During your three decades with the NFL, what would you consider the important factors that have led to the NFL having the most valuable television contract of the major sport leagues?

There are various ingredients that have come together to make the NFL so popular on TV. Football, as a sport, is TV friendly with natural breaks—unlike soccer for example—for commercials plus a playing calendar advantageous to attract viewers. The regular season begins in the fall and continues through the depth of winter when more folks are inside their homes with a TV set or two nearby. The NFL season also runs parallel with the advertiser’s calendar beginning with “Back to School” and ending with Christmas and New Year’s. The other major factor is simply a very good product. And the key to the product is competitive balance made possible through a variety of rules and regulations that make it possible for any team to compete; thus, the entire fan base stays interested.

How important was and is the sharing of revenue from the broadcast contract by the teams to the quality of the product that is on the field?

Revenue sharing is the foundation of competitive balance. Without it the NFL over time would be in a more difficult position to compete for the entertainment dollar.

What role do the televised games play in growing and strengthening the NFL brand as well as growing other revenue sources (e.g., licensed product, visits to NFL.com)?

It is easy to look at the NFL’s television contracts and just see the billion dollar rights fee. Obviously those fees allow the NFL to maintain reasonable ticket prices and so on. But the other huge advantage involves the 100 million viewers each week that watch the NFL. The League in recent years has taken more advantage of these platforms to promote other NFL initiatives... from community service efforts to NFL.com to the NFL Network. The NFL as a brand has never been stronger.

Describe the league’s relationship with its broadcast partners? Is it a win-win situation? If so what makes it work?

We trust it is a win-win for both parties. The NFL delivers a reliable product week in and week out. The NFL has labor peace. The NFL offers solid demographics. I think the proof of the NFL’s value to the networks is the various media companies that want a piece of the NFL. After CBS declined to re-new a few years ago, they jumped at the opportunity to get back in at the next chance. NBC returns this season after being away. As the TV landscape changes, the NFL remains a pretty solid constant to deliver viewers.

With that in mind, what type of input does the league have in regards to the production of one of its games by a broadcast partner (e.g., content, announcers, access, views of announcers, etc.)?

Actually, we rarely get directly involved because we have to treat all five networks the same. Our contracts certainly cover certain standards that obligate the networks to deliver a high quality product. The reality is that with five networks covering our games, there naturally is going to be quality coverage because the five networks are all trying to out-do the others. And consequently NFL fans benefit.

What factors were in play that led to the decline in viewership of Monday Night Football (MNF) and what was the thought process of moving the game to ESPN? How much input did the league have in that decision?

There were probably two influencing factors regarding Monday Night Football. The most important one is that viewing options expanded over the past 20 years. In that regard, MNF simply mirrored what has happened to all over-the-air network programming. Their percentage of viewers has steadily declined. The second factor involves the decline of “so-called” team dynasties. Competitive balance, which is certainly a huge plus for the NFL, made it more difficult for teams to succeed from year-to-year. Consequently, it was more difficult to schedule one game in April that would reliably have...
a good chance of remaining attractive in November and December. Last year, the NFL owners decided that the Monday Night Football package makes more sense with ESPN. Cable has two revenue sources to help the bottom line plus ESPN plans to begin a full slate of programming each Monday afternoon from the actual site of that night’s game. They want to make Monday nights special in a different way.

No question, just your response to two names: Roone Arledge and Pete Rozelle. Specifically, their impact on the broadcasting of the sport.

Huge impact. Pete Rozelle had the vision and Roone Arledge the insight to try Monday Night Football on ABC after the other networks declined to get involved. Now you find a lot of sports programming on during prime time. They opened the door for everyone.

What has led the Super Bowl from somewhat of an exhibition game being played in front of a less than full stadium for minimal rights fees in 1967 to the major celebration of the masses as well as the major media event of the year?

I’m not sure there’s any one factor. Again, the game being played in the depth of winter for most of the nation helps. The country seems ready for a day to gather family and friends, making the date truly America’s unofficial holiday. Plus the credibility of the competition contributes. Also, the rather small number of NFL teams making the postseason allows not only for the regular season to maintain its attractiveness, but also means whichever two teams do advance to the Super Bowl deserve it.

Was there a seminal event that enabled the game to move to its iconic spot not only in sport but society (e.g., Joe Namath and Super Bowl III, the Dolphins’ perfect season), or did it evolve?

Many people go back to the 1958 NFL Championship Game as the growth point. I’d say the merger between the old NFL and the American Football League nationalized the sport at a time when TV was developing an incredible delivery system. Commissioner Rozelle getting the anti-trust exception in 1961 to collectively negotiate national TV rights was also a major factor.

What led to the increased interest and viewership in the Super Bowl around the world?

Technology advancements in delivering any media product have made the world smaller, so to speak. It will take time for the NFL to grow internationally, but the seeds have been and continue to be planted. The NFL plans more and more American Bowl games outside the US, including one in China soon. You will also see regular season games played outside our borders within the next couple of years.

Has the interest in viewership of the Super Bowl impacted viewership during the regular season overseas?

Sure. The Super Bowl is becoming a bigger and bigger event each year overseas. It is the one item that anchors any of our worldwide TV deals. The latest estimate is that nearly one billion viewers watch the Super Bowl around the world.

What precipitated the Super Bowl being viewed as an important vehicle for brands to launch their brand campaigns?

I think with so many media options available, advertisers like the idea of having a reliable vehicle to launch their campaigns. I’m intrigued by the overt competition that has developed in recent years among the agencies and advertisers to produce the most popular commercials in the Super Bowl. I never thought that type of competition would be happening on Super Bowl Sunday.

In terms of the Super Bowl being an extravaganza where is the line drawn between entertainment and sport?

The NFL basically has been successful in keeping the proper balance. We all have to remember the game is the attraction. Always has been and hopefully always will be. The entertainment around the Super Bowl is an extension of making the day special beyond just a sporting event.

The halftime show in many ways has become as big as the game. Is that a good thing or a bad thing?

It would be a bad thing if that were to happen, but I don’t think the pre-game or halftime entertainment will ever be more important than the game itself. How much does the league have to say in who will perform and what they will perform? Who has final say? What is the thought process in selecting the acts?

A whole lot more than it did a few years ago in Houston with the Janet Jackson episode. It is safe to say the NFL totally controls the content, including who performs and what is shown. The Commissioner ultimately okays the plans.

From all the Super Bowl experience, in your mind what was the finest/defining broadcast moment?

I’m not sure I have a single answer. Probably Joe Namath predicting the Jets’ upset win over Baltimore in Super Bowl III. The game itself wasn’t that well played, but the pure fact of the AFL beating the NFL started a new era. In many ways, the NFL and TV grew together after that.

How does the production and presentation of the Super Bowl game differ from a regular season NFL game?

There’s really no comparison. In the regular season the networks might have eight to 10 cameras on
Sunday afternoons up to 14 to 18 for prime time broadcasts. For the Super Bowl, the telecasting network will use 30 or more cameras. Fox recently had small cameras embedded in the Super Bowl field to capture a particular shot, for example. For the Super Bowl, the telecasting network starts its pre-game show around 2 p.m. in the afternoon, compared to the regular season when NFL pre-game programs start an hour or so before.

How have the broadcast partners viewed the NFL Network? Is it viewed as competition or does it create more interest and ultimately viewership in the games for the weekend?

Hopefully the other networks view the NFL Network as a channel devoted to building viewership for their own games’ telecasts. In fact, there have been several shows on the NFL Network that have included announcers from the other rights-holders.

Is it in the NFL’s future plans to produce its own games for television?

The NFL Network begins producing its own games in 2006 with two preseason games and then late-season Thursday and Saturday night games as a lead-in to the postseason.

When you started did you ever think there would be the day that a coach’s press conference would be shown in entirety live? Is the amount of access the fans have to information through the media good?

Over the past 36 years, I’ve seen a lot things come about that I would have never envisioned. For one, I would never have guessed that the NFL would have cameras hovering over the field of play like we do now with Skycam and Cable cam. The viewer benefits and that helps everyone. There is more access to coaches’ press conferences. If there wasn’t the demand for such coverage it wouldn’t continue. Even though the NFL is national in scope we can never forget that the NFL is really a series of local attractions. Most people in western New York follow the Buffalo Bills; in Tennessee, the Titans and so on. I still find it remarkable that NFL game telecasts are regularly the highest rated local programs in the vast majority of NFL markets.

Beyond the viewership of games, do the networks that pay the rights fees for the NFL see a return on its investment?

They must or they wouldn’t compete for the rights. For example, I know the importance each network places on airing its own promos during a game. So they use the NFL to gain viewers and to add advertiser dollars for their other shows.

Does the league control or offer advice to teams who have moved in direction of doing in-house production of coaches shows, etc.?

We help when we can, but local programming is best left to those who know their own markets. Consequently, the teams make their own decisions on what’s best for them regarding coaches’ shows, team shows, etc.

What is the future of sport broadcasting for sport leagues (e.g., in-house production webcasts)?

Who knows for sure. The variety of delivery opportunities will expand over time. Some will work and some will fail. I do believe the NFL will stay on over-the-air TV for the majority of its games for the immediate future. Over-the-air networks still deliver the dollars plus remain probably the best avenues to maintain a national following. They have been the life blood of the NFL TV relationship, and I would guess they will continue to be for quite some time.

Interview conducted by Dr. Matthew Robinson, University of Delaware