



Case study

# The Phoenix Suns Have a Winning Strategy with Verizon, MEC and a 5G Arena

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## The Phoenix Suns

As one of the most innovative teams in the NBA, the Phoenix Suns have a reputation for using technology to maximize player performance. At the team's new training facility, the Verizon 5G Performance Center, the Suns can leverage the power of 5G and multi-access edge computing (MEC) to optimize their play. And by installing 5G Ultra Wideband to turn the Footprint Center into a true 5G arena, the team has also committed to providing a best-in-class game experience for fans.

In their first year in these cutting-edge facilities, the team made its way back to the playoffs for the first time in a decade – and saw an historic run in the NBA Finals – while enhancing the fan experience with in-person viewing after pandemic restrictions were lifted.

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## Building a champion

Before 5G was deployed in the arena and the Verizon 5G Performance Center opened, the Suns faced challenges on and off the court. The plan for success was twofold: The team needed a modern training facility – a living lab – that would allow coaches and athletes to collect data during practices and turn it into game-changing insights. They also wanted to turn their existing arena into a true 5G arena to deliver the optimal fan experience. The right technology can be critical to eke out the microscopic edges that can mean the difference between an NBA championship and a pick toward the top of the NBA Lottery.

The Suns do not just compete with the rest of the league – they compete for fans and entertainment dollars with Phoenix's myriad of entertainment options. Metropolitan Phoenix is home to several professional and collegiate sports teams, and it hosts concerts, conferences and activities year-round. To draw fans in and keep them coming back, the Suns knew they could ultimately benefit from utilizing 5G and MEC in both their practice and game facilities – to help improve player performance and as a means of enhancing the fan experience both in and out of the 5G-equipped Footprint Center.

# Driving the lane with data

The Suns' previous practice facility had just four cameras and a slow network, meaning the team had to wait to analyze data and review video. Systems weren't interconnected. Insights suffered.

The Verizon 5G Performance Center puts real-time performance and biometric data at the fingertips of the team's players, trainers, coaches and front-office staff. The new practice facility is a living lab for athlete innovation, using more than 150 cameras and sensors embedded in the walls and ceiling of the 5G Performance Center to capture every movement of every player during every drill and scrimmage.

"The future is really around technology and understanding a 360-degree view of a player," said Dan Costello, the Suns' chief revenue officer and senior vice president of business innovation. "Building a center like this makes sure we're running and optimizing at the highest level possible."

With Verizon 5G Ultra Wideband and MEC, the Suns can access the data in near-real time from player tracking, shot correction and other analytics applications, so the Suns can monitor mechanics and player performance on the court and in the weight room. Rather than separating their ball-tracking, player and biometrics platform data into separate silos, like other teams in the league, the Suns are working with Verizon to create a single app that brings their data points into one singular view. This system helps players make microscopic adjustments to their shot, footwork and exercise techniques to gain an edge over their world-class competition.



## 150 cameras and sensors



## 360-degree view of a player



## Access data in real time

Verizon's 5G capabilities can also help trainers leverage artificial intelligence and machine learning to analyze full-body kinematics. By monitoring how ankles flex, shoulders hunch and knees bend after every jump shot, trainers can better predict wear and fatigue and rest a player before an injury occurs.

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Coaches can now use 3D force plates hooked into the Internet of Things in the Verizon 5G Performance Center to measure and analyze a wide range of movement patterns, such as impact force, balance, launch angles, acceleration and deceleration. This should help players dial in movements to play efficiently and prevent injury. Player and ball-tracking sensors can help coaches monitor practices virtually in real time and let them compare against historical data to make strategy adjustments that they can take to games in the 5G arena.

"A lot of the vision we're seeing from the athlete perspective is not that different from what we see from a business perspective," Costello said. "The reason we're seeing so much success on the business and basketball side at the same time is that we are united in one vision."

What is that unified vision? Athletes, coaches and executives can help make better decisions with the help of ML and AI technology. The Suns' investment in analytics and technology should allow the team to improve the value of its roster and attract talent to the team; already, it helped propel them to an additional 17 wins over the previous year and earned them a playoff run deep into the finals.

"Understanding our athletes from a 360-degree perspective is at the heart of it," Costello said. "We have 14 different athletes who all get a curated experience about what they get when they come to train or play. That experience in the Verizon 5G Performance Center lets us curate 14 different experiences at the same time with many different types of technology working in the background. It's incredible."

# Enhancing the fan experience

The Suns' 5G-powered Footprint Center can host more than 17,000 fans per game, but millions of fans worldwide follow the team. When renovating their home arena, the Suns knew that incorporating technology would be critical to enhancing the fan experience, whether the fan is courtside or on their couch. The team partnered with Ticketmaster, FanDuel and PayPal to provide a complete digital experience at the Footprint Center.

Enhancing the fan experience is an ongoing process. According to Costello, the average ticket gets scanned between three and six times between the point of purchase and the moment a fan takes their seat. Verizon 5G and MEC can help the Suns to enable ticketless entry and use near-real-time data analytics to predict where and when fans will be in the building to help appropriately staff concession stands, reduce wait times and provide fans with wayfinding to direct them to the areas of the 5G arena with the shortest lines.

 **17,000+ fans per game hosted in the 5G arena**

“The power of MEC and 5G really is the engine that makes us run,” Costello said. “We can offer touchless payments and tickets in mobile wallets in near-real time.”

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After Arizona legalized sports betting in April 2021, the Suns were able to take another step in enhancing the fan experience. The organization partnered with FanDuel to let fans place wagers during games through their mobile devices via the FanDuel Sportsbook app or in-person at the new FanDuel Sportsbook at Footprint Center that opened in September 2021. Real-time connectivity makes the first quarter of the game as exciting as the fourth, and fans stay engaged for all 48 minutes.

Verizon Professional Services used its experience in designing and deploying high density Wi-Fi networks at sports venues to install a Wi-Fi network at the Verizon 5G Performance Center and the Footprint Center 5G arena allowing staff and fans alike ubiquitous coverage.

“We fundamentally believe that to be successful, you need world-class, frictionless partners powered by low latency to make decisions so you can do things like augmented reality or show different camera angles on the phone,” Costello said. “For us, it’s all about engagement – getting more people to watch and invest in the game.”

# Bringing the game home

The Suns are just as focused on enhancing the fan experience at home as they are in the Footprint Center. Using BlueJeans by Verizon's video collaboration platform, the Suns create content to bring fans behind the scenes on game day, increasing fan engagement far beyond the game.

The team first deployed BlueJeans Events during the 2019-2020 season, when the team played in the NBA bubble at Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida. Because the team had not played during the pandemic-induced hiatus, and because fans wouldn't be able to watch the team in person for the rest of the season, the Suns wanted to provide a second screen experience that let homebound fans stay connected to the team.

Using BlueJeans, the Suns broadcast live content to mobile phones during games, delivering engaging experiences such as interviews with Suns legends and insiders, contests, and in-game promotions for the Suns and their partner brands. Using BlueJeans Events' chat, poll and Q&A features, fans connected and interacted with the team and each other, just as they would have at the game.



## Interviews with Suns legends and insiders



## Contests



## In-game promotions

The Suns also used BlueJeans to fulfill their sponsorship commitments. Local grocer Fry's Food Stores, for example, sponsored a promotion in which BlueJeans app users could use the hand raise feature to express interest in a T-shirt – the same way they would have waved to the T-shirt cannon during halftime. Fry's would pick a winner, and the winner would go to their local Fry's store to pick up their prize – and maybe pick up groceries at the same time.

The Suns continue to use BlueJeans to create and distribute live video content as a strategy for enhancing the fan experience outside the 5G arena. By using one software platform for their streaming, the team can focus on the quality of their content instead of worrying about how to deliver it. Offseason and non-game day content, such as live player Q&As with season ticket holders, help the Suns stay at the top of fans' minds 365 days a year.

"BlueJeans helps give fans a look behind the curtain to feel invested and part of the Suns family," Costello said. "We also use it to think about how we can give in-person fans another look at the game on their devices, at the touch of their finger. It's all-important for us to serve our digital fans."

## A model partnership

The Suns ended the 2020-2021 season with an impressive finals run, and Costello sees the partnership with Verizon as a big part of the team's success.

"We'd be piecing together technologies using APIs and things of that nature, but there would be a bit higher latency than we could work with," he said. "I don't think there's a way to accomplish our vision of understanding movements as they happen without the power of MEC computing, and, more importantly, without the people that are behind it at Verizon. They worked with us to develop great systems that allow us to really understand what this looks like so we can make decisions on the fly. They're the secret sauce to what makes all this happen."

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[Learn more about the partnership between Verizon and the Phoenix Suns >](#)

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