

Fans rejoice: Subscription-free streaming for NFL games

5 September 2018, by Anick Jesdanun



In this Thursday, Aug. 30, 2018, photo apps for NFL and Yahoo Sports are displayed on a phone on the sidelines before a preseason NFL football game between the Philadelphia Eagles and the New York Jets in Philadelphia. As the regular season starts Thursday, Sept. 6, the league is finally dropping a requirement that viewers sign in with a cable or satellite subscription, as it seeks to expand its online audience at a time when TV ratings are declining. The subscription-free games will be available on the NFL app and the Verizon-owned Yahoo Sports, Tumblr and AOL apps. (AP Photo/Matt Rourke)

The good news for football fans: It's going to be much easier to watch NFL games online this year.

The league is finally dropping a requirement that viewers sign in with a cable or satellite subscription, in hopes of expanding its online audience at a time when TV ratings are declining. Though there are restrictions—no free streaming on smart TVs, for instance—the move marks a significant departure for sports. Other major professional leagues still require TV subscriptions for hometown teams.

The NFL regular season starts Thursday.

"We think people will still want to watch on the biggest screen possible," said Brian Rolapp, the league's chief business and media officer.

But as more people drop cable or satellite subscriptions—or never sign up in the first place—the NFL needs to be flexible in order to reach them, Rolapp said. Even those who can watch on TV are preferring phones, he said.

"If you don't get to that younger demographic, who aren't conditioned to go to the television, you do run the risk of losing them," he said.

The NFL has been inching toward subscription-free games in recent years. It made a deal with Twitter, then Amazon, to stream a handful of games online. This year, Amazon will offer 11 Thursday night games for free on its Twitch app or on its Prime Video app with a \$119-a-year Prime subscription.

Last season, Verizon customers got subscription-free access on phones to whatever CBS or Fox was broadcasting regionally on Sunday afternoons, plus all the nationally televised games on NBC, ESPN and NFL Network. Now, any wireless customer can get them on both phones and tablets. The one restriction: Seven games that are exclusive to the NFL Network channel can be viewed only on phones, not tablets.



In this Thursday, Aug. 30, 2018, photo a phone screen is displayed during the second half of a preseason NFL football game between the Philadelphia Eagles and the New York Jets in Philadelphia. As the regular season starts Thursday, Sept. 6, the league is finally dropping a requirement that viewers sign in with a cable or satellite subscription, as it seeks to expand its online audience at a time when TV ratings are declining. The subscription-free games will be available on the NFL app and the Verizon-owned Yahoo Sports, Tumblr and AOL apps. (AP Photo/Matt Rourke)

Online football streaming, estimated by NFL officials at 2 percent to 3 percent of overall viewership, isn't enough yet to offset declines in television viewership. But the NFL believes every viewer counts. A key element in getting the television networks on board: The networks get to sell the majority of ads appearing on those subscription-free streams. Distributors such as Verizon get the rest.

The subscription-free games will be available on the NFL app and the Verizon-owned Yahoo Sports, Tumblr and AOL apps in the U.S. On iPhones and iPads, the games can also be streamed on the Safari web browser.

TV networks will still stream games through their apps, but you'll typically have to sign in with a cable or satellite subscription. That's how you can get games on smart TVs, including streaming-TV devices such as Apple TV and Roku, as well as on laptops and desktop computers. The [network](#) apps will stream games on phones, too, something not available before because of Verizon's exclusivity.

Cable-like online streaming packages offer yet another option for TVs. Only two major ones have all five football networks: PlayStation Vue for \$50 a month, and DirecTV Now for \$55. Sling TV offers budget-conscious fans NBC, Fox and NFL Network for \$25. Sling TV and others offer four networks for \$40 or \$45. Some of the over-the-air stations might not be available in your market, especially outside big cities, so check before subscribing.

As for NFL RedZone, a channel that switches from [game](#) to game to show key plays and scoring, you can subscribe on phones for \$5 a month. But if you want to watch on other devices, you need to first subscribe to a cable, satellite or online package, then pay extra.

Once a game ends, it's available for streaming through the NFL Game Pass service, which costs \$100 for the season.

And for out-of-market games—those not televised by your local CBS or Fox station—DirecTV offers the NFL Sunday Ticket starting at nearly \$300 for the season. It's typically limited to DirecTV satellite subscribers, though an online package is available if you can't get a signal where you live. DirecTV Now subscribers in seven cities can also get it as part of a test offering.

As for college football, the bulk will be on cable channels. Online policies vary, but a cable, satellite or online TV package is typically required.

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