

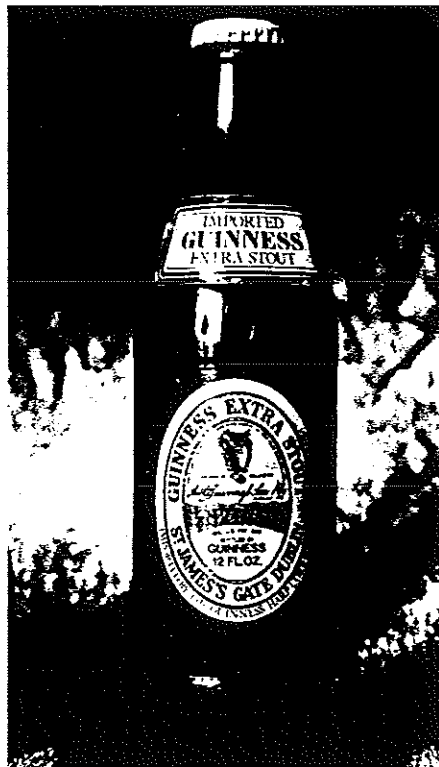
VERSUS, February, 1985

Super Bowl Beyond the Sea

Eleven o'clock p.m. The cellar of a Victorian mansion-turned-college-residence-hall. Leeds, West Yorkshire, England. The President of the United States is having some difficulty somewhere in California flipping a coin, and a throng of about fifty blokes in the cellar are watching him and heaping a certain amount of contumely.

It's almost Monday morning here, but by God it's Super Sunday. For the third year in a row the great American ritual is being beamed live across the ocean. Britons are treated to an hour of NFL highlights every Sunday night, but this is the one game per year that they can watch in its entirety. In a nation that values its contact sports (and, in fact, has recently invented a new one called Gang Warfare, played in the stands during soccer matches), American football has caught on in a hurry.

The gentlemen in the cellar demonstrate a fairly high level of comprehension regarding the game — generally. They're not used to any stoppages of action, and pauses bring forth scattered cries of "Get on with it!" The independent British network doesn't seem to expect so many breaks either, as they have only four commercials to run, two for fast cars and two for beer. At least their mar-



keting department has learned from the Americans.

The British network's announcing team is comprised of a stammering Scot and a loquacious London disc-jockey, neither of whom has even seen a football game before. An American of some sort is offering a

bland and laconic analysis of each touchdown: "That was a trap play to the wide side. As you can see on the replay, the guard was pulling and the tight end hooked in on the strong-side linebacker. That was almost a crackback block. Back to you, Ian." A puzzled silence descends over the cellar.

And now it is halftime. The British announcers have given way to Dandy Don Meredith and Frank Gifford. Meredith sings something about what a humdinger of a halftime show we got comin' up. The gentlemen in the cellar ignore the TV; a minority are gloating vociferously. Exuberant betting seems to have taken place, but a prevalence of sentiment seems to be in Miami's favor, and Miami is getting stomped. A redistribution of wealth seems to be in the offing.

A Hollywood soundstage has appeared on the field, and a few are starting to notice it. Big Brother's disembodied voice is coming over the stadium loudspeaker with a mellifluous sermon about The Realization of Dreams and The American Way. A lot of music has started up. A person dressed entirely in white is making sweeping but ambiguous gestures atop the soundstage. There are a few chuckles heard from the audience

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across the Atlantic.

"But only in a land where freedom and liberty are possible," incants Big Brother, "can these dreams be realized." The Britons emit a collective "Hmph."

Big Brother is pouring it on a bit thick now: "Hard work, perseverance . . ." The pillars of the rugby team, two large gentlemen named Sumo and Manimal, harmonize a response: "Oh, fook off!"

Now Donny Osmond or a look-alike is performing a toothy postmortem on Frank Sinatra's vocal style.

Now a tribe of singing sequined women is making fluid Californian motions. Grunts of lusty approval from the assembled throng, and a few raised-beer-can salutes, American women being genetically superior to the species available here.

Now Marvin Gaye or a look-alike is much too obviously lip-synching "This is My Country," Yankee statist hymn.

Now thirteen original motorpowered stars are rotating in the blue field of an American flag strewn on the midfield. This is too much. This is not really happening. This is a

mixup in the satellite transmission or a collective hallucinogenic flashback of some sort.

The inhabitants of the TV room heap contumely.

I am rationalizing, thinking that things could be worse; ABC might, for instance, have assigned Howard Cosell to cover the game. I might have put money on Miami, had I not foreseen the complete breakdown of the motor-sensory portion of Dan Marino's nervous system. A couple of nearby friends, great-hearted blokes, are comforting me, giving me beer. Mercifully, the bloodletting of the second half has started.

A comforting twinge of cosmopolitan recognition sets in as the cameras pan around for a few shots of the ridiculous people in the crowd who have painted themselves in various hues as a sign of allegiance to the 49ers or of mental illness. It occurs to me that America displays these crazies only on game-days in California, whereas such individualists are all out on the streets in the United Kingdom.

The Englishmen are not yet completely comfortable with American football. Rugby and soccer are contact

sports, but one does not build up as many Newtons (as the physicists would put it) in playing those games as, say, a wide receiver does on a fly pattern. Late in Super Bowl XIX, Marino hurls a bomb toward a man streaking down the sidelines. Intended receiver and defender, both having missed the ball, roll violently off the playing field, then get up and trot back to their respective huddles. One among us finds this sequence disturbing: "'E stomped on 'is bloody face! Aren't they going to call a penalty?"

2:45 a.m. It is over. The Britons are filing out, and I offer a small prayer of thanks that they will not hang around to watch grown American men in the winner's locker room pour champagne over each other. We have a bad enough record of conspicuous consumption as it is. Someone with a responsible tone of voice is reminding us that the Warden of the Hall lives immediately upstairs and to leave quietly. Outside, an Irish accent is relieving itself on one of the Warden's weary rosebushes. There is a plaintive tone in his voice: "For two bloody years I ha' believed in Dan Marino . . ."