

BY BLAIR HUGHES

The live sports fan experience has been undergoing a rapid and exciting transformation in recent years in an effort to bring fans back to the game.

As a result of the high-definition widescreen TV sports experience becoming so entertaining these days, sports businesses have had to work extremely hard to increase fans' emotional loyalty and provide extra value and 'bang for their buck' to try to get people to switch off their TVs in their sport caves and get their bums back into the arena.

Major sports teams and stadiums across the globe are addressing fan concerns such as poor-quality food options, long queues and inadequate parking, public transport woes, expensive tickets and dirty or insufficient toilets.

Stadiums are seeking to woo fans with technology like artificial intelligence and virtual reality activations, real-time player stats and biometric fast-track fingerprint ticketing screening, as well as in-seat food and beverage ordering and apps that show you the fastest moving toilet line. However the one area that often gets the most gripes from fans is the quality or lack thereof in stadium beer.

There are many exciting things happening at this intersection of craft beer and live sports. Teams in the US such as the NFL's Buffalo Bills and the Major League Soccer's DC United have both brought out their own lines

of pale ales for fans, such as Southern Tier Brewing Company's 'One Buffalo Our Beer' and DC Brau Brewing Company's 'The Tradition' respectively.

Soccer team Sporting Kansas City also teamed up with Boulevard Brewing to release special brews on game days – I was lucky enough to try their delicious 'Sporting Saison' at a game in October.

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Venues like the American Airlines Arena in Dallas, Texas, (home to the hockey team the Dallas Mavericks and basketball team the Dallas Stars), and Westpac Stadium in Wellington, New Zealand, have recently introduced local craft beers to appeal to fans' tastes. In the case of Wellington's Westpac Stadium

– the first stadium in Australia or New Zealand to offer local independent craft beers – the initial foray has been for Wellington Phoenix games this season with the beers changing for each event.

The stadium's CEO and beer fan Shane Harmon says that "craft beer was cited as the No.1 area in which we could improve the fan experience". He says that at the most recent event "we poured Garage Project's Hāpi Daze (a Pacific Pale Ale) and Orange Sunshine (a citrus wheat ale) as well as Tuatara's Outrigger (a Pacific Pale Ale), Pilsner & Helles", with the feedback from fans having been universally positive.

Elsewhere, English football teams Burnley FC and Crystal Palace have both held beer festivals celebrating local craft varieties from Moorhouse Brewing and Cornwall's Sharp's Brewery, while Reading FC have recently called on fans to name and brand their new West Berkshire Brewery pale ale to be sold in the stands. It's these types of beer initiatives that have deeply engaged hardcore fans who love craft beer as well as the world game.

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Back in the US, and the New York Mets held an educational 'beer passport' event last year that featured plenty of New York brews from Brooklyn Brewery, The Bronx Brewery and SixPoint. Baseball team the LA Dodgers have also upped the ante by creating a technologically advanced ice-cream type foam that sits on top of your cup of beer to keep it ice-cold for 45 minutes!

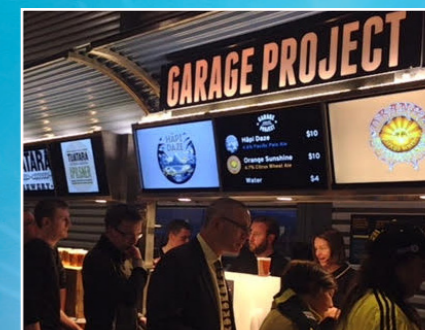
In recent seasons in the US there's been a big push for stadiums to feature better-quality beers, with NFL grounds such as New York's MetLife Stadium featuring Captain Lawrence and BluePoint, Chicago's Soldier Field serving up Half Acre and Goose Island, and the Green Bay Packers' Lambeau Field pouring Hinterland and Badger State brews. In fact, in

writing this article I counted over 100 craft beers on offer at US stadiums.

Throughout other US sports grounds, in-seat ordering and self-serve craft beer machines mean that fans avoid missing long periods of on-field action as beer lines are shorter (with colder beer) and beer can also be delivered straight to your seat.

For those fans who want to watch their beer calories, Canada has manufactured a recovery ale sports beer called 'Lean Machine' that is being marketed as the perfect post-workout beer, as it only contains 80 calories and even had scientists backing it up by saying its no more harmful than a sports drink. Designated drivers are also rewarded in the US – teams like the New Jersey Devils and New York Jets give sober fans who sign up to drive their mates home a free soft drink, which is a good idea that could work here too.

Exciting developments are happening in Australia too, with the SCG recently launching their Matilda Bay Brewers Pavilion bar featuring a special lager called Wagging Tale. Not to be outdone, Sydney's ANZ Stadium has



just opened The Crossbar that features Kosciuszko Pale Ale amongst 16 other varieties of beer, while also creating the James Squire Craft Beer Bar inside the stadium.

With Mountain Goat and Little Creatures having been bought out by Asahi and Lion Nathan respectively, and with fans constantly demanding more value, we may well be seeing these fine beers or others at an Australian stadium soon.

So raise your plastic schooners, sports fans, and rejoice in the knowledge that your love of craft beers is finally being addressed by teams and stadiums across the globe and even here in Australia as they look to give us greater fan experiences each time we head through the turnstiles.

Blair Hughes heads up the Australian operations for audioBoom. He has previously worked at English football club Queens Park Rangers and The Gabba. Twitter: @MrBlairHughes