

NFL expands broadcast reach to Twitter

By [David Barron](#)

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Photo: Phelan M. Ebenhack, AP

Thursday Night Football sportscasters Bill Cowher, left, and Phil Simms broadcast from the set on the field before an NFL football game between the Jacksonville Jaguars and the Tennessee Titans in Jacksonville, Fla. The NFL has picked Twitter to stream its Thursday night games. When the league negotiated its latest deal for Thursdays, it decided to sell the streaming rights separately for an "over the top" broadcast.

The NFL took another step into the future of sports distribution on Tuesday with a one-year, \$10 million agreement to stream Thursday night NFL games via Twitter.

The agreement between the NFL and Twitter for 10 games that also will air this fall on traditional television networks (NBC or CBS plus the NFL Network)

will provide a broader third stream of availability for the games at a time when the NFL and other sports organizations are trying to adapt to new technologies and attract younger viewers through non-traditional means.

Highlights and 140-character comments about NFL games have become a staple of Twitter, and now users of the social media platform will be able to watch games in addition to commenting about them on the same screen. The video also can be embedded on other sites or within other applications where Twitter content is available.

"There's a whole new class of potential buyers for video rights," said Ed Desser, president of Desser Sports Media and a longtime industry observer. "Sports is a game-changer - the type of property that one gets involved with to get attention - and the NFL has joined up with Twitter at a time when Twitter needed to get attention."

This is the first season-long game streaming deal for the NFL, which last year partnered with Yahoo to stream a single game between the Bills and Jaguars from London. Yahoo paid \$20 million for the game, which drew an average audience of about 2.4 million viewers, a fraction of the normal audience for nationally televised NFL games.

Meanwhile, Desser said, the NFL also is looking to hedge its bets as it positions itself to attract younger viewers who are more comfortable with digital program delivery than their older counterparts.

"If you're a sports organization, you have to be looking to the future not only from a revenue-generating standpoint but a fan development standpoint," he said. "There are all sorts of things you can do on a platform like Twitter that you can't do with traditional television, at least not in the same way. So this is about testing a new paradigm and seeing what you can do."

The 10 Thursday night games included in the agreement with Twitter – five airing on NBC, five on CBS – have not yet been identified because the NFL has not yet released its 2016 schedule. Another six Thursday games that will air solely on NFL Network are not covered by the deal with Twitter.

The NFL rakes in billions from contracts with traditional TV providers, the most recent being its one-year, \$450 million deal with CBS and NBC for the 10 Thursday night games.

However, networks and leagues are more willing to vary from old patterns; witness the fact that the Monday night NCAA title game between Villanova and North Carolina from NRG Stadium aired for the first time on a traditional cable channel, Turner Broadcasting's TBS, which six years ago went into partnership with CBS to televise the Tournament. The Bowl Championship Series and College Football Playoff series also has migrated from ABC to ESPN.

"There was a time when having the NCAA final game on cable would have been unthinkable," Desser said. "But here we are. It happened Monday night, and nobody paid much attention. Maybe this (the Twitter/NFL deal) is the next chapter of that evolution."

NFL games normally can be viewed on mobile devices only to subscribers to Verizon's NFL Mobile package or DirecTV's Sunday Ticket. The Thursday night games, however, will be available on Twitter to mobile users as well. Commercials will be the same as the network TV telecast, but Twitter also will be able to sell its own ad inventory in some slots reserved for local TV commercials.

"Twitter is where live events unfold and is the right partner for the NFL as we take the latest step in serving fans around the world live NFL football", said NFL commissioner Roger Goodell. "There is a massive amount of NFL-related

conversation happening on Twitter during our games and tapping into that audience, in addition to our viewers on broadcast and cable, will ensure Thursday Night Football is seen on an unprecedented number of platforms this season."

"This is about transforming the fan experience with football. People watch NFL games with Twitter today," said Jack Dorsey, Twitter's CEO. "Now they'll be able to watch right on Twitter Thursday nights."

Yahoo earlier this year reached an agreement to stream several NHL games each week free of charge with no subscription required. Amazon, Facebook and Verizon also were believed to have bid on the NFL streaming package that went to Twitter, and several news outlets, including The Wall Street Journal, reported that the NFL turned down higher bids totaling about \$15 million to partner with Twitter.

Streaming rights have become a basic part of television contracts, but most games are available online only to authenticated subscribers to a cable or satellite provider such as DirecTV or Comcast. The Thursday night NFL games via Twitter will be available to all users without charge and also will be available internationally in areas where NFL games normally do not air on television.

As sports distribution is changed by the Twitter deal, Twitter may be transformed as well, Desser said.

"This is an organization like Facebook that has gotten used to having people give it free content and free promotion," he said. "That's a good business model. So now they're paying \$10 million, which is not that big a check but is more than pocket change."

Twitter previously signed an agreement to distribute NFL highlights and other clips. Brian Wieser of Pivotal Research Group said the agreement announced Tuesday fits with the NFL's approach to "windowing content ... and diversifying the potential buyers of content, all of whom place a premium on bidding against each other."

Michael Nathanson, an analyst with MoffettNathanson, described the Twitter agreement as a trial run as the NFL positions itself looking forward to the next major round of television negotiations for a contract that will begin in 2022.



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