

FIELD OF STREAMS:

Why sports fans are getting lost in the cornfield of streaming.



Remember when watching sports was simple? You'd grab a beer, turn on the TV, and the game was just there — on one of the handful of channels every fan knew by heart. Today, the fan experience is changing fast. There's more choice than ever ... and a whole lot more confusion. Most major leagues have at least one foot — and in some cases, both — planted firmly in the streaming pool. For instance:

- [Prime Video won NBA rights away from WBD](#), leaving TBS without basketball for the first time in 40 years.
- YouTube's acquisition of NFL [Sunday Ticket](#) has made it a new home for football fans.
- Netflix now boasts the [two most-viewed boxing matches in history](#).
- [Apple TV holds exclusive F1 rights in the U.S.](#), coinciding with the [streaming release of its upcoming Brad Pitt-led F1 movie](#).

And it's not just the streamers. Legacy media companies like Paramount and Versant are betting big on sports as they reinvent themselves for the digital age — 100 years in the making.

Why Sports Still Make Sense

Even as media companies tighten their belts, sports rights have only grown more expensive. Why? Because sports have attributes that the streaming wars have made even more valuable. **Let's break down what makes sports such a powerful — and increasingly pricey — anchor for streaming:**

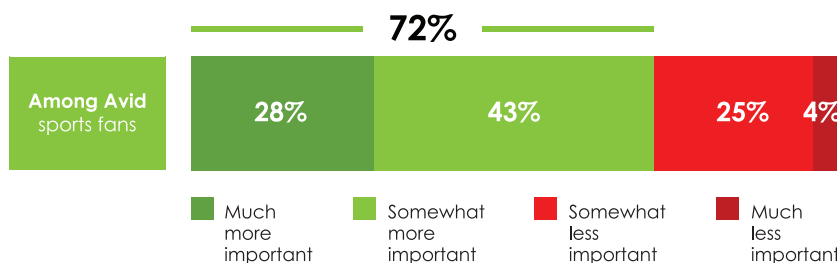
1. Sports are unique where scripted content differs only by degree.

There are lots of buzzy original shows, but in sports there's no substitute. Fans care — deeply. According to Hub's Evolution of Sports study:

- **72% of avid fans say they care more about sports than anything else they watch on TV.**
- **82% of avid fans would sign up for a new subscription if they needed it to watch a sport they follow.**

A MAJORITY OF AVID FANS CARE MORE ABOUT SPORTS THAN OTHER TYPES OF CONTENT, AS DO HALF OF CASUAL FANS

How important is it to be able to watch sports content compared to other things you watch, read, or listen to?



BASE: TOTAL RATINGS IN EACH GROUP; AVID FANS (n=3904), CASUAL FANS (n=2597); Average across all sports rated (respondents rated up to two key sports)
N5. How important is it for you to be able to watch programming for these sports compared to other things you watch, read, or listen to?

Nothing else we've measured in our research at Hub has this kind of power to drive subscriptions.

2. Sports are predictable, where scripted content is risky.

The TV business has long relied on a small number of hits paying for a larger number of misses. But today, the economics of streaming and the cost of production make those failures even riskier. Sports are different: no one checks Rotten Tomatoes before they turn on the game — they just tune in. Year-round [sports like the UFC](#) or WWE generate hours of consistent content. And [social media](#), athlete engagement, and sports documentaries help keep seasonal sports relevant year-round.

3. Sports drive higher ROI for scripted content.

Fans will sign up for a platform they've never used simply to watch a game. That gives streamers an opportunity to introduce them to shows they might never have discovered otherwise. And sports help drive that discovery:

- **37% of fans at least occasionally watch shows promoted during a game (and 77% say it happens a lot).**
- **32% say they stay on the same channel or platform after a game and watch something else.**

37%

"very often"/"often" watch a show they see promoted while watching sports (and 77% do at least occasionally)

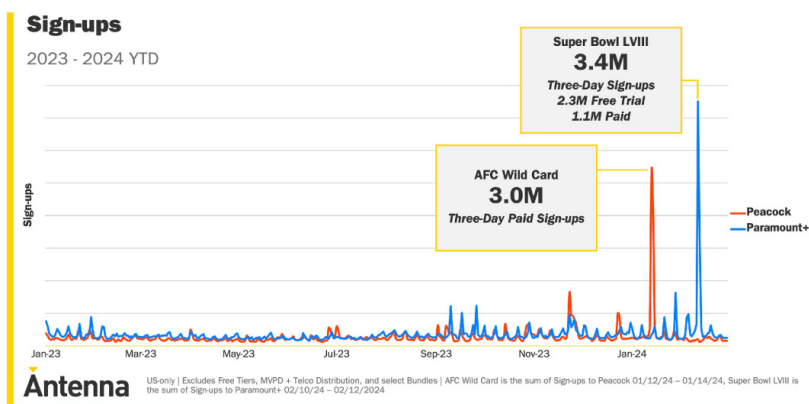
32%

"very often"/"often" stay on the same channel/service after the game and watch a show they had not planned to



With the number of viewers at stake, the impact can be enormous.

In January 2024, Peacock made a big bet by putting an [NFL playoff game behind a paywall](#) — and it worked. They generated an estimated **2.8 million new subscribers**, a huge boost for a platform that had about 34 million total subs at the time.



So the stream-ification of sports has big, obvious advantages for both the leagues and the platforms. However, there are some obstacles.

Fan Friction

Navigating the shift of beloved content from linear TV to streaming isn't new. Viewers already faced this speed bump with scripted TV. But with sports, the stakes are higher. Buzzy original shows can be found on any platform these days — but there's only one NBA, one Premier League, one NFL. There is no substitute.

If viewers can't find the game, it's at least an inconvenience — and at worst, it disrupts a cherished, time-honored ritual. Eagles fans climb lampposts when the team loses; imagine if they couldn't watch the game in the first place.

[Hub's Evolution of Sports study](#) shows that this frustration is already rearing its head:

- **65% of fans say it's a hassle to use more than one service during a season.**
- **53% say it's gotten harder to find the games they want to watch.**

The disaggregation of sports also disrupts habits formed over decades — highly analog, but deeply loved.

For instance: back in the cable days, you could check the score of another game by hitting “last channel” to flip back and forth. With streaming, you may have to exit one app, find another on your smart-TV home screen, open it, locate the game, and then wait for it to buffer and start playing.

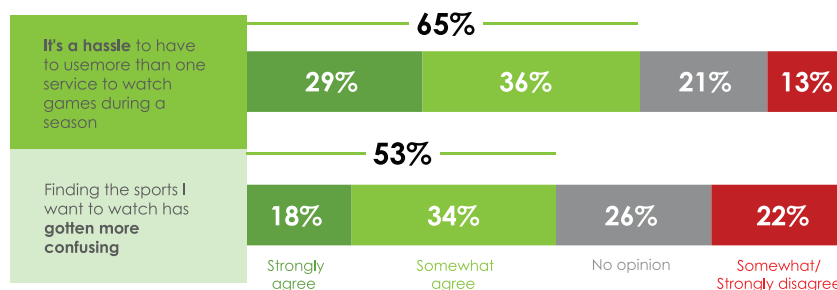
The interruption of these familiar behaviors matters:

- **63% of viewers say it's too hard to check other games happening at the same time.**

And while diehard fans will tune in no matter what, this friction can slow the process of turning casual fans into avid ones.

BUT DISAGGREGATION CAN HURT THE VIEWING EXPERIENCE FOR FANS

Do you agree or disagree with these statements?



MANY ARE STILL TRYING TO REPLICATE THEIR “ALL LINEAR” SPORTS-VIEWING EXPERIENCE

% fans who stream live sports that have each problem “**regularly**” or “**sometimes**”:

63%

“it's difficult to check on other games that are on at the same time”

69%

“It's hard to find the game or match I want to watch”

What Media Companies Should Do

The next evolution in sports streaming won't be about rights — it'll be about navigation. Fans don't need another platform; they just need a better way to use the ones they already have. Here's what media companies can do to be successful:

Cross-Platform Interfaces.

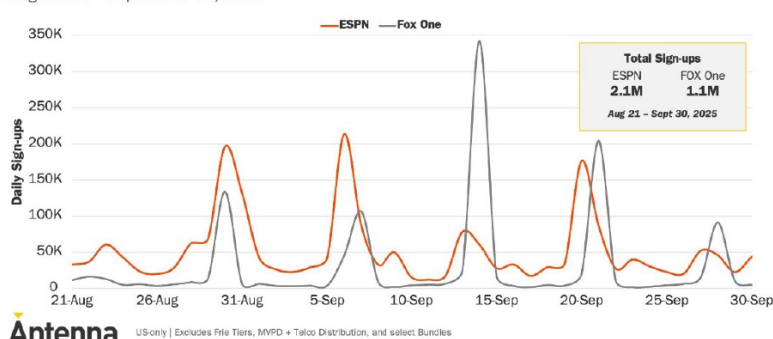
- **YouTube TV's Multiview feature** lets users toggle between multiple games on one screen.
- **Roku's Sports Zones** organize content by sport rather than by who owns the rights — which is how fans actually think. You choose your sport — from the NFL or NBA to motorsports or extreme sports — and the interface guides you to live games and related content, regardless of platform.
- **ESPN's Where to Watch feature** tells fans where to find and watch their games, even when those games appear on a competing network — something that would have been unthinkable even a couple of years ago.



Swing Big on Rights. Many major sports properties don't want to sacrifice reach by selling all their rights to one platform. But some sentiment is shifting. For example, when shopping for a media partner, the UFC wanted to give fans a true one-stop shop. **Now, Paramount+ will carry all UFC Fight Night events as well as all pay-per-view.** This represents big savings financially — but more importantly, it creates a simpler experience that would be appealing even if the price were identical.

ESPN and FOX One Daily Sign-ups

August 21 – September 30, 2025



Go Big on Bundles. For all its flaws, cable made sports simple: all the games were on your remote, and you could find them the moment they came on. Individual streaming apps do a solid job of aggregating the sports they hold the rights to — but with rights scattered across so many companies, **collaborations like the new ESPN/Fox/Warner bundle remove an extra layer of friction.** While the bundle is only a few weeks old, sign-up rates for the individual services (which cost \$10 more outside the bundle) suggest it will be very successful.

Putting the Fan Experience First

Sports are poised for even more growth. Major leagues are more popular than ever; streaming and social media are helping niche and women's sports scale at record rates; and AI will soon enable hyper-personalized feeds that deepen fan engagement year-round.

Still, until discovery improves, the industry risks alienating the very audience it fought so hard to attract. Fans don't know — or care — about rights; they just want to watch the game. Every extra speed bump disrupts the habits and rituals at the heart of why fans love sports in the first place.

SUBSCRIBE
to HubIntel.Substack.com

