In 1977, right after his favorite team lost an unprecedented fourth Super Bowl, Jim O'Brien took typewriter in hand to tell it like it was going to be with pro football. His portentous words were printed in Cultural Correspondence Spring 1977). Here it is seven years later and time for a look to see just how clear was Mr. O'Brien's crystal ball.

FRE! or Why Pro Football on TV is Doomed

By Jim O'Brien

Let me begin with a story of stark human tragedy.

On New Year's Day, not long before the football telecasts were to begin, I was visiting my good friend and fellow worker Jill Goldstein, who was confined to bed with a painful backache. She couldn't sit up, and reading would be hard, but she could watch television.

At this point, the reader might conclude that my friend was looking forward to an afternoon of pleasant diversion watching the bowl games. And she would have, except for one thing: she doesn't like football.

The less said about this unfortunate episode the better. Rather than dwelling on it further, I would like to explore some of the reasons why televised football is such a popular form of entertainment. I don't think anyone would argue that football gets so much TV time because of a ruling class conspiracy. It's on TV because the audience is in the living room waiting for it. (The one exception is the so-called Super Bowl, whose audience is swelled way beyond its natural size by the extraordinary build-up that TV and the daily press give it beforehand. Nine out of the eleven Super Bowls played so far have been one-sided or otherwise dull, yet the fools keep tuning in year after year. One year my mother watched the Super Bowl.)

Why do a lot of people watch football? I don't think it's the violence as such that makes it popular. Hockey never made it big on TV, and in fact has lost its network coverage during the period when it has become most violent. A lot of the brutality in professional football games is illegal and therefore furtive – hidden from the camera as well as from the officials. I do think that the risk of injury increases the audience, for the same reasons that trapeze acts are considered more exciting when there's no net. For similar reasons, I find that games played in the snow or in extreme cold (like the Green Bay-Dallas NFL championship in -14 cold in 1967) are more interesting to watch than most games. (Another fellow worker, Richard Stuart, says he only wants to watch games played in lightning storms, but that's because he doesn't like football.)

I sometimes tell myself that I like football because of the grace and coordination involved. And there's a lot of both. The grace shows up mainly when a team "takes the aerial route." In any single game you're likely to see several remarkable feats of agility and timing on the part of pass receivers and/or defensive backs. But my own interest in these feats declined somewhat this year when I heard a TV announcer say that the receivers wear stickum on their fingers. Besides, I've never seen a pass receiver (with the single exception of Lynn Swann) show the smooth form of the two dogs I once saw catching frisbees in their mouths in the Arnold Arboretum in Boston. No kidding, you should have seen them stretch.

As for coordination, there's no denying that football games have a lot of it. Whereas in baseball a single play will involve the pitcher, catcher, batter, one to three baserunners, and usually no more than three fielders, every play in a football game involves some particular role for each of the 22 players on the field. Even the dullest three-yard play is possible only because the blockers create a space that is empty during the precise split-second that the ball-carrier enters it. But this is a different kind of coordination from the improvised kind that you see in the finest moments of a basketball or hockey game. In football the coordination consists of "good execution," the faithful carrying out of plays that have been diagrammed and drilled into the players by their ubiquitous coaches. Who needs to watch that?

To my mind, the game's greatest attraction is that it gives the viewer a chance to identify symbolically with people who are breaking through their difficulties and imposing their will on those (the other team) who have other plans for them. Aside from long passes, the most exciting plays are ones which involve both speed and power on somebody's part. That somebody is preferably the runner if your team has the ball,

preferably a tackler if your team is on defense. If you don't have a strong favorite – I always root for the more progressive team myself – you can identify with players on either team. The only qualification is that the play has to have some significance in relation to the outcome of the game. One-sided games are dull as dishwater unless the underdogs are the ones running up the score, or unless the losing coach is widely regarded as an asshole.

Anyway, the average fan has lots of frustrations in his own life, and football provides a handy, vicarious way of overpowering them. It isn't so much the violence as it is the sight of the would-be tacklers being shaken off or the aspiring blockers being pushed aside. It is much better for this purpose than any dramatic program, since only the finest actors with the best scripts can equal the intensity of football players who are "up for the big game." With TV actors you always know they're actors and you always know you're still at home in your living room. With a football game, though, especially since the players are rendered anonymous by their padding and helmets, it's easy to forget. It is also better for this purpose than other sports, I think. Basketball and hockey players are always rushing up and down the court/rink, but in a football game the ball carrier is making measurable progress by the very act of advancing down the field with the ball. Every yard that he advances is over the fierce opposition of the other team. Every first down is an accomplishment and every touchdown is potentially (depending on the score at the time and the degree of frustration in the viewer's own life) an epiphany.

Is it sexist? Obviously it is. Try to imagine a three-hour TV program with all female performers and female announcers, and with all the performers being dressed to the point where you couldn't even see their faces. Then, after imagining it, try to sell the idea to any network or any sponsor. It can't be done. The sexism in TV football is more deeply embedded than the sexism in, say, an all-male panel of public affairs "experts" ruminating on events of the day. Women are kept off the panel (when they are kept off) by sexist attitudes, while they could never qualify for big-time football teams because of the premium these teams put on sheer physical size. Unike such sports as basketball, track and field, tennis, and increasingly baseball, football is meaningless to most women because they're excluded from it at all levels, going back to grade school. In a non-sexist society we would probably still get plenty of boring panel discussions, and with any luck at all we'd get a lot of good sports programs – but you can bet that there'd be a lot less TV football.

In the meantime, though, I would like to get a few things off my chest concerning the announcers. A giant PUL-LEEZE! to nearly all of them: for their bland I'm-not-from-any-place-in-particular accents, for their mindless parroting of the cliches they pick up from the coaches or from each other, for their inability to convey either excitement on the big plays or humor on the little ones, and for their ignorant garroting of the English language. Don Meredith is the only real exception. Between his boisterous southwestern accent and his apparent drinking problem, he makes the telecasts more interesting; he's the most likely of any current announcer to come out with something like that famous bit on the Blooper record, "… he's at the 50, the 45, the 40, the 35, look at that son of a bitch run!" (Meredith was pretty subdued during the Super Bowl, but that game seems to make everyone nervous.) Of the other announcers, the redeeming features I can see are that Lindsey Nelson has a pleasing voice, that Keith Jackson's voice crackles nicely on the big plays (on little ones too, unfortunately), and that from my Scrabble experience I can sympathize with Howard Cosell's efforts to get away with made-up words (as in "attemptedly"). *

So far this article has been brilliant, but has made no breathtaking theoretical breakthroughs. As my contribution along these lines, I would like to introduce the concept of the Falling Rate of Excitement. This concept does <u>not</u> apply to college games, at least to the ones I saw on TV this year, because the college teams seem to play a wide-open game with lots of option plays and last-minute pitchouts by the quarterback. Besides, college games are a kind of celebration of Youth and will always have their nostalgic viewers. It's the professional game that is threatened by the Falling Rate of Excitement. The basic cause of the FRE is that with game films and (increasingly) computers, professional teams are able to come up with defensive formations that can eventually stymie every new offensive tactic. In other words, what happens to the Minnesota Vikings in the Super Bowl every year will eventually happen to everybody.

Of course, the most sophisticated readers will know immediately that the Falling Rate of Excitement is really a <u>tendency</u> of the Rate of Excitement to fall. In the short run it may not actually be Falling at any given point. For example, the invention of instant replay in the early 1960s gave TV football a tremendous boost as a form of entertainment. No game is so dull that it doesn't have at least a few exciting plays that can be highlighted by repetition and by being shown from different camera angles. Instant replay meant instant relief from the workings of the FRE in the '60s. But in recent years the FRE has reasserted

itself, and new expedients have been necessary. A couple of years ago the National Football League changed its rules (e.g., moving the goal posts further back so there would be less temptation to settle for field goals rather than going for all-or-nothing) in an effort to add more thrills and chills to the game. (The field goals were getting to be a drag; you even had coaches and announcers talking about field goal "Production" and about the "productivity" of the kickers.) This year, as the inexorable workings of the FRE continued anyway, the sexist pig networks started to go in for camera shots of cheerleaders and female spectators to counterbalance the sluggish play on the field. That's fine for Dallas and other warm-weather cities, but in places like Minneapolis and Buffalo there are limits to the networks' ability to require scanty clothing, and to the cheerleaders' ability to feign an enthusiastic interest in the game.

This reporter sees no technological or other breakthroughs in the offing that will have even the short-term effect that the introduction of instant replay had. The next historical period will witness the virtually unhindered operation of the Falling Rate of Excitement, and professional football will be on its way downhill.

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* I think it was Cosell whom Edwin Newman quotes in his new book as having called a team capitalistic, meaning that it took advantage of the opposing team's fumbles, etc. My friend Barbara Engh, when she heard that, said, "That's right, a communist team would say, 'Who needs the ball the most?'"