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OP-EDS, SUPER BOWL

## Op-Ed: 'Svper Bowl Svnday' – Our Invented Ancient Tradition

By Kiran Aditham on February 3, 2012 11:03 AM



Our Super Bowl series continues as we top the week off with a piece from [John Maxham](#), who has spent the past two years as partner, ECD at Seattle's own Cole & Weber United.

As we get ready to watch the Super Bowl and, of course, dissect the ads that go along with it, I'd like to call attention to a subtle form of marketing that is (almost) as old as the big game itself. Because when we gather together on Sunday, beers in hands, remotes at the ready, we will be sitting down to watch Super Bowl XLVI, not Super Bowl 46.

The use of Roman numerals in Super Bowl titles has become a widely accepted, if not often discussed part of the season finale. It dates back to Super Bowl 5, excuse me, Super Bowl V, when the championship game was a relatively new concoction.

According to football lore, Kansas City Chiefs owner and AFL co-founder, [Lamar Hunt](#), first came up with the numbering idea. It's worth noting that it was also Hunt who thought up the infectiously catchy and bombastic name, "Super Bowl" to crown the big game. He did these things to make something that was relatively new and without tradition seem more storied and important. I'm sure a lot of people in our line of work can appreciate having to deliver on that brief.

So how does one infuse an upstart entertainment event with the gravitas of something that's been around for a long, long time? Say, like from the time when people wore togas and laurel leaves were all the rage in headgear? Simple. Use Roman numerals. Because Roman numerals aren't merely written, they're chiseled – usually in expensive, important materials like marble. And you can't just read them, you have to decode them. While you're trying to remember your L's from your X's and whether the I comes before or after the V....you could spend seconds, even minutes, staring at the Super Bowl logo. It's like a primitive form of brand engagement!

Apart from being an effective and fun marketing gimmick, the use of Roman numerals in the Super Bowl may offer a deeper insight into our national psyche.

I grew up just outside of Washington DC. And when I was in grade school, we took quite a few field trips to visit the national monuments. Like everyone else, I was duly impressed by the grandeur of it all. But as I got older, it struck me that much of our nation's capital looks like a kind of democracy theme park. Nothing there is really as old as it seems. Many of the lovely and awe inspiring Parthenon-like structures (Lincoln Memorial, Supreme Court, etc.) were completed in the 20's and 30's. At the same time that Art Deco skyscrapers were soaring in New York, we were knocking off the ancient Greeks in DC. Again, big emphasis on gaining cred by chiseling things in marble.

For a while, it bugged me. There's something inauthentic about a modern nation aping the architecture and trappings of an ancient one. And as a person in a creative line of work, *homages* have always seemed like a cop-out. But I've softened my view in recent years. Mainly because I've recognized that institutions are fragile and that, sometimes, people need something solid and stable to cling to. Even if it's made up.

There's a real hunger for historical validation in our relatively new nation. We're charmed by the pomp of the Royals in Europe. We admire the mystique of the Samurai. But when we look out across our own landscape we see mini-malls and drive-thru Starbucks. Sometimes it seems like a strong wind could carry it all away. And so we borrow some of our traditions. We invent a past that isn't always as deep or storied as it appears. Inventing is what we're best at after all, so in a way, it has become an authentic American tradition in its own right.

If baseball is our national pastime, then football is our version of the Gladiatorial games. From that perspective, there's something that feels right, almost natural, about co-opting Roman numerals. And while thankfully the present-day game is nowhere near as savage as the death matches that occurred in the Roman Coliseum, football is definitely where we get our aggressions out. The NBA and MLB seem almost genteel by comparison.

Personally, I look forward to many more years of the invented tradition of using Roman numerals in the Super Bowl. It may be borrowed interest, but as far as I'm concerned, it's on-brand.