Sky shakes up football again — will fans opt for TV or terraces?

This season, more than 1,000 lower-league games will now stream online. But the varied kick-off times are sparking debate

William Turvill

On a Thursday lunchtime in early August, the Toughsheet Community Stadium, home of the once-mighty Bolton Wanderers, was dead. With the nearby M61 humming, a few locals were trickling in and out of the club store, which sells Bolton-branded ties, towels, curtains and dog leads. But they were far outnumbered by those shopping at Next, across the road in the Middlebrook retail park.

In a couple of weeks, the atmosphere in this suburban corner of Bolton will be rather more lively as Wanderers host their League One rivals Wrexham, the Welsh club that has found international fame under the ownership of screen stars Ryan Reynolds and Rob McElhenney.

"We've already sold over 20,500 tickets, two-and-a-half weeks out from that fixture," said Neil Hart, the chief executive of Bolton Wanderers, sitting with a coffee in the darkened bar of the Bolton Stadium Hotel. "I'm confident we'll hit 23, 24, 25,000 for that fixture. So bordering very close to a sell-out."

A full capacity at the Toughsheet on Sunday, August 18, would be significant because the match will be broadcast live on Sky, meaning fans could choose to watch it for less money in their living rooms.

The clash between Bolton and Wrexham is one of 1,059 English Football League matches that will be shown live on Sky, or the new Sky Sports+ app, this season thanks to a five-year, £935 million broadcast deal that starts this Friday night.

Previously, Sky paid £119 million a year for 243 matches. Now the company is paying £187 million a year for the rights to more than 1,000 matches across English football's second, third and fourth tiers. With each team guaranteed to be on at least 20 times, the result is that Championship clubs can expect at least £2 million a year from Sky, while those in League One will receive more than £400,000, and those in League Two £200,000.

This is arguably the most transformational TV deal for football since Sky landed a £304 million, five-year deal with the newly launched Premier League back in 1992.

Beyond the Sky money, EFL chief executive Trevor Birch is hopeful that clubs can boost their fanbases and find new sponsorship opportunities. "Giving them a bigger platform, giving them wider exposure, will undoubtedly help them in terms of their revenue generation," he said.

There is a catch. Some clubs are concerned that the tie-up may reduce matchday attendance, and therefore ticket revenues. Some Sky subscribers may choose to save money by watching matches from home. But the bigger concern is that fans could be enraged or put off by a more varied calendar of kick-off times.

The 3pm Saturday blackout, which prevents broadcasters from showing live matches during English football's traditional hours of play, means that many games will now have to be played outside this window. Sky has won an exception to the blackout rules for this coming weekend, allowing it to broadcast all matches, including those starting at 3pm.

Nowhere will the challenge of the new regime be felt more keenly than in Swansea, south Wales, on Saturday morning. Swansea City's opening match kicks off at 12.30pm in Middlesbrough, more than 300 miles to the northeast. The supporters' coach is scheduled to depart at 4am.

Ahead of this season, Championship club Swansea has reduced prices, so that a typical matchday ticket will cost £23.50, down from £29. A spokesman said that while the club's chief motivation was to make games "as affordable as possible", the Sky deal was "also factored in, given the spread of potential kick-off times, and the rise in appearances on live broadcasts".

Chris Jackson, 28, a long-standing season-ticket holder at Doncaster Rovers in South Yorkshire, was planning to attend the League Two side's away match at Harrogate, North Yorkshire, next month with his girlfriend, Dani. But they decided against it when the fixture was moved to a Thursday night. "If you're an average fan, and you're wanting to watch any lower league football, that's great – because you're getting a lot more coverage," he said. "But it's really annoying for those who want to go to matches that were supposed to be on Saturday at 3 o'clock."

ILLUSTRATION: PETE BAKER

> People work very hard in our city to be able to come on a Saturday with their families

Other clubs are not concerned about their matchday attendances. Many fans have become accustomed to having fixtures rearranged because of cup match clashes and broadcaster decisions. Under the new deal, Sky is pledging to give fans their fixture times often several months in advance.

And as for the concern about more watching from home, supporters have long been able to tune into matches, paying £10 per game, through the EFL's iFollow platform and club streaming services – although these were capped at 360 a season. This will no longer be available for domestic fans. The Sky deal is significant because all EFL clubs have voted to sell access to their games through Sky rather than attempt to stream directly to their own fans.

Zoe Webber, the executive director of Championship club Norwich City, said there was no evidence that showing more football on television eats into matchday attendances. "That live experience – it's so much more than watching the game," she said. "It's coming on a matchday with your friends. It's going to a particular bar. It's going with maybe your mum or your dad. So I don't think broadcast can take over that experience."

Ryan Sparks, the chief executive of League Two's Bradford City, agrees. But he will be keeping a close eye on fixture changes. "The only fear I have is the displacement of too many games," he said. "Because people work very hard in our city to be able to come on a Saturday with their families." But, he adds, he was able to persuade Sky not to move one of Bradford's big Saturday matches to a Monday, fearing the club could miss out on a 20,000-plus attendance.

For Sky, the hope is that its £935 million outlay will strengthen its status as the televisual home of English football. The deal looks good for Sky: it is paying far less money per match, and will hope that it can draw in new subscribers.

"This is just the beginning," said Jonathan Licht, the managing director of Sky Sports, which costs about £30 a month. "Sky Sports+ unlocks the potential for us to keep evolving and finding new ways to deliver brilliant sport to our customers."

He adds: "For the first time next weekend, we will broadcast every game live from across the EFL. It's going to be a huge moment for football fans up and down the country and is a fitting way to kick-off our ground-breaking new partnership with the EFL."

This new money is welcome for the clubs of the EFL, but there is an elephant in the room. While their deal is worth £119 million a year to 72 clubs, Sky recently struck a £5.2 billion, four-year deal with the Premier League, equal to £1.3 billion a year for 20 clubs.

One boss, whose club had moved between the Premier League and Championship in recent years, said that top-tier clubs could expect at least £100 million a year in broadcast revenues. In the second tier, through the sale of domestic and international TV rights, as well as other related income, the biggest clubs can expect to make closer to £10 million.

Back in the Bolton Stadium Hotel bar, Neil Hart has plans to use his new Sky money to invest in the training ground, as well as his club store. But, he added, the broadcasting deal alone is not enough.

Bolton's owners, Football Ventures, bought the club out of administration five years ago, and it remains a loss-maker. "It is impossible for Bolton to be sustainable as an EFL club," said Hart, explaining that for the club to break even, it would have to halve its player budget and sacrifice its footballing "ambition".

The solution, he believes, lies in the hands of the new Independent Football Regulator, which will go live after passage of the Football Governance Bill. Hart wants there to be a fairer "redistribution of funds" from Premier League clubs to the EFL, and said there should be new regulations on player salaries.

"We've just got to hope that the regulator comes in and works with clubs from the Premier League right through to the EFL, to put a better financial model in place for football," he said. "That is much needed. It's been desperate for a number of years."

France wins gold for public spending, but fails at budgeting

PETER CONRADI

in Paris

When Holly-Rose Clegg was beginning her acting career in Paris, a job at Starbucks helped pay her bills. Almost a decade later, she has a successful career on stage and screen – but it is now the French state, rather than serving coffee, that keeps her going in the inevitable gap between engagements.

Every month, Clegg logs onto an official website to input the jobs she has done and how much she has earned . She is then paid for the days she has not worked– in her case, typically €1,600 (£1,350) a month.

"It's amazing because France is the only country that pays us like a salary every month," said Clegg, 33, who was born in London to British parents and moved to France when she was eight. "They give it to actors, singers, dancers, musicians, even technical people who work on movie sets or do the sound. Even if you're a foreigner, you can still have it if you work here, which is really cool. It's not just for French people."

The scheme, estimated to cost more than €1 billion a year, is typical of a unique economic model that has made the French state one of the largest and most generous in the world.

Such largesse comes at a cost, however: now at close to 57 per cent of GDP, government spending in France has long been way higher than in any of its G7 rivals; the equivalent figure for Britain is 44.2 per cent and for America 37.5 per cent. At the same time, tax rates are high, while social charges – the French equivalent of national insurance – are vast. Yet, in recent years, successive governments have found it difficult to balance the books: the budget deficit is running at 5.5 per cent of GDP, which has helped push up government debt to 110.8 per cent of GDP, third only to Greece (159.8 per cent) and Italy (137.7 per cent).


Holly-Rose Clegg can claim pay for days she's not worked

Now, with all eyes on Paris for the Olympic Games (which will cost the state a few billion euros more), the crisis is coming to a head: the markets are getting nervous, the ratings agencies have downgraded French debt and the European Commission is demanding action.

To further complicate matters, the country is still without a government almost a month after an inconclusive election in which the largest number of seats was won by the New Popular Front, a left-wing coalition that wants the state to spend considerably more, rather than less.

"We are the world champions for public spending and the European champion for taxes, plus growth is mediocre at little more than 1 per cent," said Benoît Perrin, director of *Contribuables Associés*, a campaigning group that is the French equivalent of Britain's TaxPayers' Alliance.

"The figures for our public accounts are staggering. We haven't had a balanced budget since 1974. The only way to balance the books is to cut public spending, but for 50 years, our governments have drugged the French with public money, and it is very difficult to wean them off it."

Part of the problem is the high level of spending on social protection, which at 33 per cent of GDP is well above the European average of 27 per cent.

Discontent, meanwhile, is growing with the quality of public services. France's much-vaunted health system, though in a considerably better condition than the NHS, is struggling to eradicate "medical deserts" – areas where there are not enough doctors – while its schools are sliding down the international league tables.

Paradoxically, France's budgetary woes come despite a concerted drive by President Emmanuel Macron to open up the economy: labour laws have been made more flexible, taxes for business lowered and unemployment cut.

Foreign investors have taken note and, for the fifth year running, put more money into France than they have into Germany or Britain, according to a new EY attractiveness survey.

Still, though, France is in the midst of a financial crisis – and, when it comes to crises, Macron's response, like that of his predecessors, has been to spend more public money.

How, and when, France will get to grips with the problem is not clear. Bruno Le Maire, the outgoing finance minister, announced plans last month for €25 billion in budget cuts this year, with the aim of bringing the deficit down towards the level demanded by the EU: 3 per cent of GDP.

This was not enough to appease the *Cour des comptes*, the independent body that scrutinises France's public spending. In a damning report, the auditors accused the government of failing to deliver sufficient cuts and described its debt-reduction promises for the future as "unrealistic".

The Council of Economic Analysis, an organisation attached to the French prime minister's office, argued that the government would have to cut spending by €112 billion over the next 7 to 12 years to generate a 1 per cent primary budget surplus necessary to bring down the debt. Macron does not appear to have got the memo: spending by the French presidency last year was €125.5 million, a budget overshoot of €8.3 million.

As the largest grouping in the new parliament, the New Popular Front has staked its claim to the premiership, alarming financial markets with policies that include raising public sector wages, linking salaries to inflation, and cutting income tax and social security contributions for lower earners.

Notably, it has pledged to reverse a controversial law to raise the retirement age from 62 to 64, credited with saving the state an estimated €17 billion a year – and reduce it to just 60.

Last weekend, its candidate for prime minister, Lucie Castets, 37, a left-wing economist and senior civil servant, called for €150 billion more in taxes between now and 2027, largely levied on the better-off and on companies, and said keeping to the EU's 3 per cent limit would not be her "primary objective".

Macron is not obliged to appoint her, however, and has indicated that he will try to form a centrist coalition grouped around his own supporters in parliament. Unwilling to destabilise the country in the middle of the Olympics, he has said he will not do so until after the Games. Meanwhile, France's debt looks set to continue ticking up.