

Sports Radio Gears Up For The 2021 NFL Season

Derek Futterman | September 9, 2021 | Barrett Sports Media

The 2021 N.F.L. season is set to kick off tonight when the defending Super Bowl champion Tampa Bay Buccaneers, led by quarterback Tom Brady, host “America’s Team,” the Dallas Cowboys, in the Sunshine State. Around the country, sports radio stations with and without team play-by-play rights are preparing for what is sure to be an unparalleled season, including the addition of a 17th game, and the threat COVID-19 imposes on teams, potentially subjecting them to forfeiting and/or canceling games if there is an outbreak of the deadly disease.

As teams return to the gridiron, they will have to judge their opponents, adjusting during the game in order to put themselves in the best position to win. Similarly, sports radio, in a new digital age, will have to continue evolving so it fits consumption trends and technological innovations, all while remaining committed to best serving its listening audience.

“There’s a lot more information being distributed more quickly, and because of that, it creates a greater sense of immediacy in talking football on the radio,” said Raj Sharan, program director of 104.3 The Fan and ESPN Denver 1600. “Sports talk radio is live [and] local... [it] is really well-equipped to be in the moment. [We] can really help create that immediacy and intimacy with the listener.”

According to a recent Gallup poll, football is America’s most popular sport, with 37% of respondents choosing football when asked what their favorite sport was to watch. Keeping fans engaged with new content is something radio stations will strive to do as they set to embark upon a season full of uncertainty and ambivalence amid the global pandemic. Some of the ways stations intend to do this include introducing new programming and/or making existing programming accessible across a wider variety of platforms.

“We have a [Minnesota] Vikings-related show every day of the week,” said Chad Abbott, program director of KFAN Minneapolis, which holds the broadcast rights to the Minnesota Vikings. “This year, we have a podcast made for radio as opposed to a radio show made for podcasts [, and] it will feature a handful of different Vikings players throughout the season.”

In the District of Columbia, Washington Football Team Head Coach Ron Rivera is set to join *The Sports Junkies* on 106.7 The Fan as a weekly guest throughout the 2021 season. This valuable addition to the guest list should give fans unrivaled insight pertaining to the Washington Football Team, along with offering them perspective from a current NFL head coach who is around the players for practices and during each game.

With football’s substantial popularity comes the ability to augment revenue, ratings, and listener engagement ahead of the release of the fall ratings book. Program directors,

such as Sharan, are cognizant of the book's importance on determining the success of their radio stations, and value its numbers, along with growth across digital platforms.

"Every ratings book is important; that goes without saying," expressed Sharhan. "Obviously the fall one is very special because football is very popular and it's America's number one sport. We count on this time of year financially because of how popular the sport is."

Chris Kinard, operations manager at Audacy D.C. and the brand manager of the aforementioned 106.7 The Fan, in addition to 94.7 The Drive and The Team 980, the latter of which holds the broadcast rights to the Washington Football Team, carries a similar sentiment regarding the emphasis those across the industry put on fall ratings. He looks at a variety of numbers, both traditionally- and digitally-based, to get a broad sense of how the stations he manages are doing.

"In terms of measuring the audience, I think that's a challenging thing right now," said Kinard. "We do have more tools at our fingertips than we have ever had in terms of supplementing Nielsen data with streaming data, podcast downloads and website traffic. That helps give a better picture of how big of an impact the football season has on audience growth."

While there are a handful of diehard football fans who will watch the games and engage with the teams on media platforms no matter how the season is going, some fans rapidly lose interest in football, even if their team is contending for that coveted Lombardi Trophy. While the NFL generally garners most of the sports headlines during this time of year, the NBA and NHL both begin in just a few weeks, and that, combined with the ongoing college football season and the imminent start of the MLB playoffs, sometimes cause the effects of this oversaturation of sports and ancillary content to be felt by sports radio stations.

"I think the NFL is the best sport for when teams are struggling because there is always a storyline that can be talked about during the week," said Abbott. "My hope every year is that the team is as close to making the playoffs as they can by the end of the [fall ratings] book. Sometimes, it's nicer to have a 9-7 team than a 14-1 team because you [then] don't have the ability to live and die by each game."

Unfortunately for Sharan, he's had "about five years of practice" in covering a struggling football team. Ever since winning the Super Bowl in 2015, the Denver Broncos have failed to qualify for the NFL playoffs, finishing last or in second-to-last place in four of those five seasons. The key question for sports talk radio stations relates to keeping the audience intact throughout the entire season, even if the local team has a losing record and is quickly eliminated from playoff contention.

When radio stations hold the broadcast rights for a team, though, freely expressing critical opinions towards the team's personnel and ownership is often seen as damaging to the partnership. The Denver Broncos currently broadcast their games on KOA

NewsRadio, and for Sharan, he sees the prospect of obtaining the broadcast rights to the team, if it were hypothetically possible, as eschewing his station's ability to be an extension of the fanbase.

"We've built our brand around personalities free to give their opinion without endangering any type of partnership," said Sharan. "We view being a completely independent brand to where people can come to get unimpeded opinions as a positive. If we want to dig in on Broncos ownership and how that's affected the issues going on, we can do that. If we want to hold a front office executive or coach accountable in a major way, we can do that. We don't have the obligation that tends to come with those rights. I absolutely never want the broadcast rights [to] the Denver Broncos."

For radio stations holding the broadcast rights to NFL teams, such as those managed by Kinard and Abbott though, they enter this season vulnerable to experience two scenarios; one of which will be a definitive occurrence, and the other which will be sought to be avoided entirely. The first is the addition of a 17th game to the NFL schedule, something that was officially added to the league schedule after the NFL and its player association inked a new collective bargaining agreement in March 2020.

As the first major change to the NFL schedule since the 1978 season, fans and broadcast affiliates alike are enthusiastic about the addition of another week of regular season football and content. From a program director's perspective, though, there is more to be excited about than just the local team taking the field one extra time.

"Selfishly, it's good for programmers," Abbott elucidated. "It extends into the winter [ratings] book of the next calendar year, so this season will extend into the 2022 winter book. The idea of an extra game in January, which will obviously stretch the playoffs more, gives you a shot in the arm to stretch out the book."

Concurrent with the seventeenth game, though, is the reality that all stakeholders — whether they be fans, broadcast partners, radio stations, or teams — would like to avoid: The threat of some scheduled games having to be canceled or forfeited because of the spread of the Delta variant (B.1.617.2) of SARS-CoV-2, the direct cause of the fast-spreading, more severe form of COVID-19. If cancelation or forfeiture of matchups occurs, sports radio stations will treat it like breaking news, adjusting on the fly to continue to produce relevant football-related content.

"We haven't discussed in detail any type of contingency plan because, just like any other storyline, that becomes the thing we talk about," said Kinard. "We'd approach that the same way we did last year when there were changes to the schedule; we talk about the effect of that, whether it is right or wrong, who is to blame [, etc.] This is a storyline."

Entering the 102nd season of the National Football League, where, in many marketplaces, fans will be allowed to attend the games *en masse* for the first time since the onset of the pandemic, sports radio stations are committed to bringing their audiences extensive coverage of all the action on and off the field. In the process, they

seek to improve and/or maintain ratings, generate more revenue and increase listener engagement.

“We know that during the football season we gain new listeners and clients, and we want to find ways to maintain them throughout the rest of the year,” expressed Abbott. “It’s a marketing tool for many radio stations; the challenge is maintaining listeners throughout the season.”

It is nearly time for kickoff, and sports radio stations will attempt to put themselves in the best position to score a touchdown this football season in a dynamic media landscape. The extra point, though, will surely come from fans being able to safely enjoy the games together again under diminished restrictions.

“We all had a very difficult last year-and-a-half and have looked towards September as a time where kids are going back to school, people are returning to the office, etc.,” said Kinard. “Football is back, and [with] all of those things combined, it should make for a great fall.”