

## COMMENTARY

## The real toughest men



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It was a remarkable week for American culture, the one that began last Sunday with the Super Bowl.

There were Super Bowl celebrations in New York City, and Mardi Gras parties kicking off the Lenten season of abstinence in New Orleans, and primary elections kicking off the rundown to ultimate power, in 20 states, all on Tuesday.

I like some sports, which is a religion, and some religion, which is a sport, don't you? Especially if it's topped off by some politics, which is a cavalcade of people who will either put you to sleep or make you stare in fascination, the way you'd stare at a python swallowing a cat.

How can you look at these American characters — Clinton, McCain, Obama and Romney, along with that cast of beefsteak football pros — and not recognize that our nation remains the most optimistic collection of determined misfits ever to grace the planet?

On game day, a guy named Verlyn Klinkenborg wrote about the death of a squirrel, in the *New York Times*. That's all they have to do at the *Times*, is write about dead squirrels?

Here's an excerpt, which I read while awaiting the big football game, still about 8 hours away.

"Coming back down the hill, plunging knee-deep through the snow, I stopped. There was the print of a bird's wings. From the angle and size, I guessed it was a barn owl. I looked across the pasture and saw a squirrel's track, which ended at the wing-print — no sign of a struggle, just an abrupt vanishing..."

"That wing-print allowed me to glimpse the

uncompromising discipline of nature. But it will stand in my mind as the model of an almost perfect ephemerality, a vision of life itself. The snow has melted away, taking with it the squirrel's track and the arc of those wings and my own track up the hill and the burnished spots where the horses rolled in the snow."

Translation: Carpe Diem, baby. Because when the snows melt, everything we did or cared about or tried to do will have vanished, along with ourselves, like a squirrel's tracks. No news to anybody, right? I dismissed it.

Meanwhile, the sports programming on FOX-TV began in earnest four hours before the game. Four grinning, hail-fellow tough guys — three of them former players or coaches turned sportscasters — served as hosts.

Each former athlete now sells cars or something else for a living, in television advertisements. They were running taped segments they'd prepared well ahead of the Super Bowl, between the numerous ads.

They did interviews with players, with family members, and even with old guys who once played, many of whom who had tears in their eyes. All recounting the sacrifice and the pain. And like a big plate of cheese nachos, it was appealing. I knew what was coming, I knew it had the nutritional or intellectual value of sand, but I liked it.

These triumphant stories were the monumental stuff of thundering histories and parading celebrations of the American character, weren't they?

What I loved most were the endless pre-game crash shots. The diving catches, head-on collisions, and devastating "hits" on the gridiron, all garnished by a deeply satisfying soundtrack of bone-breaking grunts, gut-wrenching howls, and expulsions of brutally interrupted breath.

Sportscaster Howie Long conducted his annual "toughest man" contest, as always. In it, he named current professional players to an imaginary squad of the toughest men, then picked one out of the bunch for the ultimate honor. Finally and triumphantly, he delivered \$50,000 to the toughest man's high school, to boost its athletic program.

In America, pal, tough guys are nice guys, sometimes. And they drive Chevy trucks with V-8 engines, and pick up other tough guys who ran out of gas on country roads by driving some other manufacturer's truck, as far as I can tell from watching Howie Long sell cars.

Of course, sex was intimated everywhere, for hours, both in commercials and game shows, to my delight. Female hips undulated while the lips on the faces above them sang. Slender women fawned over just about anything big and bright, such as a new car with a man driving it.

But sometimes, the car was the man, apparently. What would you call that (not heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or trans-sexual), autosexual? A beautiful woman driving in the night explains that all the things that come on cars, like GPS systems and fine sound systems and leather and wood, all amount to nothing. Nope, the question is really this (suddenly she looks urgently at the camera, as if sex were imminent, and purrs): "When you turn your car on, does it return the favor?"

Then there was the kickoff, and the hard-fought game, and the unfortunate moment for me that put it all in perspective.

On a whim, I switched the channel to WGCU public television, channel 30.

And from the gridiron war — which many insist is a metaphor for life — I was transported suddenly to the Pacific war, where some of my relatives fought.

I'd never seen the Ken Burns special on World War II, and I watched original footage for about 5 minutes, before turning back to the game.

A line of gaunt Marines came over a hill and

started down, walking single file. The cameraman must have gotten in front of them and followed their progress from a kneeling position. Suddenly, the man in the lead, the point man, collapsed to his knees and then rolled off the trail down a steep embankment, his rifle falling away from him. The man behind him appeared to be so stunned, that for a second he didn't move.

The camera switched to a jungle. Three men struggled on a steep slope, slipping and turning and reaching, to pass down the body of a fourth. They had it under control, but suddenly the body (a dark-haired young man) got away from them, and the dead Marine flopped down the hill out of sight of the camera, like a sack of potatoes pitched through the picture from top to bottom.

None of those Marines looked like they weighed more than about 160 pounds. There was no buffed up muscle. They wouldn't have made it in Howie Long's toughest men show, or on the Super Bowl gridiron.

A veteran's voiceover recounted watching a fellow Marine drag a badly wounded but conscious Japanese prisoner into view. His open mouth revealed a row of gold teeth. The Marine pulled out his knife and began to cut out the teeth for use as souvenirs, before another Marine ran over (the voice of the old man calmly continued to relate) and shot the prisoner, putting him out of his misery.

That was Peleliu in the fall of 1944, where some of the bloodiest, most costly fighting of World War II occurred, but pointlessly, it seemed; the island became strategically unimportant.

And while I watched Eli Manning throw his winning touchdown pass with 35 seconds remaining, I realized that the pass, and the game, and the political and religious week, were just squirrel tracks in the snow.

But we couldn't have made them, and had so much fun doing it, unless somebody else had made some other tracks, once, too.

In blood, not snow. ■



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