

# New Esks schedule bad for team and fans alike

The Eskimos risk losing support and money next season, and a calendar full of mid-week games and home-and-homes is to blame



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As if the Edmonton Eskimos didn't have enough to worry about. Not only are they trying to snap out of an abysmal two-year playoff drought, but off the field, the Esks will have to deal with an almost-certain drop in attendance this season due to the recent release of what is undoubtedly one of the least fan-friendly schedules in recent memory.

The Green and Gold didn't have a great schedule last year, either—anyone remember the nearly four-week stretch between home games from 11 August to 7 September?—but thanks to the CFL's exclusive new TV deal with TSN, among other things, this year's slate is going to be much worse.

First off, the Eskimos are scheduled to have five back-to-back sets of games this year. If you're keeping score at home, that's ten out of 18 games involved in a home-and-home series. Last year, they had five as well—including an absolutely ridiculous four in a row from 3 September to 20 October. This bunch isn't any better: the Esks play Toronto twice in mid-July, then don't see them again for the rest of the year. Edmonton doesn't play Winnipeg until the last week of September, then plays them twice in a row.

Traditional home-and-homes—like the annual Labour Day series with Calgary—are fine, and when they only happen once or twice a year, many fans actually look forward to them. That won't be the case this year. There will be twelve back-to-back series in the CFL this year, and the Eskimos are scheduled to play in nearly half of them.

And that's not even the worst part. The CFL traditionally plays the vast majority of its games on week-

ends—Friday nights, Saturdays, and Sundays.

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But this season, the Eskimos have five of their first ten games on Thursdays, and all five of those games are at home. Edmonton fans won't be able to see a weekend home game until the second weekend of September. Not only that, but three of those Thursday home games start at 8pm. No one else in the league has more than one late start, or more than three Thursday home games.

While TSN deserves the brunt of the blame for this due to other weekend TV commitments, the Eskimos front office (like every other team) had to

approve this version of the schedule, which makes me wonder just what team management is thinking. Even though it's summer, a lot of families and young kids won't be able to go to the Thursday games. The average working fan will likely stay home from a late start or two because they have to get up early on Friday for work.

Add in that all of these games are against traditionally good draws (Calgary, BC, Toronto, and Saskatchewan twice), and the Eskimos will most likely see a severe drop in attendance compared to the historical average, especially against Calgary and the 'Riders—any road-tripping fans of those teams will be hard-pressed to make a Thursday game here. The Esks took in 48 per cent of their revenues from gate receipts last year—there's no way they'll reach the same revenue level this year without those road fans and the home fans that will be forced away.

And after all that, the final shot to the collective gut of Esks fans (and

the Esks' finances) will come in late October. The last home game for Edmonton of the season is on a Friday night, against Montreal—which also happens to be Halloween night. Families won't go. Young trick-or-treating kids won't go. Parents taking their young kids out trick-or-treating won't go. Older kids and anyone else with other traditional Halloween plans won't go. If the Eskimos put up an on-field record similar to the past two years going into that game, they'll be lucky to draw 20 000 fans (to put that in perspective, Commonwealth hasn't hosted a regular season crowd under 30 000 since 2001).

With a schedule like that, the only possible way that Edmonton will remain at the top of the CFL attendance standings is for the team to do extremely well on the field, which might be hard considering how the last two years have gone. And regardless what's happening on the field, it's going to be a tough year to follow—even for diehard fans.

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