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Ritual in U.S. Televised Sport: Its History and Purpose

No agreed definition of ritual exists, nor is it easy to distinguish ritual from ceremony. Nevertheless, there is general agreement that ritual requires repeated actions, the significance of which is understood by participants; is directed to some transcendent purpose; and that specific rituals may change group and individual behavior in long-term, observable ways.

Over the years, U.S. telecasts have chopped away at ritual present in the stadium, and have substituted their own framing. Only in final events such as the Super Bowl is an attenuated version of the stadium ritual still broadcast. While some TV viewers also attend live sport events, the ritual content of events experienced by almost all spectators is now manifestly controlled by telecasters. This paper argues that televised sport ritual is about status, and that the purpose of such ritual bears no relation to religious ritual, although superficial analogues can be perceived. Such media-constructed ritual is also a consequence of the commercialization of sport, having been present since the days of newspaper coverage. Televised sport ritual is created for consumers, not fans.

As part of a much larger work in preparation, this paper starts from Higgins' premise in *God in the Stadium*, "that sports and religion...are in many ways incompatible." Contrasting the ritual of the Jewish Day of Atonement and the Hopi Snake Dance which are both annual events in a ceremonial cycle, with the U.S. Open and the Super Bowl, it shows that, in spite of analogues, the very different religious rituals speak to transcendence, whereas sport rituals speak to contest. While sport ritual may emphasize that an event is "more than a game," one set of actors and participants always perceive themselves to be superior to the other. The history, bodies, clothing, actions, and reactions of both actors and other participants in the rituals are examined in brief as are the award ceremonies in the two sporting events. They demonstrate very clearly the relative status of the various actors and participants in the drama. They also demonstrate, paradoxically, one of the major continuities and contrasts between newspaper and televised coverage of commercialized sport.