

On the Decline of NFL Television Ratings

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At this writing, television viewing of National Football League games has taken a significant dip. Below is an email message I wrote to a sports writer in response to his newspaper article on the topic. If you don't follow pro football, some of this might not make sense, but in any case I think you'll pick up the gist of what I'm talking about here.

[The sports writer's first name.]:

Regarding your October 17th article on the drop in NFL's TV ratings:

I wondered how you concluded that the national anthem protests are the weakest of the assembled excuses for the lower TV ratings? [Players are kneeling or raising a clenched-fist during the playing of the national anthem before the start of games to protest racial injustice in America.] Just now, I checked the Internet and there was this: "Rasmussen Reports polled 1,000 American adults this week and found 32 percent were less likely to watch an NFL game because of the protests." And this: "At least 44 percent of NFL fans said they would actually stop watching the games if the National Anthem protests continue, according to a new Yahoo Sports/YouGov survey."

As for your quarterback inadequacy thesis [the article said the big cause of the low TV ratings is the poor quarterback play currently], do people think, "[Quarterback] Aaron Rodgers is having a down year, I'm not watching." Really? If now-less-than-stellar-quarterbacking is the big problem, what quarterbacks are we talking about? Is Peyton Manning indispensable? Personally, I found him annoying with all his back-and-forth jumping around,

shouting, pointing, directing, and false starts before plays. If I turned on TV and saw it was his team, I looked for another game. Who else can't we live without? Brett Favre I guess, but his sexting scandal muddied his image for me. There's Teddy [Bridgewater] and his gloves and short passing game, and I think we can get along without him.

I'd categorize myself as basically falling into the category of, as you phrased it, "the casual, national fan." The last couple years, the games have become, for me, your word, "unentertaining." Your article has prompted me to ask myself why the games aren't as positive an experience for me as they used to be.

- It's not so much bad quarterbacking as it is too much quarterbacking. Forty or fifty times a game, each team's quarterback throws a pass and it's completed or it isn't. I've seen it, I get it. It's the Tom Brady show, and his show looks like the Drew Brees show, which looks like the Philip Rivers show, which looks like the Eli Manning show, which looks like the Andrew Luck show, and now we've got the Sam Bradford show.
- An emphasis on defense, your phrase, isn't a problem for me. Watching Denver's defense go after people, Von Miller and the rest of them, is great to watch.
- The NFL has become low class, shoddy, cheapjack. I feel as if I'm watching the WWE [World Wrestling Entertainment] on cable. Antonio Brown's twerks in the end zone, the chest-beating displays after quarterback sacks, receivers grandly signaling a first down after completed passes, the face-mask-to-face-mask jabbering at the end of plays--the "Beckham-ization" of the game, call it that. [Odell Beckham Jr. is a particularly showy player for the New York Giants.] Watching the NFL has become embarrassing.

- The large majority of kickoffs are touchbacks. I understand the player safety motivation behind that the rule changes that result in that, but still, it has diminished the viewing experience for me. Comes the kickoff, I know what it going to happen: nothing.
- The commercials are oppressive. *The Wall Street Journal* research showed that NFL games last an average of three hours and eleven minutes, with the ball actually in play eleven minutes of that time. The one hundred ads during a game take up an hour. So there's almost six times as much advertising in a telecast as football. What really gets to me are the two minute warnings, an outrageous stunt to pack in still more commercials. Evidently, we are supposed to believe that the coaches and players can't read the scoreboard and the game needs to come to a dead halt while they are warned (not notified, warned) that there are two minutes left to go until the half or end of the game. Why only football? By this logic, umpires should stop the game with one out in the top and, if necessary, the bottom of the ninth and warn the managers and players that there are only two outs left in that half inning. The two-minute warning insult to my intelligence has particularly activated my clicker.
- The national anthem protests get to me. I didn't have to watch Tom Hanks kneel (or lie prone, whatever) before the start of the movie "Sully." Give me a break, Colin. [Colin Kaepernick, a quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, is a prominent protester.]
- I recently read former-[University of Minnesota] Gopher Ben Utecht's book about his concussion-related issues, "Counting the Days While My Mind Slips Away." I am concerned about the players' health and safety, and that detracts from my experience watching the game.

- I used to associate civility and decency with pro football. No longer. Now it's DUIs [Driving Under the Influence], wife beatings, cop run-ins, and sexual assaults. It's gotten seedy.
- I personally don't use social media, streaming, all that, a factor you brought up, but I know that it has had an impact of television viewing generally, and the NFL games are television shows, and there is no reason I can think of that they wouldn't be affected in the same way that other programming is.

Much more to be said, but I'll leave it that low football television ratings don't seem to me to be primarily a lackluster quarterbacks problem.

Sincerely,

Robert Griffin