

Sixty years of Super Bowls and one Bad Bunny

Phil Egan & Barb Swanson - January 2026

A ticket to the first Super Bowl on January 15, 1967, cost \$12. Next month, the worst seat at Levi's Stadium in Santa Clara will set you back up to \$5,000.

Many Canadians, whether fans of the Canadian Football League or not, love America's National Football League (NFL). While some Canadians might blanch at Americans' predilection for describing the game winner as "world champions", in 2024 at least 19 million of us watched Super Bowl LIX. This made us part of a global audience of 127.7 million. In America, the event has become such a cultural institution that millions have lobbied to make the Monday following the game a national holiday allowing fans and partyers to recover.

The NFL was founded in 1920 in Canton, Ohio as a league of 14 Midwestern teams. The early years were difficult. College football was far more popular than the NFL. That changed during the 1930s, at the same time as the Grey Cup era of the Sarnia Imperials. Fan interest soared through the 1950s, culminating in the so-called "Greatest Game Ever Played" in 1958 between the Colts and Giants. The competing American Football League (AFL) was founded in 1960. By 1966, the two leagues agreed to merge, leading to Super Bowl I in January 1967 between the Green Bay Packers and the Kansas City Chiefs.

The American Football "Conference" achieved respectability with the National Football Conference in Super Bowl III with Joe Namath's audacious "guaranty of Victory". Namath's New York Jets did indeed defeat the favoured Baltimore Colts. The 1970s were dominated by quarterback Terry Bradshaw's Pittsburgh Steelers and their "Steel Curtain" defense. In the same decade, Coach Tom Landry's Dallas Cowboys laid claim to the title, "America's Team".

The 1980s are remembered primarily for Coach Bill Walsh and quarterback Joe Montana. They led the San Francisco 49ers to four Super Bowl victories. In Super Bowl XX, the 1985 Chicago Bears displayed a smothering defense which is still remembered 40 years later. The Dallas Cowboys won three Super Bowls in four years during the 90s, led by Troy Aikman, Emmitt Smith and Michael Irvin. In the same decade, the Buffalo Bills emerged as a snake-bitten team, losing four straight Super Bowls.

On September 23, 2001, losing 10-3, the New England Patriots' quarterback Drew Bledsoe suffered a chest injury. From that point onwards, the NFL was dominated by his replacement: Tom Brady. Between 2001 and 2019, Brady and Coach Bill Belichick won six Super Bowls, becoming a formidable dynasty. During the past six years, the Kansas City Chiefs have emerged to win three NFL championships.

For nearly 40 years, American companies have competed for the attention of their Super Bowl viewers with memorable commercials ranging from the comical to the dramatic. It has long been a source of annoyance to Canadian viewers that we are unable to see them. This is due to a 2019 decision of the Supreme Court of Canada upholding the practice of simultaneous substitution. This ruling gives Canadian networks with exclusive rights to air the game, the ability to switch American commercials for Canadian ones. Most recently, the Buy Canadian campaign is likely to mute some of these decades-long complaints.

Super Bowl half-time shows have seen a massive transformation over the past 60 years. What began as a parade of marching bands has become a featured cultural event. This change in entertainment style famously began on January 31, 1993 during Super Bowl XXVII with a show starring megastar Michael Jackson.

Next month, Super Bowl LX's half-time show will take a deeply controversial flavour with the appearance of "Bad Bunny". Benito Antonio Martinez Ocasio is a Puerto Rican nationalist and Latino rapper -- anathema to most MAGA Republican viewers. His support of social justice, immigrant rights and LGBTQ+ causes has drawn criticism of the NFL for making Bad Bunny this year's half-time choice.

We may be locked in economic war with America, but we'll still watch, and enjoy, their big game.