

Are you Ready for some (Political) Football?

by Mike Wagner

Americans know very little about politics. About one in ten can't place Dick Cheney, even if we count those who claim he is a "Dark Overlord" as answering the question correctly. In fact, most folks just don't care about politics. And you probably don't care either. If you think I'm wrong, tell me, when was the last day you woke up, clapped your hands together and shouted to the world, "you know what? I'm going to hold my government accountable today!"

Too high of a bar? How about this: when was the last time you woke up and thought quietly to yourself, "I think the opposition has a fair point here" rather than "those hippy, dangerously naïve, reverse racist liberals/redneck, fact-hating, actually racist conservatives make me so mad!"

I thought so.

On the other hand, Americans know quite a bit about football (at least American men, but how many women are running to a website called poopreading.com? I've been married 5 years and just last week convinced my wife to start reading in the bathroom.). In fact, lots of folks are willing to watch a game where they have no rooting interest, having fun and learning something while doing so. Last night, I watched the Eagles-Browns thrilla-in-vanilla even though the outcome hasn't been in doubt for at least three weeks and the game meant nearly nothing to me as a long-suffering Minnesota Vikings fan.

People are more willing to watch, learn, and take an interest in a football game that is meaningless to their own interests than they are to take any sense of ownership over the state of the country. This is true even though you actually have more say regarding what happens to your country (the ballot box, giving money to candidates, putting up a yard sign) than you have in determining the results of a football game (you don't get to pick the players, the owner, etc.). And voting is more egalitarian. It's free to register to vote – it costs \$250 bucks to take your family of four to a football game where your glorious screaming while the opponents are on offense could help affect the outcome. And it's easier to vote. Stand in line once every few years at a church or school rather than pay a smelly dude in a fifteen-year-old stocking hat 35 bucks to park.

We're willing to watch the game for at least two reasons. The first reason is that we might learn something fun about football, even if we don't care who wins. We might learn about Brian Westbrook's backup for fantasy purposes or perhaps Ron Jaworski's ridiculous preparation in the film room teaches us how a shoulder fake freezes a safety, opening up a corner-end zone TD pass that can only be caught on the outside shoulder so long as the wind speed is under 5 MPH or over 14.325 MPH in a north-south facing

stadium. Is Jaws annoying? Yes. But is he interesting? Yes again, baby!

We don't pay attention to politics because we don't want to learn anything new. We enjoy what political scientists call selective perception. Conservatives prefer FOX so that they can only hear conservative arguments put in the best light ("No attacks since 9/11, Bush is a success!") and liberal arguments in the worst light ("Unions ruined the car industry, so let's let the liberals give eleventy-billion dollars to the auto industry...hey is that a trillion dollars under the couch? Let's have the liberals spend it on diversity training for Christmas trees!"). Liberals love them some Keith Olbermann and his "For the 2,032nd day since President Bush claimed Mission Accomplished in Iraq" and questions like, "Howard Fineman, isn't the fact that someone threw a shoe at the president the absolute enduring picture of this idiot's legacy? Some dude threw a shoe! This is more important than a man landing on the moon! A shoe! (disgusted) Good night and good luck!" which send conservatives in a tizzy.

Now, it's true that we selectively perceive sports as well. There's no way, for instance, that anyone will ever be able to convince me that Minnesota Twins first baseman Kent Hrbek pulled Ron Gant off the bag to tag him out in Game 7 of the 1991 World Series. Gant's 180-pound body just had too much momentum and the fact that Herbie was busting the deuce (and then some at 235 lbs.) had nothing to do with his presence of mind to tag that bastard out. Maybe part of the difference is that in politics, it is always the Democrats vs. the Republicans while in sports it could be the Twins vs. the White Sox (go Twins!) or the Diamondbacks vs. the Padres (who gives a shit? But it's on TV, so I'll watch).

We're just more willing to learn about the Browns offensive woes and the Eagles fans' penchant for sucker punching Santa Claus than we are willing to learn about why the world works in the way that it does. Liberals do not want to hear that union wages, pensions and health care may have hurt the auto industry (and are often run by some comically corrupt folks that make Rod Blagojevich look like Rod Blagojevich) anymore than conservatives want to hear that if we had universal health care, the auto industry wouldn't have been forced to make the deal they did with the unions (who, by the way, negotiated a deal for themselves under the auspices of a capitalist economy, why do conservatives hate this?).

The second reason we watch football is one of the only reasons we pay attention to politics. Sadly, this reason is a bad one: we think the outcome might be in doubt. There was no way the Eagles were losing to the Browns. No way.

"But what if McNabb..." No way.

"But what if Ken Dorsey caught fire..." Ken Dorsey? You're kidding.

POOP READING

"But the Browns' players wanted to win one for Crennel..." Please.

"But, c'mon, Andy Reid is so fat..." True, but irrelevant. And Romeo Crennel has an assistant coach who keeps a fanny pack of hot-wings, gravy, and hot-wings covered in gravy at the ready, so coachfat is a wash.

But even though last night's game was never in doubt, many games are (see every game the Minnesota Vikings play). In politics, election outcomes are rarely in doubt. Congressional incumbents win over 90 percent of the time. Only the Celtics are better.

For instance, nearly every political scientist elections expert in the country had been saying for at least six months (if not 18 months, like I have...so there) that Barack Obama would beat John McCain with a 52% majority vote in the 2008 election. University of Virginia Professor Larry Sabato's "crystal ball" website called the Electoral College vote within one vote (that pesky 2nd congressional district of Nebraska) long before the election. The outcome was not in doubt. If Barack Obama had ended up naked in a hot tub with a bunch of Boy Scouts in a deserted forest, then maybe.

Well, for sure if the scouts were secret Muslims....

Structural forces like the state of the economy, presidential approval, and how long the current president has served are very reliable predictors of who will win the popular vote. A gaggle of political scientists predicted in the October issue of PS: Political Science and Politics an Obama victory with about 52% of the vote. And yet, most folks who paid attention to the election did so to see who would win rather than to see what the likely winner wanted to do, how likely it would be that he could do it, and what the possible consequences would be if he did indeed do it.

We can be bothered to think about which side of the field Donovan McNabb throws to on 3rd and long, but we can't be bothered to think about whether it is a good idea to spend some money on developing alternative fuels to power our cars when the oil runs out. It's more fun to say, "Drill, baby drill" than it is to learn about where we would drill, how much oil we could get, when we could get it, how much it would cost, and whether it would encourage people to drive gas guzzling cars further polluting the environment just as it is more fun to say "we need to get rid of our addiction to oil" than it is to think about how much it would cost to change the fuels that run cars, the likelihood that people can be convinced to drive less or drive particular kinds of cars, whether the new fuels will work as well, when they will work and so forth.

One reason this is true is that while Americans love sports competitions, they genuinely hate political debate. Many Americans falsely believe that the American people

generally agree on the solutions to our problems. Therefore, any debate that politicians engage in must be illegitimate since the people already agree.

Only they don't already agree. On abortion, Iraq, education spending, tax rates, energy policy, health care, gun ownership, same sex marriage, you name it. We're fine with Vikings fans hating Packers fans, with Patriots-haters screaming about the tuck rule, and Colorado ape-people, er, fans, shouting Huck the Fuskers. But have a Democrat and Republican disagree about a policy on Meet the Press and we wonder why they all can't get along. Then, we wonder why they compromise, the sellouts.

Anyway, here's the time at the end of the column where a throwaway solution is offered. I say, hire Ron Jaworski to host Meet the Press. Ok, "Jaws" and Gus Johnson. No reason this can't be fun.
