

# Sports Without Spectators

Good for now, but hardly the new ‘normal’

Vidya Subramanian

*Watching the first post-Covid football match in the German League was an experience, but even when all the new technologies that will make the experience real are in play it will not be the same as watching it live. As technologies take sport further and further from the stadium inside which it is played, more and more do distant fans want to be a part of the in-stadium experience.*

The question that triggered this piece was, ‘what will happen in sport with no spectators?’ It’s not an easy question to answer; primarily because the spectator is the entity at the heart of sport at its highest level. Top tier sports (the large, televised kind) cannot, quite literally, exist without spectators. The funding for top level sports – which fuels everything from training to equipment and even stadium infrastructure – comes from advertising and sponsorship; which in turn exist for the ‘eyeballs’ of the spectators. So the question probably needs a bit more fine tuning. We aren’t really asking what will happen when the spectators disappear, because the ones on the other side of the television aren’t necessarily disappearing; we’re asking if it’s possible that sport with no stadium audiences can become the new normal, even after the pandemic is over.

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is becoming increasingly clear that if big ticket sports events must take place now, it must be ‘behind closed doors’. Playing top level sports with no stadium audience is by no means a new idea. The predicament of having to play behind closed doors has had to be undertaken many times, including because of punishments for unruly fan behaviour (several games in European football leagues have been played behind closed doors due to fans rioting (<https://www.skysports.com/football/news/11860/11592743/inter-milan-to-play-two-serie-a-games-behind-closed-doors-after-trouble-against-napoli>), abusing players (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/football/europe/8008928.stm>), etc; or public safety issues heavy snow in Edinburgh and concern for public safety ([http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/rugby\\_union/my\\_club/edinburgh/9295226.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/rugby_union/my_club/edinburgh/9295226.stm)) pushed a rugby match behind closed doors in 2010, and even due to epidemics (such as the H1N1 pandemic in Mexico in 2009 (<https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sdut-soc-mexico-empty-stadiums-042609-2009apr26-story.html>)). Even golf has been played with no fans in the gallery because of damage caused by a storm in 2012 ([https://www.espn.in/golf/story/\\_/id/8115466/pga-tour-play-congressional-resumes-brutal-storm-fans-kept-out](https://www.espn.in/golf/story/_/id/8115466/pga-tour-play-congressional-resumes-brutal-storm-fans-kept-out)).

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But of course, it is not going to be the same thing at all. As the world found <https://scroll.in/field/962159/the-new-normal-what-football-in-times-of-coronavirus-looked-like-during-bundesligas-return>) during the first post-Covid football match in the German League between Borussia Dortmund and Schalke FC (<https://www.livemint.com/mint-lounge/features/football-s-new-abnormal-when-dortmund-played-schalke-in-the-bundesliga-11589687534086.html> ). Watching football without the cheering fans was a whole other experience. Fans exclaimed on being able to hear the shouts and screams of the coach and players, usually drowned out by the unrelenting roar of the stadium spectators.

That is how much the stadium audience has become part of the spectacle of sport on TV. The mikes around the stadium catch the immediate applause and opprobrium of the fans, the commentators' voices matching the excitement, the action on the pitch backgrounded by these sounds – all these years, the televised spectacle has been teaching television spectators how to follow the action on the field. And then, suddenly, without the roar of the in-stadium fans, the spectacle feels...quieter, less than, reduced, and less exciting somehow.

A quick side note to say that this supposition (that sport suffers without spectators) is not entirely true for, say, neighbourhood games or inter-institute matches or even corporate tournaments. This is mostly because those are played either for the sheer joy of the sport or for smaller rivalries, team-building efforts, etc. Most of those matches don't really have large spectator followings.

I've discussed this with some regular non-professional players; and many of them agreed that there were some serious perils of having an audience. An executive in a multinational company who plays tennis regularly spoke about how his game suffers when he plays neighbourhood tournaments and people show up to watch, because he feels "pressured to perform and look good doing it". The story of how televised sport gives amateur athletes ideas of what sport should "look like" is fodder for a whole other article.

Spectators of sports are (by and large) a passionate bunch. They follow teams, individual players, follow their training schedules, dating lives, watch matches, watch matches of rivals, and are basically extremely invested in the spectacle that sport puts on. In the last few decades, spectators have mostly invested in sports and sportspersons through televised broadcasts, aided by media coverage and now social media coverage. Even for those who watch on the internet, or on devices other than the TV such as phones, computers, etc, the broadcast is that which is created and designed for the television. Perhaps the next horizon in technology-mediated viewing of sports will be the Virtual Reality or VR headsets. The attempt is to imitate the feeling of being courtside while sitting in your favourite lounge chair. Perhaps friends – in different places – can (for a price, of course) enjoy watching a game together, giving the invested sports fan another opportunity to feel closer to the game without having to be physically present.

To be sure, the technology already exists (<https://indianexpress.com/article/sports/sport-others/meet-the-jayarams-iit-couple-vr-sports-6439589/> ). It merely needs to incorporate some more special cameras into the existing set-up. Possibilities include sitting next to virtual avatars of celebrities in owners' boxes or even calling up replays and statistics that the viewer wants to see. Almost like being in an Multi-player Online Role Playing Game (MORPG), except without the role playing. It is not just VR, but also Augmented Reality (AR), Mixed Reality (MR), and all manner of Extended Reality (XR) versions that are sitting at the boundary of sport telecast at the moment.

This is not a paradigm shift at all because technology companies have already made deep inroads into sports. From better string manufacturers for tennis racquets to the new goal line technology in football, from Hawk Eye for LBW decisions in cricket to wearable inertial sensors for swimmers, big tech is already everywhere, and hopes yet to be everywhere else we haven't even yet thought of. XR gadgets would only be one further step on the viewing screen side of tech things.

### **So, no. The paradigm isn't shifting...yet**

Much of the world's Covid lockdown experience (for those who are privileged enough) has been about information and communication technologies. We have all managed to live through this strange uncertain period with the help of the internet and related technologies. Webex classrooms, video conference office meetings, movie viewing parties, even group aerobics classes on Zoom have become our new reality. ICTs have become the first place we look to for solutions to problems. From contact tracing the epidemic to improving the Public Distribution Systems, technological solutionism appears to have taken over practically every aspect of our lives. I believe that these Zoom aerobics classes and virtual classrooms may have become a good add-on to our pre-pandemic lived realities, but I doubt very much if they'll become a permanent 'new normal'.

Besides, sports was technologically mediated and live online long before the aerobics classes went live online. Broadcast and other technological influxes have, over the decades, brought sport to more people, created new audiences, and generated massive advertising opportunities for corporates; but the lived experience of watching live sport in a stadium has not yet managed to find an equal. Referring to watching tennis in the stadium, David Foster Wallace famously [wrote](#) that, "TV tennis is to live tennis pretty much as video porn is to the felt reality of human love." (<https://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/20/sports/playmagazine/20federer.html> ). That is perhaps one reason why in spite of the great leaps in broadcast technologies, we continue to invest in ever larger stadia. And why sport tourism has been a steadily growing sector (until the pandemic brought it to an abrupt halt). I believe that as technologies take sport further and further from the stadium inside which it is played, more and more do distant fans want the experience of being a part of the in-stadium experience.

When the world begins to recover from this pandemic, we will definitely see a prominent surge in the enthusiasm of in-stadium crowds. But until then, elbow bumps as on-field celebrations; cavernous empty stadia; and mandatory physical distancing norms will have to do. I think I speak for all sports fans when I say, that while XR is great, we can't wait for 'normal' to be back... but until then, we'll take what we can get.

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