The NBA is using Microsoft Teams to bring basketball fans courtside

The National Basketball Association (NBA) is using Microsoft Teams' new Together Mode to place basketball fans courtside in a virtual experience during live games. Microsoft only just revealed Together Mode for Teams earlier this month, and it uses AI to segment your face and shoulders and place you together with other people in a virtual space.

The NBA is using this new Microsoft Teams mode combined with 17-foot tall LED screens that will wrap around basketball arenas to put fans back next to players. Fans will be able to react in real time, and players will be able to see and hear those reactions. These virtual stands will include more than 300 fans using Together Mode to sit side by side with each other virtually in Microsoft Teams. Fans will be able to watch a live feed of the game within Teams alongside a view of each other.

"This new experience—the first to go live as a result of the NBA / Microsoft partnership — gives participating fans the feeling of sitting next to one another at a live game without leaving the comfort and safety of their homes," explains Jared Spataro, head of Microsoft 365. "Players, meanwhile, will experience their energy and support as they dribble down the court and see fans' real-time reaction. And viewers tuning into the game from home will feel the crowd's energy as well as they see the virtual stands filled with fans."

Fans will sit together in a virtual experience.
Microsoft

There’s obviously a lot of potential for abuse if fans suddenly go rogue during the sessions. Thankfully, the NBA will have members participating in the calls and will remove any participants who behave inappropriately or disrupt the experience.

Broadcasters ESPN and Turner Sports are also repositioning cameras to include new angles for fans watching at home, and microphones around the court will capture the sneaker squeaks and ball bounces we’re used to hearing. Alongside the Microsoft Teams experience, fans will also be able to cheer virtually using the NBA app. These virtual cheers will appear on video boards during games with animations.

The NBA’s work with Microsoft is all part of a strategic alliance that the pair formed earlier this year. Microsoft signed a multiyear deal with the NBA to become the official AI, cloud, and laptop provider for the league. This is the first big example of the deal, and we’ll also see the NBA using Microsoft’s Azure platform to broadcast live and on-demand basketball games, with personalized content.

The NBA season is set to resume on July 30th, after it went on hiatus in March due to the coronavirus pandemic. This innovative use of Microsoft Teams is part of a number of ways that different sports around the world are trying to create virtual fans experiences. Fox Sports is also bringing “virtual fans” to its Major League Baseball broadcasts on Saturday, replacing empty seats with CGI fans and fake crowd noises.

***Update, July 24th 4:10PM ET**: Article updated with additional details on the Teams meetings.*

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