

Struggling to watch Luka Doncic and Mavs? Bally Sports Southwest access won't be easier anytime soon

Callie Caplan, DMN

To be an engaged Mavericks, Stars or Rangers fan while living in the Dallas area over the last two years has required knowledge far beyond box scores.

Most have to assess cable plans and prices, scout streaming service options or discover other convoluted — and not always totally legal — ways just to watch their favorite teams play.

Don't expect a return to normal TV-watching fandom anytime soon — or potentially ever.

For many reading this, the Bally Sports Southwest-Sinclair Broadcast Group-regional sports network conundrum likely needs little introduction.

Over the last two-plus years, multiple cable providers and all but one streaming service have dropped Bally Sports Southwest, the local channel that has rights to nearly all Mavericks, Stars and Rangers regular-season broadcasts and the Texas high school football state championships.

That has left fans scrambling to keep up with TV listings and fuming about the lack of widespread access to the home-team feeds.

Industry experts predict the saga won't end with most cable and streaming packages restoring Bally Sports Southwest to include all channels, all the time, as had become the carriage norm over the last decade.

Instead, they say consumer behavior and expectations will likely have to evolve to meet the broadcast industry's new approach.

The opportunity to purchase a Sinclair-specific Dallas sports package could soon be in the a la carte mix, too.

"It's very messy. It's certainly challenging," said Eric Sorensen, a senior contributing analyst for Parks Associates media research who helped launch Longhorn Network, WatchESPN and SEC Network.

"At the end of the day, you're trying to reach as many consumers as possible with your product, and so creating a hybrid business model ... and then a direct to consumer business allows you to reach as many consumers as possible, and giving consumers the choice of what they want to watch."

Sense of urgency

Mavericks fans can lay claim right now to the most pressing need for BSSW.

The start of the Rangers season is in limbo amid Major League Baseball's lockout. The Stars are currently out of playoff position.

The Mavericks, meanwhile, have a 97.9% chance to make the playoffs for a third consecutive season, according to ESPN's Basketball Power Index, and sit just 2.5 games out of first-round home-court advantage.

Major matchups against Eastern Conference-leading Miami (Tuesday), West No. 4 Utah (Feb. 25 and March 7) and West No. 2 Golden State (March 3) loom.

Those games will be broadcast only on BSSW.

BSSW is available in packages through traditional cable providers Spectrum, DirecTV, Suddenlink and Grande Communications. DirecTV Stream is the only streaming platform to carry the channel.

DirecTV Stream offers four packages at varying prices, but regional sports networks like BSSW are only available at the “Choice” level and above, which recently increased to a starting price of \$89.99 a month, not including taxes and fees.

Popular streaming platforms YouTube TV, Hulu, Sling TV and FuboTV do not offer BSSW.

NBA League Pass carries BSSW as the Mavericks’ home-team broadcast, but fans in Dallas cannot use the league’s service because games are blacked out locally.

Other options

A social media survey of Mavericks fans signaled many have adopted nontraditional — and often creative — methods to watch BSSW if they can’t afford cable or DirecTV Stream or want to maintain their other RSN-less subscriptions instead.

“Secret” websites. National games only. VPN connections. TikTok streams. Shared logins with family, friends and, in one case, an unsuspecting grandmother.

The list goes on.

One fan, debating whether to move from the Dallas area to the Texas Hill Country, listed “can get NBA League Pass for Mavs games” as a pro for the relocation.

“Kinda has dampened my enthusiasm around the team in general,” another responded, “but I still try to watch when the streams are available/viable.”

How did we get here?

When Fox Sports Regional Networks owned the channels, media expert Ed Desser said, the network packaged the RSNs with other channels that TV providers rarely turned down.

Fox’s leverage

That meant Fox Sports Southwest was widely accessible in the Dallas area.

But Walt Disney Company acquired 21st Century Fox in Spring 2019 and then closed on a deal in August 2019 to sell the 21 Fox Sports Regional Networks to Sinclair.

Sinclair’s offerings, Desser said, didn’t generate the same leverage.

Throughout 2020, popular streaming services started dropping the Sinclair-owned RSNs, citing “the rising cost of sports programming” and relatively low viewership. In March 2021, Sinclair’s naming-rights deal with casino-operator Bally prompted the name change.

“When it was with Fox, you had everything from Fox News to NFL, NASCAR, Big East, Big Ten, Big 12,” said Desser, a sports television consultant who spent 23 years working in the NBA’s corporate office and helped start NBA TV.

“You think of all the things that they’ve offered historically. It was a big enough sports package that it was sort of hard to live without. ... The sale of those networks [through Sinclair] is now being done in combination with the Tennis Channel and a bunch of local TV stations from various network affiliates, so the process of deal-making has changed.”

The Mavericks have tried to help.

In November, owner Mark Cuban offered a monthly credit for the remainder of Dallas’ season for 10,000 fans to subscribe to DirecTV Stream, and the Mavericks said at least 1,000 have signed up.

Cuban’s plan marked an unprecedented engagement initiative as more than half the league’s cities grapple with similar troubles. Sinclair owns RSNs in 15 NBA cities, and a handful of other companies that hold local rights elsewhere have hit recent broadcast impasses.

“Coming up with that in-market solution is at the top of our agenda right now,” NBA commissioner Adam Silver said in October.

Stand-alone product

Sinclair appears to feel the same.

The company is in the process of creating a direct-to-consumer, stand-alone streaming product that will allow fans to pay a monthly fee — reported to be around \$18 — to receive access to the RSNs and other entertainment channels available in their home region.

Currently, viewers can download the Bally Sports Southwest app, but each must have a separate cable or streaming account to watch.

Think of the new product as the local sports version of ESPN Plus or NBC’s Peacock in the broadcast industry’s increasing pick-your-interest subscription landscape.

Sinclair plans to soft-launch it by June and make it available to the public by September and has already renewed digital distribution rights for Mavericks and Stars games to air on the new platform.

But not yet for the Rangers.

Another wrinkle in the drama.