

Is NFL pushing boundaries on international games?

Australia trip could test limits of global growth

BY KEN MAGUIRE
ASSOCIATED PRESS

LONDON — The Los Angeles Rams landed in London just 30 hours before kickoff against the Jacksonville Jaguars in October.

That won't fly when they play in Australia next season.

The Melbourne game is part of a multiyear commitment and represents a new frontier for the NFL's aggressive international plan. The league has never staged a regular-season game so far from home, and Commissioner Roger Goodell has already said Asia will follow "shortly thereafter."

Goodell hopes to eventually stage 16 games per season internationally — an escalation that could be facilitated if the league moves to an 18-game NFL season. The current maximum number of international games allowed per season is 10 under the collective bargaining agreement with the NFL Players Association.

Ahead of the Super Bowl, the league announced Paris as a new host as well as a return to Madrid and Mexico City for next season. As of Monday, there are a record-high nine international games scheduled for 2026. But not everyone is as enthusiastic as Goodell about the league's global ambitions. There are questions about scheduling, the risks to players as the air miles add up, and the quality of play.

"The voice of the players and what's in their best interests come from our membership, not management," NFLPA media relations director Brandon Parker told The Associated Press. "That's why it's imperative for the union to be a partner in assessing and making decisions on all aspects of the international player experience."

"Any sort of expansion must be balanced against how it impacts players' bodies along with health and safety data."

An 18-game schedule likely would include adding a second bye week and reducing the number of preseason games to two — all of which would need to be agreed on between the league and the NFLPA. The current labor deal runs through the 2030 season.

PARIS AND RIO DE JANEIRO ALSO IN 2026

The NFL has added at least one new host city each season since 2022, when Munich joined the ranks. The following year it was another German city — Frankfurt. Brazil's São Paulo became a host in 2024, and this season saw debuts for Dublin, Berlin and Madrid as the NFL staged seven regular-season games abroad — a record that will be eclipsed next season.

For 2026, three more first-timers — Paris, Melbourne and Rio de Janeiro — join Munich, Madrid, Mexico City and old stalwart London — to bring the international lineup to nine games.

The league said London is currently scheduled to host three games. Tottenham Hotspur Stadium hosts two games each year, apart from the Jacksonville Jaguars' arrangement with Wembley Stadium. The Jags have the option of playing two home games internationally in 2026 because of their stadium renovation project.

The labor agreement's 10-game limit on international games includes an exception for stadium construction and renovations.

The Paris game will feature the New Orleans Saints and will be held at the 80,000-capacity Stade de France.

Goodell had previous-



Jeff Lewis | Associated Press
Kansas City Chiefs fans cheer against the Los Angeles Chargers in an NFL football game on Sept. 5, 2025, in São Paulo, Brazil.

ly confirmed — and the league made official Monday — a return to Mexico City now that Azteca Stadium has been renovated ahead of the World Cup. The Dallas Cowboys expect to play at Azteca, team owner Jerry Jones said in September.

CALENDAR CONCERN

A typical flight from Los Angeles to Melbourne is nearly 16 hours, "which is about as challenging as it gets from a body clock perspective," said Tom Brownlee, associate professor in Applied Sport Sciences at the University of Birmingham.

The Australia game — at the 100,000 capacity Melbourne Cricket Ground — is expected to be Week 1 and raises the unusual prospect of the NFL starting its season before Labor Day, which falls on Sept. 7. It could be as early as the Wednesday or Thursday before the federal holiday.

"Players still have to adjust several times," Brownlee said. "They prepare in the U.S., then try to function normally in Australia, and then have to

readjust again on the way home before their next game. That second adjustment is often overlooked but can be just as difficult."

Brownlee, who formerly worked at Premier League club Liverpool, said gameday effects of long-haul travel can include "slower reaction times, reduced sharpness or feeling heavier than normal."

The NFLPA has also raised concerns about field conditions for international games. Parker, the union spokesman, said players "appreciate the global stage" but expect that "proper travel standards, working conditions, scheduling and protections must be in place to maximize player recovery and performance."

In a statement, the NFL said the health and safety of players "is always a priority no matter where we play."

"For international games, the league's football operations team works alongside club operations staff and local support on the ground in markets to ensure every detail is considered and planned for to

optimize the traveling and playing experience for all involved," the league said.

IS IT WORTH IT?

The European games are timed to kick off Sundays at 9:30 a.m. Eastern, which is 6:30 a.m. Pacific. The league could eventually sell it as a new broadcast window.

The six international games that were on NFL Network this season averaged 6.2 million viewers (TV and digital), which doesn't include over-the-air stations in the markets of the two teams playing. During the 2025 regular season, the NFL averaged 18.7 million viewers per game.

"I don't see the economic sense of sacrificing US audiences on this scale," said Stefan Szymanski, a University of Michigan professor of sport management.

The sport also can be hard to understand for new audiences, he added.

"By contrast, the NBA has a much better chance of making it international," he said.

Teams have mostly bought into the league's

plans, though Browns co-owner Jimmy Haslam said in October that if Goodell was sitting in front of him "I'd tell him, I would much rather play at home in Cleveland than travel all the way over to London."

There's no shortage of interest among the international fans and host cities, however. International games typically sell out quickly and game-week events bring mini-Super Bowl vibes to locations where soccer usually dominates the sports landscape.

ASIA AND MIDDLE EAST IN FOCUS

League officials haven't specified which Asian countries they are exploring as future hosts. Tokyo has staged preseason games. China is one of the eight countries outside the United States where the NFL has an office.

The NFL has looked at the United Arab Emirates.

Gerrit Meier, managing director and head of NFL international, told the "Leaders Worth Knowing" podcast the Middle East

"is very, very attractive for us."

Wizards acquiring Davis from Mavericks in 8-player trade, AP source says

BY SCHUYLER DIXON
ASSOCIATED PRESS

DALLAS — The Washington Wizards are acquiring Anthony Davis in an eight-player trade with the Mavericks that includes draft picks for Dallas, a person with knowledge of the deal said Wednesday.

The move is a signal the Mavericks are moving on from the widely criticized trade that sent superstar Luka Doncic to the Los Angeles Lakers for a package headlined by Davis last year.

Former general manager Nico Harrison, who was fired by Dallas in November, engineered the middle-of-the-night deal that angered fans. Trade speculation had surrounded Davis ever since Harrison was let go following a slow start to the season.

The Wizards are sending Khris Middleton, AJ Johnson, Malaki Branham and Marvin Bagley III to the Mavericks along with two first-round draft picks and three second-rounders, according to the person who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because the deal had yet to be approved by the NBA.

Washington is getting three guards from Dallas in Jaden Hardy, D'Angelo Russell and Dante Exum.

The Wizards have made a stark shift recently from their rebuild after losing 67 and 64 games the past two seasons. Washington traded for Trae Young last month and now adds Davis to a group of young players that includes big man Alex Sarr, the No. 2 pick in 2024.

It's not clear if Young or



Tyler Tate | Associated Press
Dallas Mavericks forward Anthony Davis (3) drives to the basket while guarded by Utah Jazz forward Cody Williams (5) during the first half of an NBA basketball game on Jan. 8 in Salt Lake City.

Davis will play much this season, which could be for the best given the Wizards lose their top draft pick this year if it falls outside No. 8.

Still, a deal like this suggests Washington is ready to move on from the phase of waiting for lottery luck. A 2026-27 team with Davis, Young, Sarr and other complementary players could be interesting in the Eastern Conference, although health is always a concern with somebody like Davis.

The 10-time All-Star has been out since Jan. 8 with a left hand injury and wasn't

expected to return before the All-Star break later this month.

Harrison's Doncic-for-Davis deal was so heavily criticized because he took on the big man with an extensive injury history while giving up a generational talent in his prime. Doncic was 25 at the time of the trade.

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Julie A. Skaggs Executrix

470 Riverhill Dr., Atlanta, GA

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As might have been expected, Davis appeared in just 31 of a possible 84 games over two partial seasons with the Mavericks, including the two play-in tournament games he played last season.

The 32-year-old's ailments included a core muscle issue and a calf strain before Davis injured his hand while defending a driving Lauri Markkanen of Utah last month.

The trade is a big step for Dallas toward making Cooper Flagg the next face of the franchise after Doncic. The rookie No. 1 pick set an NBA scoring record for a teenager with 49 points against Charlotte last week, and the 19-year-old is on a three-game streak of 30-point games, another

league first for the under-20 group.

Flagg, who is averaging 20.1 points per game a year after leading Duke to the Final Four as just the fourth freshman to be named the AP men's basketball player of the year, doesn't turn 20 until next season.

The Mavericks lost all three games on Flagg's current 30-plus run and are on a five-game skid, a season worst. Dallas is 12th in the West at 19-31, making it increasingly unlikely that guard Kyrie Irving will play this season. The nine-time All-Star tore the ACL in his left knee last March.

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