

SUPER BOWL SEX TRAFFICKING TRASH TALK 2014

Now that the super exciting Pro Bowl is over (shoot that thing and put us all out of its worthless misery), we are down to just one last football game. But it is a good one, with the top ranked team in each conference representing, and the best offense versus the best defense. And all that jazz.

And, really, what else is there to say about the game at this point? It has been the fascination of sports, general and entertainment media for two weeks of hype now. I could take you through the normal rundown on the teams, but why? My one real take is that the game boils down not to Denver's offense or Seattle's defense, but rather to Denver's defense. Peyton and the Broncos will score some points no matter how well they are defended. The same cannot necessarily be said about the Seahawks. So, if the Broncos defense plays big, Denver wins. If not, they don't.

Can't wait to find out; will be one hell of an exciting game to watch. If you can't wait and want a simulation, this Breaking Madden piece is pretty great.

So, let's talk for a bit about the game itself in terms of what it means and does for the host city. Does hosting a Super Bowl mean as much to a city as is commonly claimed?

Here is a report on the effects of 2008 Super Bowl XLII on the greater Phoenix area by the Arizona State University WP Carey School of Business. The results claim:

Super Bowl festivities generated a record \$500.6 million in direct and indirect spending by visiting fans and organizations, according to the newly released Super Bowl impact study

produced by the W. P. Carey MBA Sports Business program.

The gross impact of a half billion dollars in the Arizona marketplace brings rejuvenation to an economy that has been weakened by a recession.

The ripple effect of return visits, family and company relocations, and word-of-mouth marketing nationally could equal or exceed the record Super Bowl spending in years to come.

That is in line with many of the claims that are commonly pitched for Super Bowls, but is that right?

Well, maybe not. There are a lot of demands on a host city, and they really add up. One of the best journalists out there writing on the intersection of sports and society is Travis Waldron, and he reported this on the eve of last year's Super Bowl in New Orleans:

Those estimates, though, are likely fool's gold, according to an assortment of academic research into the actual economic impact of Super Bowls and other major sporting events. When professors Victor Matheson and Robert Baade studied the economic impact of Super Bowls from 1973 to 1997, they found that the games boosted city economies by about \$30 million, "roughly one-tenth the figures touted by the NFL" and an even smaller fraction of what New Orleans officials predict. A later Baade and Matheson study found that the economic impact of a Super Bowl is "on average one-quarter or less the magnitude of the most recent NFL estimates."

Similarly, a 1999 paper from professor Philip Porter found that the Super Bowl had virtually no effect on a city's economy. Research on other events New Orleans has hosted, including the men's

Final Four, is similar. When Baade and Matheson studied Final Fours, they found that the events tend “not to translate into any measurable benefits to the host cities.”

There are multiple reasons the estimates are often overstated. Impact estimates usually take into account how much money will be spent in the city during an event like the Super Bowl without examining how much potential spending will be lost because people don’t visit or leave the city to avoid the crowd – that is, the impact studies account for gross spending, but not net spending. And the estimates rarely include the additional cost of putting on the event, further distorting the disparity between gross and net spending figures.

Frankly, I find the Williams College study undergirding Travis’ argument far more persuasive than the happy face one put out here by ASU that is cited above. Still, even if the net impact is “only” 150-200 million dollars, that is a good thing for a city’s economy. And I don’t know what people going to the Super Bowl in cold weather place like New Jersey/New York are going to come away with, but I know for a fact that people that have come to the two held here have left gushing about their stay and promising to return. The best I can figure, hosting a Super Bowl is not nearly as lucrative for a city as advertised, but it is still a pretty positive thing.

What about those “other costs” to cities a Super Bowl entails? There are a lot. Just the preparation and presentation of an official bid years ahead of time costs a small fortune. But once awarded, the demands made of the host city really start. Which is how I came to this issue today.



Yesterday I had a bit of a discussion on Twitter with Dave Zirin and Melissa Gira Grant about the “sex trafficking” aspect of the Super Bowl, which is currently a trending topic in the New York/New Jersey area because, inter alia, the stepped up prostitution enforcement. Here is a New York times op-ed dated yesterday on the topic:

No data actually support the notion that increased sex trafficking accompanies the Super Bowl. The Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women, a network of nongovernmental organizations, published a report in 2011 examining the record on sex trafficking related to World Cup soccer games, the Olympics and the Super Bowl. It found that, “despite massive media attention, law enforcement measures and efforts by prostitution abolitionist groups, there is no empirical evidence that trafficking for prostitution increases around large sporting events.”

Even with this lack of evidence, the myth has taken hold through sheer force of repetition, playing on desires to rescue trafficking victims and appear

tough on crime. Whether the game is in Dallas, Indianapolis or New Orleans, the pattern is the same: Each Super Bowl host state forms a trafficking task force to “respond” to the issue; the task force issues a foreboding statement; **the National Football League pledges to work with local law enforcement to address trafficking**; and news conference after news conference is held. The actual number of traffickers investigated or prosecuted hovers around zero.

The Super Bowl sex-trafficking hype isn’t just unfounded, though – it is actively harmful because it creates bad policy. In the days leading up to Sunday’s game, local law enforcement dedicated tremendous resources to targeting everyone engaged in prostitution. (emphasis added)

So, there you have it, the “Global Alliance” has said there is none, so there isn’t! Now the author of the NYT op-ed did not have the courtesy to link the actual report she was referring to, but it would appear to be this one and it, too, is pretty darn short and bereft of anything close to “empirical evidence”. So, we are back to anecdotal evidence.

It is not maybe an abundance, but I have some anecdotal evidence and experience on Super Bowls and their their host cities from two Super Bowls here and the preparation for the one on the direct horizon in Phoenix next year. That will be three in less than twenty years, which is not bad by host city parameters. Go figure: great stadiums, great weather, fourth biggest county in the US, great airport, Scottsdale, Paradise Valley, and all the pretty things, why not?

For a lot of cities, the “why not” is because the NFL doesn’t think they and/or their facilities qualify. Here is a recent description from Seattle, who is contemplating making a bid

on a Super Bowl in the future:

The NFL has a few requirements for any city that wants to host a Super Bowl. The league likes the stadium to seat at least 70,000 and the hosting city needs to have at least 25,000 hotel rooms. CenturyLink Field can be expanded to fit 72,000 and King County has 34,000 hotel rooms. Check and check.

The NFL also likes the average February temperature in the Super Bowl city to be above 50 degrees. Obviously, this year's Super Bowl doesn't have that, but this year's Super Bowl is an experiment. Seattle doesn't meet the weather threshold either, the average February temperature in the city is 44 degrees.

"If you decide to put in a bid and you don't meet one requirement then you better knock it out of the park in another area," Morton said.

That is really but the very tip of the iceberg for a viable bid to host a Super Bowl. Here are the actual NFL host bid specifications that were applicable in 1998 when Jacksonville was bidding. There are specific bid requirements for the stadium facility, available hotel rooms and facilities in the surrounding area, local transportation and telecommunication capacity and capability, available practice sites for the teams, government/police capability and anti-scalping laws, provisions for a separate "NFL Experience" event, provisions for staged Friday and Saturday Night parties, provisions for additional facilities, and provision for a separate "NFL Youth Education Town".

Read through all the bid spec details. They are many and onerous. But there is a catchall for other things the NFL wants too:

These Bid Specifications do not specify all of the local assistance necessary to the successful staging of the Super Bowl

Game. Additional assistance may be requested from or proposed to the Host Committees from time to time.

And that is where we get back to the sex trafficking bit where we started. Making a local public show of sex trafficking and merchandise/ticket fraud enforcement is something the NFL actively promotes and demands, whether the host city is Phoenix or New York. It may be demagoguery to a large extent but, by the same token, there is increased activity surrounding a Super Bowl of those vices.

It may be anecdotal, but from my sampling of the parties, resorts and bars in the East Phoenix, Scottsdale and Paradise Valley area during the two Super bowls that have been here, and that is the part of town I live in and where all the festivities are, there is absolutely an infusion of, shall we say, "out of town talent". If you don't see it, you simply are not hanging out in the right places.

Here is the thing though, while there is increased sex trade activity, the "right places" are not the kind of places the NFL is concerned about, nor are they the ones the local cops roust and police. This is not just my observation from a lot of time out on the town, it is what was stated to me by local detectives in the course of my representation of a prostitution defendant from the last Super Bowl here in 2008.

So, at least from my experience, the author of the New York Times op-ed, Kate Mogulescu, is both wrong....and right. She is wrong because there is increased activity, but she is very right to claim that all the hype and media attention about it is bullshit. The real activity is where neither the NFL nor police, nor local government and business leaders, want disturbed. Because it is where the rich, pretty and powerful are. It is where the big money is. That is holy ground, and especially so during a Super Bowl. It is a class based double standard,

but there it is, and it exists.

UPDATE: Marcy made a couple of points in comments that further, and quite well, flesh out my point about the hypocrisy of the yearly NFL bullshit hype on “sex trafficking”. I am going to put them here in the body of the post as well:

One of the problems with the whole “sex trafficking” discussion is the agency implied by the words used. There are sex workers. Many of them will travel to where there are lots of rich customers—that’s called capitalism. There are sex buyers. They are left entirely out of the agency and even further out of the criminalization of this discussion, yet without the buyers, there are not the workers.

Both of those things are very different from “sex trafficking,” which is a term law enforcement uses so that people will use the word “vice” to collapse the distinction between sex workers selling to sex buyers – which is a market prone to abuse but also a market that will always exist – and the more nefarious parts of the industry, which involve underage pimping and slavery and the like. That is the point of the people objecting to the use of the term. It is tried and true way for law enforcement to use the specter of child pimping and slavery to criminalize sex workers but not their customers.

You want to start putting the rich johns in busses and sending them to jail for the weekend so they can’t use their \$2,000 tickets, do it. But until you do, that the framing of it is wrong.

One reason I put a great deal of stock in Melissa Gira Grant on this issue (aside from the fact that she has experience in the subject almost none of

the people commenting on the subject have) is when I was trying to figure out why FBI's "sex trafficking" numbers were so obviously flawed, when they boasted about the number of people they had saved. They would point to a few underage girls and claim a great deal of success and also provide a general number of all the other people "saved," which they didn't break out but which were very very clearly all female.

If anyone is talking about sex trafficking and yet can't find a single man or boy "trafficked," then the entire concept is broken. Melissa, who does track this stuff, confirmed my suspicions. Not only doesn't the FBI consider men—whether selling to men or women—part of the trade, but it doesn't consider boys needing to be saved.

You do the math. "Sex trafficking," as used, does not include all the abusive parts of the sex trade, and it includes a lot of the sex trade that is not abusive.

Exactly. And exactly why I call the hype and hypocrisy of the NFL bullshit.

Okay, that is it for this season's weekly Emptywheel Football Trash Talk. Until football starts up in earnest next fall, there will be periodic Trash, and certainly for the start of the Formula One circus and maybe March Madness. Until then, rock on people...and Go Broncos!