

Being at the big game—from the comfort of your own home

March 6 2015, by John Biers



In a few years, sports fans more accustomed to watching sport on television may be able to don virtual-reality headsets that allow them to experience the action closer than ever before

Imagine sitting on Centre Court at Wimbledon, ringside at a Las Vegas heavyweight boxing title fight, or amongst the VIPs at an NBA game—all from the comfort of your own home.

Far-fetched? Maybe. But in a few years, sports fans more accustomed to

watching sport on television may be able to don virtual-reality headsets that allow them to experience the action closer than ever before.

"Someone is going to be able to sit at home on the couch and feel like they're sitting courtside at a basketball game," said David Blitzer, a co-owner of the Philadelphia 76ers NBA team.

"It's amazing."

The futuristic vision of home entertainment was just one example of how technology is changing the face of sport and showcased at this week's Sport Business Summit in New York.

The theme of the conference was unmistakable. Big data and digital technology are transforming professional sports as never before as innovations provide new tools for superstars and keep fans happy.

Technology companies can now mine millions of social media posts for comments about a player and show that the intensity of an athlete's following merits a fatter endorsement contract.

Participants in New York described changes remaking all levels of sports, from the way teams pick and train players to the manner in which leagues and media companies negotiate broadcast rights.

Drones as cameras?

The event drew more than 500 attendees, from the Nascar racing league to women's professional golf association and prominent European football teams. Mixed in were agents and a slew of technology providers.

"Especially in the context of other media, sports just outshines everything else," said Eric Shanks, president of Fox Sports Media

Group.



WBC heavyweight champion Bermane Stiverne (L) takes a punch from Deontay Wilder during their title fight at the MGM Grand Garden Arena on January 17, 2015 in Las Vegas, Nevada

Shanks was bullish on the use of drones as a filming tool, describing plans to broadcast a Supercross cycling race that way to give viewers a whole new experience.

Shanks also sees growth if more gambling is permitted on [professional sports](#).

NBA Commissioner Adam Silver last year expressed support for legal gambling as a way to boost fan engagement. Silver said more legal gambling is "inevitable" in the US, given that much already takes place

under the table.

But the Fox executive also alluded to some of the challenges facing established market players. Broadcast systems that let fans log in and watch games from mobile devices have boomed, reaching some 80 million Fox fans in the US, Shanks said.

Yet there are open questions surrounding what this means for long-term deals such as the NBA's nine-year contract with broadcasters TNT and ESPN, unveiled in October.

"Who is going to be bidding for those rights" in 10 or 12 years, said Blitzer of the Philadelphia 76ers. "You're going to see different names."

Fan bases revealed

Athletes too face sophisticated new technology challenges and opportunities.

Wearable technology gives unprecedented insight into an athlete's heart rate and other body signals, giving teams key information that can affect which players play and how they train.

General Sentiment, a New York data analytics firm, scrutinizes Twitter and other sites to analyze whether there are any patterns within a player's fan base that might interest advertisers.

A disproportionate preference of Twitter followers for a particular car brand could be used in endorsement discussions, said Asher Feldman, a director of Strategic Analytics.

Other [big data](#) efforts are geared at fans, as when broadcasters or websites upload past results for viewers who want to know how many

times a quarterback has been intercepted or the number of double-faults by a tennis player.

Fan engagement could be taken to new levels if the virtual-reality headsets become commonplace.

For the time being, the sheer bulk of headsets meant it was still "very early days" for the technology, said Jens Christensen, chief executive of Jaunt VR.

But if a viable, comfortable headset is developed it could revolutionize the way people watch sport at home.

"It makes it almost a new medium," Christensen said.

But Boston Celtics co-owner Wyc Grousbeck said there were limits to where [technology](#) could take fans, as when a particularly heroic effort by a hometown hero gets a roar from an adoring crowd.

"It's in the personal connection, it's walking the streets in your own city," he said. "It's an event that transcends the phone."

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Citation: Being at the big game—from the comfort of your own home (2015, March 6) retrieved 18 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-03-big-gamefrom-comfort-home.html>

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