

E-Sports: The Opportunity & Saviour?

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- *Online streaming platforms recorded a 43% jump in viewership to nearly 495 million hours in the week starting March 29, compared to the week at the beginning of 2020.*
- *NASCAR has made its esports debut with the eNASCAR iRacing Pro Invitational Series Race.*

In an ideal scenario, a football fan would be relishing the cut-throat competition in the respective leagues and Champions League as the season would be drawing close to an exciting end. A tennis fan would witness yet another season being dominated by the Big Three. A cricket lover, especially the ones in India would have enjoyed a hot yet enticing summer with IPL 13. But COVID-19 has robbed all the sports fanatics of this and left them with nothing but feeling frustrated and spurts of nostalgia by watching highlight reels of old matches.

Postponing the Olympics, the world's biggest sporting event, to 2021 has proved that the impact has been magnanimous in the sporting industry. The entire sporting calendar for 2020 has been jolted by this pandemic. Yet, if anything that has benefited in such surreal times, it is E-sports.

Sports fans and players across the world who were left frustrated by cancelled matches are turning to E-sports, with professional real-world athletes joining virtual game tournaments of football, auto racing, and many more. NASCAR has already made its esports debut with the eNASCAR iRacing Pro Invitational Series Race. The Football Association (FA) had launched a week-long #FootballisStayingatHome Cup, in which Manchester United striker Marcus Rashford and Borussia Dortmund starlet Jadon Sancho got behind joysticks to participate in an open competition. EA Sports, owners of popular game FIFA, are set to initiate the 'Stay and Play Cup' to help raise funds for the fight against COVID-19.

One of the most popular and viewed E-sports tournament, League of Legends' 2020 Championship Series, was called off in Berlin and shifted to be played on an online platform. Even though the organizers took a hit on the revenue from attendance, to their surprise, online viewership did not dip. They received a major boost when ESPN decided to broadcast the tournament. This has been viewed as a paradigm shift for the E-sports industry.

More players meant more viewers and audience engagement. Online streaming platforms recorded a 43% jump in viewership to nearly 495 million hours in the week starting March 29, compared to the week at the beginning of 2020, according to analytics firm Stream Hatchet. Amazon.com Inc's Twitch, which dominates the market for game streaming, recorded a nearly 60% jump in viewership in March with over 1,300 million hours watched, compared to a year earlier, according to Superdata, a Nielsen company. The E-sports industry must view this dramatic rise in viewership as an enormous opportunity as the only sport left standing.

What primarily works for E-sports is that, its origin is from indoors and is contactless which is the need of the hour. It is a type of sport that has originated from basements or living rooms in a house. That, coupled with our desire to connect and compete with one another online,

ultimately drove gamers to create and support the notion of E-sports. The nature of this type of gaming allows for more flexibility to meet demand while operating remotely, and many events, leagues, and competitions pivoted towards online participation and viewership.

With the entire world on lockdown, people have found time to pay attention to E-sports and its advantages. Interestingly, WHO, which defines 'video-gaming' as a disorder, is now supporting the #PlayApartTogether initiative to promote social distancing with the help of top gaming and E-sports companies. In such times, it turns out to be a win-win situation for both, the players and the E-sports industry. To put this into perspective, Counter-Strike alone has surged to one million concurrent players.

The opportunity now must be to take this unique situation to rally new fans, new users, and curious onlookers. Can E-sports be the industry that figures out a way to surge in the middle of a pandemic? Only time will tell, but in all probability that seems difficult because nothing can replace the feeling of togetherness and brotherhood - one experiences outdoors!