

Super Bowl XLVI? To some it may as well be Greek

BY LEANNE ITALIE - Associated Press

NEW YORK -- Kids LOL and OMG each other all day, but ask them to decipher the XLVI of this year's Super Bowl and you might as well be talking Greek.

They may know what X means, or V and I, but Roman numerals beyond the basics have largely gone the way of cursive and penmanship as a subject taught in the nation's schools.

Students in high school and junior high get a taste of the Roman system during Latin (in schools where Latin is still taught, anyway).

And they learn a few Roman numerals in history class when they study the monarchs of Europe. But in elementary school, "Roman numerals are a minor topic," said Jeanine Brownell of the early mathematics development program at the Erickson Institute, a child-development graduate school in Chicago.

That's not how Joe Horrigan remembers it.

"I went to Catholic school. I still have bruised knuckles from not learning them," said the NFL historian and spokesman for the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio.

What's wrong with good ol' "46" to describe this year's Super Bowl between the Giants and the Patriots on Sunday?

"'Number 46,' it just kind of sounds like an inventory. 'Inspected by Joe,' " said Horrigan, who is LX years old. "Those Roman numerals, they're almost like trophies."

Any football fan worth his weight in nachos will find a way to figure out the Super Bowl number from one year to the next, but shouldn't kids have some sense of the Roman numerals as a numbering system?

Sudden interest

"My son is in first grade, and this recently came up when we were clock shopping," said Eileen Wolter of Summit, N.J. "He couldn't believe they were real numbers. They only ever get used for things like copyrights or sporting events, which in my humble opinion, harkens even further back to the gladiatorial barbaric nature of things like the Super Bowl."

Gerard Michon isn't much of a football fan, either, but he keeps a close eye on Super Bowls over at Numericana.com, where he dissects math and physics and discusses the Roman system ad nauseam. Starting with Super Bowl XLI in 2007, he has been getting an abnormal number of game-day visits from football fans with a sudden interest in Roman numerals. On the day of last year's Super Bowl XLV, so many people visited that Michon's little server crashed. When the dust cleared, he had logged 15,278 hits, more than 90 percent landing on "XLV."

"Last year was total madness," Michon said, in part "because so many people were wondering why VL isn't a correct replacement for XLV." When the Super Bowl started, the games were assigned simple Roman numerals "that everybody knows," he said. Now "it looks kind of mysterious."

The use of Roman numerals to designate Super Bowls began with game V in 1971, won by the Baltimore Colts over the Dallas Cowboys 16-13 on Jim O'Brien's 32-yard field goal with five seconds remaining. Numerals I through IV were added later for the first four Super Bowls.

Avoiding confusion

"The NFL didn't model after the Olympics," said Dan Masonson, director of the league's corporate communications. Instead, he said, the Roman system was adopted to avoid any confusion that might occur because of the way the Super Bowl is held in a different year from the one in which most of the regular season is played.

Bob Moore, historian for the Kansas City Chiefs, credits the idea of using Roman numerals to Lamar Hunt, the late Chiefs owner and one of the godfathers of the modern NFL. (History also credits Hunt with coming up with the name "Super Bowl.")

"The Roman numerals made it much more important," Moore said. "It's much more magisterial." Or as Michon put it: Quid quid latine dictum sit, altum videtur - "Anything stated in Latin looks important."

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