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By SportsTech: The Landscape of Sports Tech — Projections for 2021

At the start of 2020, it was unthinkable that the sports world would come to a crashing halt — with the cancellation of the NCAA men’s and women’s basketball tournaments; shortened MLB, NHL and MLS seasons; the NBA and NHL playoffs taking place in a bubble and the NFL playing in mostly empty stadiums.

However, the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic also elicited a new wave of creativity, tech innovation and tech advancements in the sports world.

Case in point: In January 2020, Comcast NBCUniversal worked with Boomtown Accelerators to launch the Comcast NBCUniversal SportsTech Accelerator. For the 12-week program, 10 startups were chosen in key sports tech investment categories identified by the accelerator’s partners — NBC Sports, Sky Sports, Golf Channel, NASCAR, U.S. Ski & Snowboard, USA Swimming and USA Cycling — as integral to the future success of sports business (see sidebar). The goal was to provide these startups with a competitive edge to develop the technologies the sports industry will need in 2021 and beyond. Four of the top sports tech investment categories that bring an early lens to innovative solutions are: media and entertainment; fan/player engagement; venue and event innovation; and esports.

Media and Entertainment

In recent years, two key trends have emerged — large numbers of people are moving away from cable or satellite to streaming services, while many people are also watching sports and entertainment shows on smartphones and tablets. A study by Grabyo showed that in 2020, two-thirds of U.S. sports fans were willing to watch sports exclusively from streaming services, while 69% were willing to spend \$10 a month for online sports streaming.

This has led many sports organizations to more heavily promote their own over-the-top (OTT) sports services, including the NFL with Game Pass and the NBA with League Pass.

Sports tech trends developing in this category include remote production, niche broadcasting and direct-to-consumer content.

“This pandemic has helped fuel a shift towards being more efficient and thoughtful in how we’re producing live sports,” said Will McIntosh, executive vice president of NBC Sports Digital and Consumer Businesses at NBC Sports Group, and an advisor to the Comcast NBCUniversal SportsTech Accelerator program.

While remote production had been used previously, the pandemic accelerated its use. When NASCAR returned to racing at Darlington in May 2020, the event was broadcast with its REMote Integration (REMI) unit, in which only the camera operators, a technical director and one director were onsite. The announcers and producers were in a separate, remote broadcast production hub.

Fan/Player Engagement

A study by MRI-Simmons revealed the 83% of Americans who identify as sports fans were sad, frustrated and disconnected due to the lack of live sports during the early months of the pandemic. Sports tech companies working in the fan/player engagement category had to shift from developing initiatives for the onsite experience to remote experiences.

Since, according to the Capgemini Research Institute, most sports fans say technology enhances their enjoyment of games and their spending increases when they have a good experience with sports tech, the goal of companies in this space is to reduce the barriers between fans and their favorite players.

Fans want sports tech that gives them multiple engagement as 92.9% watch games on TV, 66.8% follow sports on social media, 44.6% purchase merchandise, 30.4% play fantasy sports and 25.9% participate in sports betting.

Venue and Event Innovation

Venues were the hardest category hit in 2020 and may be the slowest to recover because of the uncertainty about when stadiums and arenas will be able to be filled to full capacity again. The biggest innovation in this category is the development of smart stadiums.

Through a partnership with Willow, SoFi Stadium in Inglewood, Calif., home to the Los Angeles Rams and Chargers, became the first major venue in the U.S. to open with digital twin technology. Digital twin technology converts all quantifiable aspects of the stadium into an evolving virtual replica — providing stadium administrators with large amounts of analytical information to optimize its lighting, air conditioning, mechanical operations and other aspects of the stadium's game day experience.

Moving forward, more venues will adopt 5G technology to improve the fan experience. Other advances may include the replacement of paper or mobile tickets with wearable devices like wristbands and the use of mobile devices to notify fans of the shortest concession and restroom lines.

Esports

In a study by Foley & Lardner, sports leaders ranked esports as the #1 growth area. Esports thrived during the pandemic's lockdown and was expected to generate global revenues of

\$950.3 million in 2020.

“Ten years from now, when we look back, we may very well see that the sport most kids in the world participate in is esports,” said McIntosh.

More than 1.3 million viewers watched professional NASCAR drivers compete in a virtual race on Fox and FS1 in the first month of lockdown. Not only did this viewership set an industry record, it led to the development of the eNASCAR iRacing Pro Invitational Series.

Fueling this sector’s revenue growth is the multiple revenue streams it provides, including media rights for broadcast content, advertising, ticket sales, merchandising and publisher fees.

Beyond 2021

Innovation and experimentation are the hallmarks of the sports tech industry and more is on the horizon beyond 2021.

Looking ahead, sports tech leaders expect to see a greater use of robotics, including robot-controlled drones that can provide a richer view of sports events for broadcasting. One challenge that has not yet been solved is the use of wearables for swimming, but that is now just a matter of time. “I think in the next year or two, we’re going to get there,” said Matt Barbini, national team director for USA Swimming. “We’re closer to solutions now than we have been.”

The sports industry is always looking for ways to improve both competition and the fan experience and to generate more efficiencies. While many sports tech applications were already in development in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the completion and adoption of many new technologies that are now here to stay.

Top 8 Key Sports Investment Categories

1. Media and Entertainment

OTT/on-demand streaming, augmented reality, 8K, 5G, immersive video, computer vision, VR360, optical player tracking

2. Fan/Player Engagement

Game/venue updates via mobile, VR headsets, multiple camera angles, competition with AI robot, interaction with other fans or players.

3. Athlete/Player Performance

Miniaturization, player wellness, injury prevention, activity data/analytics

4. Team and Coach Success

Data analytics, training platforms, recruitment, team performance

5. Venue and Event Innovation

Smart stadiums, scheduling, ticketing, payment, security, merchandising

6. Fantasy Sports and Betting

Emergence of online betting vs. in-person betting

7. Esports

Performance analytics, event streaming and management, betting platforms, mobile gaming, fan/player interaction apps, content management apps, AR, VR, AI, ML, computer vision, gaming software, 5G, blockchain

8. Business of Sports

Marketing and management tools, data visualization, booking, ecommerce, cybersecurity

Comcast NBCUniversal SportsTech is a global accelerator operated by Boomtown Accelerators. Partners include three of Comcast NBCUniversal's sports brands — NBC Sports, Sky Sports and Golf Channel; along with U.S. Ski & Snowboard, USA Swimming, USA Cycling and NASCAR. Selected startups are accepted into the 12-week program which provides access to the top advisors and executives at Comcast and the partner consortium. Download the complete 2021 Landscape of Sports Tech report.