

Jeff Van Gundy: 'NBA Games Should Be Shortened To 2 Hour TV Window'

Derek Futterman | October 19, 2021 | Barrett Sports Media

ESPN enters its 20th season of NBA coverage with cross-platform coverage leading up to a prime-time matchup from Madison Square Garden with Jayson Tatum and the Boston Celtics visiting Julius Randle and the New York Knicks. ESPN Play-by-Play Announcer and “voice of the NBA Finals” Mike Breen will be on the call, joined by sideline reporter Lisa Salters and analysts Mark Jackson and Jeff Van Gundy. Jackson, who most recently served as head coach of the Golden State Warriors after a 17-year playing career, looked back on how far the broadcast has come since he first joined it in 2006.

“It [has] progressed with the variety of people [who] are covering the game,” said Jackson on a recent conference call. “Across the board, they’ve done an outstanding job of not making us all look and sound alike. I’m honored to be a part of that group.”

An issue prevalent in many sports, most notably Major League Baseball, pertains to pace-of-play. In an attempt to shorten “America’s Pastime” to attract and hold the attention of younger audiences, the introduction of new rules, such as limitations on mound visits, clocks to regulate time in-between innings, and restrictions on when the batter can step out of the box during an at-bat, have had the adverse effect. The average MLB contest lasts three hours and 11 minutes, the highest mark recorded since consistent measurement began in 1946.

While a regulation, four-quarter NBA game is significantly quicker than an MLB contest, Van Gundy, a former coach of 11 years, hopes the league can shorten the game even more to adapt to today’s viewing audience that holds an average attention span of just eight seconds, shorter than that of a goldfish. He suggests modifying rules, such as the length of halftime and instituting a statute of limitations on challenges, to ensure the game remains enthralling and entertaining for future generations.

“I’d love to see the game shortened into a two-hour window,” said Van Gundy. “I think we need to keep finding ways to reduce stoppages of play from timeouts. I would either shorten or greatly modify halftime. I think [the league has] to constantly look for ways to shorten the viewing window and have as much action in that two-hour timeframe as [it] can.”

With ESPN recently launching the “Manningcast,” an alternate, non-traditional broadcast of *Monday Night Football* featuring former NFL quarterbacks, Super Bowl champions and brothers Eli and Peyton Manning, the world of sports media has undoubtedly taken notice. The broadcast has a similar feel to friends hanging out and watching a football game, except these friends just so happen to have played and reached the pinnacle of professional football, offering unique perspectives and viewpoints shattering the fourth wall between the athletes and the fans. While the NBA

on ESPN has yet to do a broadcast at that scale with regularity, it is something that the network analysts are taking notice of.

“When you’re dealing with one of the greatest to ever play the game in Peyton, and a hall-of-famer in Eli, both guys do an incredible job,” said Jackson. “I think it gives an opportunity for viewers who want to see that type of broadcast. I don’t even know how many channels [ESPN has, but] it’s always going to be something against what we are doing... I have no problem with it at all.”

If ESPN decided to produce a non-traditional, alternate broadcast, Van Gundy offered an idea to close out his broadcasting career where the fans would be given the unfiltered perspective of those who have been on the court.

“I want to do one game, NBA on ESPN: The Entire Truth,” opined Van Gundy. “[We would] be able to tell the entire truth — not 90% of it, not 80% of it, but the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. I think that would be an outstanding, one-time broadcast as I sign off and finish my career.”

While Jackson and Van Gundy do not cover the NFL, they have not had their heads in the sand. They were asked about the emails from Jon Gruden leaked during an investigation into the culture of the Washington Football Team. Both hold concerns regarding similar issues that may have already occurred or could occur in the future within the NBA, a league that protested racial injustice last summer when playoff games were postponed and nearly cancelled following the shooting of Jacob Blake.

“It’s unfortunate, and I totally agree with the price that Jon Gruden had to pay for the things that he stated,” said Jackson. “My concern is I truly do not believe it is just a Jon Gruden story. There’s more to it, and there’s people being protected. We have to find a way to weave those people out... [and] hopefully we can get better across the board.”

Van Gundy holds an analogous sentiment with Jackson, and has lost trust in the NFL’s stand against injustice and willingness to do whatever it takes to directly avoid bad publicity

“The NFL has always found ways to protect itself from these things, and to deflect their responsibility,” affirmed Van Gundy. “They’ll give you a lot of clichés about transparency; yet, they are always covering and protecting their own. My level of trust for their investigations is nil.”

Aside from the trio of Breen, Jackson and Van Gundy, ESPN’s lineup of on-air personalities and commentators, the latter of whom all plan to appear on-site this season, includes analysts Doris Burke, Richard Jefferson and Vince Carter and play-by-play voices Ryan Ruocco, Mark Jones, Dave Pasch, Brian Custer and Beth Mowins. Additionally, sideline reporters for this season of the N.B.A. on ESPN include Malika Andrews, Katie George, Rosalyn Gold-Onwude, Cassidy Hubbarth, Lisa Salters and Jorge Sedano. One name, though, that has been within the N.B.A. landscape longer

than any of ESPN's rotation of broadcasters is Naismith Basketball Hall-of-Famer Hubie Brown, who starts his 50th season in the league between coaching and broadcasting.

Jeff Van Gundy, who ESPN recently inked to a multi-year contract extension, does not think his career will have the longevity of Brown's, but is grateful for the time he has spent with the network thus far, and looks forward to the future of what he calls his "second career."

"There has to be an award named for [Hubie Brown] somewhere. He's 88 — that would take me to 2050. I can't even imagine that," said Van Gundy. "The upper management of ESPN has changed a lot, but my direct boss in Tim Corrigan has never changed. Broadcasting is good, but broadcasting with friends is great... I've enjoyed it particularly because of who I work for and who I work with. I can't state how lucky I've been along the way to have coached as long as I did and to stumble into a second career."

ESPN's 20th season of NBA coverage kicks off Wednesday night with the prime-time matchup between the Boston Celtics and the New York Knicks at Madison Square Garden in New York.