

Q&A WITH JASON VANDERGROUND

The Esports Venue Summit caught up with Jason Vanderground to get the lowdown on Irwin seating and discuss the company's move into esports.



Jason will be joining our live Q&A panel discussion answering questions from the attendees on 4.30PM UK TIME on Tuesday October 27

Can you give us a bit of background about Irwin Seating?

Irwin Seating is a leader in providing seating for a whole host of public venues that stage entertainment, sports, the arts and education events. We have seats in 80% of all NBA and NHL arenas. We've a lot of presence in the North American market.

We also do a lot of work with the NCAA in football and basketball. People really know our seats. We work with all the leading movie cinemas and theatres and we're in all types of performing arts centres. I think we have seats in the vast majority of theatres on Broadway.

People have known us for a long time and we're a full-service provider. We work with clients to co-create very highly configured seating solutions. We make them, we deliver them, we install them and we service them.

Why is the company moving into the esports market?

To me it's just a very natural extension of what we do. If you look at the needs in the esports market, it's very consistent with what we're seeing

in other markets. It certainly has its uniqueness but there's so much growth potential there, especially for spectators. They're looking for this very immersive experience and they need to be comfortable. Esports can be fairly lengthy events and so the seat is really a fan's place for several hours. They need a great view.

When you look at the needs of the operator of the venue, they want a lot of flexibility and so they demand seats that are durable, strong, comfortable and hold up to repeated use.

Especially with retractable seating solutions they need things that give them a lot of flexibility to host events of different sizes and types.

We're really well suited to provide that and we see it as a market that is going to define not just esports, but I think it's going to have a lot of impact on the future of sports and entertainment.

So, there will be influences in this market that I think will impact traditional sports as well. We want to learn from this.

In order to be profitable, venue operators need many events throughout the year. Sometimes you'll have a

bespoke set-up that's really designed for one thing.

We worked on Dickies Arena in Texas where rodeo is the primary thing, but they also host basketball games there, so they need to get the dirt out and put a hardwood floor down between events. They also host concerts there and so they have a venue that can host 200 events a year.

The venue needs to accommodate many alternate activities as well.

When you look at telescopic retractable seating, it's all about being able to expand and contract and create a great seat for whatever that event is but then being able to adapt the seating for the next type of event. That really gives the operator a much higher likelihood of running a profitable venue.

What are the current trends in esports venue development and how do your products translate well to every kind of esports venue?

It's interesting because esports is more focused on allowing spectators to view the screen rather than looking at a stage, or court or a pitch. Spectators



are looking up a lot of time, and so large screens hung from the ceiling are important.

It's a lot like what you see in a cinema and so having a more comfortable seat that you can recline back, where the pitch is different is important. It's different from having a seat where you're primarily trying to look down onto an ice rink or a soccer pitch.

I think the other thing that you're seeing is more need to support technology. People bring smart phones with them and they need access to power. Wireless and wired power. Having a place to plug in a headset to become a part of this experience, to be fully immersed in it and remove the separation between the fan and the gamer is key. All of those things need to be delivered at the seat and those are things that we're exploring and actively working up right now.

In seat power is something we've been doing for a while but we're now imagining somewhere convenient to plug in to - either a USB port or to a wireless charger. The need for power is significant in these spaces.

Owners and operators want to deliver more of the experience at the seat - a seat that is more responsive, that's animated, that is connected. All of those things are going to be happening here in the near future.

Are you working on any new enhancements or innovations?

We've made a proposal for Fusion Arena and the luxury suites there, in terms of a club seat. We have created an end table that goes in between the seats and put in a little counter top for personal items. But underneath it has a protected area for either wired or wireless charging.

People are worried about forgetting or losing things, so we wanted to design a solution where you could recharge your device but also still see your device and have access to your device.

We're coming up with solutions where people can see their phone, they can see their notifications, they can stay active on their phone but they can also still stay connected to power. That's one of the tensions that we've been solving on that project.

How has Irwin Seating adapted its current ways of working with venues in recent months in light of the coronavirus pandemic?

Right now we're studying a lot about disinfecting. Our customers are asking us a lot about that and also we've been conducting surveys on safe reopening and what our customers are planning, the questions that they're asking, what they're wondering about.

We've moved beyond just saying 'here's our products' and we've asked what are the fundamental problems our customers are trying to solve?

If you look across public venues, the idea of gathering together in public is different now and will be different for a long time. I think there are some things that will fundamentally change and so one that we're working on is just how do you design for that duality, of both the way that Covid is impacting right now and what the long-term new normal might be.

It means the venue is going to need to have a lot more flexibility and certainly technology will play a role in that.

We've been seeing that with ticketing systems. There's much more need now to sell to household groups to sit together but there's also a need for social distancing from the next group.

The situation with Covid is constantly changing. Many of our customers already have active construction sites and they still need to complete those venues.

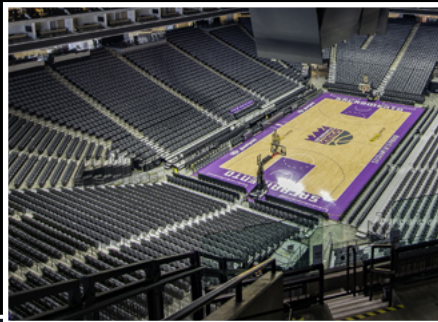
There's still revenue to be made in public gatherings at public venues and so we're helping a lot of our customers get ready for when they are able to either re-open their venue or open for the first time.

It's a fundamental human desire to be connected, to be part of a shared experience with a sense of belonging. These are things that we need and crave and there's a downside to being isolated. It takes a toll.

We need these events to be able to come together but then we need to be able to do it safely.

One of the things that is so important that we've been helping our customers with is how they communicate to their fanbase what's being done in the venue to make it a safe, healthy environment for them and what they need from the fan.

What are the things that the venue is doing to disinfect all the surfaces from seats, fabrics surface materials, common touch points and how do they provide some reassurance to fans to entice them to come back.



What are the other beneficial ways that you can bring your experience from all the sports projects that you have worked on across to the esports market and the strength of relationships you built with architects and contractors?

Because we work on so many sports and entertainment venues we have good relationships in architecture and construction with Populous, Gensler, HOK and AECOM. We have a good partnership with the American Institute of Architecture and provide continuing education and training to interior architects and designers.

Fixed seating is really complex and once you bolt something to the floor or bolt it to a platform it's pretty much there to stay and so they need help making sure the configuration or the sight lines are right for patron comfort.

How do we make sure that the interior architecture supports all of those things is something that we've worked on for a long time, supporting people in traditional sports and entertainment venues.

I think that translates over really well and I think also all of the cinema work that we do, where you're looking at more of a luxury experience and something that is more reclined and screen based, actually has a parallel in esports.

Esports is a young, dynamic market which is well positioned to recognise the need to have more inclusivity and equal opportunities for everyone. How does this fit in with your own company philosophy?

As you watch our market mature, we were saying what are the things that we need to do with esports to make sure that that it is diverse, that it's sustainable and that it benefits the communities that it's associated with.

In certain parts there still is this stigma attached to esports, that it is something that is done for hours on in a basement or in another secluded area. We need to really bring it out from there and elevate it.

How can we support that as we look to build these venues and to make sure that esports is more inclusive?



Our future will be more female, more minority, more young people. How do we make sure that we're supporting that and that it's sustainable.

That comes into making sure that the seating is ergonomic and comfortable and supportive, but I think those are all things, as we work together to see this market mature, that we need to be mindful of.

It's not just about building venues and selling products.

Are you focusing your plans for esports projects in North America or are you also able to work on projects in other regions?

North America is where we primarily operate but I think what's interesting with Covid is that there are actually fewer restrictions in some ways now, because people are able to have more frequent and quicker connections with each other. Certainly, Europe is an option for us as well.

We're interested in following where the esports market is going and I think where we have customers that value

a quality product and are looking for a partnership where they can co-create a solution together, there's really nothing limiting us from partnering in that area of the world together.

We're already doing work in Russia and we're bidding projects in Germany so I could definitely see the sports entertainment work that we're doing in those parts of the world leading to esports opportunities.

It's where a lot of architectural and construction firm relationships are also doing work and so I can see us being pulled into esports projects really throughout EMEA and maybe even certain portions of APAC. ■

