

NFL has aggressive, calculated game plan, but they make it look easy

By Ed Desser and John Kosner 2.13.2023

Like the old Hollywood joke about a movie so good it directed itself, the NFL's juggernaut appears effortless ... like a Cowboys extra point. In reality, the league has been offering a best practices master class for decades. With the season just concluded, we examine their aggressive, state-of-the-art tactics to maintain and grow media audience, some of which can be emulated. Here's our Pick Six:

1. The Game

"Quarterbacks are the most important players in sports," according to Mike Mulvihill, Fox Sports' executive vice president and head of strategy and analytics. Their preeminence "simplifies and personalizes a complicated game." The NFL has embraced charismatic stars like Patrick Mahomes (the Steph Curry of the gridiron) who have opened up the sport, dramatically increasing scoring and the pace of the game, while attracting young fans. Tom Brady and Aaron Rodgers are synonymous with the position, but the eight NFL divisional playoff teams were all led by QBs under 30. The NFL markets these players; the rules protect them.

2. Expanding Core Content

- In the 1970s, teams played six preseason and 14 consecutive regular-season games, with uniform Sunday 1 p.m./4 p.m. ET doubleheaders and a Monday night game (beginning on low-rated Labor Day weekend), eight teams made the playoffs, the Super Bowl took place on the second Sunday in January, and the (untelevised) draft was staged two weeks later in a hotel ballroom. Non-sellout games were blacked out in the home market, cold weather night games were minimized and the schedule rarely changed. Baseball was the top U.S. sport.

- Today, NFL teams play three preseason games, 17 regular-season games over 18 weeks, with staggered starts for the Sunday tripleheaders at 1, 4:25 and 8:30 p.m. ET, plus four morning starts from Europe, prime-time games Monday and Thursday (the season beginning after Labor Day); 14 teams make the playoffs with later start times, the Super Bowl is now on the second Sunday in February, and the draft is a late April, three-day/night traveling spectacle, dissected by three networks, attended by 100,000+. Local blackouts are long gone, every market (including those with a home game) now gets three Sunday afternoon broadcast games (a fourth on the opening and closing weeks), and next season will bring flexible scheduling to both Sunday and Monday nights. The NFL has no peer on U.S. television.

- The NFL not only maximized its season (adding few net average additional games beyond those from expansion teams) but also its January/February extension capitalizes on high cold weather HUT (homes using television) levels and routinely frigid night games. Ever opportunistic, the NFL found valuable new promotable opportunities — "Super Wild Card Weekend," which captures the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, tripleheaders on Thanksgiving and last year, Christmas Day, with a Black Friday game for Amazon Prime upcoming.

3. Moving to a Year-Round Presence

In addition to its scheduling maneuvers, the NFL has forged a year-round content calendar with its combine and free agency signings in March, the draft in April, the NFL schedule release in May, training camps in July and the preseason in August.

4. Content Innovations

As NFL Films is the granddaddy of in-house sports production, it's fitting that the NFL has become its own executive producer with NFL Network, NFL.com, premium app NFL+, and NFL RedZone, which revolutionized live sports coverage. It has also redefined access with "Hard Knocks," highlights with "Inside the NFL" and even has its own daily show, "Good Morning Football."



SkyCam technology over the years has changed the way NFL games are produced.getty images

5. Maintaining Multiple Media Relationships

In the 1970s, before cable and streaming, all three broadcast networks held NFL rights. Today, the NFL has agreements with all four broadcast networks, the leading national cable sports network, plus huge digital companies Amazon and Google/YouTube, plus Apple is the new sponsor of Super Bowl halftime. Each of the media partners is deeply invested in the NFL, contractually mandated to aggressively

promote, and by design encouraged to outdo one another. ESPN's popular "ManningCast" is an example, as are a set of tech innovations such as "1st & Ten" and SkyCam. Plus, the NFL negotiated itself an early opt-out in these deals. In this dire media environment, its numbers defy gravity:

- Per Variety, in 2022, NFL games represented 75% of all sports telecasts that reached 10 million or more viewers last year (figures achieved because the NFL has embraced both broadcast and streaming);
- Per The Wall Street Journal, the league has boosted the rights fees for all of its media properties by more than \$100 billion in less than three years.

6. Continuously Raising the Bar

- No "prevent defense" here. The NFL has had excellent senior media leadership from Steve Bornstein and Howard Katz to Brian Rolapp.
- The league commissioned fan research in 2016 resulting in several changes that streamlined game broadcasts, including fewer commercial breaks and advertisements now inserted into dead spots, like instant replay reviews.
- They've upgraded both markets and venues — Las Vegas and Los Angeles, with state-of-the-art Allegiant and SoFi stadiums.
- But traditions live on. In the 1970s, the league marketed "On Any Given Sunday," trumpeting the competitiveness of its then 26 teams. In 2022, the NFL's 32 teams played a season with an average victory margin less than 10 points, the lowest in 90 years.

Befitting of a 21st century sport behemoth, the NFL has embraced its own weekly spectacle, where the regular season truly matters. And, of course, everyone watches the Super Bowl (some for the commercials). Some things never change.

Ed Desser is an expert witness and president of Desser Sports Media Inc. (www.desser.tv). John Kosner is president of consultancy Kosner Media (www.kosnermedia.com). Together they developed league TV strategy and ran the NBA's media operations in the '80s and '90s, always with an eye on the NFL.