

pit stop | Racing coverage postponed by CBS misconceptions

By Jim Williams

Pictre this on your television screen: "Well, Howard, here it is, Super Bowl MCMLXVI. They're ready for the opening kickoff now—it's up—taken at the eight by Blortz—he's to the ten, the twenty, picking up blockers, he's getting outside, along the sidelines, the forty, the fifty..."

"Thanks, Howard, and that's it from Super Bowl MCMLXVI. We'll have taped highlights of this game next week on "Flat World of Sports..."

Ridiculous, right? Unbelievable, right? Implausible, right? You didn't watch the Columbia Broadcasting System's (CBS) telecast of Saturday's United States Grand Prix West (USGPW), right?

Because that's exactly what happened. A brand-new event, maybe the most significant race of the most exciting kind of racing this year—cut after the first fifteen minutes for live coverage of the Heritage Classic Golf Tournament.

The USGPW is a new event on the Formula One road racing circuit. The highly-sophisticated Grand Prix cars, piloted by top American star Mario Andretti and Europe's most glamorous athletes, screaming through the streets of Long Beach, Calif., at 180 miles an hour, through turns, bumps and giddy changes of elevation that demand the most in driving skill and car durability, would make a spectacle too good to miss, I thought.

CBS Sports thought not. They sent an expert staff, but most of their work will be denied us until next week's

"CBS Sports Spectacular."

Automobile racing is the world's second biggest spectator sport, after soccer. So why does television cover it like a lace handkerchief, and your local newspaper even less?

The seniority system combined with the "baseball mentality" is one problem. Sports departments often are headed by the person with the most experience. Many of these curmudgeons are old enough to have started when baseball was "the game", the national pastime.

Then there's the "experience gap" between both writers and readers and sports like auto racing. Most of us have engaged in many stick-and-ball sports on some level, enough that we can identify with that thrill of looking back over your shoulder and watching that perfect pass coming in, turning ponderously like a planet.

There's no real sandlot equivalent of major-league motor racing—no "viewer identification."

But if you wrote to CBS Sports (524 W. 57th St., New York, N.Y. 10019) these are not the reasons they'd probably give you. They might tell you they give no more serious coverage to motor racing than they do because not enough people watch it, because it has not been developed or promoted enough.

They might not mention that professional football almost died after World War II, that only heavy television promotion saved it and made it into today's "national pastime."

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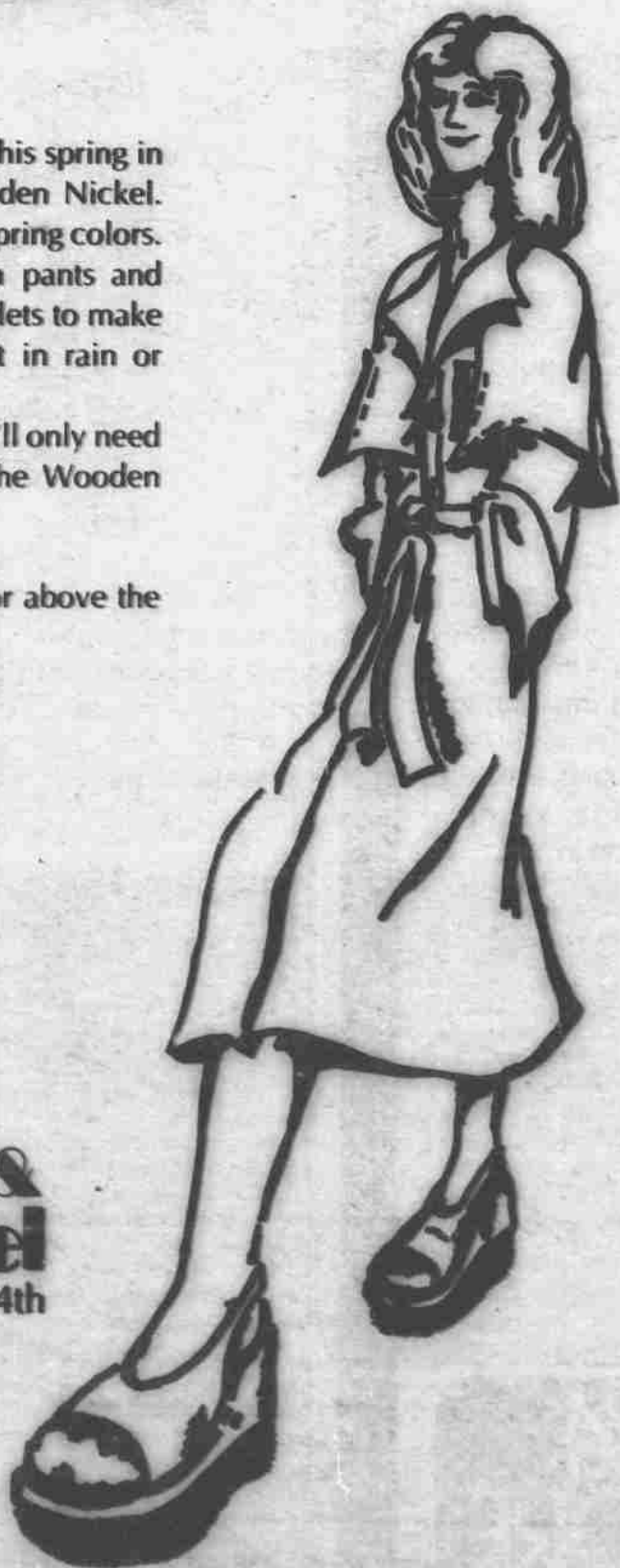
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