

SPORTS

NFL's Video Ban Won't Slow Its Ratings Tailspin



58  OCT 12, 2016 4:27 PM EDT

By [Stephen L. Carter](#)

While Major League Baseball is enjoying one of the most exciting post-seasons in its recent history, the National Football League is losing viewers. So low are this season's ratings that television networks are being forced to [give away free ad slots](#) to make up for the low numbers. Speculation about the reason is rampant: the election, the protests. Whatever the explanation, the smart folks at NFL headquarters seem to think the solution is to keep their heads down and hope things get better. But it's tough to fix the problem if we don't know what's wrong.

The consensus view seems to be that blame rests with the enormous interest in the presidential campaign. Viewers are too distracted to pay attention to football. Maybe so. On the other hand, as Peter King of Sports Illustrated [has pointed out](#), although the pendency of an election always hurts the NFL's numbers, the effect has never been as pronounced as it is this year. Ratings are down some 13.4 percent, far more than the

usual election-year drop-off. So there's at least a fair likelihood that the full explanation lies elsewhere.

Lots of commentators [blame sinking ratings](#) on what has come to be known as the "Kaepernick effect": a negative reaction to the protests against racial inequality by San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick and others during the national anthem. The league has [tiptoed around](#) the controversy, wary as usual of giving any offense to anybody on any issue. [1](#) Angry fans show no such reluctance: One-third of those surveyed by Rasmussen said the protests make them [less likely to watch the games](#). Posters using the Twitter hashtag [#BoycottNFL](#) cheer every new story of a ratings decline. So although the effect is untestable, it's difficult to imagine that fan indignation plays no role at all in the NFL's troubles. Nevertheless, I remain skeptical that the Kaepernick effect is very large, and I would not be surprised to see it dissipate as the season progresses.

Whatever the cause of the ratings decline, the league could do itself a considerable favor by not making things worse. With its usual sure instinct for aiming carefully at its own foot, the NFL [just last week ordered teams](#) not to post video to social media during games. Previously, if you followed your favorite team, and your team made a big play, up it would come on your feed. No more. Now only the NFL's own Twitter and Facebook accounts can carry video snippets of events as they unfold. Fines for violations begin at \$25,000.

At first blush, this change might seem trivial, but according to an [internal e-mail obtained by several journalists](#), the league warned its teams that the new rule should not "be distributed externally to any third parties, including, but not limited to, our social media partners." Put another way, not only are teams not allowed to post video to Twitter or Facebook during games, but they also are not allowed to tell Twitter or Facebook why they aren't posting video during games. One can only conclude that the league itself has known all along that the new policy might not look too good in the light of day.

The rationale for this bizarre prohibition is unclear. It's unlikely that the NFL's broadcast partners are complaining; nobody watches a football game by waiting for a team to tweet the occasional GIF. The other obvious theory is that the NFL is trying to drive traffic to its own Twitter and Facebook feeds, which remain free to post video as

games unfold. Perhaps the league considers this a way to prepare for a future in which viewers would rather spend those three hours away from the television, checking in only occasionally on games. Gathering all those eyes in one place might one day help advertising sales.

But if the goal is to bridge the divide between those who consume football the old-fashioned way and those who never will, a better alternative would surely be to market NFL Sunday Ticket (which allows the consumer to watch any game of their choice) to [anyone who wants to buy it](#), rather than only those who have DirecTV. [2](#) Already Sunday Ticket is available to college students [as an independent product](#). But unless the same service continues once they've graduated, the NFL will likely lose many of them as viewers. The millennials and their variously named successor generations want content delivered to their phones on demand. They won't be buying satellite dishes anytime soon. And if they can't watch professional football, they'll watch something else.

For those of us who love the sport, the grimmer explanation for the drop in ratings is that we have passed peak football. Four years ago, economists Kevin Grier and Tyler Cowen (now a Bloomberg View colleague) [sketched out](#) what the end of the NFL's dominance might look like. They proposed a "slow death march" as parents worried about concussions and CTE keep their sons away from the game, high schools gradually drop it, and what was once the most popular sport in the nation becomes a regional phenomenon.

Well, guess what? The percentage of boys playing high school football is declining. (Participation in other sports is declining, too, but participation in football is [declining faster](#).) One group of parents in particular is sufficiently worried to keep its children away from the sport: college-educated Democratic voters. For the rest of the population, football remains as popular as ever. In fact, even as high school participation rates have fallen in blue states, they have [risen steadily](#) in red states. The notorious partisan divide over football has a basis in fact.

None of this means that the forecast by Grier and Cowen will come to pass, at least in the short run. If the election really is to blame for the NFL's ratings, then viewership should recover [in a few weeks](#) (assuming the league stops shooting itself in the foot). And if the true story turns out to be the Kaepernick effect, I suspect the slump will also be transitory, and ratings will also pick up as the season goes on (with the same caveat).

If, on the other hand, the ratings decline marks the beginning of a downward spiral, let's all give thanks that the rest of television is enjoying its golden age. **3**

1. Well, *almost any issue*.

2. Ah, Google, where were you *when we needed you*?

3. Unless that's *ending, too*.

This column does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the editorial board or Bloomberg LP and its owners.

To contact the author of this story:

Stephen L. Carter at scarter01@bloomberg.net

To contact the editor responsible for this story:

Brooke Sample at bsample1@bloomberg.net

