Google Glass Could Offer Sports Fans First-Person Perspective

Jay Cohen, AP Sports Writer

CHICAGO (AP) — Your favorite team is playing for the title, and you are in the middle of the field. You have a ticket in the very top row for an NBA playoff game, and a courtside seat. The referees are reviewing a big play in the final seconds, and you are right there in front of them.

Google Glass is slowly becoming more common in sports as teams and broadcasters try to bring fans closer to the action. The Philadelphia Eagles are going to test the Internet-connected eyewear for in-game use, and a company with a key application for the technology says it has secured a new round of financing that will help roll out its Glass program to sports, entertainment and other fields.

"When I talk to teams and ask them about what technology are they looking at, what technology are they keeping track of, the two answers I mostly commonly get are Google Glass and Snapchat," said Eric Fernandez, a founder and managing partner of SportsDesk Media, a fan analytics and digital media activation company.

The futuristic eyewear was known as "Project Glass" when it was introduced by Google in a video and blog post in April 2012. The Mountain View, California, company started selling the $1,500 glasses to a select crowd later that same year, but it only recently became available to the general public.

The use of Glass in sports has progressed from trendy athletes dipping their toes in the water to a tool for teams looking to draw fans to arenas and stadiums, and then keep their focus on the action, instead of their omnipresent smartphones and tablets. It comes with endless revenue possibilities, ranging from sponsorship deals for the new content streams to a possible attendance boost for teams with empty upper decks.

"I think the fan experience one is the one that's really hitting hard," said Eric Johnsen, the business development lead for Glass at Work, "and the performance line people are dabbling with, that's really interesting."

Punter Chris Kluwe used the eyewear in training camp last year to take fans inside an Oakland Raiders practice. Seattle Seahawks wide receiver Golden Tate wore the glasses at Super Bowl media day. Roger Federer used one when he hit with former tennis star Stefan Edberg during a visit to Google's campus, and a referee at the recent USA Sevens Collegiate Rugby Championship donned the glasses for the NBC Sports broadcast.

But it is the big-picture applications that offer intriguing possibilities for teams and leagues concerned about attendance in the 21st century, when flat-screen TVs and

rising prices at sporting events have made the in-home experience even more appealing.

The 2014 Know the Fan Report, produced by Sporting News Media, Kantar Media and SportBusiness Group, found 45 percent of fans use a second-screen device while watching sports on TV, a definite factor in the willingness of teams and broadcasters to take a closer look at Glass. The report was based on a survey of more than 1,000 American adults conducted in February.

"The focus has been through sports at large, how do you get people using their phones to interact during the game?" said Rob Laycock, the vice president of marketing for the Indiana Pacers and Fever.

"What's nice about Glass is that it's keeping your focus on center stage, you know main court, with the scoreboard right above it."

The NBA's Sacramento Kings used a CrowdOptic application to become the first pro sports team to employ Glass in the arena when they put the eyewear on their mascot Slamson and others for a January loss to the Pacers, allowing fans at the game and viewing at home to witness the courtside experience. Indiana used it for the first time for a March 26 game against Miami, and the Orlando Magic broke it out for their April 9 game against Brooklyn.

The Eagles are the first NFL team to try the application for Google Glass. They are planning for a similar approach to the Pacers, who used the CrowdOptic program to provide multiple courtside perspectives over the videoboard during games.

"We're on a constant search for ways to enhance the overall fan experience at Lincoln Financial Field," said Brian Papson, the vice president of marketing for the Eagles. "So what caught us is that this is a creative, different, new innovative way to do that."

There are many factors at play with the use of Glass at sports venues, including the strength of the WiFi network and the reliability of moving people wearing the technology. Thousands of people using their phones to post to social media or check fantasy sports can grind WiFi networks to a halt, and a courtside perspective becomes much less attractive when it's an obstructed view.

That's where CrowdOptic comes in.

"What our stuff does is it really converts all this chaos into a demonstrable broadcast feed that, for example, the Pacers can really count on," said Jon Fisher, the CEO and co-founder of San Francisco-based company. "So they can put Glass out there and it can work in many cases as well as any other fixed camera asset because of these algorithms at work."

Maintaining a reliable feed is just one potential problem for sports teams deploying the technology. There is concern about overwhelming fans with a barrage of viewing options. The eyewear has faced criticism over its intrusiveness and its

ability to take photos and video through voice-activated commands, making it more likely that even attentive fans could find themselves on the videoboard before they realize what's going on.

The rollouts have been conducted with great care.

"We haven't just determined yet who's going to be wearing the Glass and deploying it, that's all up for a lot of discussion," Papson said. "But I think as content such as this continues to be more available, I think every team has those discussions as to what's not appropriate to provide."

Asked about his vision of the future, Johnsen paints a compelling picture.

"If a fan wants to be Tom Brady, 10 seconds left in the Super Bowl, in the red zone making the call in the huddle and executing a play," he said, "I think it's absolutely possible next 10 years if not sooner ... with Glass-like technology."

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