

Congress, the National Football League, and the Blackout Controversy of 1972-1975

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Since the 1951 hearings on Organized Baseball, the U.S. Congress has regularly involved itself in the affairs of professional sports. In the early 1970s, Congress found itself engaged in a bitter struggle with the National Football League over the controversial "blackout" rule. Congress held hearings in 1972 on the league's policy of blacking out home games and passed a temporary anti-blackout bill that was to be in effect for three NFL seasons. Brief hearings were held in 1975 which culminated in the passage of the Sports Broadcasting Act of 1975, a bill that has radically changed sports broadcasting.

The purpose of this paper was to briefly dramatize the congressional hearings of 1972 and 1975, while summarizing the arguments of congressmen who supported the bill and the testimonies of representatives of the NFL who opposed the bill. Beyond this, the paper offered conclusions concerning the forces that brought about the bill's introduction and passage, the effects of the legislation, and Congress' perceptions and treatment of professional football vis a vis professional baseball. The paper, based primarily on congressional documents and newspaper coverage, is a piece of socio-political sports history that will cast more light on the increasingly important relationship between Congress and professional sports.