

SPORT

NBL plays on Christmas Day for first time, joins NBA, NFL and 1950's Test cricket in scheduling December 25 games

By [Simon Smale](#)

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Nothing says Christmas Day more than watching a disappointing performance from your team while dressed as Santa. *(Getty Images: Douglas P DeFelice)*

For those of you who believe Christmas Day should remain sacrosanct and free from professional sport, you might want to look away now.

Fields and courts around the country have been silent on December 25 for close to half a century, but no longer, as the NBL prepares to host its first Christmas Day fixture.

Melbourne United will travel to the Sydney Superdome to take on the Kings at 6:30pm AEDT.



The Sydney Kings are getting ready to slam some sport into our Christmas Day schedule.

(Getty Images: Mark Kolbe)

The NBL touted the match as "the last scheduling frontier in sport in Australia" when it was announced back in July and, from a modern perspective, that's true.

However, once upon a time, Christmas Day was a fixture staple across the world and, in some places, still is.

Football, a UK Christmas tradition

In the UK, football is a festive season staple, with the Boxing Day fixtures one that fans look forward to all year.

However, football was also regularly played on Christmas Day as well, from the leagues' earliest days in 1889, when Preston North End beat Aston Villa 3-2 at Deepdale, right through to the last Christmas Day fixture in 1965.



Aston Villa played the first Christmas Day match in the Football League in 1889. (*Getty Images: Aston Villa FC/Neville Williams*)

Playing matches on one of the few public holidays in the year actually makes sense — especially in the era before television — and the crowds were regularly very healthy.

Some memorable matches took place on Christmas Day, often with plenty of goals being scored.

Christmas Day 1940 was a particularly wild one, when Norwich thumped Brighton 18-0 — although Brighton did have to resort to fielding youth players and even pulled some people of the crowd to make a team — Southend United beat Clapton Orient 9-3, Bournemouth beat Bristol City 7-1 and Bury drew 5-5 with Halifax.

In 1937, Charlton goalkeeper Sam Bartram not only had to play on Christmas Day, but got left out in the field on his own for 15 minutes.

After heavy fog descended on Stamford Bridge in the match between Chelsea and Charlton, the referee ordered everyone off — but Bartram didn't realise so remained on the field until a policeman emerged out of the mist to tell him everyone else had left.



Arsenal's Jack Kelsey had an issue with fog stopping a game in 1952, but presumably his teammates told him when the game had finished. (*Getty Images: PA Images*)

Christmas Day fixtures petered out in the late 1950s, with the last English Football League game to be played on Christmas Day being Blackpool versus Blackburn Rovers in 1965, when Blackpool won 4-2 in front of a crowd of 21,000 people.

It wasn't just the men who played on Christmas Day though.

Dick, Kerr Ladies — [the trailblazing women's team that once attracted 53,000 to a match on Boxing Day](#) — played their first match against Arundel Coulthard Foundry on Christmas Day in 1917, with 10,000 supporters turning up to Preston North End's Deepdale stadium to watch.

In Scotland, Christmas Day matches continued to be scheduled right up until 1976.

The most-famous match to take place on Christmas Day though was supposed to have taken place in no man's land in 1914, when German and British troops stopped their fighting to play a number of impromptu matches between the trenches.

Around the rest of the world, football continues apace across Christmas, with fixtures this year scheduled in a number of leagues across Africa and Asia.

American pro sports leagues love Christmas

You'd think Santa had more important things to do than watch basketball on Christmas Day. *(Getty Images: Mike Stobe)*

Christmas Day in the US has traditionally been a busy time for basketball fans and this year is no exception.

Five NBA matches are scheduled for Christmas Day: New York Knicks vs Philadelphia 76ers, Dallas Mavericks vs LA Lakers, Celtics vs Milwaukee Bucks, Golden State Warriors vs Memphis Grizzlies and Denver Nuggets vs Phoenix Suns.

This year, that bumper program is joined by three NFL matches: Miami Dolphins vs Green Bay Packers, LA Rams vs Denver Broncos and Arizona Cardinals vs Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

Is it the 12 days of Christmas or the one afternoon of Aaron Rodgers? (*Getty Images: Michael Reaves*)

The NFL usually only hosts matches on a Christmas Day when it falls on a weekend.

That first happened in 1971, when two play-off matches took place, featuring the Dallas Cowboys vs Minnesota Vikings and Kansas City Chiefs vs Miami Dolphins — the later game notarised as the the longest in NFL history after going to double overtime.

The NBA has been hosting matches on Christmas Day since 1947, its second season, and has been hosting five games every year since 2008.

It tries to make them big games too, featuring the defending champions or other marquee matches, such as when Kobe Bryant and Shaq O'Neal went head-to-head in 2004.

The NBA schedules big matches on Christmas Day to cash in on the nationwide TV audiences. *(Getty Images: NBAE/Noah Graham)*

North America's other major winter sports league, the NHL, does not schedule games on Christmas Eve, Christmas Day or Boxing Day as part of their bargaining agreement with the players.

It did used to host matches on Christmas Day though, starting in the 1920s and only stopped the tradition in 1971.

Christmas cricket?

Usman Khawaja (left) and Joe Burns love Christmas, but a generation or two ago, they might have had to play on Christmas Day. (AAP: Julian Smith)

Christmas Day cricket is far from unheard of — Bangladesh and India are playing a Test match right now, for instance — one of seven instances where play has taken place or is scheduled to take place on Christmas Day in Test matches.

No sport is so bound in tradition and idiosyncrasies than first class cricket, so the fact that matches have been played on Christmas Day might surprise some.

It's even more surprising, given the rigidity around there traditionally being no play ever scheduled on a Sunday — I mean, that just wouldn't be cricket, would it?

That has led to some surprising anomalies, such as in the second Test between Australia and England at the MCG in 1950, where the match started on Friday, December 22, had two rest days on Sunday December 24 and Monday 25, before resuming for another two days as Australia wrapped up a 28-run win.

That was one of 29 Tests that have straddled Christmas Day, including 10 in Australia, the earliest of which was against England at the SCG in 1924 and the most recent of which was against the same opponents at the MCG in 1994.

The first Christmas Day Sheffield Shield game took place in 1926, between South Australia and Queensland at Adelaide Oval.

Incidentally, that game started on Christmas Day, a Saturday. The following day was a Sunday, which was when the rest day was scheduled.

The 1924 first Ashes Test at the SGC straddled Christmas Day, starting on December 19 and finishing on December 27, with rest days on December 21 and 25. (*Getty Images: PA Images/S&G*)

As a brief aside, having a rest day on the Sunday of a Test match dates back to the Sunday Observance Act of 1780, a UK law that prohibited the use of any building or room for public entertainment or debate on a Sunday.

The last Test that featured a rest day in Australia was Pakistan's visit to the Gabba in 1995, when November 12 was set aside for the players to relax.

Back in 1926, CricInfo reports that 13,000 people came through the gates on Christmas Day to see Test opener Arthur Richardson score 232 runs to help South Australia reach the close on 6-432.

The hosts would go on to win the game by 10 wickets and start something of a tradition — that was the first of 29 games featuring play on Christmas Day to take place at Adelaide Oval between 1926 and 1969, including two Test matches.

In 1951-52, the West Indies touring side completed a six-wicket victory over the Aussies on Christmas Day of 1951.

The West Indies completed a six-wicket victory on Christmas Day in Adelaide, but Australia won the series 4-1. (*Getty Images: PA Images/S&G*)

Interestingly, though, the touring South Africans were not made to play on Christmas Day the following year at the MCG, a rest day was scheduled instead.

In 1967, though, Australia beat India in the opening Test of their tour, a match that straddled Christmas Day and saw Bob Simpson and Bob Cowper score centuries on December 25.

Paul Sheahan and John Gleeson both made their debuts in that game — unwrapping a baggy green under the tree wouldn't be a bad Christmas present — but spare a thought though for Bill Lawrie, who endured a torrid Christmas Day by getting dismissed for a golden duck, caught behind by Farouk Engineer off the bowling of Umesh Kulkarni.

Incidentally, Don Bradman was bowled out for a duck on Christmas Day in a domestic first-class match against Victoria in 1940.

Australia have also played Test cricket overseas on Christmas Day, beating India by 77 runs in the fifth Test at the Madras Cricket Club in that match.

Since then, though, no first class or A-list cricket has taken place in Australia on Christmas Day, although Big Bash bosses may be keeping a keen eye on how the NBL game is received.

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