

## The Art and Science of Scheduling Meet in the N.F.L. Office

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The e-mail was finally sent to Roger Goodell at 12:33 a.m. Monday — “White smoke from the scheduling room.” That one line put an end to the N.F.L.’s yearly eye-blurring, mind-bending exercise in juggling the absurd and the inconvenient, in balancing prime-time television and 10 a.m. body clocks for West Coast teams, in sifting through 14,000 potential schedules to find the one that pleases the most and infuriates the least.

But even in the hours before the 2012 regular-season schedule was released to the public Tuesday night — setting off hours of analysis of matchups whose existence, though not their timing, had been known for months — the calls and texts kept coming into the small room at the N.F.L.’s Park Avenue headquarters outfitted with five computers, a gigantic monitor and a critical shredder.

There were complaints and questions and the occasional compliment from teams and television networks that had spent the last two and a half months lobbying the scheduling department for their preferred combination of games, and who are likely to continue to vent and question or marvel at the schedule’s sometimes accidental foresight, until it is time to start planning for 2013.



“This is the annual ritual of finding out how stupid I am,” said Howard Katz, the N.F.L.’s scheduling czar. “We work for months and months in this room and ‘What were they thinking?’ It comes with the territory.”

After recalling what he thought was a coup last year — putting a game between the New Orleans Saints and the Indianapolis Colts on the Sunday night opposite the World Series, only to watch the Saints obliterate a Peyton Manning-less Colts team, 62-7 — Katz summed up the snap judgments of the schedule that are as quick to change as a channel.

“We’re geniuses one day and absolute morons the next,” he said.

For the networks that pay billions of dollars to carry N.F.L. games, they have been mostly geniuses. N.F.L. games were watched by an average of 17.5 million viewers last season, the second most since 1989, and off slightly from 2010. N.F.L. games accounted for 23 of the 25 most-watched television shows among all programming, and the 16 most-watched shows on cable last fall.

Designing a schedule that generates those ratings, while also guaranteeing competitive fairness, is more complicated than ever, even though a computer program in use for eight years now does some of the work that was once done entirely by hand — spitting out 400,000 complete or partial schedules from a possible 824 trillion game combinations.

Katz’s department must consider a confounding array of factors, from the N.F.L.’s expanded Thursday night package, which gives each team a game in a short week, to potential baseball playoff situations that could affect the availability of stadiums and parking lots in October. The summer is spent rooting against certain baseball teams that share facilities with football teams. When baseball began awarding home-field advantage in the World Series to the winning league in the All-Star Game, it further complicated the task.

“We walk out of here the night of the All-Star Game and say, ‘Who are we rooting for?’ ” said Onnie Bose, a member of the scheduling staff.

The process gets serious in January, when teams submit lists of requests detailing stadium availability and preferences for scheduling order. This year, teams submitted more than 70 blocked-out dates for stadiums — the Jets and the Giants are both on the road in Week 3, for instance, because Bruce Springsteen will be performing at MetLife Stadium — and 100 requests, from the sublime to the ridiculous.

Florida teams often ask not to play 1 p.m. games in September and October, believing it is more difficult to sell tickets in broiling heat; sometimes the same organization will submit different requests because coaches believe the heat provides a

competitive advantage. Southern teams do not want to go north late in the season. Teams that struggle to sell tickets worry especially about their late-season schedule.

There are requests not to play at home on certain holidays — the Jets and the Giants typically ask not to play home games during the Jewish High Holy Days. When the N.F.L. put the Jets at home on Rosh Hashana and the start of Yom Kippur in 2009, Katz heard about it from the team. And others.

“I heard from every rabbi — ‘How could you screw that up?’ ” Katz said. (On Thursday, the N.F.L. moved the start of the Raiders-Dolphins game in Miami on Sept. 16 — Rosh Hashana — up from 4:15 p.m. to 1 p.m. to give Jewish fans more time to be home before the holiday starts at sundown.)

The Jets asked to host the Thanksgiving night game this year. Jonathan Payne, another member of the scheduling group, opened a folder with more requests.

“No games against teams coming off their bye,” he read.

During Super Bowl week, Katz meets with representatives from each of the networks that carry N.F.L. games, receiving wish lists from NBC, ESPN and the NFL Network for games they want in prime time, and lists — often nearly identical — from Fox and CBS of games they do not want to lose from their Sunday afternoon slots.

Among observers, NBC is viewed as getting the best treatment because of the cachet of the popularity of football on broadcast television. ESPN hopes for plenty of division games because there is almost always something on the line. Last year, NBC and Fox wrestled over the regular-season finale between the Cowboys and the Giants, a guaranteed ratings bonanza. The N.F.L. moved the matchup — which determined which team went to the playoffs — to NBC for the second time in the season, upsetting Fox so much that Katz said the network’s lead analyst, Troy Aikman, stopped speaking to him.

Katz’s department starts with thousands of seed schedules, empty slates in which a handful of critical games with attractive story lines are placed in select spots. Then the computers generate possibilities around those games. The N.F.L. also feeds the computer with penalties for situations it prefers to avoid — three-game trips, for example, or teams starting with two road games.

The Pittsburgh-Denver game in the first week on Sunday night was an early favorite for that spot because it was a rematch of a playoff game and would have featured a ratings juggernaut with Tim Tebow. Then Denver signed Peyton Manning and Tebow was traded to the Jets. The N.F.L. reconsidered, then left the game in the slot. Manning’s move to Denver did not change the schedule as much as might have been thought because the Broncos were likely to get considerable prime-time consideration with Tebow. Nor did the Saints’ recent strife because Katz and his crew think New Orleans will still be a good team without Coach Sean Payton.

This year, the computers generated 14,000 playable schedules, which were reduced to 150 with an eyeball test. Then the scheduling department reviewed those 150 by hand, scoring them for each team and each network.

“It’s part art and part science,” said Michael North, who works closely with Katz. “The science is the needle in the haystack may be so far over here that the computer cannot search through the entire space. What if that seed schedule had one game in the wrong spot and that one game prevented us from looking at that part of the haystack?”

A few weeks ago, Katz’s department had a schedule it loved, until it realized one team had a three-game trip heading into a Thursday night game. The schedule was tossed.

Finally, late Sunday, after the computers had run one last time, the department settled on the schedule it reviewed with Goodell for two hours Monday and announced Tuesday.

That will undoubtedly not be the last they hear about it.

At the league meeting last month, Katz was approached by Baltimore Coach John Harbaugh and told he had to meet his brother. Jim Harbaugh, John’s brother and the coach of the San Francisco 49ers, was upset that his team had been sent across the country for last year’s Thanksgiving night game against his brother’s team.

“I talked to him, then I talked to him the next day and then I talked to him the third day,” Katz said of Jim Harbaugh. “He said, ‘Now that I’ve met you, I don’t hate you quite as much.’ His brother said to me, ‘That’s as good as you’re going to do.’ ”