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Virtual reality sports look to revolutionize experience

Virtual reality (aka VR) has not been on the sports scene for long but the emerging technology is becoming a must-have for sports broadcasting companies, and companies developing VR technology are partnering with leagues and broadcasters to try to make the most of the VR experience for sports fans.

The viewing experience of today's sports fans has become not just interactive, but immersive.

Still, it may be too early to tell whether virtual reality will become a viewing revolution — or just a cool gimmick. The companies creating VR broadcasts will play a central role in determining the future of this technology in the sports industry.

Virtual reality in sports broadcasting requires a lot of technology. Users need a VR headset to watch virtual reality content and to interact with the simulated environment.

A string of strategically placed cameras at sports venues and powerful computers that can handle a staggering amount of data produce 4K-resolution images that create the three-dimensional virtual reality experience of being at a live sports event.

A few companies currently dominate sports VR tech at the highest level, including tech giant Intel (which is celebrating 50 years in business this year), and relative newcomer, NextVR, which has become a key player in the VR industry since it launched in 2009.

Intel is out to cover all of its bases with a series of deals with the biggest sports leagues and events to provide a unique VR broadcasting experience for viewers. It currently has deals with Major League Baseball, the National Football League, the National Basketball Association and the National College Athletic Association.

Intel signed a three-year deal with Major League Baseball in

SPORTS MARKETING PLAYBOOK



**DOUGLAS N. MASTERS
AND SETH A. ROSE**

Douglas N. Masters is a partner at Loeb & Loeb LLP, where he litigates and counsels clients primarily in intellectual property, advertising and unfair competition. He is co-chair of the firm's intellectual property protection group and he can be reached at dmasters@loeb.com. Seth A. Rose is a partner at the firm, where he counsels clients on programs and initiatives in advertising, marketing, promotions, media, sponsorships, entertainment, branded and integrated marketing, and social media. He can be reached at srose@loeb.com.

2017 and launched the new partnership by livestreaming one out-of-market MLB game a week for free during the regular season via its Intel True VR technology.

According to the company, the live "Intel True VR Game of the Week" uses multiple 4K-resolution cameras that lets users control their vantage point by selecting up to four camera angles per game.

Viewers can watch the game from behind home plate, at third base, or above the dugout, or they can switch viewpoints. They can also opt for a produced VR broadcast experience. The broadcasts include real-time player and team statistics throughout the game, exclusive in-app commentary, on-demand replays of each game and post-game highlights.

Intel is also the official technology provider for the NFL and has installed its VR cameras in selected stadiums around the country for teams including the Arizona Cardinals, Baltimore Ravens, Carolina Panthers, Cleveland Browns, Houston Texans, Indianapolis Colts, Kansas City Chiefs, Minnesota Vikings, New England Patriots, San Francisco 49ers and Washington Redskins.

As the official virtual reality partner of the NBA, Intel is partnering with the league and TNT

to broadcast games and events like the NBA All-Star weekend on its Intel True VR app, either live or on-demand.

TNT provides in-app commentary and analysis. In college basketball, the NCAA named Intel its official VR partner, which will give fans a unique perspective of March Madness this year from the comfort of their homes.

In addition, Intel brought virtual reality to this year's Olympic Winter Games in Pyeongchang. As part of NBC's Olympic coverage on the NBC Sports VR app, Intel's VR content featured more than 30 live or on-demand Olympic events.

Intel is also pushing the viewing experience a step further with Intel True View, which relies on more than 38 5K-resolution cameras positioned around a venue to create a 360-degree broadcast. The company explains that its battalion of cameras capture huge amounts of volumetric data — height, width and depth — using 3D pixels called "voxels."

With the 360-degree view, the user remains in one place while looking around, leading some critics to argue that it isn't actually virtual reality, which lets users move around the environment.

Like Intel, VR broadcasting startup NextVR is casting a wide net in the sports world with

deals to broadcast basketball, soccer, wrestling and tennis events and content. Next VR jumped into the sports stratosphere when it signed a five-year deal with Fox Sports in 2016. NextVR has broadcast major sports events including the Daytona 500, the U.S. Open and the Kentucky Derby.

NextVR is the official NBA league pass VR partner for the second year in a row. Collaborating with NBA Digital, NextVR broadcast free on-demand virtual reality game highlights of the 2018 NBA Finals.

In July, NextVR also announced a partnership with COPA90, a global multiplatform soccer media business. The deal includes a dedicated COPA90 channel in the NextVR app, behind-the-scenes features with U.S. and international teams and broadcasts of selected matches in major events like the International Champions Cup.

Earlier this year, NextVR began featuring highlights from selected World Wrestling Entertainment special events in virtual reality on a new WWE channel within the NextVR app after the applicable event. It's also been collaborating with the U.S. Tennis Association since 2016 to provide highlights and other content in virtual reality from a variety of events.

But despite the excitement around VR and its possibilities, providers are grappling with a number of significant problems with sports broadcasts.

So far, the technology is struggling to keep up with demand and image quality often isn't up to par, critics say. VR broadcasters, particularly Intel, have taken heat for technical glitches and images that are too pixelated. Given the huge worldwide audience for sports and its insatiable appetite for content, keeping the underlying VR technology running smoothly clearly needs to be a top priority for the VR sports broadcasting experience to grow and evolve.

One of the biggest complaints

about VR is that it takes away the vital social component of watching sports. The need to use headsets makes VR viewing a solitary experience for sports fans who are accustomed to watching events surrounded by other fans and to being able to discuss the action online or in person.

A number of VR startups are working to make the experience

more interactive, however, according to TechCrunch. Virtually Live offers a VR environment that gives fans the ability to create their own avatars and interact with each other via VoIP, or Voice over Internet Protocol.

Another company, LiveLike, designs customizable apps for VR content providers and launched a feature that allows users to invite Facebook friends

to a virtual “suite” so they can chat while watching the game, TechCrunch reported.

Clearly, broadcasting sports in VR is a rapidly evolving work in progress. But will the technology be able to keep pace with the expectations of viewers that are accustomed to continual innovation?

Competition among traditional and newer sports broadcasters

like Facebook, which bought the VR startup Oculus in 2014, will likely push tech providers to their limits to deliver the best viewing experience and content possible.

As sports fans gravitate to VR to watch their favorite teams and players, the next few years could be crucial in determining whether or not the technology has true staying power.