

Self-indulgent NFL hasn't sold fans on overkill

- Even diehards yawn at schedule “specials” and offseason blather.

VIKINGS INSIDER

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If it's not yet time for an all-out intervention, I'm afraid we're getting close. Those three letters that we've long loved (NFL), that trusty entertainment industry that injects us with giddy anticipation every fall? Well, I'm beginning to suspect the NFL and its media partners have a problem — a potentially dangerous addiction to publicity and nonsensical hyper-analysis.

How else can we justify what happened Tuesday when America's favorite pro sports league unveiled its 2012 schedule and then blasted it with a firehose of over-involved discussion?

Suddenly matchups we've known for months had — *gasp!* — dates.

ESPN pounced on the “breaking news” with a three-hour prime time special. It began with a melodramatic intro featuring some dude scribbling equations on a marker board and trying to go all MIT on the NFL.

The narration: “Lots to consider. Bye weeks. Short weeks. Games in

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NFL's buffet of overkill leaves even diehards bloated

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prime time. Thursday night games. How's this all going to come together?"

Is it really that complicated?

The NFL Network, meanwhile, had six talking heads on set during its three-hour extravaganza, equipped with compelling features like "R stands for Reunion or Revenge?"

All this for the release of a schedule.

Seriously NFL, I'm a little worried. I'm close to summoning Seal Team Six to round up Roger Goodell, Adam Schefter, Mark Schlereth and Tim Tebow for a counseling session.

It's time we put them all on a couch and say: "Boys, it's OK to step out of the big top for a day. Take a breath. We'll survive. Honestly, we don't need to continue packaging every NFL news nugget as if it's the equivalent of the first moon landing."

And more talk

Look, I get it. The release of the schedule provides a jolt of energy, a chance to start sniffing the tailgate fumes. And I have no problem with fans who eagerly anticipate that announcement, looking for a fix before the schedule makes it onto their refrigerator magnets.

But three hours of analysis? Not even "Monday Night Football" announcer Mike Tirico could feign enthrallment.

"You have no idea which games are going to be good," Tirico said only 18 minutes into ESPN's special. "What I've learned ... is the good matchups become the worst games and the worst matchups become the good games. You don't know."

Yet here came 162 more minutes of debate — on games more than 4½ months away.

I worry the NFL is sliding down a slippery slope, squealing like that zip-lining pig in the Geico commercials. I fear the league's desire to be the center of the sports universe all 365 days eventually may alienate fans who don't want all the buildup, all those contrived debates and all that Tim Tebow crammed down their throats day after day.

Overexposure near?

Remember when things began going haywire for LeBron James? It was in prime time on July 8, 2010 when a massively hyped ESPN program called "The Decision" exposed King James' annoying aura of self-importance and his worrisome lack of self-awareness.

Before that, James was widely beloved. He was a jovial superstar doing Nike and Sprite ads while being asked to host "Saturday Night Live" and The ESPYs. Then he became a free agent, fell into a publicity-hungry trap and lost the love.

The sudden revolt that made James a despised sports villain didn't occur simply because he jilted Cleveland in bizarre fashion. It came because LeBron couldn't control the hype that surrounded him, got sucked into its vortex and became so self-absorbed that the nation had no choice but to sigh, roll its eyes and become cynical.

In some ways, the circus surrounding Tuesday's NFL schedule release had similarities.

Hype machine rolls

We may always love the high stakes of all those Sundays from September through

early February. We love watching star quarterbacks and receivers pick apart helpless defenses. We appreciate it when a team like last year's Giants transforms from a middling underachiever into a Super Bowl champion in the matter of six weeks.

But let's not get out of control. What the NFL, its sponsors and its media need to avoid is breaking out the Vegas-style marquee when there is an unveiling of "new uniforms" that look pretty much exactly like the old ones.

What the NFL needs to tone down is the unnecessary pomp that now means handing out the MVP and Rookie of the Year awards at an imitation Oscars show fully loaded with red-carpet theatrics.

What the hype machine needs to filter out is the breathless coverage that chronicles which players showed up for the first day of offseason conditioning — in April.

Look, when I was a kid, I loved soda. So imagine my delight when I discovered the Big Gulp and later the Super Big Gulp at the local 7-Eleven.

And when that lost its novelty, they put a kiddy pool-sized Double Gulp cup beside the machine.

Because what's more refreshing than 64 ounces of Mello Yello?

I loved it. For a week.

Then one day I could only get through about 40 ounces before getting violently ill. Haven't had a Big Gulp or Mello Yello since. It was just too much.