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Emptied Sports Stadiums Tackle Losses With New Experiences.

Drive-ins, weddings and dinosaur safaris help keep jobs—but can't compete with game-day revenues

Darryl Dunn, the chief executive and general manager of the Rose Bowl Operating Co., would have been preparing to receive the biggest crowd of his year around now, had this year been normal. The 90,000-plus college football fans that usually flock to the Rose Bowl's stadium in Pasadena, Calif., for the annual New Year's Day game will be watching the action at home this time, in accordance with California's social-distancing measures.

Mr. Dunn will instead be organizing the arrival of roughly 70 animatronic dinosaurs. The Rose Bowl's parking lot in January will be transformed into a "Jurassic Quest" safari. The parking lot has already served as an outdoor concert and comedy venue, and a haunted drive-through at Halloween.

The stadium is one of many large sports venues testing new visitor experiences as the coronavirus pandemic chokes revenue from ticket sales. The venues hope to take advantage of one asset they still have: large amounts of indoor and outdoor space.

"Our revenue is based on people, and if we don't have people, we don't make money," said Mr. Dunn. "But what we have got is space—so we said to ourselves, let's use that to try and make lemonade out of this situation."

The Rose Bowl's foray into lockdown live experiences began in July, when a deal with the Tribeca Film Festival saw the stadium's parking lot turned into a drive-in movie theater for 30 screenings across four weeks. Tickets cost \$30 per vehicle, and attendees could purchase food and beverages from outdoor concession stands. Each screening of 500 cars sold out, Mr. Dunn said.

The Tribeca series put the Rose Bowl on the drive-in map, Mr. Dunn said, and led to other deals with entertainment companies such as Netflix Inc. and Walt Disney Co.'s Hulu, which last month hosted an immersive "haunted drive-through forest" experience there as part of its "Huluween" horror movie screenings.

"We've literally transitioned our business to drive-in movies," Mr. Dunn said. "That's the business that we're now marketing and selling."

The Miami Dolphins have similarly found creative uses for their home stadium, which has reopened to spectators at a limited capacity of 13,000. Since June the National Football League team has turned the outside of Hard Rock Stadium into a makeshift theater. A 90-foot-wide screen, originally installed for the 2019 Miami Open tennis tournament, screened movies throughout the summer; attendees sat in tented pods dotted around the west and east lawns of the venue. The setup on Sept. 13 rebranded as the Gameday Theater and now shows home and away Dolphins games.

Meanwhile Gillette Stadium, best known as the home of the NFL's New England Patriots in

Foxborough, Mass., will later this month open a drive-through holiday lights display in its parking lots, allowing guests to navigate the 1.5 mile route in a car, bus or limo. The stadium in September also played host to Jurassic Quest, which “was such a huge success that two additional weeks were added to its original 10-day run to meet the demand for tickets,” a spokeswoman said.

Sports fans are longing to return to the stands, but health experts say stadiums are one of the highest-risk areas for coronavirus transmission. Dr. Peter Chin-Hong, an infectious disease specialist, walks us through how easily the virus could spread among the crowd. Photo: Associated Press (Originally Published May 17, 2020)

In the nation’s capital, soccer team D.C. United has been working with local fitness studios to host outdoor exercise classes on Audi Field. And the NFL’s Green Bay Packers last month turned home stadium Lambeau Field’s parking lot into a contact-free trick-or-treating zone for Halloween.

With no end in sight to social-distancing protocols, some stadiums plan to build dedicated venues that will let fans watch games and concerts at a social distance. The National Basketball Association’s Milwaukee Bucks earlier this year signed off on the construction of a multilevel “outdoor tailgating space” in the parking lot of their home arena, Fiserv Forum, which will let small groups of fans eat, drink and watch any action inside the arena from shipping-container pods and parking spaces overlooking new exterior screens.

The plans have been put on ice as the team awaits guidance from the municipal health department about permissible capacity, said Bucks and Fiserv Forum President Peter Feigin.

Nevertheless, Fiserv Forum from July to September held NBA Playoffs watch parties, turning the arena’s central court into a restaurant for groups of up to 10 people. Food and beverages were delivered to dining tables, a DJ provided pre-tip-off entertainment, and the games were streamed on the center hang screens. It was, Mr. Feigin said, “like the coolest basketball wedding you’ve ever been to.”

The success of the parties encouraged the Bucks’ sales and marketing team to develop Fiserv Forum’s fledgling hospitality offering, which—for now, at least—will be targeted at people looking for a space big enough to host socially-distanced parties, meetings and weddings of up to 100 people, Mr. Feigin said. Wisconsin limits public gatherings to no more than 25% of a room or building’s total occupancy.

The Bucks hope such an alternative revenue stream will at least cushion decimated ticket sales and keep staff employed if the coming basketball season goes ahead without spectators, Mr. Feigin said. Still, stadium executives are clear these new experiences will not come close to covering the losses of 2020, no matter how successful they have been.

Hard Rock Stadium does “not make much money at all” from its Gameday Theater, but its operation does create jobs for local people, said Todd Boyan, the Dolphins’ senior vice president of stadium operations. The Rose Bowl, which is owned by the city of Pasadena and operated as a nonprofit, will lose around \$13 million this year, Mr. Dunn said.

That is better than the estimated \$16 million loss it would have suffered without the drive-in theater and experiential events, but a far cry from its usual break-even forecast, he said.

“But this helps us keep jobs and it sends the right message to our community,” Mr. Dunn said. “We’re saying to the city: We’re still open—we’re just open a bit differently.”

The Wall Street Journal

By Katie Deighton

Nov. 3, 2020 5:23 am ET

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