Security at sporting events eyed after Boston attacks

By Bob Sullivan, Columnist, NBC News
Updated 13 minutes ago

NBCNews.com

If Boston fans are allowed into TD Garden on Wednesday for a scheduled Bruins-Sabres game, or into Fenway Park on Friday for the next Red Sox home game, they are sure to be greeted by grim reminders of Monday's terror attacks — beefed up security, extra uniformed police, additional bomb sniffing dogs. Already, fans around the country are seeing and feeling the aftermath at sports venues around the country.

Experts are wondering if these changes are temporary or permanent. Could the Boston Marathon bombing to do sporting events what the 9/11 attacks did to airports? Might the attack lead to aggressive new security measures that create long security lines and frustration for fans?

One change could come quickly: Sports venues around the country might take a hard look at banning all backpacks or bags of any kind, said Dr. Lou Marciani, director of the National Center for Spectator Sports Safety and Security at the University of Southern Mississippi, which is funded by the Department of Homeland Security. The center trains venue operators and security personnel around the country.

At least one of the bombs that detonated near the finish line of the Boston Marathon on Monday was hidden in a backpack. Investigators have found fragments of dark or black nylon, which were possibly from a bag or backpack that contained the bombs.

Whether or not backpacks were used, bags are sure to come under increased scrutiny.

"Some stadiums are moving toward eliminating any type of carry-in anyway," said Marciani. "If that ends up being a factor (in this attack), that might be one best practice that comes out of this."

Those attending sports events for the next several weeks should expect to see heavy security presence, Marciani said. Fans should leave a little early and pack some extra patience, particularly in Boston and other East Coast cities.

Marciani urged careful deliberation, however, as little is still known about the methods of Monday's attacker.

"We can't do anything until the investigation is complete," he said. "When it is, we will take a look at that information, we will collaborate at our annual conference, and digest that into our best practices."

'It's not fool proof'
One security measure that is unlikely to appear at sports venues: metal detectors. Bob Karl, who runs security firm Safety Act Consultants, said the machines cost $35,000 each and would be too costly to add at every venue gate.

"And it's not fool proof," Karl said. A magnetometer would catch a bomb packed with metal shrapnel, like the ones apparently used in the Boston attack. But it's not hard to craft bombs that are invisible to metal detectors. The next step would be X-ray machines, which no one wants at sporting events, he said.

"You can really create some unhappy fans ... How many people per minute can you screen, and at what point is the fan experience ruined?" he said. "You are always balancing the threat versus the inconvenience and the

expense."

Karl agrees a backpack ban will get fresh consideration, and thinks some other lower-cost technologies might be implemented at future events.

"Supposedly, this device was in a trash can," he said. "At a lot of the high-rise venues I work with, any trash cans there are blast resistant."

Urban sports venues like Yankee Stadium pose their own security challenges because they don't have a natural buffer zone around the perimeter that can be secured — such as the parking lots which surround many suburban stadiums. Additional security personnel — and diligent fans — are the best security measures, he said.

"We'll look at some training, but we're not going change what we're doing now," he said. "We will keep our public events in this country. One thing I can take away from this is we are proud of what the response was. We've trained a lot of first responders, and they were ready."

'Do the best you can'
There are special problems with securing a marathon, Marciani said, and it would be a mistake to draw too many conclusions from Monday's attacks. Marathons have more in common with public space events like parades than big-ticket sporting events like pro sports, he said.

"Marathons are open-ended. There's no access control. You have 26 miles to cover. It's a lot more like St. Patrick's Day," he said. At stadiums, every entrant must pass some through some kind of access point. "(At a marathon) you do the best you can, check the manholes, check the garbage cans, but you can't manage every aspect of 26 miles."

David McWhorter is a sports stadium security expert with Catalyst Partners in Washington, D.C., a consulting firm that just helped Yankee Stadium operators obtain the coveted "Safety Act" designation, meaning it has been deemed well-protected against terrorist attacks by the Department of Homeland Security.

There are additional high-tech measures that marathon operators — such as those running this weekend's London race, or Montreal's race on April 28 — might consider, he said.

"A huge cadre of K9s might have picked up on something. Also, depending on the viewing angle and other considerations, there is software ... that analyses camera feeds and can detect certain types of movement or unattended items," he said. "Also, there are more covert technologies that monitor for certain electronic signals, but I'm not at liberty to get into details.

"Lastly, there is the option of more human security guards, although it is not at all clear that this would have helped," he said. "Unfortunately, all those things take money to buy and maintain. No one has the budget to defend against all possible threats."