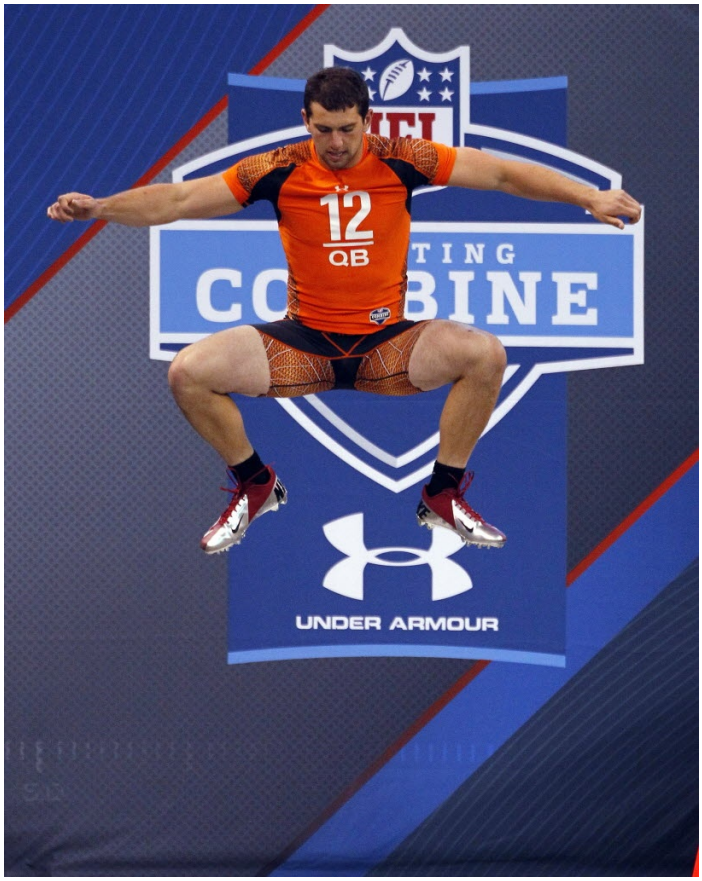

You have to hand it to the NFL. The annual meat market known as the Combine has started and it's generating all the excitement that the NFL expected when it decided to invite noodnik reporters inside the ropes to watch anonymous-looking faux student athletes attempt to trade in on their three or four year commitment to do the minimum amount of academic work at various Division I schools while enhancing the athletic budgets of said schools so that they could then get on with their life's work, a 3-4 year career in the NFL that starts with them getting drafted in the fifth or sixth round and ends with them as another Bill Belichick-inspired salary cap victim.

In a completely related story, the NFL revealed Thursday that it wants to overhaul the NFL's offseason, essentially pushing everything back a month not because it is concerned about the players or safety or anything substantive like that but because it wants to ensure it has relevant events in each month of the offseason, part of the NFL's quixotic quest to be as ubiquitous in March as it is in October.

This is a problem of the NFL's making, like most problems in the NFL, and as usual they are crafting their uniquely NFL resolution.

The problem with the NFL schedule right now, looking at it solely from the point of view of the

branding experts the NFL hires to help run its business, is that the event the NFL manufactured out of the Combine now bumps into the event the NFL manufactured out of its once quaint championship game. Both events now dominate February and March is now a sleepy, dead month where free agency begins and teams work behind the scenes in the run up to the event the NFL manufactured out of the draft, which takes place in April.

You can well see the problem, right? It's not just that free agency, which starts in March, doesn't generate constant coverage, though ESPN tries its damndest to make it so. It's more that it's not a visual event. Local television crews are reduced to tracking incoming flights to see who might be visiting Berea and where they might be having dinner but that's good for about 30 seconds, at best, and it's all local. The NFL gets little buzz. And for good measure, if you think it's boring to listen to Joe Banner drone on and on about renovations to the Berea complex, wait until you hear him drone on and on in March about free agents the team won't actually sign and draft prospects that the team has no intention of pursuing. If you're the aforesaid NFL branding expert, is that how you really want fans in Cleveland to view your product during March? How about New England where Belichick would rather have a colonoscopy than talk to the press, be it March or December?

Step one of course was to move the Super Bowl into February. If you think it seems nutsy to play football in February in New Orleans, wait until you get the unique thrill it is to play football outdoors in February in New Jersey. But pushing the Super Bowl into February helped distance the NFL's annual tribute to excess from the more mundane and generally more compelling playoff games that serve as the preliminaries.

Nothing and I mean absolutely nothing can beat the Super Bowl as the most uniquely American event ever. It's the reason the Taliban hate us. It's a Las Vegas hotel buffet on steroids shoving pancakes deep fried in lard and coated in chocolate and powered sugar down our throats. There isn't a story too small, too insignificant to merit a 10 minute piece on Sportscenter. It's a place where Martha Stewart mingles breezily with Snoop Dog and the rest of us act like it's normal despite the fact that in any other context Martha Stewart wouldn't get within two states of bumping into Snoop Dog as he entertains sycophantic white kids from the 'burbs with his clichéd admixture of marijuana and misogyny. The Super Bowl is a celebration of almost everything the NFL aspires to be, assuming it aspires only to be a money printing operation. By the time the game is actually played, most people are tuned in not for the action on the field but for the commercials in between. The Super Bowl may have grown somewhat organically from humble roots to bloated excess but don't think for a moment that the NFL would change a thing about it, from the staid entertainment (Bruce Springsteen & The E Street Band serving as such a glaring exception that I no longer believe that they actually performed but that I imagined it, Bobby Ewing style, as the real entertainment, Styx, ran through an even more overwrought version of The Grand Illusion) to the 12 hour pre games, to the fireworks and the smoke and the National Anthem and the nip slips and, oh yea, the game. Even this year's blackout actually seems to have been contrived to revitalize a game that was on life support at that very moment.

So, yea, the Super Bowl gets February and all the post game analysis should spill into the few weeks thereafter, that's the theory anyway. But when the NFL branding experts pushed the Super Bowl into February its glow, which by their calculations should linger for about 18 days

thereafter, was getting snuffed out by the Combine, which those same branding experts advised should likewise become an event.

That's the sole reason, I think, that the NFL Network was invented in the first place. In its early days it offered exactly nothing of any interest to any fan anywhere. That's still mostly true, actually. But then the branding experts hit on an idea, a perfectly wonderful awful idea. Cover the Combine. And boy do they. From the 40 yard dash to the squat thrust to the cones and to whatever other activity some Torquemada wannabe NFL assistant devised to simultaneously test and embarrass a college kid. What I'm waiting for is for the NFL to broadcast the Wonderlic test administered verbally and with real-time scoring. "What did George Washington say when he crossed the Delaware?" "Poop poop pe doop, poop poop pe doop."

And let's just say it and get it over with. The Combine is stupid. If it once had some usefulness it doesn't any longer. The best prospects shit all over it by refusing to participate, a small and final act of defiance before those prospects fall under the iron fist of the NFL and the increasing fines it administers for virtually any act of noncompliance. At best it serves only to confirm what each team's scouting department already knows and if it didn't exist it wouldn't matter. Teams still bring in all the prospects they want after the Combine ends to do exactly the same thing, confirm what they already know.

But the Combine does serve a larger purpose. Its phony substantive bend, and the reporters who blindly follow the narrative, make it seem as though something is happening. That in turn generates column inches and video reports on every imaginable outlet in the service of the NFL's ultimate goal, brand awareness. It literally dominates all football talk in February; I mean all football talk once the Super Bowl is in the rear view mirror.

Because there's no turning back on the Combine, mainly because the NFL never turns back on anything, ever, all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, it was only a matter of time before it got a full month all to itself. And that will happen when the NFL gets its way, which eventually it will, with the union and revamp the calendar so that the Combine is in March and the draft moves to May. That will make April the dead month of free agency and prospect probing.

I'd like to think that the NFL would cede April to baseball as it's season opens, but I know better. I've been covering this hapless group for far too long already. Somewhere in a conference room on Madison Avenue some branding expert is focus grouping an idea for a Free Agency Bazaar that runs from April 4th through April 21st on Miami's South Beach. when it happens remember you heard it here first and that now I own the copyright.