

Friday Night NFL Broadcasts

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The National Football League made history in September 2024 by playing the first regular season game in Brazil between the Green Bay Packers and the Philadelphia Eagles. The game took place in São Paulo, at the arena where the professional soccer team SC Corinthians plays. It was the first game of the season for both teams and was streamed on Peacock, NFL+, and broadcast locally for both team markets (NFL 2024).

Other than being in Brazil, this game was unique because it was on a Friday. The last time the NFL had a game on its opening weekend was September 18, 1970, which was over fifty years ago (NFL 2024). Under the Sports Broadcasting Act of 1961, 15 USC §1293 prohibits pro football on Friday nights after six pm or on any Saturday seventy-five miles from an intercollegiate or interscholastic football game from the second weekend of September through the second weekend of December. There are three qualifying factors the football game must meet. If it's an intercollegiate football game, it needs to be between four-year degree schools. If it's an intercollegiate football game, it needs to be between accredited or certified schools that go through the twelfth grade. For both intercollegiate and interscholastic, the games need to be "announced through publication in a newspaper of general circulation" before August 1, as a regularly scheduled game, meaning they cannot just be a pop-up event (15 USC §1293).

The Brazil game, which was on September 6, was clearly outside of this restriction, but it brings up an interesting point. The Sports Broadcasting Act was written at a time when the NFL season only lasted fourteen to fifteen weeks. In 1966, the regular season ran from the first week of September to the third week of December. The Super Bowl was in the middle of January and there was only one Monday night game and two Thursday night games (Sports Reference, NFL 1966; Sports Reference, AFL 1966). A very foreign schedule to what the NFL looks like today.

Even a year later, when 15 USC §1293 was fully enacted, Saturday games could still be found on the schedule in places like Houston, San Diego, and New York, even though the games fell within the second week of September through second week of December time frame (Sports Reference, AFL 1967). This could lead one to assume that the NFL had an easier time finding Saturdays where there was not a college game happening within seventy-five miles of the scheduled game.

The NFL, like most entities, has expanded over the years. In 1966, the NFL merged with the American Football League. The two kept separate schedules for a few years, then in 1970, started sharing a single schedule. This shortened pro-football's regular season for a few years before it grew to fit more teams, first in 1976. The addition of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and the Seattle Seahawks brought the league total teams to twenty-eight. Expansion through 2002 brought in teams from new areas and areas that had previously lost them, bringing the total number of teams to thirty-two (Gulizia, 2019).

With this expansion, the NFL naturally expanded the length of their season. The 2024 regular season started the first weekend of September and will end after the first weekend of January. NFL now has an eighteen-week schedule, almost a month longer than what it was in the sixties and seventies (Sports Reference, 2024). Where the timeframe from 15 USC §1293 almost fully covered the pro-football season in the sixties, the NFL outgrew its restraints on either side.

According to Frommer (2021), the point of the banning NFL on Fridays and Saturdays was to protect fans of high school and college football. If this was truly the purpose, then a change needs to be made. The NFL jumps on the chance to broadcast on Fridays and Saturdays outside of the restrictions of the Sports Broadcasting Act. There was the Friday game in Brazil this year because it was the first weekend in September and there will be another Friday game on Black Friday. It has a start time of 3:00 p.m., so the majority of the game will be over by 6:00

p.m., meaning it meets the rules of the Sports Broadcasting Act. There will also be two games on Saturday, December 21, the third weekend of December. This also falls outside the restrictions of 15 USC §1293, so it is allowed (Sports Reference, 2024).

The NFL also plays every year on Christmas Day. This year, it happens to fall on a Wednesday. This will mark the fifth straight year of scheduling games on Christmas, though there will only be two games instead of the triple-headers in recent years. The NFL continues to schedule these Christmas day games because it draws in viewership. The 2022 triple-header averaged 21.9 million viewers (Deitsch, 2023; Sports Reference 2024).

There has also been some experimentation with types of broadcasts. One of the 2023 Christmas broadcasts was on Nickelodeon, dubbed the “Nickolodeon NFL Nickmas Game” averaged 906,000 viewers while the CBS broadcast of the same game averaged 22.6 million viewers. Fans could also catch football on Nickelodeon when the characters of Spongebob Squarepants did commentary for the Super Bowl. While the Nickelodeon broadcast isn’t returning for Christmas 2024, fans will see it in the postseason. There was also a “Toy Story Funday Football” ESPN broadcast that used tracking technology and Next Gen Stats to animate the game live into “Andy’s Bedroom” from the Pixar movie “Toy Story.” Disney+ announced that the event was the most viewed of all its live events, however the data is a bit skewed with this since live streaming events is fairly new for Disney+ (Associated Press, 2023; Dietsch, 2023; Kerr, 2024; Palmer, 2023).

Looking back to the Eagles-Packers game in Brazil, the viewership averaged 14.2 million across Peacock and local NBC affiliates in Philadelphia, Milwaukee, and Green Bay (Lewis, 2024). The peak of the broadcast was 15.3 million viewers, the most of a Friday night broadcast since April 2024, when Iowa and UConn faced off in the Women’s Final Four. It ranked fourth in NFL streaming exclusive games, falling behind two 2023 Amazon Prime streamed Thursday

night games and a playoff game on Peacock. Excluding the playoff game, it ranks third in the regular season streaming exclusive games (Lewis, 2024). The choice to schedule it for a Friday was a good one. It's not competing with other games on Sunday – other international games don't have to compete because they are in different time zones, so they are earlier – so it's drawing plenty of numbers.

International games could also be a place for expansion. The NFL has been playing preseason and exhibition games in different countries since 1926, but the international series was started in 2007. Mostly, teams were sent to London, but it eventually expanded to Toronto, Mexico City, and Frankfurt. This year, São Paulo and Munich have been added to the docket (NBC Universal Media). As the league starts dealing with more foreign governments, scheduling may become an issue, and the NFL may push the boundaries of the Sports Broadcasting Act even further.

There is a clear willingness to experiment and expand to different days of the week. In December 2023, NFL executive vice president for media distribution Hans Schroeder shut down the idea of playing football on a Wednesday, but a year later, there will be two played on a Wednesday (Deutsch, 2023; Sports Reference 2024). What if the next step is to play on all possible Fridays and Saturdays that are outside of the Sports Broadcasting Act's restrictions? The solution is to reevaluate the Sports Broadcasting Act of 1961, 15 USC §1293. Compare the viewing numbers and see if it is really doing its job in protecting high school and college football fans. There have been both Friday and Saturday games, so there is data that could be used to see if NFL numbers are pulling away from college viewership. If college football can hold its own against professional football, then lift the restriction and let NFL expand and experiment away.

The more viable option would be to go the other way and extend the restrictions to fit the interscholastic and intercollegiate seasons more appropriately. Make it so there is no loophole

that the NFL can find and make people choose between watching students play and watching professionals play.

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