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THAT'S SPORTAINMENT!

Perhaps the most distinctive element of the late capitalist order can be discerned from the intensifying convergence of various facets of social existence. As Jameson noted, the late capitalist condition is marked by a “dedifferentiation of fields” (Jameson, 1998, p. 73) such that the once perceived—but never in actuality realized—clear distinctions between cultural, political, economic, and even spiritual life have become blurred. This is evident within a contemporary US context liberally punctuated by the presence of corporatized universities, market-driven public health initiatives, commercially driven religious institutions, and even faith guided politics. Sport—whether acknowledged or not—has long been subject to such sectoral indivisibility:

the processes involved in the formation of modern sport were not just *disciplinary*, they also simultaneously worked to *commodify* sport. Just as the standardization of sport according to the regulation of time, space and conduct, provided a method of social control through the regulation of popular culture, it also produced a spectacle that could be sold to spectators through admission fees. In this way sport was part of a broader process of commercialisation of popular culture from the end of the nineteenth century. (Brookes, 2002, p. 9)

The social, political, and economic forces of industrialization clearly aided and abetted the mass industrialization of sport culture, just as media- and information-based post-industrial forces have facilitated sport's post-industrialization. However, although regularly used to describe popular music, film, television, and fashion

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sectors, sport has rarely been identified or addressed as a culture industry. This is most perplexing since, perhaps more than anything else, within today's mass media driven economy, professional sport organizations are "brazenly commercial enterprises, that make no pretense as to the paramount importance of delivering *entertaining* products designed to maximize profit margins" (Andrews, 2001, p. 154, italics added).

Contemporary sport culture routinely exudes the "profit making" focus and "rationalized organizational procedures" exhibited by the more readily accepted forms of industrialized mass culture (Negus, 1997, p. 77). If popularity is any indication, then certainly sport can be considered a legitimate culture industry, in that it represents a lucrative site for the accumulation of capital via the manufacture of popular practices and pleasures for mass audiences. Moreover, as Bell and Campbell noted, "Its drama, its personalities and its worldwide appeal mean sport is the new Hollywood" (Bell & Campbell, 1999, p. 22). In all likelihood, this observation is even more insightful than the author's original intention. Not only has sport matched Hollywood in terms of its cultural and economic influence as a "dream factory" for the consuming masses (Powdermaker, 1950), like the film industry during the 1930s and 1940s; sport in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries could be considered the emblematic cultural industry of its time.

In his informative overview, Hesmondhalgh (2002) posits sport at the periphery of the core culture industries (advertising, broadcast media, film, Internet, music, and various forms of publishing). He precludes live sport contests and events (whether consumed *in situ* or via media broadcasts) from membership of this core group due to their innately unpredictable character, which distances them from the highly regulative and predictive practices of truly industrialized mass cultural production. Far from being designed and produced for maximum entertainment, and thereby maximum revenue generation, sport is "fundamentally competitive, whereas symbol making isn't. Texts tend to be more scripted or scored than sport, which is essentially improvised around a set of competitive rules" (Hesmondhalgh, 2002, p. 13). Evidently, such thinking fails to consider the manner in which sport has been transformed by the dictates of a corporate capitalist order propelled by commercial media. This is most graphically illustrated in the conclusive conflation of sporting and mass mediated entertainment universes in the past few decades:

There was a time when the thought of comparing professional wrestling and the NFL, NBA, or major college sporting events was unthinkable. The lines of distinction were simply too clear. Wrestling was staged. Rivalries were created then hyped. What transpired outside of the ring was every bit a part of the show as what went on in it. It was entertainment pure and simple. *Real* sports were something entirely different. They were serious. It was the game that mattered. But there is little difference between today's professional, and increasingly, college sporting events and an ECW or WWF event. . . . To describe an NBA or NFL game or the Final Four as a "sporting event" is no longer accurate. These events are entertainment extravaganzas, subject to all the promotional and marketing gimmicks of a three ring circus. . . . Today,

sport is packaged, merchandised, and marketed as entertainment. It is more about money, television ratings, advertising rates, and corporate sky boxes than it is about sport. (Gerdy, 2002, pp. 25, 26)

While romanticizing sport's "real" past, Gerdy's characterization of "sportainment society" (2002, p. 30) nonetheless points to the "seductively consumerist union of commerce, sport and television" (Rowe, 1996, p. 566) that has come to dominate, and indeed define, contemporary sport culture.

The fusion of sport and entertainment domains is, according to Hall (2002), a logical convergence derived from sport's evolution into a commercial product operating within the highly competitive leisure marketplace, and the entertainment economy's perpetual need to harness the emotions (and discretionary incomes) of the consuming masses:

Sport alone is no longer the opiate of the masses. Professional sports have responded with their interpretation of market demands and the competition they face for the audience's attention and money. That response is "sportainment"—the merging of sport and entertainment.

Sportainment is a marketplace reaction to increasing popular demand for greater human excellence and more escape plus the desire spectators have to feel the experience. Professional sport can no longer hold its audience with promises of greater human accomplishments, and entertainment has no new escape or feeling. Sportainment is the combined result of separate realities that no longer meet our audiences' expectations. (Hall, 2002, p. 23)

Hence, sportainment: "where athletic performance is merely an element used to give a sense of 'real-life drama' to staged spectacle. It is the equivalent of a TV movie that purports to be 'based on a true story'" (Lipsyte, 1996, p. 10). Sportainment has become both the anticipated form and the intended corollary of mass mediated sport spectacularization.

The blurring of sport and entertainment economies reached its apogee—or, as some suggested, its nadir—with the fleeting presence of an upstart 8-team professional football league, the XFL, on US television screens in the spring of 2001:

It wasn't the Xtreme Football League or the X-rated Football League, although those were dual implications of the ubiquitous twenty-fourth letter, which the American public had come to recognize as the default signpost for "aggressive." No, this was just XFL. (Forrest, 2002, p. 9)

While only in operation for a single season, this innovatively structured and produced professional football league provided an exaggerated, but nonetheless illuminating, statement on the forces and relationships underlying the sportainment phenomenon. Rather than an ephemeral and inconsequential sporting anomaly, as some chided (Fendrich, 2001c; Forrest, 2002; McNulty, 2001), the XFL represents a fertile site for examining the commercial media production values which have, arguably, become the principal motor (to use a metaphor drawn from popular economic

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rhetoric) for professional sport's development in general. For, as Anderson forewarned in regard to the XFL's television coverage, "don't think you're watching football. You're just watching programming" (Anderson, 2001, p. D1).

Born of the creative minds of the WWF (World Wrestling Federation, since renamed World Wrestling Entertainment) professional wrestling empire, and largely facilitated through the broadcast and financial endorsement of the NBC television network, the XFL was ostensibly a radical morphing of hyper-dramatized production values and sporting content. According to Brookes, the XFL "used many of the presentational methods familiar from wrestling (building up soap opera storylines around interpersonal conflicts, etc.), while at the same time maintaining the integrity of the sport" (2002, p. 13). The contentiousness of Brookes' last point aside for the present, the XFL clearly can only be understood as an ultimately misguided outgrowth of the WWF's expansionist impulses.

Up until the mid-1980s, professional wrestling in the US was comprised of a loose aggregate of regionally bounded wrestling associations, many of which produced popular television programming for local affiliates. As such, the sport was characterized by a fragmented regionality that, while holding considerable local resonance, effectively limited the WWF's geographic reach. On acquiring the WWF from his father in 1983, Vince McMahon Jr. embarked on an ambitious growth strategy for both his organization and professional wrestling in general. At the forefront of McMahon's expansionist agenda was the acquisition of competing professional wrestling organizations. Seduced by the WWF's acquisitional pull, the 20 regional promoters operating in 1984 had shrunk to fewer than 5 in 1989 (Assael & Mooneyham, 2002). In buying out their main competitors, the WWF forged an effective monopoly within the professional wrestling industry and thereby gained control over a widening network of venues and television markets. In effect, McMahon's "take-no-prisoners business style" (Zaleski et al., 2002, p. 44) resulted in the nationalization of the WWF. In taking his version of professional wrestling to a national (and, ultimately, a global) audience, McMahon stirred the interest of corporate advertisers seeking to engage particular youth and male consumer demographics. Thus, the WWF benefited from significant increases in advertising revenue, which McMahon subsequently reinvested into elevating the production values of WWF programming in order to produce the "best television product," through which it came to dominate the professional wrestling industry (Sheldon Goldberg, quoted in *Bodyslam!*).

During the 1980s the WWF also benefited from, and indeed helped to nurture, the expanding cable television universe. While the development of pay and cable television began during the 1950s (Mullen, 1999), deregulation during the Reagan administration permitted extensive growth within this media sector. The maturation of the cable medium brought with it a need for a broadening range of content that could be offered across the platform's ever-expanding array of channels (Segal, 1994). As a result, emerging cable outlets were soon in need of inexpensive content that could, nonetheless, draw viewers and attract relatively high ratings, something that sport was seen to provide. Cable thus offered the necessary growth me-

dium for the WWF to infiltrate American homes, while wrestling provided cable television with commercially viable content around which they could build their network brands. According to Eric Bischoff, onetime president of erstwhile WWF/WWE rival World Championship Wrestling (WCW) and professional wrestling personality:

God bless cable television . . . that's all I can say. I might be doing something else for a living right now if it wasn't for cable. When cable was growing and expanding, wrestling was one of the things that really helped cable gain an audience. (Quoted in *Body slam!*).

A further mass-media relationship which paid dividends for the WWF was the creation of *Saturday Night Main Event*, a wrestling program developed during the late-1980s for the NBC network. Rather than air re-runs of the popular sketch-comedy *Saturday Night Live*, NBC executive Dick Ebersol chose to fill *SNL*'s time slot with the WWF on a tri-weekly basis. *Saturday Night Main Event* soon became the centerpiece of the WWF's cable and network programming, with many of the more-marketed storylines transpiring during the NBC broadcasts. Moreover, the show's ratings success, and the relationship developed between the organizations' executives, laid the groundwork for the financial and creative collaboration between the WWF and NBC that spawned the XFL (Forrest, 2002).

Despite increases in attendance, viewership, and revenue generation during the 1990s, the WWF steadily began to face increasing criticism over the scripted, non-authentic nature of its core product, the wrestling spectacle. Throughout the 1980s, the league had been averse to admitting that the wrestling was scripted. Still, the more popular wrestlers of the era were widely acknowledged to be the better actors and personalities rather than the more skilled athletes (Webley, 1986). During the 1990s, however, McMahon and his wrestlers became increasingly willing to admit that the wrestling under their name was indeed simulated. As McMahon now trumpets: "We were the first promoters to say that this is not a sport; never has been a sport. It's really entertainment. It's sports entertainment" (quoted in *Body slam!*). The WWF's newfound openness on the issue of sporting inauthenticity signaled the beginning of a shift in promotional emphasis; that is, the WWF had moved away from accentuating sporting elements in favor of producing ever more entertaining spectacles. As a result, by the end of the 1990s, the WWF had become "one of the most powerful and influential entertainment companies in existence" (Rider, 2000, p. 8D), generating \$356.7 million in annual sales, with yearly profits greater than \$70 million (Brady, 2000). Most of this money was a result of widespread merchandising and sales from the corporation's various live, cable, and pay-per-view events. In an ironic twist, the WWF was recently forced to change its name to World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE). The change—mandated after a successful lawsuit filed by the similarly acronymed World Wildlife Fund—was, however, deemed a positive opportunity by the organization's executives (Finnigin, 2002). As Linda McMahon, Vince McMahon Jr.'s wife and the current CEO of WWE, stated: "Our new

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name puts the emphasis on the ‘E’ for entertainment, what our company does best” (Finnigin, 2002, p. 12).

The XFL emerged from the WWF empire at a time when the company’s fiscal and cultural status had scaled new heights and penetrated new markets, making it one of the world’s leading sports-entertainment corporations (Atkinson, 2002). By the end of 2000, the WWF’s stock was trading at a high; the WWF brand was expanding through new ventures such as a just-opened restaurant in New York’s Times Square; and the cable television ratings for WWF programming were at a peak. While company boss McMahon had always expressed an interest in entering the football business, various obstructions had continually precluded these aspirations being realized (he made unsuccessful attempts to buy the Canadian Football League and an NFL franchise). The XFL, however, provided McMahon with another vehicle for advancing his successful, if formulaic, approach to the production, delivery, and marketing of *sports entertainment*. In doing so, he could augment the close relationship between the WWF and the demographic that comprised the primary market for both professional wrestling and the NFL. The intention was to draw young adult males away from the NFL to the WWF, through a football forum, the XFL, which pointed to the staid irrelevance of the NFL.

Following a press conference on February 3, 2000, announcing the creation of the XFL, McMahon received a reaffirming phone call from Dick Ebersol, the head of NBC Sports. In it he proclaimed, “Vince, don’t do anything TV-wise until we talk” (Heath, 2000, p. D01). For McMahon, this signaled the resurrection of a crucial relationship between the WWF and the network that had vaulted his organization into the upper echelons of America’s most powerful entertainment entities. The renewal of their partnership presented mutually beneficial and timely opportunities for each organization. NBC’s involvement gave the XFL the financial backing to pursue the personnel, property, and advertising necessary to start the league. While the WWF invested roughly \$110 million in the new league, Ebersol and NBC Sports provided an estimated additional \$100 million dollars over the (anticipated) first two years of the XFL’s existence, “chump change compared with the annual \$150 to \$200 million in losses the network would incur if it were airing NFL games” (Manly, 2001, p. E8). Conversely, NBC eagerly jumped on board with ambitions of regaining a generationally engaging football product following the loss of pivotal NFL television rights to rival networks FOX, ABC, and CBS in 1997 (Stewart, 2000). In this way, NBC’s investment in the XFL was prompted by the same motivations underpinning their inauguration of the Gravity Games as an alternative to the NFL. Though referring to the Gravity Games, Ruibal (1999) identifies NBC’s motivation for investing in the XFL:

Instead of running dead air or Lassie reruns, the Peacock Network is attacking the soft underbelly of the NFL: boys ages 10 to 17. Some of them don’t care about the NFL—yet. They like football when they play it on a video game, but their favorite TV sport is pro wrestling. . . . That demographic niche also happens to be the Holy Grail of marketing: Snickers-munching, Pringles-crunching, Gatorade-sucking, acne-wary consumers who have yet to form life-long brand preferences. (Ruibal, 1999, p. 12C)

Hence, like the WWE, NBC sought to question the relevance of the NFL spectacle to the male youth and young adult markets, and thereby undermine the ratings and profits of rival networks, through advancing programming with values and aesthetics that seemed to clash with the sporting mainstream.

The primary goal of the XFL business plan was to achieve at least a 4.5 rating for NBC's primetime Saturday night slot during the spring of 2001 (Cafardo, 2000). Although modest, such ratings would ensure the financial stability necessary to continue league operations during the inaugural season. The initial response was favorable beyond expectations, as the XFL's debut broadcast on NBC drew an unexpectedly high overnight rating of 9.5 with a 17 share. A rating of 10.2 for men 18 to 34 was better than the 9.5 average for ABC's *Monday Night Football* during the previous NFL season, and better than the 8.2 rating garnered by Major League Baseball's World Series on the Fox Network ("54 million watch XFL," 2001). Not only did the program win the time slot, but viewers tuned in at twice the rate XFL and NBC executives had hoped for ("Ratings for XFL plummet," 2001). NBC's cable broadcast partners were equally successful. Cable networks TNN and UPN had joined the broadcasting line-up in late 2000, giving the league three televisual platforms for delivering their product (Doyle, 2001). UPN's first telecast drew a high rating of 3.1, and TNN's first XFL game drew an equally impressive 2.4 ("XFL helps UPN ratings surge," 2001).

With the conjoined cultural appeal of football and professional wrestling as a selling point, the XFL seemed destined to break the cycle of failed challenges to the NFL American football monopoly. However, the morphing of WWE-style marketing with American football's mass appeal, under the direction of NBC producers, created a skeptical response from many commentators even before the league started play. Most of the critiques were directed at new rules conjured up by McMahon and NBC, the overtly sexual sideshow of XFL cheerleaders, and the personalities directly and indirectly associated with NBC telecasts. Control over the XFL was essentially divided between McMahon and the WWE, NBC Sports, and Ebersol's production crew. While broadcast logistics were largely left to Ebersol and NBC, McMahon and the WWE were responsible for shaping the structure of the league (including decisions on team location and names: Birmingham Thunderbolts, Chicago Enforcers, Las Vegas Outlaws, Los Angeles Xtreme, Memphis Maniax, New York-New Jersey Hitmen, Orlando Rage, and the San Jose Demons); formulating suitably modified rules of the game; creating the personalities nurtured within and through game broadcasts; and advancing a league-wide mantra of the importance of on-site entertainment. It was hardly surprising, therefore, that the league's in-stadium aesthetic closely resembled that of the WWE. Certainly parallels between the XFL and WWE were intentional, as XFL Executive Vice President Billy Hicks stated before the start of league play:

ticket holders in stadiums would see a display that includes pyrotechnics, loud music, and big video screens—just like the WWE. On the tube, viewers will get all that plus video clips about the players and cheerleaders, also shades of the WWE (Reeves, 2000).

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On-site, the XFL adhered to the pre-established models set forth by the WWF. At the same time, Ebersol and NBC strived to deploy the latest broadcast technologies to ensure that the XFL would be “football like you’ve never seen it. With microphones all over the field, cameras peeking into huddles, and interviews with players right after a big run or a sack, the new league aim[ed] to take TV viewers where they [had not] gone before” (Fendrich, 2001a). NBC’s broadcast method hence both contributed to, and was shaped by, the XFL’s overt “sportainment” countenance. Prying camera narratives were only one production element contributing to the visceral voyeurism of the XFL experience. Again echoing the WWF, fan involvement was a core component of the XFL entertainment package. As McMahon himself alluded, “The NFL has forgotten about the fans. What we’re doing is respecting the fans, giving them more than their money’s worth and bringing them closer to the game” (Fisher, 2001, p. B1). Indeed, the centrality of the fan experience—both live and televisual—in shaping XFL production values was underscored by the importance of audience involvement. As the Marketing Manager for the Memphis Maniax (personal communication) stated, “Similar to what the WWF does with their live events, we want the crowd to feel as though they are part of the show.”

Despite the seemingly suffocating presence of the NFL, XFL executives held fast to the notion that there was room in the American sport/entertainment marketplace for a new professional football league. As league president Basil Devito stated, “It’s simple. Nobody owns it. Nobody owns football” (quoted in Gano, 2000, p. 1). League executives made a concerted effort to suggest the XFL as the “anti-NFL” (Jenkins, 2000) by integrating rule changes, seemingly taboo sexual content, innovative camera angles, and “involved” narrative during live games and telecasts. Both functionally and symbolically, Vince McMahon and other executives from the XFL took great measures to position the emerging league against the existing one. NBC Sports Chairman Ebersol explained in January 2001, “Right now we are selling the differences between us and traditional football. We’re tinkering with the game and trying to get some of the duller elements out” (quoted in “XFL on TV aims to be different,” 2001, p. 3D). Though often disparaging in the comparisons, the media certainly recognized the differences. Sportswriter Thomas Heath described the XFL as the “Un-FL, featuring fewer rules, less choreography, no superstars but attitude to spare” (2001, p. D1). Certainly, on the field, XFL promoters promised a game that was faster, harder hitting and more viewer-friendly than the NFL (Reeves, 2000). Meanwhile, NBC promised a televisual experience unlike anything previously offered in American football: “cameras in the locker rooms at half time, microphones on the sideline, cozy cheerleaders, and [Minnesota governor and former WWF wrestler] Jesse Ventura . . . as the tasteless TV analyst” (Anderson, 2001, p. D1). The in-stadium, television-friendly spectacle that McMahon had created featured player introductions, sideline interviews during play, pyrotechnics galore, the integration of personalities from the WWF, and inordinate coverage of the XFL cheerleaders, all of which occupied at least equal billing to football content itself (Forrest, 2002). To this end, one commentator

argued, "football has little to do with the made-for-TV XFL, which is more about provocatively clad cheerleaders and trash-talk than touchdowns and tackles. The action on the field was little more than a sideshow" (McNulty, 2001, p. C6). A further report succinctly evinced the WWF edict infiltrating the XFL by describing NBC's XFL telecasts as "the perfect marriage between sex and violence . . . you're pretty much on the playing field with these pumped-up bozos and their bimbo mascots" (Robbins-Mullin, 2001, p. B3).

A final component of the XFL spectacle, also modeled after the WWF, was the fabrication of celebrity figures as an integral part of NBC's XFL broadcasts. Over the past two decades, the WWF brand and its pantheon of "superstars," have emerged as serious commercial entities within both the American sporting and entertainment landscapes. As testament to the strength of the WWF brand: two of its "celebrities" have each produced *New York Times* best-selling autobiographies; WWF superstar The Rock, despite minimal cinematic experience, has crafted a moderately successful (as measured in terms of box office revenue) film career; and, when a WWF personality is on the cover of *TV Guide*, copies reportedly "fly off newsstands so fast they have to be reordered" (Stoeltje, 1999, p. 1). Seeking to manufacture its own constellation of celebrity sub-brands, the XFL crudely created characters like "Touchdown" Tommy Maddox and Rod "He Hate Me" Smart and disseminated them through television and print promotions. This process of instant celebritization was necessary, since the players had little or no recognition among the general public, with the exception of a few high-profile figures who had underperformed in the NFL (e.g., former Heisman Trophy winner Rashaan Salaam). Typically, XFL participants were drawn from the anonymous ranks of undrafted college, former NFL, CFL, or Arena League players (Smart, who became the league's most recognizable [anti-]hero in the guise of "He Hate Me" was an undrafted college player from Western Kentucky). McMahon's choice of personalities to narrate XFL action also exemplified his commitment to bringing wrestling values and approaches to a football product. Taped scenes and live appearances of WWF "superstars" such as The Rock and "Stone Cold" Steve Austin became important elements of XFL broadcasts, and the XFL employed the services of WWF personalities such as Ventura, Jim Ross, and Jerry "The King" Lawler in further attempts to appeal to the wrestling-oriented consumer (Forrest, 2002).

Superficially, the XFL seemed a more than adept unification of the perceived strengths of the NFL—violence, warlike combat, and visceral intensity—and the spectacular essence of the WWF—violence, hyper-masculinity, and anti-tradition insolence (c.f. Atkinson, 2002; Trujillo, 1995). As one journalist argued prior to the start of play, the new league would succeed because "America loves football and young America loves wrestling" (Cafardo, 2000, p. C8). However, by the XFL's second week, the NBC share had fallen to 4.6, as more than half of the viewers from the first game switched over or switched off ("Ratings for XFL plummet," 2001). Decreasing viewership during the course of each game signaled further bad news: as in the first week, each 30-minute measure indicated more and more viewers were

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changing the channel (Fendrich, 2001b, 2001c). In week three, the drop-off was significant as the NBC share fell to 3.1 (Fendrich, 2001d). Bob Reardon, the XFL's Vice President of Sales, stated that, owing to the dismal ratings, the league was going to have to give away free advertising for the week 5 broadcast (Westhead, 2001). NBC's cable partners, UPN and TNN, were experiencing the same rate of decline in viewers, and by the end of the season, ratings had reached abysmal lows on all three networks ("XFL ratings falling fast," 2001). The XFL's end-of-season championship game drew a Nielsen rating of just 2.1, almost half the rating expected by McMahon and Ebersol (Forrest, 2002). It was no surprise, then, that shortly after the game Ebersol and McMahon decided to cut their losses and disband the league.

After only one season and only three months of existence, the XFL was a financial and public failure for both the WWF and NBC. The WWF's stock, once trading at almost \$35 per share, fell well below half that upon announcement of the league's closure (Forrest, 2002). Further, the WWF and NBC were widely ridiculed in the press after the league's demise. As one reporter put it, the league failed because it was made up of "everything a sports league should not be, drawn up on a marketing man's story board with no respect whatsoever for the fan, the game or the integrity of sport" (Todd, 2000, p. F6). Beyond scathing critiques levied by those in the media, however, questions about the league's downfall remained unanswered. Had the new league failed to reach the target, the young male demographic? Had McMahon and Ebersol overestimated their formulaic approach to producing mediated sport? Perhaps most significantly, is the NFL's stronghold over the football-consuming populace so tight that even the injection of WWF-style sensationalized hyper-marketing is not enough to render a viable football alternative?

Cursory observation suggests that the XFL did indeed isolate its core wrestling audience, males aged 18–34 (Fendrich, 2001c). Perhaps it lacked the carefully scripted dramatic and aesthetic elements of wrestling, or maybe, despite the innovations, the XFL too closely resembled an athletically inferior version of the NFL. Perhaps more significant, however, is the contention that the XFL's failure was in larger part owing to its inability to compete with an evolved NFL *spectacle*, already deeply entrenched in the American popular sporting imaginary. At the same time, the cultural cache of the WWF brand paradoxically served to further undermine the XFL. Thus, not only did the XFL as a popular cultural commodity fail to present the quality of football demanded by a sport savvy American consuming populace, it fell short of the extreme "attitude" consumers have come to expect from the WWF. The NFL represents the dominant model of contemporary corporate football; hence, it would be difficult for the XFL to penetrate, or deviate from, the pre-established archetype. Ironically, the WWF itself had set the standards for corporatized rebellion against the sporting mainstream: the core wrestling audience that the XFL coveted came with expectations of carefully manufactured sensationalized entertainment. Thus, in contrast to those who have pointed to the XFL's *over-emphasis* on entertainment as reason for its failure (cf. Anderson, 2001), it is, arguably, more accurate to say that the XFL didn't go *far enough* in accentuating

production values over sporting content. If the WWF represented the dominant model, then ironically the XFL may have fallen victim to the heightened audience expectations already set in place by its primary investor.

In conclusion, the league did not represent a *failed experiment* with regard to either its “sportainment” sensibility or hyper-commercialized structure. The XFL was not fundamentally different from other professional leagues in North America, or, indeed, globally. This is nowhere more evident than in comparisons with the NFL. While the XFL was supposedly the anti-NFL, the two leagues demonstrated more similarities than differences. As Wade (2001, D4) proclaimed during the first week of the XFL: “Yes, look. And see what [NFL Commissioner] Paul Tagliabue doesn’t want you to see. After just one weekend, it’s clear the XFL and NFL are more alike than different.” While professional football has always possessed something that wrestling has generally lacked—the popular perception of sporting authenticity—in recent years wrestling’s over-the-top production and marketing values have become the envy of professional football executives. Forrest (2002) argues that it was the perceived need to enhance and recreate its telecasts that led to the ABC network’s hiring of comedian Dennis Miller, and more recently colorful ex-coach John Madden, for its pivotal *Monday Night Football* broadcasts (strategies which could not prevent the demise, in the face of steadily falling ratings, of primetime network *Monday Night Football* coverage as announced by its shift to the ESPN cable outlet from the 2006 season onwards). Across the game’s expansive television landscape which ranges from coverage on CBS, NBC, Fox, and ESPN networks, to the NFL channel, and NFL Sunday Ticket packages on DirecTV (the generative sum of which, beginning in 2006, will approach \$3.74 billion per year), the league has become ever more consciously designed, promoted, and delivered as ratings-driven entertainment. Thus, we have seen an increased emphasis on a visceral, violent, voyeurism (referee-viewpoint cameras, on-player microphones); the lionizing of hyper-masculine protagonists (Warren Sapp, Brett Favre, Ray Lewis); the involvement of highly objectified female figures in studio and sideline settings (Melissa Stark, Lisa Guerrero, Michelle Tafoya on ABC, Bonnie Bernstein on CBS); the fostering of celebrityhood both on and off the field (Dennis Miller, John Madden); the highlighting of particular player performances (in shows like Fox’s *Under the Helmet*, and *Monday Night Football*’s puerile “You’ve Been Sacked” half-time segment). With this combination of features, the NFL could almost top the XFL.

As the latter examples suggest, the XFL was hardly unique in its blurring of popular cultural realms. Further, critiques of the XFL’s explicit, profit-driven production values—which often forsook the on-field action—seem hypocritical given the state of the NFL and contemporary sport in general. While league executives were certainly more overt in their identification of the XFL’s sportainment ethos—McMahon himself was quoted as saying “I don’t care how [the fans] are entertained” (Morgan, 2001, p. D1)—to denounce the XFL as programming as opposed to sport (Anderson, 2001, p. D1) seems naïve if one pays closer scrutiny to any recent NFL broadcast. As journalist Juan Rodriguez so succinctly put it in his sardonic reply to coverage of the XFL in the popular press:

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Take Bob Ryan of the Boston Globe. . . . He leveled the league for being “all about hits and leaving people crumpled on the ground.” What does this make the NFL and its ace color man, John Madden, whose trademark word is “Boom!”? (Rodriguez, 2001, p. 61).

While, like professional wrestling, the XFL lacked the perception of authenticity, its production values have been paralleled within professional football, if not readily appropriated and deployed by pro-football executives. The XFL’s business plan may have been to combine the “cultural standards of professional wrestling” with the “basest qualities of the NFL” (Bisher, 2001, p. 3D), but it would appear that the NFL itself had already been heading down the same path with a long-established if not always loyal audience already in tow. Certainly the NFL has been more covert in its conflation of sport and entertainment—an implicit rather than explicit blurring of sport, culture, and economics—the XFL nonetheless lies somewhere on the same continuum: although the XFL may be a more highly evolved form, the NFL must also be considered a form of sportainment.

Rather than being an ingenious (if ingenuous) marker of the future of football, the XFL was merely symptomatic of broader trends within the media-sport nexus and popular culture more generally. In the XFL, converging corporate and cultural interests manifest themselves in an institutional conglomeration whose façade only loosely resembled sport in its traditional guise. That the NFL now so closely resembles the XFL suggests modern sport has indeed reached a point of “total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives” (Fukuyama, 1989, p. 3) to the sport-media-entertainment complex which so explicitly showed itself in the now departed football league. While it may not have lasted long on the cultural landscape, the XFL was a potent indication that we should not overlook the economic, technological, and political forces that come together to structure our experiences of contemporary sport culture. Viewers may have turned away from the XFL because it, too explicitly and unashamedly, blurred the lines between melodrama and sport, but the veneer of sporting authenticity that envelops leagues such as the NFL may be crumbling. Perhaps sport, to paraphrase Postman (1985), is in danger of amusing itself and us to death? That’s sportainment!