On Sunday 1 February 2015, defending champions Seattle Seahawks will take on the New England Patriots in the forty-ninth American Football Super Bowl (or NFL Super Bowl XLIX [http://www.azsuperbowl.com/], as it’s officially called) in Glendale, Arizona. And, like the Olympics or the World Cup, it’s an occasion which is more than a mere sporting event; there are many significant geographical issues at play.

Geographers don’t need to actually understand the rules to appreciate the issues surrounding one of the world’s biggest annual sporting events.
**ECONOMICS**

The ‘where’ element to the season-ending Super Bowl is important in numerous ways, but especially when it comes to economics. American cities bid to host the event – and to be in the spotlight which is cast upon the game – several years in advance. Along with the prestige, there is the economic boost which comes from hosting the match to fight for. The National Football League (NFL) (http://www.nfl.com/) estimates as much as $600 million (£395 million) in economic benefits are brought to the city which hosts the sporting spectacle.

However, Jerry Weiers, Mayor of Glendale, Arizona, home to the University of Phoenix Stadium, where this year’s Super Bowl will take place, has suggested that when the cost of public safety measures, as well as other necessary expenses, are factored in, it is quite possible the city will be worse off than if it wasn’t hosting the match.

‘There is no evidence of an economic impact for hosting a Super Bowl,’ Kurt Rotthoff, Associate Professor of Economics and Finance, Stillman School of Business, Seton Hall University, tells Geographical. He highlights several ways in which researches have reached this conclusion, including how the NFL often awards the event to cities which have recently built new stadia, meaning that the subsequent boost is unlikely to exceed the initial investment in the stadium, and also how money spent at local hotels and other businesses tends to go to national corporations, meaning the money doesn’t stay in the local area anyway.

Rotthoff also cites an observed phenomenon known as the ‘crowding out effect’: ‘That is, there are people that would have been visiting that area, either local residents or out of town guests, that avoid the area because of the traffic surrounding the event,’ he says. ‘Because of this, people often count the number of game attendees as an economic boost, but these people that are avoiding the area – and would have been there without the game – need to be taken out of the overall numbers; thus the number is much smaller than estimated.’

**CULTURE**

The Super Bowl is a key part of American life, even amongst people with no interest in American football. The NFL pursued an aggressive marketing strategy from the 1960s onwards, making the Super Bowl the centerpiece of the annual American television schedule. The 2014 final between the Seattle Seahawks and the Denver Broncos became the most watched television event in US history, with an average 111.5 million viewers, a record which is expected to be broken this weekend.

‘The Super Bowl has almost all of the highest TV ratings and audiences over the past 40 years,’ Michael Oriard, former player for the Kansas City Chiefs, Distinguished Professor of American Literature and Culture at Oregon State University, and author of Brand NFL: Making and Selling America’s Favorite Sport, tells Geographical. ‘The NFL is one of the few things in this country that crosses genders, races, classes, regions, even politics. And the Super Bowl is the focal point of that mass-cultural appeal.’

With its rock star half-time shows, firework displays, and multi-million dollar television advertising, the Super Bowl has grown into a culturally-significant occasion, so much more than a mere sporting event. ‘The Super Bowl was developed and marketed as a spectacle of excess, known for its commercials, its half-time show, its all-day TV preview, its orgy of festivities in the host city before the game as much as the game itself,’ continues Oriard. ‘Football itself, played at the highest level, is crucial to the appeal of the NFL and the Super Bowl, but marketing is responsible for much of the Super Bowl’s magnitude.’
ENERGY

As with most major sporting events, the Super Bowl is an energy-intensive occasion. However, this year will see the inclusion of an innovative renewable energy initiative. The Salt River Project (SRP) (https://www.srpnet.com/default.aspx), an Arizona-based public utilities company, the third-largest in the US, will be supplying the University of Phoenix Stadium – the venue for the match – with renewable wind-generated energy ‘to offset greenhouse gas emissions associated with Super Bowl XLIX’.

‘The Super Bowl is a great opportunity to demonstrate ways that a world-class event can be environmentally responsible,’ says Jack Groh, NFL Environmental Program Director. ‘Working with SRP to green the power at University of Phoenix Stadium is one of many strategies to respond to environmental concerns and create a positive legacy of Super Bowl in Arizona.’

In 2013, US-energy consumption analysts Opower (http://opower.com/) also found that despite the millions of Americans glued to their televisions over the course of the Super Bowl, the communal nature of the event and the reduced usage of other household appliances, meant that energy usage across the country actually dropped during the match. It claims (http://blog.opower.com/2013/01/will-the-super-bowl-save-the-planet-how-americas-most-watched-tv-event-reduces-home-energy-usage/) ‘the total decrease in US home electricity usage during the Super Bowl is greater than three times the amount of energy consumed by all the TVs watching it.’

GEOPOLITICS

All this spectacle and popular culture makes the Super Bowl arguably one of America’s most ‘American’ events, which, significantly, was watched last year by fifty million people outside the United States. This gives the US the chance to say something about itself, something different from the ‘hard’ military actions which shape many global perceptions of the country. Sport, in general, gives America the opportunity to portray itself somewhat differently from how it may otherwise be seen by much of the world population.

‘An America is created that is neither military hegemon nor corporate leviathan – a looser place, less rigid and more free, where anyone who works hard shooting a ball or handling a puck can become famous and (yes) rich.’ Those are the words of Charles P. Pierce, in his 2003 Boston Globe article The Goodwill Games, as quoted by Joseph Nye in his book Soft Power: The Means to Succeed in World Politics.

And with the Super Bowl at the forefront of the American sports market, it is this event which could potentially have the most say in changing global perceptions of the US, and having a significant influence of other countries’ relationships with the country.

‘I take some issue with the game being viewed as some kind of instrument of US soft-power,’ Jeremy Hildreth, co-author of Brand America, tells Geographical. ‘It’s the Super Bowl. It’s unabashedly American.’ He also highlights one traditional Super Bowl branding – the Roman numeral sequential numbering method – as a reason why host cities may struggle to gain recognition from staging the event. ‘Right now, the name of the game is “NFL Super Bowl XLIX at the University of Phoenix Stadium in Glendale, Arizona”’, he says. ‘No mere mortal stands a chance with that, I’m afraid. “Super Bowl 2015: Phoenix” would be better for everybody.’
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