



Games without fans

How sports organizations can thrive now,
and in the long term

Sporting events are entertainment, perhaps the greatest unscripted drama: intense competition, fan reactions, lead changes and upsets, the occasional bad call; the electricity when the crowd swings from disappointment to euphoria in one perfect, shared moment. All of it contributes to the thrill of live sports. But as the sports industry seeks to find the Next Normal, returning to regular play—albeit without fans present—is the new reality.

Apart from lost revenue, the lack of live crowds completely changes the atmosphere of the game, affecting not just players and fans, but broadcasters and other business interests. And as leagues prepare to play behind closed doors, they must evaluate short- and long-term challenges and opportunities for everyone involved.



Athletes and intensity

Athletes draw energy from the presence of fans—so much so that, for example, fans are often called the team's "Twelfth Man." Can technology help fill this breach in the game-day environment, perhaps through music and piped-in crowd noise? Fans could upload videos, digital signs, or other user-generated content to share online and display to players in the moment. Augmented virtual reality might even help motivate players.



Fans and engagement

According to Deloitte's [State of the Consumer Tracker](#), a biweekly survey spanning more than 10 countries, more than 80% of consumers worldwide currently do not feel safe attending in-person events. In the [US, Deloitte's Digital Media Trends survey, 14th edition](#), found that more than one-third of consumers wouldn't be comfortable returning to live events for more than six months. With live attendance off the table, how can teams and leagues keep fans engaged? What about new ways to (virtually) fill seats, from cardboard cutouts to digital avatars? With so many fans already consuming sports via TV and online platforms, there's an opportunity to use technology and innovation to bring the in-game experience to viewers' living rooms. Could the current reality be catalyst for invention? Can teams encourage at-home fans to do The Wave, fist-bump friends, or clap and cheer? Upload short videos? Organizations need to identify and invest in innovations that unlock long-term digital engagement and reinvent the fan experience.



Broadcasters and relevance

Are "ghost games" relevant to TV viewers? Is broadcasting from an empty arena bound to disappoint—or is it an opportunity to serve a captive audience craving normalcy? Broadcasters must find ways to make sports content compelling without the energy of fans in the stands. For some, there may be some upsides to the relative silence—for example, more chances to hear interactions between players and officials. A digital-only sports ecosystem could also accelerate audience globalization. A multi-channel approach to fan engagement may keep sports alive year-round, during the crisis and beyond. For example, some sports have virtualized or shifted to esports. In the US, 19% of US Millennials are watching virtualized sporting events in lieu of live events, according to Deloitte's Digital Media Trends survey, 14th edition.



Using technology to improve the remote fan experience

Several leagues have already hosted fan-free games, with many more planning to do so. Notable innovations:

- A Danish football club teamed up with a video conferencing platform, giving fans the chance to watch the game together. Twenty-two video conferences replicated 22 sections of the physical stadium. Giant screens set up at the actual stadium showed fans from each call, allowing players to see and hear the virtual crowd during the match.
- Another team invited fans to a "drive-in experience," making 2,000 parking spaces available at the local arena. Supporters watched live games on jumbo screens, from the safety of their cars.
- An ambitious sports production platform is planning to use augmented reality technology to let spectators "add themselves" to live broadcasts. Fans will be able to customize avatars with team wear and face paint, then view the game virtually from their favorite stadium seats.



What can you do now?

Amid the short-term uncertainty, think about investing in long-term success. Some actions to consider:

- 01 Refresh your strategy.**
Review your short- and long-term strategies for the Next Normal. Too much uncertainty? Run scenarios to give your team options.
- 02 Invest in digital capabilities.**
Now could be the perfect time to enhance your digital capabilities. What platforms and interfaces could help you engage fans, connect on social media, and communicate with partners and vendors?
- 03 Accelerate transformation.**
Do you have long-term transformation goals? Use the crisis as an opportunity to accelerate existing efforts, or kickstart initiatives that previously felt too time-consuming to tackle.



The bottom line

Whatever happens, it's going to be different. What is the Next Normal? How will sports recover and thrive in a post-COVID world? For sports organizations, this time is a challenge—but also a unique opportunity to make sports even more appealing for athletes, remote fans, and broadcasters. How will you use innovative technology and the power of media to bring your sports community together on game day?

For more ideas for thriving in trying times, read our article, "[Resources for resilient leadership: Actions for senior executives responding to COVID-19.](#)"

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