

It's ridiculous that Dodgers' historic run is not seen by majority of fans



Dodgers players, wearing uniforms inspired by youth leagues, celebrate after a victory over the Brewers. (Harry How / Getty Images)



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This is a golden era of Dodgers baseball.

Parity can take its act somewhere else. Say, the American League West. When the Houston Astros clinch, the AL West will have crowned four of its teams as champion within the past five years.

The National League West? The Dodgers, five years running.

The Dodgers have fielded a team since 1884; this year's squad could demolish the club record of 105 victories in a season. The personalities are compelling and likable: Clayton Kershaw's intensity, Justin Turner's happiness, Kenley Jansen's passion, Yasiel Puig's exuberance, Corey Seager's drive, Rich Hill's perseverance, Chase Utley's Yoda.

It should be quite a party when the Dodgers clinch the division championship, any day now. It is absurd that all of Los Angeles will not be able to watch the live clubhouse celebration unless the Dodgers clinch on a Tuesday.

That is where we are, four years into the Dodgers' television blackout: Get Spectrum, or get a few Tuesday night crumbs on KTLA.

The aggravation extends beyond the city limits. In New York, where Rob Manfred recently joined the commissioners of the NBA, NFL and NHL for an otherwise upbeat panel discussion at the Paley Center for Media, an audience member rose and asked what the league was doing for the majority of Dodgers fans who do not get to see their team on TV.

"I will tell you," Manfred replied with a sigh, "you managed to find the single question that I like less than any one that I get asked."

He added: "L.A. is a bad situation for our sport."

Manfred has endured criticism for saying he is essentially powerless to resolve the issue, but the commissioner does not work for the fans.

The owners hire him. The owners can fire him. So, no, he would not order the Dodgers to get on the air by discounting their \$8.35-billion television deal because the billions that would be sacrificed help enrich all the owners through the league's revenue-sharing program.



The Dodgers invested their billions, anyway, to upgrade the team and the stadium, and to recoup the record price paid to buy the club. They are the party that ought to be most motivated to end the blackout, with a generation of fan growth jeopardized because of an impasse between two television companies.

“It doesn't enhance the brand of the Dodgers,” Manfred said.

DirecTV does not appear motivated to end the stalemate. The company has not suffered any great loss of customers by refusing to carry SportsNet LA, the Dodgers' team-owned cable channel, saying the price would be too high for a channel too few viewers would watch.

Charter Communications does not appear particularly motivated either. When that company bought Time Warner Cable, Charter accounted for the steep financial losses on the Dodgers' deal, even as it inherited the responsibility to sell SportsNet LA elsewhere in the market. For now, Charter trumpets SportsNet LA as an exclusive benefit of its Spectrum service (“No Spectrum? No Dodgers!”).

The Dodgers' television deal lasts for another 21 years. Manfred suggested the blackout might not last all 21 years.

“There will be a reordering, I think, of the RSNs in the L.A. market at some point in time,” Manfred said, “and hopefully a reordering that will bring this distribution dispute to the end.”

What he means: The L.A. sports that used to be on two regional sports networks now are on five. As viewers rebel against price increases and cut the cable cord, can Fox Sports sustain two Los Angeles channels without the Dodgers, Lakers and Pac-12? And can the Dodgers, Lakers and Pac-12 channels survive on their own?

Say, for instance, the Dodgers killed SportsNet LA and joined the Lakers on Spectrum SportsNet. Even if the Dodgers and Lakers agreed — a big if — DirecTV might not agree to pay more for the Dodgers no matter what their channel.

“It’s not that they would be unwilling to have the product,” said Ed Desser, president of Santa Monica-based Desser Sports Media and former president of NBA TV. “It’s just a question of, are they willing to pay for it if it’s one Charter-branded network vs. another Charter-branded network? That’s where I have my doubts it would make a great deal of difference.”

The Lakers' channel is not blacked out, so the Dodgers' games could become available to all, but probably not unless the Dodgers were willing to sacrifice billions in the process.

“What’s the incentive?” said Ed Goren, former president of Fox Sports. “Getting your team more exposure in the community is a lovely concept. But from the Dodgers' perspective, there’s no need to do that. They got their money. And they’re going to be getting their money for a lot more years.”

Stan Kasten, the Dodgers' president, has long blamed DirecTV, saying the company has failed to negotiate in good faith.

The Dodgers nudged government officials from Los Angeles to Washington to issue statements and send letters demanding that DirecTV accept mediation, arbitration or negotiation. Kasten celebrated when the Department of Justice filed a federal antitrust complaint, alleging DirecTV colluded with other cable and satellite companies to keep SportsNet LA off the air.

The complaint was settled out of court. The elected officials were revealed to be powerless because government generally cannot compel a private business to enter into a contract with another private business.



However, after meeting with Kasten and Dodgers general counsel Sam Fernandez, state Sen. President Pro Tem Kevin de León (D-Los Angeles) said he decided to ask California Atty. Gen. Xavier Becerra to investigate whether DirecTV might have violated state antitrust law. De León made his request three weeks ago; Becerra's office said Friday the issue is "under review."

"I am exploring all options at my disposal to make sure the state's laws are enforced," de León said. "I think it's deplorable that Dodgers fans who don't have the financial resources to go to Dodger Stadium and watch the team in person don't have access on television."

No argument there, but a potential California antitrust suit could take “years” to work its way through the courts, said Jennifer Elkayam, who practices antitrust law at Blecher, Collins and Pepperman in Los Angeles.

Even if the state were to win, Elkayam said, the courts would not require DirecTV to negotiate a deal to carry SportsNet LA. She said the courts most likely would levy a fine or impose conditions designed to restrict the company from acting in concert with other television providers.

When asked why he believed the antitrust approach would help accomplish the ultimate objective of getting the Dodgers games on the air, Kasten declined comment through a team spokesman.

There might come a day when the Dodgers are on TV for all to see. There also might come a day when every fan can see the Dodgers via next-generation streaming or some yet-to-be-invented technology, and television might become a marginally relevant relic, like paper tickets or cash purchases.

Today, though, Desser says the Dodgers’ hand has been forced in a way that is decidedly not fan-friendly. After heralding an all-Dodgers, all-the-time cable channel as the only way to see the team on local television, the Dodgers have put a handful of games on free TV in three of the past four years, including 16 this year on KTLA.

The Dodgers never would have made this ill-fated television deal had Time Warner Cable not promised it could sell SportsNet LA to other television providers.

TWC could not deliver. Whether one believes DirecTV was shrewd or sinister, Desser said the Dodgers were left with two unpalatable options: Keep all the billions and keep the games off the air in many homes, or forfeit some of the billions and get the games on the air in all the homes.

“They’ve already banked that money,” he said. “They’re clearly using some of it to buy some of the best players in baseball. It’s hard to fault them on that count. They’ve made a choice.”

Some of the best players in baseball are sure to celebrate a fifth consecutive division championship any day now. Some of the best fans in baseball are sure to miss it.

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