

America's TV Pastime: An Analysis of Why Professional Sports Fans Prefer Watching the National Football League Over Major League Baseball on Television

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More out of habit than anything else, we still refer to baseball as the national pastime (McAdam, 2004). However, football began making inroads as the most viewed sport as far back as the 1970s. Two decades later, it isn't much of a contest anymore in terms of viewing popularity (McAdam, 2004). In 2014, 35% of fans called the National Football League (NFL) their favorite sport, followed by Major League Baseball (MLB) (14%), college football (11%), auto racing (7%), the National Basketball Association (NBA) (6%), the National Hockey League (NHL) (5%), and college basketball (Rovell, 2014). Although a wide variety of factors impact the popularity ratings, I am specifically interested in the reasons people may prefer watching the NFL over MLB on television.

In order to better understand, I conducted a short study that asked 36 male and female fans of MLB, the NFL, or both, and all above the age of 18, to complete a 21-question survey about their sports viewing preferences. Six percent of respondents were between the ages of 18-25; 72% were 26-33; 14% were 34-42; and 8% were older than 42. Participants ranged from stay-at-home mothers to working professionals in the sports media, which helped create a diverse background of respondents.

After viewing the results of my survey, I noticed three trends. First, my participants preferred both the length of NFL games over MLB games and the action that happens continuously in the NFL. Second, the participants also preferred the length of the 17-game NFL season versus the 162-game MLB season. Lastly, certain off-field issues have affected why the participants of this analysis watch the NFL over MLB on television. The results showed that 89% of participants prefer watching the NFL over MLB, while 6% would rather watch MLB, and 6% indicated they had no preference. Personally, I enjoy watching the NFL on television, regardless of which point of the season they are in, pre-season, regular season, playoffs, or the Super Bowl. Yet, I generally only start really watching MLB on television during the post-season and during the World Series. Out of curiosity, I decided to ask my respondents to also address their NFL and MLB television viewing habits during these times of the respective seasons.

During a MLB game, there are pauses between each pitch thrown to the batter, a pause when a new batter comes up to the plate, and long pauses between innings while the teams transition from offense to defense and from defense to offense. Rule 8.04 in Major League Baseball's rulebook says, "When the bases are unoccupied, the pitcher shall deliver the ball to the batter within 12 seconds after he receives the ball. Each time the pitcher delays the game by violating this rule, the umpire shall call Ball" (Berg, 2014). In 2010, games lasted on average about two hours and 55 minutes, according to Baseball Prospectus. The average game has increased steadily in length every season since, and contests in 2014 averaged about three hours and eight minutes (Berg, 2014). This can make for a very long time spent sitting in front of a television, and if the MLB game is slow, or potentially goes to extra innings, that time can seem like an eternity to some fans. Forty-seven percent of participants said they enjoy watching MLB on television somewhat, 33% said they don't like watching MLB on television, and only 19% said they like to watch MLB on television. One participant said, "[I] don't find the MLB boring entirely, but the pace of the game is slow and it's lost much of its tradition and luster. It's definitely more exciting during the playoffs from a television spectator standpoint." While another participant added "the MLB games have too much down time."

The NFL has more action in shorter periods of time than drawn out MLB games, and the breaks in play seem shorter, even with the delays that are a part of the game. In the NFL, a game progresses at a faster rate than a MLB game. The speed of the game could be a reason why some fans prefer to watch the NFL over MLB. In the NFL, there is a 40 second play clock, which is an allotted amount of time for the offense to run a play, and the in-game time clock continuously runs, yet can be stopped if there is a penalty, for the review of a play, or after an incomplete pass. Time between plays will be 40 seconds from the end of a given play until the snap of the ball for the next play, or a 25-second interval after certain administrative stoppages and game delays (NFL.com, 2015).

Regardless of the outcome of each play, the 40 second play clock is reset each time a new play begins. Although there are breaks and stoppage in play in the NFL, the game moves along quicker than that of MLB. The fact that there are more chances for train-wreck like collisions, exciting run and pass plays provide more room for the fans to enjoy the events that have taken place, and the defense has the opportunity to make big plays as they try to stop the offense from scoring, which has an appeal to a fan. In MLB, the chances for a homerun or a big catch happen less often, compared to a touchdown or turnover in the NFL. “Football is charitably called a contact sport. In actuality, it's a collision sport. You can watch a nine-inning baseball game and never see two players come in physical contact with one another. Not so with football, which guarantees high-speed crashes between players of ever-increasing size and strength on every play (McAdam, 2004).

The 162-game regular season schedule is also a reason why people have lost interest in watching MLB on television. Although games are played every day, with few days off for a long period of time, those are a lot of games to follow and stay updated on if you have a life outside of following MLB, and in reality most people don't have the time to watch a MLB game daily. Sixty-one percent of the participants answered that they would like to see the MLB's 162-game regular season shortened, while 31% like the length of the season, and 8% had no answer. The fact that football is generally played one day a week—while every baseball team plays every day for six months—is another point in the NFL's favor (McAdam, 2004).

Off the field factors have also affected my participants' decisions to watch MLB on television. Four of the participants indicated that performance enhancing drugs have skewed their views of the game, while the other four participants were bothered by the fact that MLB doesn't have a salary cap. One participant said, “the salary cap makes the list of who actually have a chance to win the World Series extremely small, which really hurts the game and the league.” Additionally, two people had a tough time supporting the international superstars who have become prominent in the game today.

Like MLB, there are off the field factors that have been perceived negatively by the participants that are fans of watching the NFL on television. Fifty-seven percent of the people are bothered by the off the field issues that involve the NFL, 14% are bothered by contract disputes, and 14% had no answer. Twenty-nine percent of the participants had other comments and opinions that affected why they watch the NFL on television. One respondent stated, “[I] don't support woman or animal beaters,” while another person added “I don't like how Commissioner Rodger Goodell has handled things.”

As a sports fan, I have been told the experience of watching MLB live, in person is greater than watching it on television. However, I have been to Spring Training in Arizona, and to Fenway Park in Boston, Massachusetts, to watch the Red Sox host the New York Yankees, which is arguably one of the most historic rivalries in all of sports. Both times I left equally bored, whether I watched the game on television or in person. However, I felt it was important to address the participants' personal preferences in this analysis. Fourteen percent of the people had attended Spring Training, 92% had been to a regular season game, 11% had been to a playoff series, 3% had been to the World Series, and 8% had never been to a MLB event in person. When the stakes are highest in MLB, for example during the playoffs or the World Series, 92% of the people said they watch MLB on television, while 8% said that wasn't a factor of whether they watched MLB on television. Compared to MLB in person, 44% of respondents had been to a NFL pre-season game, 100% of the people had been to a regular season NFL game, 24% had been to an NFL playoff game, and 8% had been to the Super Bowl. Also compared to the 92% of the people that watched MLB more on television during the post-season or World Series, 8% of the respondents answered they watch the NFL more on television during the Super Bowl, 81% claimed they watch the NFL more when the Super Bowl is on, 6% had no answer, and the other 6% commented. The response which stood out to me the most was whether the participants in this research watched the NFL more so on television during the Super Bowl, in which one participant said “the answer is no, but I want to say that football is most enjoyable to watch during the regular season.”

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