



1990 has started with a whimper not a bang. Satch has joined the ranks of former *Autoweek* columnists, the flu has sapped a major chunk of my resolve and TH's suitcases are worn out from overuse. The cat's personalities have taken on Jeckel and Hyde behavior, the weather is completely confused and unpredictable, the waxy build-up on my kitchen floor has reached crisis proportions. And if all that isn't bad enough, the quality of TV advertising has finally surpassed the drivel offered by the networks in providing more yucks per thirty second spot than the shows they are supposed to be sponsoring.

Witness, if you will, this year's Superbowl. Take away the embarrassing outcome, take away Madden's ranting analysis and pop art, take away the hokiest half-time show in recorded history and what are you left with? For me, amid those five long hours of trash, of fumbles, interceptions, sacks, of miles of wasted video tape and the thousands of kilowatts of power required to assault our senses, there was only one minute of television excellence, one brief, shining, never-to-be-forgotten example of absolute perfection. If you were out of the room getting a beer or some popcorn or taking care of some bodily function, I feel badly because there is no way of knowing when or if it will ever occur again. Superbowl XXIV will forever be embedded in my memory for the sight of a fully uniformed, helmeted and smug Paul Newman mounting a shiny black mini-mini bike for a quarter-mile challenge all in the name of American Express. Ah! Visual Bliss!

Running a distant second in this year's advertising olympics is an offering from Nissan touting the Pathfinder. This one starts out pretty blandly informing us of the good looks, practicality and affordability factors of the product. The voice over then rises to a fever pitch and describes the possibility of competing in the Paris to Dakar Rally with the entire family along for the ride. We are shown this adorable child strapped into the back seat of the vehicle in five point harness and full helmet attempting to eat a double scoop ice cream cone (strawberry and pistachio) while the vehicle is being jostled across the desert. Great stuff. Nah - maybe not.

Quite frankly, if I never see another Bud Bowl or Coke vs. Pepsi commercial I will consider my life a total success. What ARE

these folks thinking about? There was a time when I screamed at the TV whenever I heard the word "constipation" or "feminine hygiene" or "plaque." Now the sight of Spuds MacKenzie or any one of a dozen "stars" telling me why they are switching soda camps sends me in search of a fire arm.

The one notable exception to this rule is any Pepsi commercial with Michael J. Fox. While these are basically as inane as the others, I truly appreciate the effort taken to make them APPEAR interesting. Fox gets himself into some pretty ridiculous situations and will go to ludicrous ends to get himself a Diet Pepsi. He's had to work for it unlike Joe Montana who expects Coke lovers to come to him now that he's engineered two Superbowl victories in a row. It's very clear to me why no one has shown up - Joe forgot to mention that he was heading off to Disney World!

From miscellaneous reading and airy conversation with friends who are more familiar with the inner trappings of the advertising industry, the whole operation seems to hinge on some pretty thin ground. First, advertising agencies are paid scads of money by corporations to come up with ingenious ways to hawk their products. These agencies in turn peel off a little of that money to pay "account executives" in charge of ingenuity and "concepts." They then shovel the rest into unmarked brown paper bags. These bags are then dangled like a carrot in front of some easily recognizable persona from either the entertainment industry, professional sports or, when things are really tough, a recently retired politician. I take great glee at sneering at these "spokespersons" when they insist they only endorse products they "truly believe in." Moose Marbles.

Phase two of this process is the actual negotiation with the networks for "precious advertising time." Now, who's kidding who here? The average 30 minute sitcom today only has 18 minutes of sitcom and 12 minutes of "precious advertising space." The rate charged to buy space in any given time slot is based on a mathematical formula that would confuse Copernicus. Advertising

rates are based on rating points earned and tabulated by the Nielsen Company. 1792 (or thereabouts) families around this country are Nielsen "households." In it's simplest terms (the only kind I can deal with these days) if a Nielsen household watches a particular show, that show gets a point. After a pre-arranged period of time the points are tabulated, a statistical magic wand is waved and faster than you can say Bibbity-Bobbity-Boo, Entertainment Tonight is telling us what's cancelled.

Now, I have a few questions. Is any one of you out there a Nielsen family? Have any of you ever known a Nielsen family? Have any of you ever known any one who ever knew a Nielsen family? I thought not. Therefore, the whole selling process is based upon the viewing habits of a handful of people nobody has ever met.

And folks call car racing silly!

The third part of the package has to do with an annual event staged by the advertising industry itself, usually televised on a station with the cheapest advertising rates. The event, the CLIO Awards Presentation, honors outstanding achievement in advertising. Unlike you who have never known a Nielsen family, I actually know someone who won a CLIO once. Rav (short for Ravioli - I honestly have no idea what his real name is) had the good sense to come up with a nifty BMW commercial a few years back. You know the one I mean, the black BMW easily negotiating the twisting, turning road at the base of the mountain in Germany. Well, I've got two surprises for you. The ad was filmed right here in New York State and THE MASS did it better!

So, it's all illusion, all fantasy. Paul Newman on a mini-mini bike, Tip O'Neil popping out of a suitcase, ..... Know what would make me a believer? Picture video cameras running as Car #2 rolls into the finish at STPR. Picture Roddy tugging on the chin latch of his helmet, obviously exhausted from the grueling test but knowing he has won. Listen as the voice over asks that inevitable question. Smile when Roddy's toothy grin responds, "I'm going to Disney World!"