

Pigskin Proselytizer

By Nico Earhart

I didn't have a dog in the fight but when a friend of mine rang me up one Wednesday evening and asked if I wanted to join him for a trip to the Super Bowl in Atlanta, I figured I'd jump at the chance. Having just separated from my girlfriend, I felt that this would be just the remedy I needed for the frost-induced self-pity I had been wallowing in. What better way to get over female woes than to head to arguably the largest, most macho single-game sporting event in the entire world? I touched down in the ATL on Friday afternoon, just in time for the start of the weekend's festivities. Our group would be scattered around different airport hotels, the few remaining hotel rooms in the city, given our late commitment. Places like downtown Atlanta and Buckhead having sold out months ago. The plane I was on and the airport we flew into was filled with reveling fans from both coasts; the light blue and yellow of the Los Angeles contingent and the Navy blue and white of the New England faithful.

Los Angeles, in only their second year back on the left coast, had started the season off on a hot streak, looking like the top team in the league through the halfway point. After a brief midseason dip back into normalcy, they had wrapped the season up strong, displaying momentary traces of mastery in their two postseason games, benefitting from a favorable call in the New Orleans game that will go down in history as one of the NFL's most egregious non-calls. They would be showing up to Atlanta with two of the most formidable defensive players in the league in the likes of Aaron Donald and Ndamukong Suh and an upstart quarterback, Jared Goff, who promises to put LA back on the football map.

The Patriots once again faced adversity during the season and much naysaying by the media to pick up their play at the end of the year and get back into the Divisional Playoffs, where they laid a beat down on the other team from Los

Angeles, the ~~San~~ Diego Chargers. They went on to face what would arguably be their biggest test of the season with a frigid trip to Kansas City to take on that city's new quarterback prodigy and soon-to-be regular season MVP, Patrick Mahomes, who threw 50 touchdowns during his rookie campaign. The juxtaposition most highlighted by the media in that AFC championship was the youth of KC's gunslinger versus what many felt to be father time chipping away at Brady's impenetrable armor. But the ageless wonder held on and battled back during the away game and the Patriots came away with the AFC title and another shot at the World Championship. So it was set, the playing of the 53rd Super Bowl in Atlanta, Georgia, would be between two teams coming in hot and ready to dish out some pain.

Prior to the 6:30 pm start of the game on Sunday, Atlanta would be alive with the rattle and hum that accompanies Super Bowl weekend. Mercedes-Benz Stadium, the site of the matchup, would be locked down tighter than Fort Knox but parties and rallies were sprinkled throughout the whole city. Given that I was tagging along with the Patriots contingent I mostly found myself surrounded by extremely intoxicated New Englanders during these events; not a huge plus for a non-Brady loyalist. The overwhelming majority of Americans would like to remedy the smugness of Pats fans with a swift judo chop to the face, but I'd known these Boston brothers for over a decade so I was no stranger to the usual antics and radicalisms of the diehards. When I first started watching the Patriots in 2003 they had just come off what was a miserable half century, so I almost felt a tinge of sympathy for these aficionados of two of the worst franchises in sports, the Boston Red Sox lumped in with the leatherheads from Foxborough. But things have changed since then. Beginning with the 2002 season, the Patriots have gone to the Super Bowl nine times and won the ring a whopping six times. The facts remain that over the last decade in the National Football League the Patriots have been the best team bar none. These preparty events were all quite amusing and certainly highlighted the superlatives of the Atlanta nightlife but, ultimately, I oft found myself looking at the time, counting down the hours until I was able to see

my first Super Bowl game. With yet another inebriated Pats fan confessing that, given it was necessitated by Mr. Brady, surely this fan would provide oral copulation to his beloved quarterback, I decided to call it a night. Saturday night we returned to the hotel even earlier, before 9 pm, the nerves of most of my companions completely shot, thinking about the war to come on the morrow.

Sunday dawned clean and clear, a slight chill to the soft Georgia winter. I was up early, excited, ready to go. I grabbed a quick and insipid breakfast in the lobby of the Airport Best Western before heading out to meet up with the rest of the team. The plan was to head down to the stadium before it got too hectic, grab a quick beer near the field and then head in three hours before kickoff. It was the earliest I had ever gone to an NFL game but with three multi-Super Bowl veterans leading the charge I figured I would heed their advice. Security was tight, the road lined with Army men who looked more at home along the streets of Falluja, while the eerie sound of drones whipped by overhead. They casually smiled at the attendees while occasionally passing the barrels of their assault rifles past our heads. A peculiar feeling but one that inspired faith that the armed services would be keeping a wrap on this game. F-18s took laps around the Atlanta skyline.

When we got into the stadium I would say the breakdown was something like 30% Rams fans and 60% Pats, the remaining 10%, like myself, steering clear of declaring a favorite. The number of Rams fans, while in the minority, was actually quite surprising given the newfangled success of the team and the fact the majority of Angelinos still have no clue that there is a football team there to begin with. There were some holdouts who remained loyal to the squad from the early 90s and before, a sprinkling of Eric Dickerson and Lawrence McCutcheon jerseys to be found around the concourse. But equally evident were groups of people from Los Angeles who had taken a moment away from their tofu burgers and wheatgrass enemas to come drop \$5,000 to fly across the country and see 'their' football team in action. Pats fans, on the other hand, flowed like the salmon of Capistrano. New England White, the same color the team has won most of their

Super Bowls in, could be seen throughout the stadium, the overwhelming majority of them with that bold-font #12 on the back, like a messiah leading his people to the promised land. They could be heard throughout, yelling to their brethren and occasionally letting loose in profanity-laced diatribes to Rams fans who looked on, perplexed. Becoming a Patriots fan is something akin to joining the *cosa nostra*: you're usually born into it and the only way to get out is through death. But what the New England fans lacked in civility, sobriety and general regard for the space of others, they make up for with passion in spades. You can say many things about Patriots fans, most of which will lead to a fist fight, but what you cannot say is that they are dispassionate for their team.

As the countdown to game time neared zeros the stadium began to fill. The tension was palpable. This is one of the things that make the Super Bowl so uber-exciting: the fact that this is one game for all the marbles. No coming back tomorrow to try and pick up your play. No do-overs. This one game would decide at least a year's worth of work on either side of the ball and the energy in the building was electric. Even as the great Brady took the field to the cheers and catcalls of the fans, he seemed to be in a purposeful trance, unaware of the goings on around the building, concentrating solely on the mission at hand.

The pomp and circumstance start early at the big game. An extended version of America the Beautiful was quickly followed by an even longer version of God Bless America and a fly-over by Navy fighter jets that, I was told, was seen by up to 30 people in the stadium. The team captains walked to the middle of the field to enact that plebiscitary pregame tradition, the coin toss, where the first possession would be determined. With all the housekeeping taken care of and my first winning bet in the books (Over/Under Length of God Bless America – 1 min 38 sec. Thank you, Gladys Knight, songbird of a generation.) it was time to get this game into gear.

The knock on this year's Super Bowl by the talking heads was that it was sluggish, underwhelming, anemic. Boring. The total lack of offense, only three total points in the first half, left

those tuning in searching for the puppy bowl. But if you were lucky enough to be in the building, circumstances were quite opposite. What most TV viewers saw as offensive inefficiency was, in fact, the astute defensive prowess of both teams on display. Neither side could gain momentum as the green quarterback was stunned and the crafty vet saw pressure like he has not experience all year. The two imposing figures of the Los Angeles defense holding fast to the meddle that pulled them through the season. With the score remaining close in the first half, even with a deficiency of points scored, fans from both legions were searching for the heart medication. The Patriots had a couple of chances to put space in between them and their adversaries but a number of dropped passes and a missed field goal at the end of the half lead to the Rams heading into the locker room up by three.

I stayed in my seat for the halftime show. Not out of a desire to see the band Maroon 5, which I didn't have, or a necessity to report on the halftime theatrics, which I didn't possess, but because the lines for the restrooms and the concessions were painfully long. The show, which was predictable, not loud enough and too long was underwhelming, to say the least. So I tried to enjoy the musical accompaniment of the popular rock group, assisted by the likes of Big Boi and Travis Scott, but couldn't seem to get into the groove. Unsurprising given that we were at the largest sporting event on the face of the Earth and music was the last thing on my mind, or anyone else's it seemed. When one of my compatriots return from his rounds in the crowded milieu, buying some more suds and grabbing a snack, I couldn't have agreed with him more when he announced, at the top of his lungs and to the delight of many children seated near us, his displeasure with the staging equipment still on the field: "Get this fucking stupid bullshit of the fucking field and let's play some fucking football." He took the words right out of my mouth.

With only 30 minutes left in the game now, the stakes, which had already been vertigo-inducing at the start of the game, were raised to dizzying heights. 30 minutes left in a three-to-nothing game to decide who would reign supreme in America's most important game of the nation's

most popular sport. The pressure on Tom Brady during the break must have been insurmountable; widely regarded as the best QB in history, he was being beaten by a sophomore slinger who faced the polar opposite of expectations but still had shown streaks of trepidation during the first two frames. Brady had been here before and done that and he was clearly being outmaneuvered by the younger and some might say better looking Goff. After a glacially-paced first half, the New England receiving corps had little to show. 'Tommy Touchdowns' had some work to do and the entire New England region was waiting with bated breath for him to come out firing.

For those waiting at home for the offense to pick up in the second half, you were sorely disappointed. But inside the building you could have cut the tension as easily as imitation butter. With the score still close and each possession displaying the tenacity of either team's defense, it became apparent that only a few points would be needed to win the game and claim the Championship. The Over/Under for points scored in the game was 58, leaving those who had bet on a defensive matchup (myself included) scrambling to find their bettor's stub. But at the end of the day, the onus would fall on the man who everybody in the building expected to have a big second half, one Thomas Edward Patrick Brady Jr. To the delight of the ravenous masses of Patriots fans and the chagrin of media folks who had spent the first half saying, "see, I told you that guy was too old," TB12 started to put on a clinic by the end of the 3rd quarter. Not one of his famous, I'll make everybody out here look silly clinics of yesteryear, but one of an older and wiser quarterback who knew where his new strengths lay and how to systematically dismantle a defense that had been giving him trouble all day. Gone were the 45-yard bombs that had historically been thrown on a dime. Now, Brady had to find a way to pick the Rams apart, hooking up with his infamous receivers Julian Edelman and Rob 'Hulk Smash' Gronkowski. The play of the game up to that point, a 25-yard catch-and-run by Gronk that left the Pats knocking on the door, lead to the game's first touchdown, a 2-yard run by Running Back Sony Michel.

The Rams would have two more chances to put points on the board but clock mismanagement and possible coaching inexperience would leave the Rams offense listless, unable to connect on that potential big play that would get them back into the game. Even down by 10, Los Angeles, who still had Greg 'The Leg' Zurline on the bench ready to hit one of his famous 60-yard field goals, seemed to have some life left in them when the fourth quarter began to come to a close. In their last meaningful drive of the game, they made their way into New England territory, threatening a six-point touchdown. But it would be a relative unknown (at least compared to the other sparkling names on the field: Brady, Goff, Donald and Suh) who would come up big to seal the game with a timely interception on his own 10-yard line. Stephon Gilmore, who only had two interceptions during the whole of the 2018 season, waited under a flailing pass from Goff that hung in the air too long to swipe the ball and ground any momentum the Rams had accumulated to an abrupt halt. The building erupted and stoic New Englanders around the stadium could be seen in ecstatic and 'definitely-not-gay' embrace. I remember raising my hands in glee and a shout that would send me over the edge of losing my voice; a sports moment that I will carry with me for the rest of my days. The clock slowly edged towards triple zeros and as the time wound down the rumble from the crowd began to grow to an enthusiastic din. The Patriots were once again Champions of the World.

We hung around the field for an hour after the game. Taking in the sights and sounds of yet another win by the Patriots. My patients for New England fans, omitting the few that I had gone to the game with and become part of their rooting section with, was growing thin. But I wouldn't rain on their parade, naysaying the razor-thin victory they had just pulled off. That would be playing the sore loser and I hadn't even had a dog in the fight to begin with. Maybe it was that painful word that every NFL fan from a different region traffics in as they watch the Pats, yet again, make confetti angles at midfield. Maybe it was jealousy.



Another win in the books for Pats Nation

The End