

Why Was Tour de France TV Viewership up in 2020?

As *VeloNews* recently reported, [interest in the Tour de France](#) seemed to be up this year. Some broadcasters, for example, Eurosport, indicated audience strong numbers for 2020 – though its reach is small compared to Europe’s free public channels, which most spectators watch.

But an analysis from Professor Daam Van Reeth of KU Leuven in Belgium – the preeminent economist studying television trends in pro cycling – shows that overall TV audiences across the traditional hotbeds of cycling in Europe were actually *down* this year. According to Van Reeth, the only European country which saw an increased audience this year was Slovenia – not surprising, since two of its native sons were battling each other for supremacy in an exciting race.

The confusion results from the fact that there are several different ways to measure sports television audiences. The primary metrics vary around the issue of how long an individual viewer actually spends watching the event. The industry standard, and one which broadcasters use internally to track their performance, is called “average viewers per minute” – the definition is pretty self-evident. But race organizers or teams looking to promote sponsorship deals often latch on to other figures, to better prop up their case. One metric often used is called “total reach” – which is a rough measure of the total number of people that check in to the programming for at least *some* amount of time. Unfortunately, this figure is not very useful from a comparative perspective, because different countries measure it differently; the required time on-site to “count” as a viewer ranges from fifteen minutes all the way down to just one minute. This is a source of endless controversy and argument, and different parties tend to use the figures that best support their own purpose. But according to Van Reeth, total reach is a highly unreliable measure, and typically overstates the real audience by roughly a factor of ten. Van Reeth’s assertions have not made him popular with race organizers, but they were confirmed by executives from NBC Sports contacted by *The Outer Line*.

Despite this confusion, the interesting fact is that – in terms of the more accurate average viewers per minute – the total TV audience in the U.S. *was* truly up this year. Indeed, U.S. viewership of approximately 400,000 per stage was the highest it has been in ten years. This is shown in the chart below, prepared by Prof. Van Reeth for *The Outer Line*.

Source: Professor Daam Van Reeth, KU Leuven

(It's important to keep the general context in mind here: in absolute terms, European TV viewership is far larger than the American market, but in relative terms, it was down this year, while American viewership was up.)

This finding is very interesting given the context of overall sports viewership in the United States. [SportsPro Media reports](#) that the NBA, NHL, and MLB all suffered *double-digit* domestic viewership declines this year, as rescheduled seasons and events were squeezed into the second half of 2020. Hockey audiences were down 61 percent and the NBA was down 51 percent. The World Series was the lowest-rated in history. The Kentucky Derby down 49 percent and the Masters golf tournament, in its new fall spot – although the most widely watched golf event of the year – had the lowest-rated viewership since 1947.

The SportsPro Media analysis continued. “On one evening in September, for example, U.S. sports fans could take their pick from the NBA and NHL postseason, NFL and MLB regular-season games, as well as the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA), Major League Soccer (MLS), college football, tennis’ US Open and the opening round of the PGA Tour’s Safeway Open.”

Back in mid-April, we also speculated that [cycling TV coverage could suffer](#) if lots of different sporting events were crammed into the end of the year. “In its normal July timeframe, the Tour doesn’t really have to compete against many other European sports, and hence has traditionally enjoyed extensive TV coverage. According to [The Sports Consultancy’s](#) Angus Buchanan, there are at least 15 major sporting events that have already been rescheduled for September and October. He asks “How will this extraordinary increase in the number of events in this congested calendar compete for more limited budgets from broadcasters, sponsors, and the ticket-buying public?”

So, looking back at the season now, the question is: why was Tour viewership up in the United States while (1) it was generally down in the traditional cycling markets of western Europe, and (2) *overall* sports viewership is sharply down in the U.S.? Below, we offer several hypothetical explanations.

First, and most obviously, this year's Tour de France was a pretty exciting race. It was very competitive, there were a lot of new faces, halfway through the race there were eight riders within a minute of each other. It truly wasn't over until it was over – with Tadej Pogacar grabbing the yellow jersey off Primož Roglič's back on the penultimate stage. Plus, an uphill time trial makes for pretty exciting viewing.

But there are likely some other critical reasons as well, ones which were verified by the executives we contacted at NBC Sports. First, more people tend to be watching television in the fall – when this year's Tour was run – rather than during its normal slot in the summer. This is for the simple reason that as the weather cools, more people tend to stay inside, and some of them are watching television.

But perhaps the key reason for the increased audience this year – particularly vis-à-vis the trend seen in other American sports – is simply our longitudinal position on the planet i.e., the Tour's morning viewing slot in the United States. Virtually all of the other American sports cited above broadcast their games and compete against each other in the afternoon or evening; the Tour basically had its own exclusive time window in the morning with little or no competition. (Conversely, greater competition with other sporting events in the afternoon or evening, may at least partially explain why European viewing was down this year.)

And not only that; with so many Americans working from home this year due to the pandemic, there were undoubtedly numerous cycling fans who could take advantage of the situation to catch some footage of the Tour, whereas they might have been less likely to do so while working in a more traditional office environment in prior years.

All these factors, combined with the fact that it was actually an exciting race, can probably explain why this year's Tour was the most-watched by Americans since Lance Armstrong made his celebrated comeback effort ten years ago.

Written by Steve Maxwell, December 16th, 2020.

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