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College Basketball Games Carry on Without Fans

Ben Wiley, Author

The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically altered collegiate sports during the 2020-21 academic year. First it shifted fall sports, such as soccer and cross country, to the springtime. Now, basketball teams beyond Seattle University are having to play their games without the presence of fans, creating a game day experience unlike any before.

While the current 2020-21 college basketball season began as planned in late November, numerous teams have had to pause activity or cancel future games due to COVID-19 health and safety protocols. Duke, Virginia and Vanderbilt Women's Basketball teams have completely opted out of the remainder of their seasons. Additionally, the NCAA recently announced that the 2021 NCAA men's basketball championship tournament will be held entirely in and around Indianapolis to create a bubble-like format and limit the spread of COVID-19.

The absence of fans and subsequent empty arenas creates a different environment for players and coaches, who tend to feed off fans' energy during games.

Chinwe Ezeonu, a redshirt junior forward on the Seattle U Women's Basketball team, shared her feelings about this season's game-day experience.

"It's definitely been different since we have to test when leaving and upon return, play in front of no fans, and there are so many restrictions when we enter gyms and leave," Ezeonu said. "It's just a little bit more stressful since there are so many things going on. But, when it's game time it seems regular."

Suzy Barcomb, the head coach of Seattle U's Women's Basketball team, expressed the changes that she has had to make during this unique season.

"Not having fans hasn't really impacted our ability to have games concerning COVID. As a coach, you just want to be focused on the game and not focusing on the fans. However it has been somewhat of a challenge to coach with a mask on," Barcomb said.

Although the absence of fans may not affect the outcomes of games, it is hurting the marketing and sales of university athletic departments. At Seattle U, without fans allowed at sporting events, no one is buying tickets, concessions or Seattle U gear at the basketball games. To compensate for this loss, the Seattle U Athletic Department recently conducted a fundraiser.

Beginning in January, they filled up the empty stands of the student section in the Redhawk center with teddy bears. Fans who donate \$30 can claim a bear, and after the season, all the stuffed animals will get donated to a local children's charity.



Eric Guttorp, assistant athletic director for marketing and fan experience at Seattle U, did not know the exact amount of teddy bears that have been sold. However, he said that since the athletic department first started putting the teddy bears in the stands, they have seen a big uptick in sponsorships and are still continuing to sell teddy bears.

Additionally, as of Jan. 15, fans of Seattle U's Basketball teams can use HearMeCheer to have their cheering from home piped in to create crowd noise at home games, providing another way for fans to participate in the gameday experience. Guttorp said that they are exploring a partnership with this company after testing out the application during Seattle U's first Western Athletic Conference (WAC) home series against Utah Valley University. Those who want to watch WAC games can find matches on ESPN+, ESPN's online streaming service, as well as the WAC Digital Network.

Along with HearMeCheer and the teddy bear fundraiser, the athletic department has been doing other things to enhance the fan viewing experience.

"We are always trying to think of new, creative ways to get fans involved, as it's hard in the digital curated world where we get to choose what we see on phones—and sports are the last mystery. Every Saturday that we play will have something new in stands," Guttorp said.

For instance, he mentioned that on the first Saturday of the new year, they put a box set of "Die Hard" in the stands, and they are growing a Chewbacca chia pit that fans can watch throughout the season.

Seattle U hopes that these efforts will attract fans to participate in the game day experience and support the athletic department and teams until they can safely attend in person.