

Redefining Our Fandom: Virtual Fans and Cardboard Cut-Outs

BY HARRY LIEN

WITH THE ADVENT OF COVID-19 last spring, the sports world has had to adapt in unprecedented ways. As the summer months approached, major American sports leagues, such as the NBA and MLB, began to resume their postponed seasons. However, given the circumstances of the pandemic, certain preventative measures had to be taken. The most transparent of these being the removal of fans in attendance at live sporting events.

The thought of having no fans for large spectacles such as sports is bizarre. We began to imagine how eerily quiet and strange it would be without the energetic and loud feedback we have come familiarized with. How will a great play or moment be punctuated?

Leagues around the nation have all found their own ways of adapting to this bizarre situation. The National Basketball Association (NBA) has set aside room for 32 virtual seats for fans. These “seats” are spots on a large virtual backdrop that stands courtside behind the team benches. The selection process that determines who is chosen is done in multiple ways. According to NBA.com, fans must register on the site, ultracourtside.com, and are then selected by each of the 22 NBA teams participating. These teams tend to favor the most loyal of their fanbase and relatives of their athletes. The league’s Head of Next Generation Telecasts, Sara Zuckert,

embraces the virtual fan experience. She states, “With the unfortunate situation involving the pandemic that we’re in, we began to focus on how to bring our fans closer to the game in different kinds of ways.” Celebrities and former players have also been spotted on the video screen representing their fandom. Notable examples include rapper Lil Wayne showing support for the Los Angeles Lakers and NBA Hall of Famer Shaquille O’Neal making the rounds with several cameos for different teams. In an NBA.com article, it is stated that “the goal is to make the atmosphere at the games as flavorful as technology can possibly allow.”

Meanwhile, Major League Baseball (MLB) has come to terms with its empty ballparks through the creative, and somewhat amusing, way of cardboard cutouts. As strange as the concept may seem, it does provide fans and players alike a fun alternative to the otherwise empty and lifeless stadiums. Each baseball team has creative direction at their ballpark. For example, the Chicago White Sox put up cutouts of players’ family members. The Oakland Athletics are offering their fans to be put on stadium cutouts starting at \$49 and going up to \$129 depending on the location. Meanwhile, the Kansas City Royals have paid homage to local baseball legend Buck O’Neil and native actor Paul Rudd.



Kansas City native and actor Paul Rudd appears on cardboard cutout at Kauffman Stadium.
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