

Tech changes allow greater fan engagement in sports

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As technology permits greater interactivity with fans, sports clubs and leagues have consulted sometimes far-flung supporters on everything from a team's name to where games should be played.

Last month, the Salt Lake Screaming Eagles went further still.

During its first [game](#) in the Indoor Football League, the brand new American football team polled fans on strategic maneuvers, letting a majority decide, for example, whether to kick or keep going on fourth down.

The Screaming Eagles lost the game, but the tactic caught notice worldwide, scoring views in 99 countries where the game was streamed for free.

We want to "give the fans a little bit more interaction, a little bit more engagement and make them feel like they're more part of their professional football team than they ever were able to be before," said IFL commissioner Mike Allshouse.

Much of the push is aimed not at fans in the stadium, but those watching the games on television or on their computer.

Teams are sending out a regular trickle of content on social media of just-executed plays, athlete interviews and backstage photos of stars.

In late December, Fox Sports 2 miked the coaches of two women's college basketball teams that were playing each other and broadcast their unfiltered banter during the game and in the locker room where cameras were present.

As part of its "League Pass" premium streaming service, the NBA has included one game per week in virtual reality streamed online.

"We are broadcasting in 215 countries. So we've got fans as passionate or more passionate on the other side of the world as you'll find here in the United States," Jeff Marsilio, the NBA's vice president of global media, told the website SportTechie.

"To give the feeling—maybe not the complete experience—but the feeling of being courtside at an NBA game, it's really exciting for us."

With the cooperation of leagues, sports media are also showing more expansive coverage of events, with Nascar and Fox Sports adding two channels, each focused on a single driver for the prestigious Daytona 500 race.

For the Olympic Games in Sochi and Rio, digital technology giant Atos developed for the International Olympic Committee technology that lets viewers watch the entire competition. The program also included access to statistics and a rewind option that let fans watch plays in slow motion.

"The two big trends today in sports are greater ubiquity and much more fan interactivity," said Patrick Adiba, chief commercial officer for the Olympics and major events at Atos.

Racing holograms next?

A much-discussed technology now being developed is holograms, which could potentially let fans watch virtual versions of a competition in a venue far away from the actual event.

"We know how to produce good-quality holograms and we know how to transmit it, but it takes too much bandwidth right now," Adiba said. "We can't yet, for example, show the final of the 100 meters in 300 stadiums in real-time with hologram runners."

The coming of 5G technology may open the door to greater progress on holograms.

For now, leagues are increasingly focused on latching onto the esports phenomenon, where competitive gamers try to outdo each other in online

games.

The NBA plans in 2018 to unveil an esports league with 30 teams that parallel the real league. The National Hockey League is also developing an offering.

"We envision something that would augment a fan's affinity to his team," said NHL commissioner Gary Bettman.

"In an industry that's constantly evolving, you can't just do it on a cookie-cutter basis. If you do it the way we've always done it, we're gonna fail."

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