

New technology allows hockey fans to feel the smash

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San Jose Sharks fans now can feel the bone-crunching action in the rink - from the comfort of their couches.

In a first for the NHL, a system dubbed 4D Sports transmits a special signal from the SAP Center to a gizmo under a fan's couch, letting them "feel" the action every time a player crashes into the boards.

But it's an open question how many [fans](#) will sign up for the service, which costs \$300, or whether it will go the way of other gimmicks such as 3-D TV.

New technologies such as the 4D Sports system allow viewers at home to get an increasingly realistic virtual experience, said Andy Dolich, head of [sports management](#) and consulting company Dolich Consulting. That's important, because [sports](#) leagues often derive a large portion of their revenue from TV contracts, and it's often the case that more people want to be at sports events than can actually attend them in person.

"Any creative thinking that goes into improving the circumstances of people watching at home should be welcomed and pursued," Dolich said.

But Dolich and other analysts said that because of the cost and other limitations, the rumble system is likely to catch on with relatively few fans.

"It's kind of gimmicky," said Chad McEvoy, a professor of sports

management at Syracuse University.

Feeling the collisions with the boards on the Sharks home ice may be just the start. Guitammer, the startup company behind 4D Sports, is exploring installing its system in all NHL arenas and at allowing fans to feel other collisions, such as when a football player experiences a big hit, said CEO Mark Luden.

More broadly, sports leagues and broadcasters are exploring numerous ways to engage fans and help them become more immersed in the [game](#), including using portable cameras and tracking devices that allow fans to better visualize the action.

"Anything more we can do to bring that in-arena excitement through the television screen, we're willing to try it," said David Koppett, senior executive producer of live events at Comcast SportNet California, which broadcasts the Sharks games.

The 4D Sports system is built around a system of motion-detecting sensors. In November, Guithammer installed the sensors on the backs of all the boards surrounding the ice rink at SAP Center. When a collision occurs, the sensors send a signal back to a computer located inside the arena. Technicians there ensure that the signal matches up with what's on screen.

The signal then is transmitted as an inaudible sound within the audio track of the game broadcast. To feel the action, fans need to have a special device installed under their seat or couch that can translate the sound into a vibration.

"It's a way for the fans to understand the physical aspects of the game, to feel closer to the game," said John Tortora, the team's chief operating officer. "We want to bring as much as we can of the experience of SAP

Center to your living room."

For now, the system only works at home games played at SAP Center that are broadcast on Comcast SportsNet. Away games or those broadcast on other channels won't have the rumble signal.

However, the setup isn't inexpensive. Although fans receive the signal for free along with the game broadcasts, the gadget needed to receive them costs extra. Guithammer's vibration device, called the Buttkicker, costs \$300, but it also can generate rumbles in response to the bass tones in a movie or video game.

Sports marketing experts said the system could find a following among some fans and may encourage them to become more involved in the game.

Michele Langdon, 51, has had Sharks tickets since the team was founded and watches all of the games that she doesn't attend in person.

Both of the San Jose resident's sons play hockey, and both are eager to check their opponents against the boards. Having seen some of the big hits inside SAP Center, Langdon understands their enthusiasm, but their league forbids it for kids their age as a protective measure. The 4D Sports system would allow Langdon's kids to get a sense of what checking might be like, she said.

"It's a great win for them," said Langdon, a senior program manager at Hewlett-Packard. "Not that they would actually be able feel the impact, but it would give them a little more tactile response to the game."

But Robin Bess, a Sharks season ticket holder since the team first started playing in San Jose, likes the broadcasts as they are now and isn't looking for enhancements such as the rumble effect.

"To me, it seems a little silly," said Bess, 46, an appraiser for AAA insurance who lives in San Jose and who goes to about 15 to 20 games a year. "I'm not playing a video game. I'm watching a hockey game."

Rick Lilly, a former Sharks season ticket holder who now watches just about all the team's games on TV, likewise said he'd be interested in testing the system out, but he isn't willing to pay for it, fearing that its novelty would soon fade.

"I think it's something that for the first game would be kind of cool. After that - whatever," said Lilly, 42, of San Jose. He added: "I can see a check. ... It's an exciting enough play that I don't know that I need my feet vibrating to get me into it."

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