

British public not yet ready for a return to live sports action

New tech can get fans closer to action and help with a safe return

As live sport broadcasting returns to our screens, the British public believe live events should only resume when it is safe to do so, and they aren't in a rush to get back to action according to a new YouGov study of 2,000 consumers in the UK. The majority (52%) of the UK public think that matches and events should only restart when it is also safe for spectators to join in the stands, while just over half (54%) believe that COVID-19 would need to be close to eradication before they would feel confident going back to a stadium.

The research is published in the middle of what should have been a jam-packed Summer sports calendar, with the COVID-19 pandemic leading to the postponement or cancellation of events such as Euro 2020 and Wimbledon. But while the impact on competitions and sports organisations has been well documented in the press, the views of the public have been less clear until now.

If sport does return from behind closed doors, two-thirds of respondents (66%) think all live matches should be available to view free-to-air, pointing to an opportunity for the country to rally behind sport as we emerge from crisis. However, the experience will be a markedly different one for viewers without crowds present – the atmosphere and sound at the stadium is the thing we have missed most about attending events, cited by 39% of those who have previously attended a live sports event.

The future of fan engagement

“Whether it's watching from home, or preparing for a cautious return for spectators, the fan experience is possibly the biggest challenge facing the sports industry right now,” says Sam Seddon, Sports & Sponsorship Lead, IBM UK. “It will likely be some time before we see capacity crowds again, so tournament organisers and clubs will need to identify new ways to re-engage fans and capture the shared experience of live sport.”

Lockdown has seen a disconnect between the public and sport, with only a third of the public (35%) trying to get their sporting fix during the pandemic. Of those that have, more than half have done so through exercise (53%), while four in ten have re-watched recordings of classic sports matches and events (44%). Younger audiences (aged 18-24) were far more likely to try to stay connected to sport (54% vs. 32% 25+).

When fans are eventually allowed to return to stadia, more than half (54%) feel that technology has a vital role in restoring confidence in attending live sports events. Whether it's help with social distancing or safe access to stadiums, it's clear that event organisers should embrace digital tools to reassure returning audiences alongside employing more traditional methods such as frequent disinfection of high-touch areas, a condition stipulated by 53% of respondents.

Closer to the action

For now, at least, watching sport at home on TV can be a welcome distraction, with nearly half of us (47%) preferring to follow the action from the comfort of our homes. A majority of respondents think technology can enhance the home viewing experience and bring them closer to the action. 27% would like to see a “ref watch” feature to closely follow and listen to a referee’s on-field decisions. Sharing the experience is still important, as a quarter of us (25%) would like to use video conferencing tools to watch the game alongside family and friends from a different household. One in five (21%) are keen on live streaming on social media, while a Virtual Reality in-stadium experience, and personalised content such as different camera angles and replays were both sought by 20%.

Some sports may take longer than others to return, but fortunately sports fans have no shortage of classic moments from history that they can relive or watch for the first time. For those interested in re-watching classic sport, remastered picture quality topped the Wishlist (62%) while richer content such as additional interviews or stories on the matches was also a strong consideration (46%). Two in five (42%) wanted easy access to the archive of footage, while contemporary style stats and analytics were requested by 40%.

The Greatest Championships

Sadly, missing from the Summer’s sporting calendar, this year, Wimbledon will be celebrated by The Greatest Championships, a digital recreation and experience where fans can relive classic matches from the tournament’s history. A collaboration between the tournament organisers AELTC and IBM, the experience will offer fans a personally tailored package of highlights, interviews, statistics and stories and a searchable archive of remastered match footage.

“Wimbledon is the second most watched live sport event in the UK according to our research and the digital recreation of The Championships will go some way to reconnecting fans with a sport they love via technology,” adds Seddon.

“The role of technology will be fundamental to both re-engaging fans and the safe resumption of events as we emerge from lockdown. Finding the right balance will be critical to those sports businesses that manage to thrive and emerge smarter from the pandemic.”

For more details on how IBM is working with AELTC on The Greatest Championships, click [here](#).

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2,069 UK adults.

Fieldwork was undertaken between 5th and 8th June 2020. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults (aged 18+).

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