
Industry Insiders Discuss NFL Ratings Expectations For '18 Season

By David Rumsey, Staff Writer
September 6, 2018

NFL TV viewership has declined each of the last two seasons, with many in the industry feeling that the trend will continue in '18. There is also uncertainty as to whether there is anything the league can do to fix the issue. A panel of industry insiders recently spoke to *THE DAILY* about what ratings could look like this fall, how worrisome another decline could potentially be for the league and its partners and what changes the NFL could make to see improvements. Answers were edited for brevity and clarity.

Houlihan Lokey Managing Dir **Chris Russo:**

I expect ratings to decline in the 5-7% range, largely due to continued migration of viewers from traditional TV to streaming services. Good news for the NFL is that this decline will likely be lower than the decline of primetime TV overall. Leagues should be very concerned about ratings declines, and more specifically, their ability to cultivate the next generation of fans. Esports, social media platforms, streaming services and other entertainment options are increasingly attracting younger users. The NFL has taken some important steps to address changing viewing patterns, such as its deal with Amazon, but even more focus on the digital space will be critical in the coming years. Embracing sports gambling may ultimately enhance ratings and engagement, but it will certainly take some time for to roll out nationwide, and leagues need to be very careful about integrity issues. If gambling components are

someday included or promoted in NFL game broadcasts, this could potentially lead to significantly more viewership. This effect was seen with fantasy sports, as avid fantasy players watch more NFL games than non-players.

Sports Media Advisors Founder & CEO Doug Perlman:

I would not be surprised to see a modest ratings decline, but a smaller decline than we've seen the past two years, driven mostly by secular trends, including declining cable subscriptions, increased competition for "screen time," limited attention spans and new ways to consume and engage with NFL content. The broader trends will be moderated by more competitive teams in major markets, the TV schedule, the return of high profile players and the rollout of legalized sports betting outlets. It's critical to consider the NFL's ratings on a relative basis and even with their recent declines they remain the dominant programming on TV. I don't see that changing in the near future and as they look toward their next round of media rights negotiations. I'm certain there will be no shortage of interested bidders prepared to pay up. One thought for change would be replacing a preseason game with another round of playoffs. This would keep more markets engaged longer and create new windows that would undoubtedly drive big ratings. Of course, the devil is in the details.

Desser Media President Ed Desser:

I would estimate ratings to decline in the range of 5% -- less than has been experienced in recent years, but still a decrease, even if the change in viewers is less of a decline. The forces that drive down ratings (more options, quality/attractiveness of match ups, blow out games) will still be present, but the NFL is well positioned

to withstand these pressures in contrast to general entertainment, although it is not immune. With a game taking over three hours, and with an unlimited stack of great shows without commercials available, ratings growth is a tall order. While there is no U.S. sports product that can match the NFL, the world has changed, and of course national anthem distractions don't help. The NFL should not be concerned about the changing dynamics which are impacting all TV viewing, but the league should do as much as it can to focus attention on the field of play, where social media is a benefit, and the NFL machine impressive. Potential changes could be significant tightening of the playclock -- more like the 2-minute drill, having fewer TV time outs, and getting rid of bye-weeks so every team plays every week (not sure if they should lengthen the season to 17 weeks or shorten, though that would decrease broadcast windows). Different feeds of games could be created, one for each team so they are not all national/generic, but more designed for fans of the particular teams. PATs and blackouts of doubleheader games in markets hosting a live game could be eliminated.

Pilson Communications President **Neal Pilson:**

I expect NFL ratings this year to be very strong with only a minimal decline, if any, from last year. In fact, I would not be surprised if ratings hold steady or even show a small increase. Fox' promotion for "TNF" will create a huge gain in ratings for that series over prior years. The influx of highly talented young QBs and running backs in several markets will move the audience needle on TV. Whatever negative impact the anthem issue may have had on ratings last year has run its course and will not be a major factor this season. Better games and better flexibility for the national TV windows is within the

power of the NFL to control. For example, the league can't mandate a winning season for the Bears but if they could, that would help too. Chicago TV numbers are way down compared to 20 years ago.

Several industry veterans were also surveyed in this week's Sports Business Journal, giving their predictions this season.