

Blackout!

By Reg P. Wydeven
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When I was a kid, my family and I went to Michigan for a wedding. We stayed with my relatives in Pontiac. Other than the Packers, the Detroit Lions were, and still are, my second favorite NFL team.

In those days, the star of the Lions was Billy Sims, the amazing running back out of the University of Oklahoma. He was my favorite player. Not only was he an amazing back, we also share a birthday.

One awesome perk of the trip was having lunch at the Marc's restaurant located within the Pontiac Silverdome, the home of the Lions. I got to eat spaghetti at a table overlooking the field where Billy Sims played.

That Sunday, the Packers played the Lions in the Silverdome. I was so excited to see both of my favorite teams play. When I asked my Uncle Stu what channel the game was on, he replied that not enough tickets were sold, so the game was going to be blacked out.

Coming from Wisconsin, where the waiting list for season tickets has more people on it than Lambeau Field can hold, a blackout was a foreign concept. Being well-versed in blackouts, Uncle Stu explained that the Federal Communications Commission has a rule that NFL games that don't sell enough tickets cannot be shown on network television in the team's local market. He went on to say that many times Ford, Cadillac or one of the other big car companies would buy big blocks of tickets to avoid a blackout, but we had no such luck that week.

Well, it looks like the next time I visit relatives in Michigan, I won't have to worry about missing Clay Matthews try to tackle Reggie Bush.

The FCC unanimously voted last month to sack the blackout rule. The rule was implemented in 1975 to encourage attendance at games. While the rule is best known for impacting NFL games, it actually applies to all live sporting events. The agency did away with the rule claiming that it benefits team owners instead of consumers.

The NFL, though, warns that by ending the rule, the League may look to move all games to pay-TV, such as ESPN or the NFL Network, to make up for the revenue lost from ticket sales. FCC Commissioner Ajit Pai believes that the League seems to be doing okay, citing the billion dollar TV contracts that constitute "a substantial majority of the NFL's revenues." In addition, he pointed out that when the rule was established nearly 60% of NFL games were blacked out; today that number is less than 1%.

The FCC wants to make it clear the government is not the bad guy. "For 40 years, these teams have hidden behind a rule of the FCC," claimed FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler. "No more. Everyone needs to be aware who allows blackouts to exist, and it is not the Federal Communications Commission."

While the blackout rule was repealed, blackouts may still occur. The NFL has analogous rules written into their contracts with broadcasters. These contracts typically run through the end of a decade.

So on our next Michigan excursion, I might not be watching Calvin Johnson, aka Megatron, hauling in touchdown passes after all.

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