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Plenty of high-tech surprises in store for sports fans

Constant and rapid advances in technology transform how fans watch sports, and while tech-savvy fans are always looking ahead for the next big thing to deepen their connection with their favorite sports teams and athletes, leagues, teams and broadcasters are concurrently seeking to monetize the technology to capture new or additional revenue streams.

Not that long ago, the advent of over-the-top streaming allowed cable and satellite TV providers to partner with sports organizations to bring fans new programming options on their digital devices.

And recently, the National Football League announced a deal with a new media partner — Twitter — to provide streaming of Thursday Night Football programming during the 2016 regular season. The social media platform will stream 10 games broadcast by NBC, CBS and NFL Network to audiences around the world.

But the next big digital thing just might make OTT old news. New developments in virtual reality will not only change the viewing experience for millions of sports fans, creating an at-home viewing experience that feels more like being at a live event, but VR will give teams and leagues ability to generate revenue from more of their fan base, including a huge untapped market of sports fans who may never attend a game in person. Virtual season tickets (VSTs) could turn out to be one of the most lucrative innovations for the sports industry in years — but only if fans are willing to pay for it.

Laguna Beach, Calif.-based NextVR has pioneered virtual reality technology that captures 180-degree and 360-degree immersive views and broadcasts live content over consumers' home and mobile Internet connections.

NextVR debuted this technology across a variety of sports in

2015 and early 2016 through partnerships with sports organizations and traditional broadcast companies.

In March 2015, NextVR broadcast the virtual-reality view of two NASCAR races for Fox Sports, an Xfinity Series race and a Sprint Cup Series race, using live feed from its specialized cameras — one camera set up on the pit road and one camera between the pit area and the track.

That same month, NextVR also broadcast the Big East Men's Basketball Tournament in virtual reality as a part of coverage for Fox Sports.

The NBA teamed up with NextVR in October 2015 to stream the first game of the 2015-16 season in virtual reality. NextVR placed a professional broadcast camera at half court to give fans outside the venue the sensation of sitting courtside to watch the Golden State Warriors play the New Orleans Pelicans.

And then last month, the 2016 Masters Tournament at Augusta National Golf Club offered golf fans the opportunity to watch continuous virtual-reality coverage during the weeklong event.

When the venerable Masters Tournament is giving virtual reality a try, the technology isn't likely to be a flash in the pan.

From a technical — and fan — perspective, viewing NextVR's virtual reality content isn't complicated or terribly expensive. Fans download the NextVR app and open it in a Gear VR headset with either a Samsung Note 4 tablet or a Galaxy S6 phone (the two tech options for now, although NextVR reportedly is working with equipment manufacturers to bring better technology to the market).

The headset costs about \$100. CNET reported that rival virtual-reality devices are being introduced, but some like the Oculus Rift, PlayStation VR and HTC Vive will need to be connected to a PC and will limit users' movements in ways that do not happen with mobile devices.

SPORTS MARKETING PLAYBOOK



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Broadcasting sports in virtual reality provides the potential for more exciting engagement for fans, and the opportunities to penetrate new markets and to generate revenue streams that are attractive to teams and leagues.

Fans don't go to live sports events for a variety of reasons — the venue is too far away, the tickets are sold out or too pricey, travel and concessions (and often a babysitter) make the outing too expensive. Accessibility issues may make attending in person too difficult and the proliferation of cheaper, more convenient alternatives for watching sports also makes staying home more attractive.

VSTs will offer fans the unique experience of being at the venue without the high cost or inconvenience.

VST could also be a financial game changer if teams and leagues can get fans who may never attend a single game in person to pay for the virtual reality experience.

Comcast SportsNet recently broke down the numbers.

Of the more than 200 million fans of the big professional sports leagues in the United States (the NFL, MLB, NBA and NHL) only about 3.2 million fans hold season tickets, CSN reported, citing data from Navigate Research. That leaves

of a potential market of more than 195 million sports fans for VSTs in those sports. And that's just in the U.S. Consider the potentially enormous international market for VSTs in U.S. sports.

Sports organizations can also augment VSTs with packages of benefits that will generate even more revenue without cutting into existing profit centers. CSN speculates that additional benefits could include: Customized gameday content sent directly to your mobile device or computer; a virtual tour of the venue's facilities; virtual VIP "suites" where you can chat with former players; special postgame high-light content and the ability to join teams on their travels through cameras placed on team buses and planes.

As with any new technology, there are issues to be addressed. Will VST holders be tech-savvy enough to get the most from the new product? Will broadcast and infrastructure providers be able to handle the potential volume of users, especially on big game days?

While virtual reality sports content is just beginning to ramp up, new application ideas are already under consideration, such as combining virtual reality technology with wearable technology for players to provide new experiences.

Wearable devices currently help teams assess players' health and performance, and CSN suggests fans could experience in-game action through avatars of players using wearable devices. CSN has also entered into a partnership with the NHL's San Jose Sharks and Guitammer Co.,

which makes a product called "The ButtKicker" that transmits signals from sensors at the sports arena to stadium seats or at-home adapters that vibrate fan seats.

One day, fans may not only be able to see and hear hockey players collide or slam into the

boards as if they were right there on the other side of the glass, but they'll feel it, too. Consider, finally, that while venues can only hold so many seats, the rapid development of VR technology may mean that, at some point soon, there might be no such thing as a sell-out anymore.

Implemented strategically, VRSTs could bring more sports action to more fans and support existing in-venue ticket, concession and merchandise sales, bringing more revenue to sports organizations. And that's great news all around for teams and the fans who love them.