

## Forget football, it's Super Bowl ads that score

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For sports junkies the world over, commercial breaks mean it's time to roll off the couch to grab another beer or boil the kettle.

Not in America, on Super Bowl Sunday, an annual pageant of patriotism and commercialism canonizing athletes and American corporations.

Big game ads are as eagerly anticipated as the football itself, as companies kick-off multi-million dollar product launches with cheeky and macho spots.

Cavorting Spice Girls and Britney Spears, tear jerking parables to the American dream, divorced Duchess Sarah Ferguson, and international man of mystery Austin Powers have all had 30 seconds of Super Bowl fame since 1999.

"Audiences for Super Bowls have become as interested in the 30 minutes of ads as they are in the NFL championship game," said John Antil, professor of business administration at the University of Delaware.

Adverts are a nuisance in most places, but a survey here found 58 percent of viewers would rather miss part of the Super Bowl than the ad breaks.

Sunday's National Football League (NFL) showpiece, this year in its 40th incarnation between the Seattle Seahawks and the Pittsburgh Steelers in Detroit, is not merely the pinnacle of the hard hitting sport's season.

Top brands like Budweiser, Gillette, Ford, Pizza Hut and Sprint will use the event as a multi-million dollar shop window.

Hip hop mogul P. Diddy and martial arts idol Jackie Chan will star for Pepsi, while Leonard Nimoy boldly goes where no man has gone before with the first Super Bowl spot for Aleve, a painkiller.

Super Bowl XL is one of the dwindling number of showpieces in the new media age which can draw millions of viewers.

The game marks a rare moment of national unity, similar to Australia's Melbourne Cup horse race, or Britain's FA Cup Final.

These are difficult days for advertising, with network television viewership challenged by proliferating cable and satellite stations and the Internet.

"It makes the Super Bowl even more important than it has ever been. The Super Bowl is the only thing left that really reaches the mass audience," Antil told AFP.

Official figures put Super Bowl viewership at close to 90 million -- but since many fans watch at parties and in bars, the true figure could touch 130 million -- or nearly one in two Americans.

In a sign of the popularity of Super Bowl adverts, the NFL's cable network will this year feature 30 minute reruns of Super Bowl commercials back to back after the game.

In a departure from ads aimed at frat boy football fans, advertisers are set to temper the male bravado, and woo women -- who form just less than half of Super Bowl viewers.

Unilever has bought a spot for one of its praised commercials for "Dove" products which dumped bone-thin models for women of all shapes and sizes.

Budweiser ads, branded by some feminist groups as sexist, will reportedly cater more to female beer drinkers.

In one famous Bud spot aired for Super Bowl XXXVII, a beer drinker's fantasies came true, when his girlfriend offered to let him date both her, and her flatmate.

The National Organization for Women has lambasted past Super Bowl adverts, charging they overwhelmingly target men, and make women the butt of jokes.

Before this year's game, a poll for the Marketing to Moms coalition found that 80 percent of American mothers don't think advertisers target them during the Super Bowl -- and 85 percent wish they did.

Ads will also air in a prudish new climate, two years after pop diva Janet Jackson infamously exposed her right breast during the half-time show, in a so-called "wardrobe malfunction."

"Nipplegate" sparked national horror, and a rethink of Super Bowl smut.

Last year's ads tamed the risqué humor. This year's game is on ABC, owned by the family friendly Walt Disney Company, so outrage is unlikely.

But in a sign of the game's demographic reach, Toyota is unveiling the first Hispanic advert for its new hybrid Camry.

Super Bowl ads are a zeitgeist of American life. Spots for online brokerages and financial tools sprouted in 2000 and 2001, before the economic boom died.

In 2002, months after the September 11 attacks, Budweiser's famous Clydesdale horses bowed before a New York skyline stripped of the World Trade Center's twin towers.

Budweiser's again ran a moving spot last year, which showed US soldiers returning from war spontaneously applauded in a crowded airport. — AFP