



THE ATHLETIC

Is 'Premflix' the future of Premier League streaming?



Illegal streaming of football is a threat to the traditional TV broadcasters Mark Leech/Offside via Getty Images

By **Adam Leventhal** Nov. 13, 2025 6:11 am GMT+1

The issue of illegal streaming in football is a complex one that poses an existential threat to the game. So what does the future of broadcasting — and paying for — Premier League matches look like?

In a special new episode of The Athletic FC Podcast, *The Underground World of Illegal Streaming*, the culture and criminal background of piracy are analysed, but also what might happen if the situation worsens.

The documentary reveals that nine per cent of the UK adult population consumed sport, predominantly football, via illegal streams in the past six months — the equivalent of 4.7million people, with the same number again either unsure or preferring not to say.

“If there are better services available elsewhere and there is more innovation and there is more choice, then consumers are going to move in that direction, even if that includes piracy,” says Gareth Sutcliffe, from tech researchers Enders Analysis. He says the situation has “become very acute” and had “developed mostly for the worse over the last few years”.

So what, if anything, can solve the issue?

“Innovation is a great response to piracy,” says Sutcliffe. “It addresses the fact that people not only want access, but they may actually want something different because they are moving faster than broadcasters or content owners are moving themselves.”

The Premier League going direct-to-consumer with its own ‘Premflix’ style platform is one of a wide range of issues explored in the podcast.

The Athletic asked fans outside the Emirates Stadium, home of Premier League leaders Arsenal, how much they would pay per month if they could watch games — including those not shown in the UK due to the Saturday 3pm blackout — via such a hypothetical service.

Answers ranged from £15 to £60 (\$19 to \$78), and beyond. “I don’t think there is a price on it,” said one fan. “If it was available, people would pay for it.”

All we spoke to welcomed it. “It’d be an absolutely brilliant idea — that’s what it needs,” said another.

It is not that simple, though.

If it were to start as a UK-only service, the Premier League would need to replace the £1.6billion it receives per season via its broadcast deals, with Sky and TNT Sports, with subscriber revenue. Five million people paying £26 each or 10m at £13 would cover it, but going direct-to-consumer means absorbing a lot of expenses too.

TNT Sports, Sky and other channels showing the Premier League rely on viewer subscriptions
Simon Stacpoole/Offside via Getty Images

Although Premier League chief executive Richard Masters — speaking on a range of topics at the Leaders sports conference — says it is “stepping towards that optionality”, he is unsure whether “a switch-on, switch-off moment” is coming soon.

Behind the scenes, the league has put itself “in the content supply-chain”, says Masters, by taking media-rights sales in-house after ending ties with IMG (International Management Group) at the end of this current season. But the decision-making process is not straightforward, and there will be no significant change until the next UK rights cycle starts in 2029.

“It’s really difficult for the Premier League to experiment,” says former Premier League CEO and now English Football League chairman Rick Parry. “It’s such a risk. How can they afford to step away from linear TV when it’s worth so much?”

The value of the Premier League’s overseas TV rights went up by 27 per cent for the most recent cycle, so the cost of adding broadcast facilities and a fully functioning customer service arm — required if going direct-to-consumer — could potentially be offset. But clubs — as Parry mentions — do not like risk and cannot operate without the security of TV revenue.

Gross debt in the Premier League in 2023-24 was £4.7billion, even as clubs received £2.8bn via domestic TV revenue, which comprised 44 per cent of overall club revenues. For nine of its teams, TV money was 70 per cent or more of income that season.

“The league’s substantial and unparalleled financial contribution to the entire football pyramid and wider communities is made possible through selling broadcast rights,” a Premier League spokesperson told *The Athletic*. “Protecting these rights through a wide-ranging and collaborative anti-piracy strategy is essential to sustaining this investment and to protecting our fans, the vast majority of whom watch matches legitimately.”

Burying heads in the sand is also a threat discussed in the episode.

“There’s a lot of complacency,” says Roger Mitchell, who was Scottish Premier League CEO and on UEFA’s executive committee. He now advises leagues on investment and rights strategy. He previously worked in the music business when it was facing its own piracy crisis.

“The industry looks at the illegal streaming issue on a narrow basis of, ‘What is it really costing us? Can we afford it?’, and they’re missing the point,” Mitchell says. “The point is: is this a product kids are willingly going to pay for when they’ve got an option not to pay for it?”

So how could the game cope if it needed to recalibrate its finances because of a decline in rights income due to piracy or a new direct-to-consumer model?

“The shock absorber is players’ wages,” says Mitchell, who highlights that just as these have increased in line with media-rights values, they can now fall. “I don’t think that would affect the supporter one way or another. (Liverpool striker Alexander) Isak would be on £100,000 rather than £400,000, but he’ll still be in the Premier League.”

Mitchell feels a key consideration is not simply expecting a media juggernaut such as Apple, Amazon or Netflix to come in and replace Sky or TNT in a new era of funding.

“What do they want as content for their business model? They’re not keeping it a secret: ‘I only need the big stuff’,” he says. “What does that mean for week-in, week-out sports leagues?”

He cannot see the status quo remaining, though, and feels there will be a “real shift” and “a different future that will ultimately change how we organise sport”.

Saudi Arabia’s influence on the media-rights landscape is a potential disruptor that is also discussed. The Gulf nation’s investment in sports streaming service DAZN, which in turn partnered with FIFA, allowed the Club World Cup this summer to be offered free to air around the world. Could the future be a nation — or a huge international brand — footing the bill and underpinning the finances of the game so the consumer does not have to?

“You could absolutely have highly-promoted content that is paid for by a premium sponsor that makes it freely available to all,” says tech researcher Sutcliffe. “There are partners out there who are experimenting with that.”