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Virtual reality lets fans play games — just like the pros

The roar. The bright lights. The scoreboard telling you it's now or never. This is your time. You gotta tune it all out. Because it's not about the lights and it's not about the scoreboard. It's about you. And the ball. It's about trusting what you've got inside."

Washington Nationals' slugger Bryce Harper coaches you as you step up to the plate in the bottom of the ninth in a tied-up ballgame. The pressure is on. Your team already has two outs, and you're going toe-to-toe with a pitcher who's throwing 90-plus mph heaters. You pop a foul off the edge of your bat, work a 3-2 count and eventually hit a walk-off homer that sails over an outfield fence plastered with a Gatorade logo and the slogan "win from within."

For the brand's 50th anniversary, Gatorade, the Chicago-based sports drink brand, partnered with ad agency OMD's Zero Code and production firm The Mill to create a first-of-its-kind athletic virtual reality film.

Shot at Nationals Park last May using 14 GoPro cameras, the video gives fans a sense of what Harper sees when he looks down at his own body, back at the catcher and out over the field while at bat. The production team used computer-generated imagery to give Harper's arms, legs and torso a video-game feel, but the rest of the footage is made to look and sound just like real life.

Minor league baseball players stood in outfield positions during filming and the audio includes crowd noise from an actual Nationals game. The production team also developed a fully photo-real computer graphics avatar of Harper, built the players' behaviors from a study of the way pitchers' and batters' bodies work and recorded Harper's monologue in binaural audio so that fans hear it just as he would hear himself speak.

"It's epic. It's absolutely spot-on," Harper has said of the

SPORTS MARKETING PLAYBOOK



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product's authenticity.

Fans can experience the Gatorade video on a VR headset like the Samsung Gear or Google Cardboard, or on YouTube 360, a new platform that allows viewers to explore different angles of videos with a click of the mouse or by shifting the position of their mobile device. Android users also can watch the film using the Google Cardboard TV app. Gatorade is also releasing a number of YouTube 360 videos about the making of the VR, or virtual reality, experience.

VR appears to be the new frontier of sports marketing, in part because it focuses on an experience that fans will want to seek out, not on a commercial that interrupts television broadcasts or social media feeds. Jeff Miller, digital director at Gatorade, believes that "athletes today are closer to their fans than ever. We feel like with virtual reality, we have the opportunity to really put our fans into the athlete mindset."

The brand kept the focus on the consumer experience rather than excessive branding and deliberately kept ad messaging to a minimum, using in-game signage on the outfield fence and inserting brief promotional clips at the beginning and end of the reel.

Other brands have taken a similar approach. At the 2014 FIFA Men's World Cup, Coca-Cola encouraged fans to don VR Oculus Rift goggles, enter a replica of the locker room at Brazil's Maracana Stadium and kick the ball around on the pitch. Matt Wolf, head of global gaming for Coca-Cola reportedly explained that while the experience included some branding, the more valuable aspect of it was "about the authenticity of being inside that stadium."

More recently, American Express presented the "You vs. Sharapova" reality experience booth at the U.S. Open, in which fans strapped on a HTC Vive VR developer kit, slipped headphones over their ears and used wand-like VR controllers to try to return Maria Sharapova's 110 mph tennis serve.

Phil Koutsis, the SVP group creative director at Momentum Worldwide, said the company mapped Sharapova's serve at the House of Moves, a premier motion capture studio in Los Angeles, by having the star wear a motion cap, running full facial scans and texture-mapping her face to full 3D modeling and filming both her forehead and her baseline volleys at the net.

The production also used physics to make sure the speed of the serve depicted was her top

speed. For Koutsis and American Express, the authenticity of Sharapova's image and movement were key, but they also took consumers' VR experience to the next level by using the HTC Vive and the controller to give users movement, rather than just the stationary experience offered by the Oculus Rift headset.

Sports teams aren't just partnering with brands to use VR to pit fans against star athletes. After software entrepreneur Vivek Ranadive and his partners bought the Sacramento Kings, the NBA team implemented several tech-focused marketing initiatives, including using Oculus Rift headsets to offer potential season ticket holders and sponsors a virtual reality tour of the new Entertainment and Sports Center currently being built.

The VR experience uses drone footage of the construction site and puts users at center court with DeMarcus Cousins, the Kings' star center. At the team's marketing center where these VR experiences are offered, consumers can use a mobile app on their smartphones and tablets to access 3D models of the seating bowl using augmented reality technology.

The Minnesota Vikings also are using VR to promote their new \$975 million stadium by taking users into the Vikings locker room, walking them down a 90-foot-long corridor past 80-inch flat-screen TVs and depositing them at field level. The Atlanta Falcons, the Atlanta Braves and Notre Dame reportedly are developing similar experiences to advertise new arenas and expensive stadium renovations.

Teams are spending seven figures or more to build marketing centers and VR experiences in the hopes of selling premium seats even though, in some cases, the arenas aren't scheduled to be open until two to three years from now.

The cost of creating VR

experiences — whether it's fan versus athlete matchups or stadium previews — reportedly are comparable to the cost of “90 seconds of any sort of high-quality, fully CGI TV spot,” according to Mike Woods, head of digital at Framestore, a visual effects studio. That puts the cost at \$1 million to \$2 million, according to industry estimates.

While relative costs may not be prohibitive, the newness of VR — in terms of both technology and application — means that its effectiveness as a sports marketing medium is as yet untested. Affordable, high-quality VR equipment is not yet readily available — one of the reasons that Gatorade chose the various platforms, including

YouTube 360 and Google Cardboard TV app, to release its first VR experience.

The learning curve for creating VR and augmented reality-based marketing campaigns is also steep. It's a totally new medium, as Zero Code's Dario Raciti acknowledges, and nobody has any existing knowledge about

creating an enjoyable and exciting consumer experience that is also an effective advertisement. As the technology develops and headsets become more mainstream, however, teams, leagues and brands need to be poised to explore and develop new ways to use the technology for marketing and fan engagement.