.[27] Loyalists to Canadian football, sport media chief among them, were as obstinate as they seemed baffled. Long-time *Globe and Mail* columnist Marty York looked to the future with despair:

> And so some day, if the NFL does indeed invade Toronto and other Canadian markets, there likely will be no more CFL football to kick around. In the meantime, though, the CFL is still breathing and it is desperately clinging to life. And, for all its zaniness, silliness, inept marketing and image problems, the plain truth is that it still provides considerably more entertainment than NFL football.[28]

In the early 1990s, the American threat to the CFL was not limited to possible NFL expansion. In a move that proved temporary and unsuccessful, the CFL expanded into several American markets that the league believed to be underserviced by the NFL.[29] The *Washington Post* speculated that the CFL would be wise to lose its Canadian-content rules for the sake of positive league attendance and increased media exposure, 'but the old-guard Canadian fans – who waved upside-down American flags and pelted Baltimore players with snowballs in Winnipeg – view Baltimore's success as a precursor to the demise of the CFL as they know it'.[30]

When possible NFL expansion into Canada was rumoured, Canadian scribes bemoaned the death of the CFL. When speculation of CFL southern expansion arose, the same media decried such plans out of fear that the Canadian game would become Americanized. As far as Canadian media were concerned, any involvement with the United States was a threat. Scott Feschuk of the *Globe and Mail* warned his Canadian readership in 1991 that reliance on the United States for the CFL's survival came with significant costs. Among them, the Canadian content of rosters would be disappear and that the Grey Cup game would no longer be played on Canadian soil.[31]

Notions of the Americanization of football in Canada became particularly acute at historical moments that emphasized or stressed the Can-Am relationship. Over the course of the North American Free Trade debates in Canada in the late 1980s, special attention was paid to the status of cultural industries in Canada and what assurances they would receive that would ensure their survival. While the discussion centred on the subsidies and protections that should be dedicated to the struggling television, film, music, and publishing industries, the *Montreal Gazette* wondered about the CFL:

> Back in the mid-'70s, Canadian cultural and economic nationalists flew up in arms over the attempt to bring a World (i.e. U.S.) Football League team to Toronto. Marc Lalonde and the federal Liberal government blocked that insidious attempt to undermine Canadian culture. But in the very week Canada was again succumbing to Super Bowl hype, Canadian nationalists who were worried about free trade never uttered a peep about the possible demise of the CFL.[32]

Media outlets argued that the CFL, and the Grey Cup by extension, not only needed protection, but also deserved it. Canadian sports writers espoused a common narrative that the Grey Cup provided a far higher entertainment value than the Super Bowl. These statements were usually based on style of game, total offence and narrower margins of victory. One of the first mentions of the Grey Cup advantage was the *Globe and Mail's* Andy O'Brien's column in 1973, conveniently titled 'Canadian Football is Better', which boasted

the 1972 Grey Cup in Hamilton was 'vastly superior' to the 1973 Super Bowl in Los Angeles. O'Brien wrote that this realization surprised some Canadians who had been 'brainwashed' into thinking the 'grossly exaggerated' NFL game was better.[33] O'Brien's labour was typical of the Canadian sport reporter on this debate – one of proselytization. The Canadian sport fan, plagued with national cultural insecurity, required a gridiron conversion to understand that their national game was more worthy.

Canadian media also believed that their audience should not simply take the word of the press corps as the only proof that the Canadian version was better. It enlisted players from the CFL to help with the conversion. 'If people would just sit back and assess what they are seeing, fewer Canadians would be professing preference for the NFL brand of football', Sean McKeown, a Canadian-born offensive tackle with the Toronto Argonauts, told the *Toronto Star*. The newspaper reported that

> he [McKeown] also made the obvious comparison between the Super Bowl Bore and the Grey Cup nailbiters. But McKeown knows the downside of the CFL all too well. He was a first-round draft choice of the Calgary Stampeders in 1984 and was with them in '85, when the Stampeders came within a blocked kick of folding.[34]

This message was a familiar refrain for the Canadian sport media who so staunchly supported the CFL. Their nation possessed a league cursed with a superior but underappreciated and underfunded product.

The Canadian media reinforced this message by the addition of other voices that supported its cause – particularly American ones with NFL experience. The *Toronto Star* used the words of Heisman Trophy winner Doug Flutie after his Toronto Argonauts captured the 1996 Grey Cup:

> Absolutely the truest statement about Sunday's wonderful Grey Cup game was uttered by Doug Flutie moments after Toronto's stirring 43-37 victory over Edmonton. Flutie's sentiments, echoed continually by others, suggest Super Bowls are never like this, that the NFL could never produce a championship spectacle that begins to compare. Absolutely bang-on correct …. It has been this way for 10, for 20, probably for 30 years.[35]

Three years after Flutie's remarks, the *Toronto Star* boasted the

> Grey Cup is a national treasure, the one sporting event we can count on to live up to the hype, a wondrous escape at the onset of winter. The Super Bowl – that much-ballyhooed event south of the 49th – is an overblown, all-bark-and-no-bite imitation of the real thing. The Super Bore, Super Blowout.

To substantiate its claims, the *Star* used the Grey Cup's smaller margin of victory as statistical proof that the game was better than the Super Bowl. While only eight Super Bowls have been decided by seven points or fewer, nearly half (15 of 33) the Grey Cups since 1966 have been won by a converted touchdown or less.[36] Jim Taylor of the *Vancouver Province* also leaned on statistics as quantifiable proof of Grey Cup superiority.

> Personally, I loved Super Bowl XXIV. It was the best advertisement Canadian football could ever get, and it didn't cost even one of the dollars the CFL doesn't have. San Francisco 55, Denver 10. … The past three Super Bowl games have produced 153 points, with winning margins of 32, four and 45 points. The last three Grey Cup games have produced 200 points, with winning margins of two, one and three points. Two of the three Super Bowls were settled shortly after, 'Oh, say, can you see'.[37]

On the occasions when the Super Bowl provided an entertaining game, Canadian media attributed it to some sort of astronomical fluke. The *Hamilton Spectator* opined after Super Bowl XXX in 1996:

> The moon must be in in the seventh house and Jupiter aligned with Mars. How else to explain what happened on every television in America last night? People tuned in to the Super Bowl and a Grey Cup broke out. Hold enough of the darn things, and throw enough billion-dollar hype at innocent bystanders and every once in a while, you get something that lives up – if only partially – to advance notice.[38]

To add to the echo chamber, newspapers printed letters to the editor that matched their claims of Grey Cup supremacy. Reader John Velchak wrote the *Toronto Star*: 'If, as some people claim, the NFL is so much better than the CFL, why then is the Super Bowl always such a boring, predictable Sleeper Bowl? …. Give me the excitement of the unpredictable Grey Cup.'[39] Fellow reader Scott Rehill supported those thoughts in the *Star*:

> I just felt I had to write to let it be known how bored I was watching the supposedly superior NFL's Super Bowl …. The playoffs might be exciting, but isn't the Super Bowl supposed to be climactic and not anticlimactic?[40]

High school student Craig Skinner complained to the *Ottawa Citizen* about the lack of excitement provide by Super Bowl XXIX: 'This year, the game was about as predictable as a WWF wrestling match … Basically, the Super Bowl is a Super Bore'.[41] In a letter to the editor printed in the *Globe and Mail*, Clint Wood wrote:

> The Canadian Football League is not a bad league, but when the media started embedding the idea that it is poorly played, the people frowned upon it. We aren't Americans, so let's stop being influenced by them so heavily. We need a culture we can call our own!'[42]

The criticism is insightful as it faults Canadian news media for the perpetuation of the Super Bowl hype at the expense of the Grey Cup. In some ways, the reader's comments were aligned with individual sports reporters, most notably Scott Young, who felt newspaper editors created Super Bowl ballyhoo and did not merely satisfy reader interest.

The Super Bowl clearly cannot be claimed by Canada but domestic sport media has found methods over the years to find Canadiana in the American championship – even if the connections appear somewhat tenuous. It has been standard practice over the years in Canadian sport reportage to provide extra exposure for not only Canadian-born players and coaches for making it to the Super Bowl, but also any former CFL players or coaches, whatever their nationality. This interest was particularly evident with the 1969 version of the Minnesota Vikings that were defeated by the Kansas City Chiefs in Super Bowl IV. Upon the defeat of his Edmonton Eskimos in the CFL playoffs, head coach Neill Armstrong resigned and assumed a defensive consultant's role with the Vikings who were in mid-season. Under the headline, 'More Canadiana for Minnesotans' the *Globe and Mail* pointed out how Armstrong had joined general manager Jim Finks (former general manager, head coach and player with the Calgary Stampeders), head coach Bud Grant (former head coach and player with the Winnipeg Blue Bombers), and quarterback Joe Kapp (formerly of the British Columbia Lions) as the Canadian contingent on the Vikings. That none of the four former-CFLers were actually Canadian either escaped the notice of the newspaper or was deemed too unimportant to mention.[43] Support for Kapp was particularly strong in Vancouver after he led the British Columbia Lions to their only Grey Cup win in 1964. In advance of his Super Bowl start, more than 3,000 Lions fans contributed 25-cents each to

have their name attached to a telegram of well wishes to Kapp with the proceeds donated to a local Vancouver charity.[44] Through the promotion of players and coaches with a CFL past that had blossomed in the NFL, the insinuation was that the CFL was a worthy league with great talent that required further observation and appreciation.

The Canadian game was not simply one of underestimated talent, its media supporters chimed, but also owed some of its greatness to the enlightened design of the game. The Canadian-style three-down approach favoured more passing plays and the wider field ensured that receivers were more difficult to cover. Again, the Canadian media used the words of a well-regarded American to spread the word. Marv Levy, who coached in two Grey Cups with the Montreal Alouettes and four Super Bowls with the Buffalo Bills was referenced in the article as a 'widely experienced and erudite observer of the game', lauded the Canadian rules – including the rouge, a scoring play unique to Canadian football that awards a single point to the kicking team for punts and missed field goal attempts that are not returned from the end zone.[45]

The rhetoric of superior design was heightened during discussions of CFL expansion in the United States for fear the game would become more Americanized and the Grey Cup would more closely resemble the Super Bowl. In an open letter to CFL Commissioner, Donald Crump, Jim Taylor of the *Vancouver Province* wrote:

> Stop talking about changing CFL rules so the game will look more like the American version. I know you mean well and you're looking at it dispassionately as a route to survival. I know you're telling yourself that a little tinkering won't change Canadian football life as we know it …. That ours is the better game with the better rules and the better field …. Besides, who made the U.S. rule-makers God? …. I think that's the part that riles me most, Don, this idea that somehow we must tailor our game to fit America's perception of how the game should be played. The CFL started before the NFL. The Grey Cup is old enough to be the Super Bowl's great-grandfather. If there's so much American interest in joining the Canadian league, let them play our rules. Tell them to widen their field, put in a 55-yard line, extend their end zones and play three-down football. If they say no, tell them to take a hike. Just once, let's be proud enough of something that's uniquely Canadian to keep it that way.[46]

Still not convinced of the Grey Cup's superiority to American mass culture? The media steered the conversation towards the bawdy, perpetuating a myth that was true in the mid-1980s but not in 2003 when *CanWest News* printed a thinly veiled reference to genitalia: 'So what if our balls are bigger?'[47] To be fair to the report, the CFL, as a league, was guilty of extending this misinformation when, upon hard financial times in 1996, the league adopted the edgy slogan *Our Balls Are Bigger* – a desperate, if inaccurate, appeal to gutter masculinity.[48]

Beyond the rules, the media in Canada spoke too about the weather conditions that added mystique to their Grey Cups and tested the fortitude of the players – something the Super Bowl could not boast since those games were almost always played in sunny or domed environs. Their identity as a nation of hardy Northerners became a central theme in the development of a Canadian national identity in the mid-nineteenth century. Nationalists employed climate and geography as more than simply national unifiers. There was also an exclusivity created by the Canadian environment. The Canadian 'Northerness' was continually, and favourably, compared with the 'Southerness' of the United States.[49] The *Edmonton Sun's* Terry Jones, who had covered 31 Grey Cups and 15 Super Bowls at the time of this pronouncement,

> We take some kind of perverse pride in our bad weather. You talk to old-timers and they'll tell you about the Fog Bowl, the Mud Bowl, the Ice Bowl. It's really remarkable. It's a celebration of the sport, the event, the culture, everything.[50]

Canadian sport media insisted that the Grey Cup was not only a better game than the Super Bowl, but a better event. Dave Perkins of the *Toronto Star* praised the folksy appeal of the Grey Cup and criticized the Super Bowl for it out-of-touch lavishness.

> Take it from someone who has been to about 10 of the overblown U.S. championship games, seldom leaving impressed. The Grey Cup, bless its Canadian heart and soul, is the fans' game. The Super Bowl is all about corporations and excess.

Perkins recommended the tradition-laden Calgary Pancake Breakfast as well as the inexpensively priced nightspots such as Riderville and Tigertown (at a modest $5 or $10 to get in, Perkins wondered, who can resist?). Perkins declared: 'This is the one big difference between Canada's game and the big one down south. Fans will always be front and centre at the Grey Cup, rather than a necessary afterthought'.[51]

The *Globe and Mail's* Stephen Brunt, at the time of his comments an attendee of 15 Super Bowls and 15 Grey Cups, remarked that the seeming grassroots nature of the Grey Cup was part of its charm, which was particularly evident if the game was hosted on the prairies (in Canadian terms, due to fan dedication, a football holy land). 'The Super Bowl, they put on all these bells and whistles, it's like a carnival coming to town. The (Grey Cup) is different. It's smaller obviously, it's more modest. It honestly kind of grows out of the local culture.'[52] Brunt's comments are steeped in judgement – smaller is better – which contradicted the enormity and extravagance of the Super Bowl.

The Canadian media wanted readers to know about this stark contrast, which was apparent even from the early years. Bud Grant, who coached in six Grey Cup games with the Winnipeg Blue Bombers and four Super Bowl with the Minnesota Vikings, was quoted in the *Globe and Mail*: 'In Canada, it was always good to be a real part of the action. But here, except for news conferences – and they are only with reporters – there's no contact with the general public. It's just too big'.[53]

'Too big' was not a worry at the Grey Cup. Matthew Sekeres of the *National Post* referred to it as 'charmingly small potatoes' in comparison to the Super Bowl. Sekeres wrote about easy and affordable access to Canada's main football celebration: 'Without much effort, you can share a beer with commissioner Tom Wright in a downtown tent or mosh dance with Hamilton Tiger-Cats quarterback Danny McManus at one of the many free parties put on by the league's nine franchises'. He cautioned Canadians that the Super Bowl experience was very expensive and the best events were invitation-only and off-limits to the average fan.[54]

The media continued to keep the monetary comparisons in print as a way of highlighting the differences between the two sport showcases. The high-priced Super Bowl, however, was not given a narrative of envious opulence as much as outlandish expense. Ed Willes of the *Vancouver Province* reported in 2004 that a fan paid $25,000 for his Super Bowl experience. 'You couldn't spend $25,000 at a Grey Cup unless you purchased a minority share in one of the teams', Willes criticized. To further explain how the CFL's pricing and salaries were more in step with reality than those stateside the reporter quoted British Columbia Lions President Bob Ackles: 'I think fans identify with the guy who's making sixty grand a year and who's busting his ass. I think they get tired when they hear people complaining about making $1.8 million'.[55]

When it came to the scale of the festivities, however, there was mixed messaging from Canadian media that, on one hand, lauded the folksy appeal of the Grey Cup when compared to the mass hysteria of the Super Bowl but, on the other hand, looked to the party to the south with envy. In 1995, the *Vancouver Province* chastised CFL personnel for their delay in embracing Super Bowl tactics. When a small contingent from the Argonauts, led by President Bob Nicholson and director of communication Dave Watkins, visited Miami for Super Bowl XXIX, the *Province* criticized their measure as 15 years too late.

> It is one of football's great mysteries that as successful as the over-bloated Super Bowl has become, the ever-struggling CFL has never seen the need to come down to one and find out what the NFL is doing to sell itself and its normally boring championship game. Surely, even the folks who can't get the National Football League's initials out of their mouths without it becoming a snarl, could see some value in borrowing one or two of the less outlandish things the NFL does to entertain people.[56]

Perhaps the most pronounced discrepancy in the competing football celebrations was in the musical acts that performed at the festivities. In 1999, for example, the *National Post* defended the lack of star power at the Grey Cup. The Canadian championship featured bands little known south of the border, including the Parablegics, Hawg Wild, Skruj MacDuhk, the Arrogant Worms and Big Dave McLean (only the latter three even have Wikipedia entries)[57] while the Super Bowl featured music legends recognizable not only in the US but in Canada and everywhere else in the world – Kiss, Stevie Wonder, and Cher. The newspaper suggested that in their musical choices for halftime fanfare, Canadians were 'true to their roots' and not swayed by style over substance.[58] Earlier that decade, Stephen Brunt of the *Globe and Mail* was certain that the CFL was on the brink of selling its soul in the name of Super Bowl-like promotion. Brunt's accusations were largely levied at the Argonauts, who were set to host the 1992 and 1993 Grey Cups, their monstrous new state-of-the-art SkyDome and cosmopolitan Torontonians who Brunt felt saw themselves as too refined for the folksy appeal of Grey Cup traditions.

> Like the Super Bowl, it will become primarily a television-driven exercise, a 'culmination event' (as the WWF calls Wrestlemania), an excuse to squeeze the maximum exposure and maximum dollars out of a single football game. Unfortunately, there aren't enough Winnipegs left for it to be any other way. The CFL can evolve or die. Doing things the way they've always been done, counting on the rest of the country to again feel the way they do here, just isn't an option for a league struggling to survive. The Argonauts' brass, the people who brought you Mariel Hemingway and the Blues Brothers for the season opener, have already begun booking acts for Grey Cup week, 1992. It promises to be a star-studded, world-class, high-gloss kind of affair, just the ticket to make the jaded denizens of the metropolis aware that something's doing. Maybe they'll stick in a pancake breakfast, or a pep rally, or put Mariel on a horse just for nostalgia's sake. But everyone there will know from the start that Grey Cup LXXX represents a whole new ballgame.[59]

Perhaps the starkest difference between the two national fan-bases resides in the almost complete American ignorance of the existence of the Grey Cup. For all of attention Canadians devote to the Super Bowl – either as unabashed fans, jingoist detractors or curious onlookers – Americans spend very little effort in their consideration of the Grey Cup. In some ways the pro-Grey Cup chauvinism espoused by Canadian sport journalists counter American ignorance and arrogance about the CFL and its title game. The *New York Times*, in an attempt to educate its readership about football in Canada, referred to the Grey Cup in 1969 as 'Canada's Super Bowl'.[60] At the time of the article, the Super Bowl had been awarded

three times and the Grey Cup game had been played 60 times. It is doubtful supporters of the Canadian game viewed their storied national football championship as an emulation of its American counterpart, still in its infancy. Jake Gaudaur, CFL commissioner 1968–1984, told the *Globe and Mail* that Super Bowl organizers learned from the established Grey Cup rather than the other way around.[61] The descriptor 'Canada's Super Bowl' has been frequently used by the American press in the years that followed and demonstrates a lack of understanding of nuance to Canadian culture and sensitivities.

Some Canadian media members bristled at the extended honorific of Super Bowl victory – world champion. Veteran *Globe and Mail* columnist Dick Beddoes commented on the 'gall' of his American counterparts for their reference to the Super Bowl as the 'world's championship' in 1970. Beddoes suggested that the winner of the Super Bowl (who turned out to be the Kansas City Chiefs) should have to defeat the Ottawa Rough Riders, defending Grey Cup champions, before such a boast had merit.[62]

In 2001, sport scholars Christopher R. Martin and Jimmie L. Reeves argued in an essay titled 'The Whole Word Isn't Watching (But We Thought They Were): The Super Bowl and U.S. Solipsism,' that claims of the American football title game qualified as a global spectacle had been wildly exaggerated. They insisted that while the game had immense importance within the United States, hardly anyone outside of the US watched the game or cared about the spectacle. They concluded it did not meet the criteria necessary to qualify as a global mega-event. Whether or not that remains valid 15 years later is up for debate. What is clear from ratings and other indicators of cultural phenomena, however, is that Canadians have fully embraced the Super Bowl. In 1992, Larry Humber wondered in the *Globe and Mail*, 'Are Canadians losing interest in the Grey Cup? And is that interest swinging to the Super Bowl?'[63] It was not the first or last time that those questions were posed. Perhaps counter to the musings and fears of Canadian sport journalists there is no or little correlation between the two questions. Why does the Super Bowl have to triumph at the Grey Cup's expense? There is some season overlap, but could not a Canadian football fan have room in heart and mind for both games, spaced more than two months apart? Academics and theorists believe it is possible. Historian Paul Rutherford argued that mass culture from the United States 'in itself does not pose, and never has posed, a direct threat to the Canadian identity, because consumers have "read" its message through a special lens made in Canada.'[64] To further that point, Aniko Bodroghkozy insisted that 'rather than seeing Canadian audiences of American mass entertainment as duped by and subjected to the imperializing strategies of these texts and their producers, audiences negotiate with and struggle against the texts in active and self-interested ways.' Ultimately, Canadian sport reporters have not credited Canadian sport fans with the ability to absorb the Super Bowl intelligently. Instead the media outlets generously polish the Grey Cup with praise and caution anyone who will listen that the Super Bowl is little more than fool's gold. In doing so, Canadian media continue a tradition of denigration of American mass culture. More than a century ago Canadian media lamented baseball's unwarranted popularity in Canada as an agent of corruption from the south. The press of that day saw it as their national duty to divert sport-minded Canadians away from American trifles and towards pursuits more deserving of their attention and admiration. The Canadian sport press corps of more modern times have pursued a very similar path as they assailed the Super Bowl and championed the Grey Cup.

Despite warnings from domestic media, it is undeniable that Canadians want to watch the Super Bowl. 'Canadian viewers appear to crave myths and ritual experiences that

encourage a sense of cultural collectivity whether such experiences are created at home or not', Bodroghkozy concluded.[65] The Super Bowl certainly qualifies in that respect. Media scholar John Fiske wrote that people are skilled at taking *their* commodities and turning them into *our* culture.[66] Canadians are well-practised Super Bowl revellers and it is reasonable to assume their national cultural sensibilities have allowed them to make the Super Bowl their own.

The Canadian Super Bowl experience, however, moves ever closer to that of the United States. Against the wishes of Canadian broadcasters who will see revenues limited, the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) have sided with viewers who lodged a complaint in regard to the simultaneous substitution practice employed by Canadian broadcasters carrying foreign content. 'Simsub', as this practice is known, allows for the airing of revenue-generating Canadian-sourced commercials in place of those aired in the United States. Only about 100 of the 9 million Canadian Super Bowl viewers felt their Super Bowl experience was harmed by not witnessing the American commercials that have become part of the larger Super Bowl experience, but it was enough to move the CRTC in their favour. Bell, who owns the Canadian broadcast rights in English (CTV) and French (RDS), has said they will file an appeal.[67]

What perhaps gets lost in the Super Bowl's standing as a mega sporting event in Canada is that the CFL, in some meaningful ways, appears as healthy as it has ever been. The findings of an Angus Reid survey focused on sport fan interest in Canada was reported by the *Halifax Chronicle-Herald* shortly after the 2014 Grey Cup. The poll revealed that 47% of those surveyed agreed 'the Grey Cup is an important part of Canadian culture and identity'. A further 6% were more enthusiastic, agreeing that it 'defines Canadian culture and identity.' The CFL trailed only the NHL in Canadian interest. The NHL carries support of 40% and the CFL 21%. The number became impressive when it is considered that Major League Baseball was third at 18% and the NFL only fourth at 17%.[68] Perhaps it is time that Canadian sport media realizes that the Grey Cup does not need to be rescued and it can coexist alongside its American counterpart, the Super Bowl.

Notes

1. It is worth noting that the CFL attempted American expansion in the 1990s with several short-lived American franchises. For a variety of reasons that ranged from 'quirky' rules to unknown players, the league never gained a foothold in the United States, despite its willingness to go into what it believed were underserved markets. Readers interested in learning more information on the expansion efforts should consult Craig Greenham and Ben Andrews, *Canadian Football on the World Stage*, http://theallrounder.co/2016/09/29/canadian-football-on-the-world-stage/. The NFL has had brief flirtations with Toronto as a possible expansion or relocation destination. Toronto served as surrogate host for Buffalo Bills home games but the second five-year hosting contract was terminated early by the Bills. Please consult the CBC news story (http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/buffalo-bills-to-cease-playing-home-games-in-toronto-1.2858780) for more details.
2. Harvard University and McGill University played a series of games in 1874 that are believed to be, if not the source, certainly instrumental to development of football in both countries. Reader interested in more information are directed to Frank Cosentino, *Canadian Football: The Grey Cup Years* (Toronto: Musson, 1969), 13. This reference is cited by more recent sources, including Don Morrow and Kevin Wamsley, *Sport in Canada: A History* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2013), 222.

3. For an updated version of CFL roster regulations as it applies to foreign players, please consult http://www.cfl.ca/game-rule-ratio/.
4. Readers interested in learning about the NFL's financial success are directed to Michael Oriard, *Brand NFL: Making and Selling America's Favorite Sport* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010). Richard Crepeau, *NFL: A History of America's New National Pastime* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014) also explores the NFL's emergence from a relatively obscure football organization to an economic titan.
5. John Kryk, 'More Canadians watched the Super Bowl per capita than Americans,' *Toronto Sun*, 7 February 2015. http://www.torontosun.com/2015/02/07/more-canadians-per-capita-watched-super-bowl-than-americans.
6. Richard Collins, *Culture, Communication, and National Identity: The Case of Canadian Television* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 205–14.
7. Paul Rutherford, 'Made in America: The Problem of Mass Culture in Canada,' in David H. Flaherty and Frank E. Manning (eds), *The Beaver Bites Back? American Popular Culture in Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), 270.
8. Bodroghkozy further argues that the Canadian media has been heavily influenced by the political economy writings of historian Harold Innis whose metropolis-hinterland thesis suggests that Canada (the hinterland) is culturally and economically dependent on the United States (the metropolis). Innis' thesis is well-known in Canadian historical circles and has been heavily utilized. It is unclear why Bodroghkozy believes, however, that the Canadian media was/is staunch supporters of Innis. Aniko Bodroghkozy, 'As Canadian as Possible: Anglo-Canadian Popular Culture and the American Other,' in Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson, and Jane Shattuc (eds), *Hop on Pop?* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 571.
9. Seymour Lipset, *Continental Divide* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 53.
10. Ibid.
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12. J.L. Granatstein, *Yankee Go Home? Canadians and Anti-Americanism* (Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), 76.
13. Reginald C. Stuart, *Dispersed Relations: Americans and Canadians in Upper North America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 30.
14. Humber, *Diamonds of the North: A Concise History of Baseball in Canada*, 32.
15. *Victoria Times*, 13 May 1905.
16. Samuel E. Moffett, *The Americanization of Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), 109–10.
17. A detailed account of this tour can be found in James Elfer, *The Tour to End All Tours: The Story of Major League Baseball's 1913–1914 World Tour* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003).
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20. Moffett, *The Americanization of Canada*, 109.
21. Scott Young, 'Let's Button Up on the Super Bowl,' *Globe and Mail*, 12 January 1977, 31.
22. Jim Taylor, 'Today Marks CFL Change of Heart,' *Vancouver Province*, 27 November 1994, A83.
23. Dick Bacon, 'The Grey Cup: From the Mud Bowl to the Fog Bowl, There's Nothing Quite like it,' *Montreal Gazette*, 29 November 1986, D1.
24. 'Whither the CFL?,' *Windsor Star*, 29 November 1994, A6.
25. Chris Zelkovich, 'Grey Cup a Special Affair,' *Toronto Star*, 25 November 2000, C1.
26. 'NFL Commissioner Rozelle Lists Toronto as site for Franchise in Expanded League,' *Globe and Mail*, 4 June 1965, 39.
27. 'U.S. League Expansion Plans Fail to Ruffle CFL Officials,' *Globe and Mail*, 12 May 1960, 29.
28. Marty York, 'Zany CFL should be Enjoyed while it Lasts.' *The Globe and Mail*, 21 July 1995, C12.

29. Notions of CFL expansion into the United States dates back to 1972 when New York real estate developer Robert Schmertz petitioned the CFL for an expansion franchise to play out of Yankee Stadium. Schmertz owned the New England Whalers of the renegade World Hockey Association (WHA) and co-owned the Boston Celtics of the National Basketball Association (NBA). Previous to that investment, however, he was a founding co-owner of the expansion Portland Traiblazers in the NBA in 1970. Schmertz threatened the CFL that if they did not grant him an expansion franchise that he would simply create his own league and put them out of business.
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33. Andy O'Brien, 'Canadian Football is Better,' *Globe and Mail*, 8 July 1973, A18.
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35. Dave Perkins, 'Great Grey Cup Games no Help to CFL's Plight,' *Toronto Star*, 26 November 1996, C7.
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47. Greg Harder, 'Grey Cup Uniquely Canadian,' *CanWest News*, 14 November 2003, 1.
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Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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