

Cardboard fans, piped applause: football looks to liven up empty stands



Cardboard cut-outs with portraits of Borussia Mönchengladbach's supporters are seen at the Borussia Park football stadium

Reuters | Bern

When Borussia Mönchengladbach met neighbours Cologne in the Bundesliga's first-ever game without fans back in March, even the referee missed the crowd.

"Football has lost half its value," said Deniz Aytekin - despite being spared the customary abuse from the stands.

Since then, it has become increasingly clear that football will have to be played behind closed doors until a major change in the course of the coronavirus pandemic - and that some creativity will be needed to provide a little atmosphere.

From cardboard cut-outs of real fans to an app allowing supporters to influence the volume of noise piped into stadiums, people are developing ideas for how to put some matchday atmosphere back into the stadiums -- though whether their ideas are accepted is a different matter.

In Belarus, the only European league to plough on through the global health crisis, Dinamo Brest filled the stands with mannequins sporting cut-out portraits of real supporters.

Mönchengladbach will follow suit when the Bundesliga becomes the first of Europe's major leagues to restart on Saturday.

For 19 euros, the club offers to put a "cardboard you" in the stands - and visiting teams' fans can book cut-outs for the away end. The club said more than 12,000 such effigies have been ordered so far.

"The campaign organisers are

regularly overrun with orders," said Gladbach fan representative Thomas Weinmann.

But for many, the real problem of "ghost matches" is the lack of noise and eerie atmosphere with the shouts of players and coaching staff echoing around deserted arenas.

Cologne coach Markus Gisdol suggested this could even lead to frayed tempers.

"Everyone on the sidelines was a little more irritable than usual because you could hear more of what the opposing bench were saying and what the officials were saying to each other," he said after the Mönchengladbach game.

On the other hand, he said the lack of crowd noise would take players "back to their roots."

"Without fans, the players have to squeeze out of themselves the same qualities that turned them into Bundesliga professionals."

One company though - Munich-based hack-CARE - has developed an app which it says produces piped crowd noise based on the reactions of supporters watching on their sofas.

Fans who download its Myapplause app choose which club to support and which match to watch, and then get four options: cheer, clap, sing or whistle.

The app can support up to 350,000 users per match and, depending on the number of clicks and sound distribution, piped crowd noise is produced both at users' homes and in the stadium.

"We tested it in two Bundesliga stadiums, we were live and it

went really well," Viktor Mraz, one of the developers, told Reuters. "You press a button and the whole stadium is cheering."

He said talks were underway with all of Germany's big clubs.

"Everybody is talking to us, even other sports," he said. "A lot of people need to agree - the players need to agree, the referees... - so I guess we will start without any sounds in the stadium," he said.

Mraz added that different sounds could be played in different parts of the stadium and sound levels adjusted to recreate the impression of having home and away support.

"The songs for one team come over the left loudspeaker, the songs for the other come over the right loudspeaker, so you have the separation of blocks like you would usually have in the stadium," he said.

Still, issues remain. Some years ago, Swiss broadcaster SRF apologised for adding fake crowd noise to the highlights of an FC Zurich-Grasshoppers derby where fans boycotted the start of the game over ticket prices.

And the last word may rest with the German Football League, which said it remains "strongly opposed" to the idea of piped noise.

"Our fans can't be replaced by any virtual audience, therefore we strongly discourage our clubs from using any artificial crowd noise," a spokeswoman told Reuters.

"We can't force the clubs not to use it - but we think they got the point."

West Indies players will not be forced to tour England: chief

AFP | London

West Indies cricketers will not be "coerced" into touring England if they are reluctant to do so during the coronavirus crisis, according to West Indies chief executive Johnny Grave.

The Caribbean side are due to travel to play a three-Test series, which has been postponed until July at the earliest.

Grave said a "wide pool" of players had been consulted and none of them would be obliged to tour.

"There will be no coercing players into this tour," Grave told BBC Radio.

"If you grow up in a country where the population might only be 60,000 or 70,000 people, to be thinking the UK has had over 30,000 deaths is a massive figure."

The England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) is considering the use of bio-secure venues and quarantining players. Matches would likely be staged behind closed doors.

Grave said he was optimistic



West Indies' players celebrate during a match against Sri Lanka (file photo)

the series would go ahead but that would depend on whether it was deemed safe.

"The ECB (England and Wales Cricket Board) have got a long way to go to get UK government approval to be absolutely certain that bio-secure cricket will

work," he said.

Grave admitted that with West Indies players coming from different islands that have different levels of restrictions due to the virus, getting them onto one plane would be a challenge but not "insurmountable".

"The players would be very much in a bubble," said Grave.

"We said to the ECB we'd want four weeks of preparation before the first Test. We're probably looking at three back-to-back Test matches.

Du Plessis proposes two weeks' quarantine for T20 World Cup

AFP | London

Former South Africa skipper Faf du Plessis said quarantining players for two weeks before and after the Twenty20 World Cup could allow it to take place in Australia this year despite the coronavirus

pandemic.

The tournament is due to be played in October-November but there is uncertainty after the cancellation of other major sporting events. Some countries have also grounded international flights.

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SUDOKU

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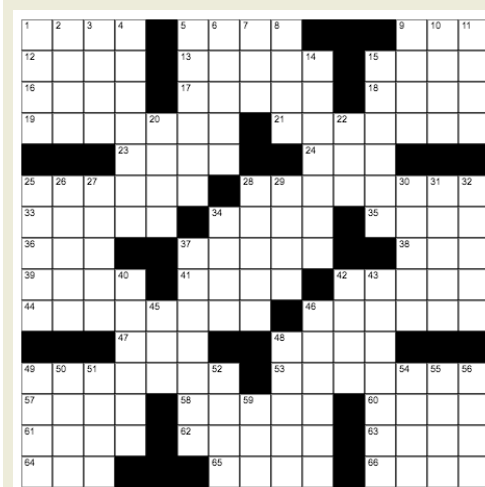
Yesterday's solution

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

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.

CROSSWORD



Across

1- Speed ratio; 2- Pianist Peter; 9- Legal matter; 12- Glow; 13- Peace goddess; 15- Remedy; 16- Hang around; 17- Counterfeit; 18- Opera set in Egypt; 19- Spider's traps; 21- Chest related; 23- Wight or Man; 24- Diamond authority; 25- Disinclined; 28- Thankful; 33- Scuffle; 34- Laugh heartily; 35- Chuck; 36- Neither Rep. nor Dem.; 37- Crowd together; 38- Doo-wop syllable; 39- Hard fatty tissue; 41- Actress Swenson; 42- Attack on all sides; 44- Sing for; 46- Passenger ships; 47- Direct a gun; 48- Titanic's undoing; 49- Mafioso; 53- Without bound; 57- Writer Wiesel; 58- Dictation taker; 60- About; 61- ... well...; 62- Conger catcher; 63- Arrest; 64- ... kwon do; 65- Fill to surfeit; 66- Hard, in Havana;

Down

1- Not fem.; 2- Mercury or Saturn; 3- Kvetch or whinge; 4- Out of control; 5- Bite gently; 6- Uneven; 7- Rule, for short; 8- Weight; 9- Undoing; 10- Mother of the Valkyries; 11- Authenticating mark; 14- Tidal river; 15- Floor covering; 20- "quam wideri" (North Carolina's motto); 22- CPR giver; 25- Off-track; 26- Locale; 27- Senior; 28- Small canyon; 29- ... avis; 30- "Damn Yankees" choreographer; 31- Doorkeeper; 32- Atty. -to-be exams; 34- Rip apart; 37- Like some cats; 40- Tantalizes; 42- Feathered creature; 43- Division of the United Kingdom; 45- It may be picked; 46- Poe maiden; 48- "John Brown's Body" poet; 49- Crux; 50- Earthen pot; 51- Ill humor; 52- Hwy's; 54- Biblical birthright seller; 55- Agitate; 56- Go it alone; 59- Guido's high note;

Yesterday's solution

S	E	R	A	B	A	L	I	U	R	G	E
U	S	E	R	E	V	A	D	E	N	A	T
R	A	N	T	C	O	R	A	L	K	N	O
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A	C	E	S	N	E	R	O	O	P	E	R
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T	I	D	E	G	N	A	S	H	U	N	D
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N	E	R	D	B	E	E	R	E	L	A	N