

Memories of the first Super Bowl on TV ...

When Green Bay played Kansas City in 1967, the great Jackie Gleason gleefully told millions of viewers what to expect. **By Richard G. Carter**

It's hard to believe last February's Super Bowl between the New England Patriots and Philadelphia Eagles was the 39th—each of which I anticipated with baited breath and watched with bleary eyes. It was a great match-up and the work of the Fox network crew of Joe Buck, Chris Collinsworth and Troy Aikman, was outstanding.

Yes, the Patriots hard-fought 24-21 victory in Jacksonville, Fla. provided plenty of TV pigskin thrills for even the casual fan. But for me, the highlight of the evening was Paul McCartney's stellar halftime show. Indeed, hearing the likes of "Hey, Jude" and "Live and Let Die"—complete with colorful pyrotechnics—brought nostalgic joy to millions.

The excitement of Super Bowl XXXIX notwithstanding, it's still easy for me to recall the very first "Super Sunday"—and the special circumstances surrounding it. For example, Jackie Gleason's confident, very gleeful prediction.

On January 14, 1967, Gleason ended

his Saturday-night TV variety show on CBS in a surprising manner. In addition to acknowledging talented *Honeymooners* co-stars Audrey Meadows, Art Carney and Joyce Randolph, "The Great One" reminded his millions of viewers to tune into the very first Super Bowl the following afternoon, matching the Green Bay Packers and Kansas City Chiefs.

"It's gonna be murder!" he bellowed. Boy, was he right. The Packers clobbered the Chiefs 35-10, and Gleason fans like me who also were long-time Packer-backers, were delighted by his fearless declaration.

Of course, some may have felt Gleason simply was shilling for CBS which, for years, had televised the games of the established National Football League. And the NFL's powerful Packers were prohibitive favorites over the upstart Chiefs of the upstart American Football League—whose games were carried by NBC.

Interestingly, in the name of fairness and to maximize advertising revenue,

the first Super Bowl was telecast by both networks. This permitted advertisers to super-size their messages and viewers to choose, or alternate between, well-known announcers such as ex-players Pat Summerall and Frank Gifford on CBS, along with Curt Gowdy and Paul Christman on NBC, among others.

Indeed, Super Bowl I was a spectacle just waiting to happen. In my book, TV and pro football went hand-in-hand. Better yet, the tube was a great equalizer for folks like me from small towns and small states—permitting us to root on a level playing field with fast-talking city slickers with their pinched back suits. And as a Wisconsin native, I loved to bend the ears of friends about coach Vince Lombardi's Middle America powerhouse, which won NFL titles in 1961, '62 and '65.

But this was not always easy in some of the hostile environments my career took me. A good example was sports-happy Cleveland, where the baseball Indians had been eclipsed by

the football Browns as king of the hill. I landed there in early 1966 to work for *The Plain Dealer*, Ohio's largest newspaper.

As the 1966 season progressed and the Packers piled up win after win, I was eager to watch the historic first Super Bowl with my two best *PD* buddies—Jerry Minnery, a red-hot Browns fan, and James Clark, a transplanted New Yorker. Jerry, who also was a fabulous cook, graciously invited us to his suburban Bay Village home to eat a gourmet meal and witness the festivities on his huge (for those days) 23-inch color TV. James, an irreverent Giants fan and self-proclaimed trencherman, was ecstatic.

As the afternoon wore on, I felt better and better—aided and abetted by Jerry's impeccable taste in food and drink, James' unparalleled ability as a teller of ribald stories and the way the game unfolded. More later about our first "Super Sunday" on TV. But first, here's a little history.

In June 1966, the NFL and AFL had called a halt to six years of bitter hostility and fierce competition for players to merge into the National Football League we know today. A key ingredient was a post-season game between the two leagues—whose teams did not meet during the regular season—to determine the true champion of pro football. Thus was born the Super Bowl, initially called the AFL-NFL World Championship Game.

Of course, we NFL fans were sure the older league was superior to what Lombardi



A ticket to the first Super Bowl—note the price!—and the ring awarded to all of Vince Lombardi's victorious Green Bay Packers

called a “Mickey Mouse league with Mickey Mouse teams.” But while the NFL tried to ignore the AFL, more and more big-name college stars, such as Alabama’s Joe Namath, opted for the new league. Namath, later to become the fabled “Broadway Joe,” signed a big contract with the New York Jets and the AFL gloated.

Finally, NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle, who previously worked for the Los Angeles Rams, managed to persuade owners of teams in both leagues that a merger was essential to the financial survival of what had become known as “Big Game America.” Rozelle’s idea included producing an event that would surpass baseball’s World Series, which pitted the champions of the National and American Leagues. And this eventually came to pass.

Since 1995, the Super Bowl has been the highest-rated TV event of the year—reaching a worldwide audience of some 800-million, and this year commanded an astounding \$2.4 million for a 30-second commercial. The game now is played at night in the Eastern Time zone and in 2004 was seen nationally by 90-million on CBS. The game always is an advance sellout and tickets cost an arm and a leg. Each player on the winning team receives \$63,000, and the losers \$35,000.

But things were a lot different for Super Bowl I on Jan. 15, 1967, in the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum. Although the Rams routinely attracted close to 100,000 fans—and despite a 75-mile TV blackout and top ticket price of only \$13—more than 30,000

seats were empty as a mere 63,000 showed up for the 1 p.m. Pacific Time start. Nationally, pro football’s initial interleague extravaganza was viewed by 70 million and a 30-second ad cost just \$42,000. Each winning player got \$15,000, which, in those days, exceeded what many earned for an entire season. Each loser got \$7,500.

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First dubbed “Super Bowl” by columnist Edwin Pope, of the *Miami Herald*, a sparse, albeit celebrity-studded crowd—including CBS’s Walter Cronkite—was treated to a smashing, pre-kickoff performance by all-black Grambling College marching band, a pair of “rocket men” soaring overhead in spacesuits and release of thousands of white pigeons.

The game itself more than lived up to expectations, as Jerry, James and I loudly whooped it up between courses of his delectable Beef Wellington gleefully washed down with a variety of fine, imported wines. Luckily, Jerry had prevailed upon his lovely wife, Ruth, to take their two kids to the zoo and a movie—leaving us to yell our lungs out.

The favored Packers, with a 12-2 record, and the 11-2-1 Chief—coached by feisty Hank Stram—came out strong. After a surprisingly close first half with Green Bay up 14-10, fans in the stands and the national TV audience were treated to G-rated entertainment provided by jazz trumpet man Al Hirt, and two marching bands. Jerry, James and I thought it was great. To be sure, those were the days before risqué commercials and Janet Jackson’s

breast-baring “wardrobe malfunction” would garner more publicity than the game itself, as it did at the infamous intermission show of the 2004 Super Bowl.

Green Bay blew the big game open in the second half and won going away. This was just what the doctor ordered for millions of NFL supporters and old-line owners such as the Giants’ Wellington Mara, the Pittsburgh Steelers’ Art Rooney and Chicago Bears’ George Halas, who’d privately pressured Lombardi to take no prisoners.

Looking back on his work that day, NBC’s Gowdy said: “I’ve never been a rooting broadcaster. I went right down the middle on the game. But inside myself, I at least wanted the AFL to make a good appearance in the game. I just wanted the Chiefs to make it close. I didn’t think they could beat the Packers.”

My pals and I switched between the NBC and CBS telecasts, but favored Gowdy’s call and spent most of the game with NBC. We cheered-on the Packers and really loved it when 34-year-old Max McGee—subbing for the injured Boyd Dowler—caught two touchdown passes among seven acrobatic grabs.

It later was revealed that McGee was hung-over from a Saturday night of curfew-breaking carousing unknown to Lombardi.

The icing on our cake was the sight of mouthy Chiefs’ cornerback Fred (The Hammer) Williamson, getting knocked out and carried off the field. The brash Williamson, who specialized in a vicious clothesline tackle of ball-carriers, was to become a movie actor and director in the 1970s and star in several popular “Blaxploitation” flicks.

One of the best-known was “Hammer” (1972).

By the time the game ended about 6 p.m., and we finished Jerry’s delicious strawberry pastry dessert, we’d had our fill of football, food and tomfoolery. But there was more to come. At a televised postgame news conference and award ceremony in a crowded locker room, Lombardi was pressed by reporters to comment on the quality of the team his Packers had thoroughly vanquished. After initially resisting, he finally said, “The Kansas City Chiefs team is a real tough football team. But it doesn’t compare to the National Football League teams...”

“Damn right!” I bellowed, glorying in the moment, which was a culmination of one of the most satisfying days in my years of watching pro football on TV. Jerry and James agreed, but, predictably, many officials, coaches, players and fans of the AFL vigorously were still not convinced. Yet, in the years to come, the gleaming golden symbol awarded to the Super Bowl victor was aptly named The Lombardi Trophy for the legendary coach whose Packers also convincingly beat the Oakland Raiders to win Super Bowl II, in 1968.

The first Super Bowl will never be surpassed for high expectations and even higher drama.

Little did the three of us know that this would be the first of many TV Super Bowls we’d share—alternating between each of our homes for the next decade. Better yet, we were joined for the final four or five by our wives and children, which actually made the day more enjoyable, and equally chaotic.

After going our separate ways in the years since, I made a point of calling Jerry and James on Super Sunday to recall that historic first Super Bowl together in 1967. And I continued with Jerry following James' death in 1984.

These days, of course, food and drink Super Bowl parties have become one of the TV rites of the New Year—and it's even possible to spot someone actually watching the game. Check it out the next time you attend one. Of course, things would be different if we still had Vince Lombardi's Green Bay Packers to root for. They were the greatest.

Years later, this historic event may have best been described by columnist Mickey Herskowitz, of *The Houston Chronicle*, who said: "There'll never be another game, in any sport, to equal the tension and the chemistry of the

first Super Bowl between the Green Bay Packers and the Kansas City Chiefs." I couldn't agree more. And along with millions of others, I'll never forget it.

To be sure, those who watched Super Bowl XXXIX on Feb. 6, 2005, witnessed a close, competitive contest in the sports spectacle to end all sports spectacles, just as Pete Rozelle envisioned. Pre-game and half-time entertainment was top-notch and, with a few exceptions, most of the expensive commercials were good—especially the Ford Mustang spot parodying the 1996 film " Fargo." And everything was enhanced for our enjoyment by gobs of modern technology. In a word, it was super. But to me, the very first Super Bowl, on Jan. 15, 1967, will never be surpassed for high expectations and even higher drama.

Richard G. Carter, a New York freelance writer, is a former columnist and editorial writer with the *New York Daily News*. A frequent contributor to *Television Quarterly*, he is a graduate of Marquette University and received the 1986 By-Line Award from its College of Journalism for distinguished achievement.