

The Biggest Fans Of All?

By Clement Chan

Talk about sports fans and the conversation quickly turns to the loyal crowds that fill professional baseball, hockey, football, basketball and soccer venues. But, there's a fan base that's growing so quickly, it can no longer be ignored. The focus is esports—the generic term for competitive video gaming. With hardcore fans expected to number 495 million in 2020, you get a better sense of what's driving growth.¹ It's estimated worldwide esports revenues will reach \$1.1 billion in 2020 and this entertainment option will achieve a 9% compounded annual growth rate between 2019-2023.²

Like their traditional sports peers, esports fans will typically head to arenas to cheer their favourite teams. Over the last several years, that's primarily been happening in Asia, where 57% of the fan base resides. Europe is also seeing growing attendance.³

In North America, things are changing quickly as investors and media participants scramble for sponsorship and media rights to various esports contests. For example, Philadelphia Flyers owners, Comcast Spectator, are backing the \$50 million construction of the first ground-up esports arena in North America.⁴ With a planned opening in 2021, the facility will be home to its Fusion team, a member of the Overwatch League.

Watching on-site is only part of the story. Live online streaming plays a huge role for players and fans alike. One of the biggest platforms is Twitch, which launched in 2011 and offers a place for players to stream their games and fans to watch. Twitch has 3.4 million to 4.5 million monthly



broadcasters and over 1 million concurrent viewers at any one time.⁵ It's interesting to note that future-focused Amazon acquired Twitch for \$970 million in 2014.⁶

Over the last few months, COVID-19 realities have blurred the lines between traditional and esports players and fans. With major sports games around the world halted, video game developers created sports simulation games, encouraging people to remain safely at home.

EA Sport's FIFA20, for instance, held the "Stay and Play Cup," where 20 soccer players—representing European teams including Liverpool F.C., Real Madrid C.F. and Paris Saint-Germain F.C.—played a mini-tournament, which was broadcast on Twitch.⁷ In North America, the NHL's Minnesota Wild recruited local professional gamers to represent the Wild and their opponents on originally scheduled game nights. Instead of watching players take to the ice, fans tuned into EA Sports' NHL20.⁸ Such initiatives helped keep fans safe and engaged with their teams during these difficult times.

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The video gaming industry will continue to grow rapidly as social media and technology weaves further into our lives. Maybe, next movie night, instead of deciding which one to stream, pick an esports game to watch. You just might find yourself becoming a fan.

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