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When the Super Bowl Is Closer Than the Score

By ALAN SCHWARZ

As the Super Bowl hype mounted these last two weeks, a nagging thought closed in on eager football fans like a zone-blitzing linebacker: why such anticipation for a game that is usually a blowout?

To be fair, several recent Super Bowls have stopped as many hearts as nachos in mid-munch. But memories of so many others ending with scores like 55-10 and 38-9 die hard, leaving advertisers skittish about placing advertisements in the second half and fans groaning, "Fool me XL times, shame on me."

Assessing the final score, however, is a crude and misleading way to measure a game's innate competitiveness and excitement. Looking deeper at the foundation of what makes close, thrilling games can unveil how most Super Bowls are similar to games in the regular season — in other (somewhat heretical) words, like any garden-variety N.F.L. game.

The closeness of a game is quite often disguised by the final score; a 21-17 game could have droned along at 21-3 before two late anticlimactic touchdowns, and a 24-10 game might have been a hard-fought 10-10 tie for most of the first 58 minutes. It's easy to see that closeness is linked less to the final score than to the length of time at each score differential.

This can be easily measured. Using Stats LLC scoring logs, which date to 1983, we can compile each game's average in-game score difference.

By this metric, the closest Super Bowl was not the Giants' 20-19 victory over Buffalo in 1991, when the Bills spent significant stretches ahead by 7 and 9 points (for a Closeness Factor of 175). The tightest Super Bowl was actually two years earlier, when the San Francisco 49ers beat the Cincinnati Bengals by 20-16 in a game in which they were fewer

than 4 points apart for almost 58 minutes (Closeness Factor: 87).

If we define a close game as one that places in the bottom third of this Closeness Factor, we discover that Super Bowls over all have indeed been relative blowouts. Compared with 33 percent of all games, only 23 percent of Super Bowls have been that close. Score one for the conspiracy theorists.

A fine first step, but there's a problem: their cries to the contrary, football fans don't want only close Super Bowls, they want exciting ones. (Which is more gripping, a 6-3 overtime defensive struggle or a 36-31 bacchanal whose lead bounces back and forth?) Clearly, an exciting game is one that is not only close, but also goes the extra yard by featuring many lead changes, the later in the game the better.

Cue those scoring logs again. Craig Rolling, a Stats research analyst who contributes metrics to N.F.L. broadcasts, helped build an Excitement Index based on three subjective but not unreasonable factors: Closeness Factor, total points and lead changes weighted by time remaining.

Afterward, Rolling said: "I would have expected excitement to correlate with the final margin more than it does. We know that a 14-7 game sometimes might not be as exciting as a 33-14 game, but that happened more than I thought it would."

Final Excitement Index numbers ranged from 15 to 94, the higher the better. The most exciting N.F.L. game since 1983 was Buffalo's 45-39 overtime victory over Minnesota in 2002; there were five lead swaps in the fourth quarter. The most dull was a 62-7 Jacksonville-Miami divisional playoff squeaker in the 1999 season.

And sure enough, many games decided by a touchdown or less scored considerably worse than those that zigged and zagged their way to a point margin in the teens — exactly what knowledgeable football fans would suspect.

This comprehensive Excitement Index casts the Super Bowl as — for better or worse — just another football game. Seven of the 22 Super Bowls since 1983 rated in the top third of the Excitement Index standings, exactly what one should expect; six were in the middle third and nine were in the bottom. Were randomness so evenhanded.

But wait, some quite justifiably yelp: Aren't Super Bowls between two very good, and therefore more evenly matched, teams? Shouldn't that make us expect closer and more exciting games?

As reasonable as that sounds, it turns out not to be true. Since 1983, N.F.L. games between teams of playoff caliber (with at least a 10-6 record that season) were barely more close or more exciting than if the teams had been 11-5 and 4-12.

The lesson? Despite the occasionally lopsided final scores, Super Bowls have been, on average, just as close and exciting as those on — you knew this was coming, right? — any given Sunday. Perhaps they could rename the title game the No Better or Worse Than Average Bowl. Not quite as catchy, though.

Players sense that too much is expected from Super Bowls, blanching at the hype and hysteria. Duane Thomas of the Dallas Cowboys did so back in 1971, long before the Super Bowl gained its reputation as anything but. "If it's 'the ultimate,'" he told Newsweek, "how come they're playing it again next year?"