

Sports Blackouts

A “sports blackout” occurs when a sports event that was scheduled to be televised is not aired in a particular media market. A blackout may prevent transmission of sports programming on local broadcast networks and/or non-broadcast platforms such as cable and satellite television. From 1975 to 2014, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) had sports blackout rules, but those rules were very limited and rarely involved in the sports blackouts you may have experienced.

Sports blackouts rules repealed

The FCC repealed its sports blackout rules, which prohibited cable and satellite operators from airing any sports event that was blacked out on a local broadcast station. This action removes Commission protection of the private blackout policies of sports leagues, which require local broadcast stations to black out a game if a team does not sell a certain percentage of tickets by a certain time prior to the game. Elimination of this rule, however, may not end all sports blackouts: sports leagues may choose to continue their private blackout policies through contractual arrangements with programming distributors. For more information read the news release at www.fcc.gov/document/fcc-eliminates-sports-blackout-rules.

Sports blackouts are privately negotiated

All blackouts of sports events today are the result of contractual agreements between the content owners (*i.e.*, the sports leagues or teams) and the programming distributors (*i.e.*, the broadcast television networks and stations, and the cable and satellite networks and systems). Each sports league has different rules about when a televised event is blacked out, and those rules are part of the contracts the league or team signs with programming distributors. In most cases, the blackout results when a sports league prohibits an event from being televised locally if the event did not sell out all its tickets. Some games also may be "preempted," often because one game is "local" and a second game is not, or because two networks (broadcast and/or non-broadcast) both scheduled the televising of the same game in the same market.

What you can do if a sports event is blacked out

If a sports event is blacked out on a particular broadcast or non-broadcast channel, you may want to contact the broadcast channel or non-broadcast system to determine why the decision to black out the event was made, as well as register your viewing preferences with the channel or system which they can consider when renewing any future distribution agreements with sports leagues. You also can contact the relevant sports team.

To contact the FCC

- By phone: 1-888-CALL-FCC (1-888-225-5322); TTY: 1-888-TELL-FCC (1-888-835-5322);
- By mail:

Federal Communications Commission
Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau
Consumer Inquiries and Complaints Division
445 12th Street, S.W.
Washington, DC 20554

Accessible Formats

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