

Virtual fans? Premier League looks at options for empty stadium games



General view inside Burnley's Turf Moor stadium

Reuters | Manchester

The Premier League is exploring the use of audio effects and computer generated 'fans', to improve the viewer experience of watching behind closed doors games.

The league voted on Monday to allow teams to return to non-contact training in small

While the league and broadcasters evaluate all the options, the focus for now though is on the players returning to their training grounds

groups and hopes to be able to clear contact training next week as it steps up 'Project Restart'.

Germany's Bundesliga returned to action on Saturday without any major hitches, which has encouraged the Premier League. However, CEO Richard Masters says they are looking at ways to improve the television experience of watching games in empty stadiums should the league return as planned in June.

"I think we'll take a different approach, not better, but slightly different approach about the behind closed doors product and that was one of the things we were able to talk to clubs today, the direction of travel on. We have group of clubs and broadcasters together on that," Masters told reporters.

The absence of fans was

highly noticeable on Bundesliga broadcasts with players' shouting the only noise to be heard other than the voice of the commentator.

Sources with knowledge of the discussions have indicated that all options are currently on the table, including adding crowd noise and the use of computer generated (CGI) fans to replace the images of empty seats in the stadium.

No decision has been taken on whether to use such technology, with concerns that any changes do not make the game appear too far away from the reality of what is unfolding on the pitch.

"In terms of the precise nature of what we are planning, we haven't really talked about it with the wide group yet so I don't want to share too much of the plans," said Masters during

a conference call with reporters.

"But obviously the big issue is that if there aren't fans in the stadium, what does the viewing fan at home, what's his experience like? And how different is it to a normal Premier League production and that's the question we're seeking to answer," he added.

Augmented reality

A number of companies offer technology, including augmented reality products, which could add crowd noise and the impression of a crowd to broadcasts.

"The idea is to protect the integrity and experience of the game, by turning the attention away from the empty stadium, and instead replacing it with appealing surroundings to make the game more interesting, and as close to reality as possible," said Gudjon Gudjonsson, CEO of one such company, OZ Sports.

"These are times to explore and experiment, to make sports even more appealing and to bring it closer to the latest developments in esports," he added.

Oz Sports declined to discuss whether they were in talks with the Premier League. "OZ Sports can confirm it is in discussions with multiple sports bodies, not limited to football," the company said.

While the league and broadcasters evaluate all the options, the focus for now though is on the players returning to their training grounds.

Initial training will be in small groups, no bigger than five players, and with social distancing rules enforced in and around the facilities.



General view of Carrow Road Stadium, home of Norwich City FC

Spain's Bautista Agut still eyeing elusive ATP Finals spot



Bautista Agut reacts during a match (file photo)

Reuters | Madrid

Qualifying for the season-ending men's ATP Finals, which features the world's top eight singles players and doubles teams, is one of the goals for Roberto Bautista Agut before he retires, the Spaniard has said.

The 32-year-old came close to ticking that off his wish list when he rose to a career-high world ranking of ninth last year and served as a reserve player for the 2019 edition of the event in London.

"It is one of the goals I would like to achieve before retiring," Bautista Agut told ATPTour.com.

"I know how difficult it is, I know that I have been very close some seasons. It's not something I'm obsessed about, but it remains a goal I'd like to achieve some day."

Bautista Agut was ranked 12th when the tennis season was suspended in early March due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The tennis shutdown will continue at least until the end of July and the fate of the 50th edition of the ATP Finals, scheduled for Nov. 15-22 in London, is expected to be decided later.

The Spaniard made a strong start to the season by winning

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ROBERTO BAUTISTA AGUT

all six of his singles matches for Spain in the ATP Cup before reaching the third round of the Australian Open, where he fell to Croatia's Marin Cilic after a gruelling five-setter.

In November, Bautista Agut, who has 11 career wins against top 10 opponents, returned to Spain's Davis Cup squad a day after his father's funeral and delivered an emotional win over Canada's Felix Auger-Aliassime to help his country to a sixth title.

"What keeps me motivated is my competitiveness. I'm very competitive both as an athlete and person," he said. "I'm always trying to improve and win, adding minor details to my game, because it's a feeling I love."

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SUDOKU

3	6							9
				6	2			8
			9	8				1
2	8	9			3			
			2			3	7	5
	1		3	5				
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	3							5
								7

Yesterday's solution

4	5	2	6	9	3	1	7	8
9	6	7	1	8	4	3	5	2
3	1	8	5	7	2	9	4	6
7	8	1	2	4	5	6	3	9
5	9	4	3	6	8	2	1	7
2	3	6	9	1	7	5	8	4
8	2	3	4	5	9	7	6	1
1	7	9	8	3	6	4	2	5
6	4	5	7	2	1	8	9	3

How to play

Place a number in the empty boxes in such a way that each row across, each column down and each 9-box square contains all of the numbers from one to nine.



Across

1- Soccer legend; 5- Fiddlesticks; 9- Gush; 13- Buddy; 15- Architect Saarinen; 16- Pocket problem; 17- Hinge; 18- Animal house; 19- breve; 20- It may come after you; 21- Stratium; 23- More spine-tingling; 25- Fast Time; 26- Country; 27- Slander; 30- Wedding words; 31- Tumults; 32- Pertaining to the management of public wealth; 37- About; 38- Member of a motorcycle gang; 40- Sat on the back of a horse; 41- Woman hired to suckle another's infant; 43- Satisfied; 44- Not for a Scot; 45- Devotees to the god of revelry; 47- Heavy hitter; 50- Oops!; 51- Dazed; 52- Growl; 53- Cruces; NM; 56- Neet rival; 57- Excited; 59- and desist; 61- Mozart's "Kleine Nachtmusik"; 62- Libertine; 63- Ruin; 64- K-6; 65- Carry; 66- Floating platform;

Down

1- Father; 2- Chieftain, usually in Africa; 3- As it happens; 4- Id's counterpart; 5- Erase; 6- Be a mother to; 7- Onassis, to pals; 8- Bullfighter; 9- Puppeteer Lewis; 10- Salk's conquest; 11- Actress Barkin; 12- Put on; 14- Furry swimmers; 22- Officeholders; 24- Harrow rival; 25- Admit; 26- Kind; 33- Get one's ducks in ; 28- Kingly address; 29- Pillar; 32- Supplement, with "out"; 33- Mountain spinach; 34- Lepidopteran insect; 35- It's a thought; 36- Sign over; 38- Boastful person; 39- Of course; 42- Go back, in a way; 43- Parch with heat; 45- Elasticized cord; 46- Gotchal; 47- Gastropod mollusk; 48- Singer Frankie; 49- Violinist Zimbalist; 51- Arrow poison; 52- Joint problem; 53- Magma; 54- Starting; 55- Denomination; 58- Sticky stuff; 60- Musical aptitude;

CROSSWORD

Yesterday's solution

A	E	G	I	S	A	A	A	E	M	B	E	D		
S	T	O	C	K	B	O	P	N	E	W	S	Y		
H	O	L	E	I	N	O	N	E	C	R	A	T		
E	N	D	O	V	E	R	L	I	N	E	S			
	E	R	I	E		T	O	T	A	S				
C	L	O	W	N	S	L	T	D	S					
C	H	E	R	E	S	A	S	S	E	R	T	S		
A	G	E	R		A	C	E		O	O	P	S		
O	S	S	I	C	L	E		P	A	L	L	I	D	
			N	A	B	S		W	M	E	L	T	S	
R	A	T	E	S		W	H	O	S					
L	A	T	E	X		A	G	H	A		T	A	E	
O	C	A	L	A		F	L	O	W	E	R	I	N	G
R	E	L	I	C		R	E	L		S	E	E	N	O
E	R	E	C	T		O	N	E		A	S	S	E	S