Benched: The Rising Costs of Following Sports in America

For fans watching games at home, streaming services and tailgating staples come with steep price tags

By: Emily DiVito, Elizabeth Pancotti, and Kylee Countryman

Following your favorite team used to take two simple tasks: turning on your TV and firing up the grill. But as NCAA and NFL football seasons kick off, both will cost more than ever for fans tuning in from home. Leagues have carved game rights into a costly patchwork of paywalled apps, regional broadcasters are collapsing under their own business models, and the tailgate spread fans look forward to all week now costs 10% more than it did a year ago – and 13.3% more since Trump took office.

Fans are being squeezed from every direction, and the leagues and retailers profiting from it don't seem to notice – or care. Streaming platforms treat live sports as a subscriber-acquisition tool, leagues treat media rights as an auction to the highest bidder, and grocery prices keep climbing – leaving fans to absorb whatever costs come out of the other end, whether they're paying for an app or a pack of hotdogs. Or worse, sit out the season altogether: **Nearly six in ten sports fans said they've skipped watching a game in the past year because it was too expensive**, with 32% saying this happened "many times."

Tailgating Staples Cost More

Whether fans are throwing hotdogs and burgers on the grill, frozen apps in the oven, or beer in the cooler, they're in for higher prices on gameday. **A basket of classic tailgating staples costs 10% more than it did a year ago – and 13.3% more than before Trump took office.[1] Many items have posted double-digit price hikes, including ketchup (up 17%), ground beef (15%), and hot dogs (12%).**

Item	Price in August 2026	Price in August 2025	% Change Since Last Year
Kraft-Heinz Ketchup	**$4.04**	**$3.46**	**16.7%**
Kraft-Keinz Mustard	**$2.55**	**$2.48**	**3.0%**

[1] Note: Authors' own analysis and calculations based in part on data reported by NIQ for the listed categories for the one-week periods ending August 8, 2026 and August 9, 2025 and the four-week period ending December 28, 2024 for the total U.S. market and total FMCG retailer channel. The conclusions drawn from the NIQ data are those of the authors and do not reflect the views of NIQ.

Ground Beef (1lb)	**$5.81**	**$5.06**	**14.8%**
Ball Park Hot Dogs	**$5.91**	**$5.27**	**12.0%**
Johnsonville Bratwursts	**$5.95**	**$5.35**	**11.1%**
Hamburger Buns	**$1.89**	**$1.73**	**8.8%**
Hot Dog Buns	**$1.89**	**$1.74**	**8.5%**
Prepared Potato Salad	**$3.84**	**$3.48**	**10.4%**
Frito-Lay Tortilla Chips	**$6.01**	**$5.54**	**8.6%**
Frito-Lay Cheese Dip	**$4.59**	**$4.28**	**7.4%**
Frozen Jalapeño Poppers	**$5.74**	**$5.25**	**9.3%**
Anheuser-Busch Light Beer	**$8.79**	**$8.60**	**2.3%**
Plastic Cups	**$4.97**	**$4.52**	**9.8%**
Reynolds Aluminum Foil	**$6.34**	**$5.17**	**22.6%**
TOTAL	**$68.31**	**$61.92**	**10.3%**

Grocery prices have been markedly increasing over the past year and a half as Trump's tariffs jack up prices for imported ingredients. Ketchup prices, for example, have increased as a result of Trump's withdrawal from the Mexico-US trade agreement on tomatoes, resulting in a 17% tariff. Rising oil prices stemming from Trump's war in Iran have also hit the grocery aisle as transportation costs for refrigerated foods and packaging costs for processed foods soar.

Food producers and manufacturers are taking advantage of the cover these broader economic effects provide for them to stiff consumers. Kraft Heinz's CEO told investors in its August earnings call that the company is introducing smaller pack sizes and looking to maintain and strengthen its margins. In other words, they're shrinking products and making sure they pass along their increased costs – and then some – to consumers. Tyson Foods – maker of Ball Park hot dogs – recently told investors that the company increased its prices for beef products by 12.1% in the third quarter alone, while its margins for frozen products, like chicken wings and other prepared appetizers, increased by more than 15%. Despite significant headwinds from rising aluminum costs, Reynolds has significantly expanded its profit margins this year.

Even if fans choose to order takeout or watch the game at a sports bar, they'll face higher menu prices. US Foods, one of the largest food distributors to restaurants, recently told investors that inflation "continues to be right in that spot that [they] feel good about managing and passing through." Price hikes led Red Robin to reach profit margins levels that were the highest in five years this spring.

Higher menu prices and the broader affordability crisis are forcing low-income fans to cut back. Wingstop reported that visits to their restaurants in lower-income areas fell by 9% while higher-income areas increased.

Streaming has Fractured Sports into a Costly Patchwork.

Because leagues split media rights for regular season and playoff games across platforms to the highest bidder, fans now pay more to piece together access to fewer game broadcasts. NFL games are broadcast exclusively by multiple networks and platforms, and getting full NFL access costs an estimated $750-$900 a year. Last season, a fan who wanted access to every NFL game had to subscribe to as many as 10 different services and pay upwards of $1,000. **Accessing coverage of all four major U.S. sports costs about $2,634, according to the *New York Times*.**

The same fragmentation has come for Saturdays. Following college football now requires juggling logins and paying for access to ESPN, Fox, CBS, NBC, Peacock, and HBO Max. For fans of the defending national champion, the Indiana Hoosiers, watching just the first three games of this season's schedule could require three different subscriptions. Even subscribing to the Big Ten Network doesn't give viewers access to half of the Big Ten games. For fans who typically watch NBC-broadcasted football games on YoutubeTV or their cable package, some games are exclusively shown on the NBC-owned Peacock app. The situation is even worse for fans of non-Power 4 teams whose games are seldom broadcast on mainstream television networks, requiring them to cobble together an expensive hodgepodge of streaming subscriptions that could very well leave gaps in their access to the full season.

This wasn't always the industry's approach. The NFL became America's most popular league in large part because former commissioner Pete Rozelle prioritized broad accessibility, pooling and selling television rights collectively so games aired widely on network TV channels like CBS, rather than being carved up team by team. MLB took the opposite approach and paid for it: wary that TV would cut into ticket sales, MLB barred national broadcasts like ABC's "Game of the Week" from airing within 75 miles of any big-league city, meaning fans mostly only saw their local team – limiting the sport's national reach and profitability compared to the NFL's far more accessible model.

As regional broadcasting collapses, teams are launching their own paid apps – on top of everything else fans already pay for. Victory+ (Texas Rangers and other Dallas-area teams) costs $25 a month, Altitude+ (Denver Nuggets) costs $20 a month, the YES app (Yankees, Nets, Liberty) costs $19.99 a month, and NESN 360 (Boston sports) costs

$29.99 a month. Even paying for these apps doesn't guarantee a smooth viewing experience. The Rangers switched their streaming provider mid-season in 2026 from Victory+ to a new platform called BZZR, which similarly lacks an app on major TV devices like Roku – leaving fans to watch on their phones or cast to a TV themselves, just to see a game they've already paid for.

While the NFL claims 87% of its games last season were free on over-the-air broadcast, sports analysts and policymakers have cast doubt on that figure. In practice, only about three games typically air free in the main Sunday broadcast window. The NFL's figure reflects availability – a game airing somewhere in the country – *not access*, meaning a fan could actually turn it on without paying extra. The league conflates the two, using it as a cover while continuing to shift its most watched games behind paywalls.

Rising costs and other hurdles have caused many fans to give up on watching their favorite teams. Nearly half of fans (47%) also said they've skipped watching games because it was too difficult to find or access them, and 72% think major sporting events should stay free on broadcast TV.

Blackouts Remain a Persistent, Unresolved Problem for Fans

Fans have been getting shut out of games they should be able to watch since long before streaming even existed, and the same structural gaps that failed them before are still failing them today.

Local blackout rules trace back decades. In the 1960s, fans without tickets to the Philadelphia Eagles games had to drive 75 miles out of town just to watch the broadcast. In 2026, a carrier dispute triggered a blackout of regional network MSG in upstate New York and Connecticut, coming as the Knicks were on an eight-game win streak, with Altice USA customers losing access to those games entirely – despite already paying for cable.

The Dodgers faced an even longer standoff: when the team launched SportsNet LA in 2013, competing carriers like DirecTV refused to pay the network's asking price, leaving as much as 70% of Southern California unable to watch Dodgers games on TV for six straight years – spanning six division titles and two World Series appearances. The NFL's existing "free local access" rule doesn't even cover a full state – a Green Bay Packers game airing on Amazon Prime Video is only guaranteed free in Green Bay itself, not the rest of Wisconsin.