

SPORTS BUSINESS

FIFA HAS PLANS TO 'DEBRAND'

Host cities and venues face the challenge of removing corporate branding from stadiums under club's policy

BY ALEX SILVERMAN and BRET MCCORMICK
Sports Business Journal

After FIFA awarded the hosting rights for the 2022 World Cup to Qatar, that nation's government built seven stadiums and overhauled one existing venue for the competition. Naturally, there were no naming-rights deals or branded signage when FIFA arrived to dress the venues with its tournament branding and the logos of its corporate partners.

The situation heading into the 2026 World Cup in the United States, Mexico and Canada is completely different. Fifteen of the 16 stadiums, none of which was built specifically for the World Cup, have long-term naming-rights agreements, and all of them are adorned with sponsor logos. If FIFA has its way, none of that will be visible next summer.

The governing body's policy ensuring that all World Cup venues are free and clear of existing commercial branding during the tournament is long-standing, but the process of "cleaning" stadiums of marks and logos is a uniquely complex – and potentially costly – undertaking in North America.

"It's quite the task – pretty Herculean to be honest," said Drew Bryant, chief creative officer at Elevate, a subcontractor helping create FIFA's venue dressings for the tournament.

"The naming-rights partnership signage is the biggest challenge."

The motivation behind FIFA's insistence on commercially clean venues is protecting the exclusivity for which its sponsors are paying handsomely. The governing body expects to generate \$1.8 billion in revenue from the sale of marketing rights in 2026, almost all of which is associated with the men's World Cup. Industry sources have put the value of top-level FIFA Partner deals between \$150 million and \$200 million per four-year cycle, with tournament-specific designations costing as much as \$100 million.

"If they told Hyundai-Kia that they would be playing in and talking about Mercedes-Benz Stadium, Hyundai-Kia wouldn't have paid what they paid," said Ricardo Fort, founder of Sport by Fort Consulting and a longtime executive with FIFA partners Visa and Coca-Cola. "And that goes for every brand."

Unlike the International Olympic Committee, which for the first time is allowing for the sale of naming rights for Olympic venues in Los Angeles, FIFA is sticking with its policy of requiring that all World Cup venues be devoid of corporate names. MetLife Stadium, for example, which will host the final on July 19, will be known

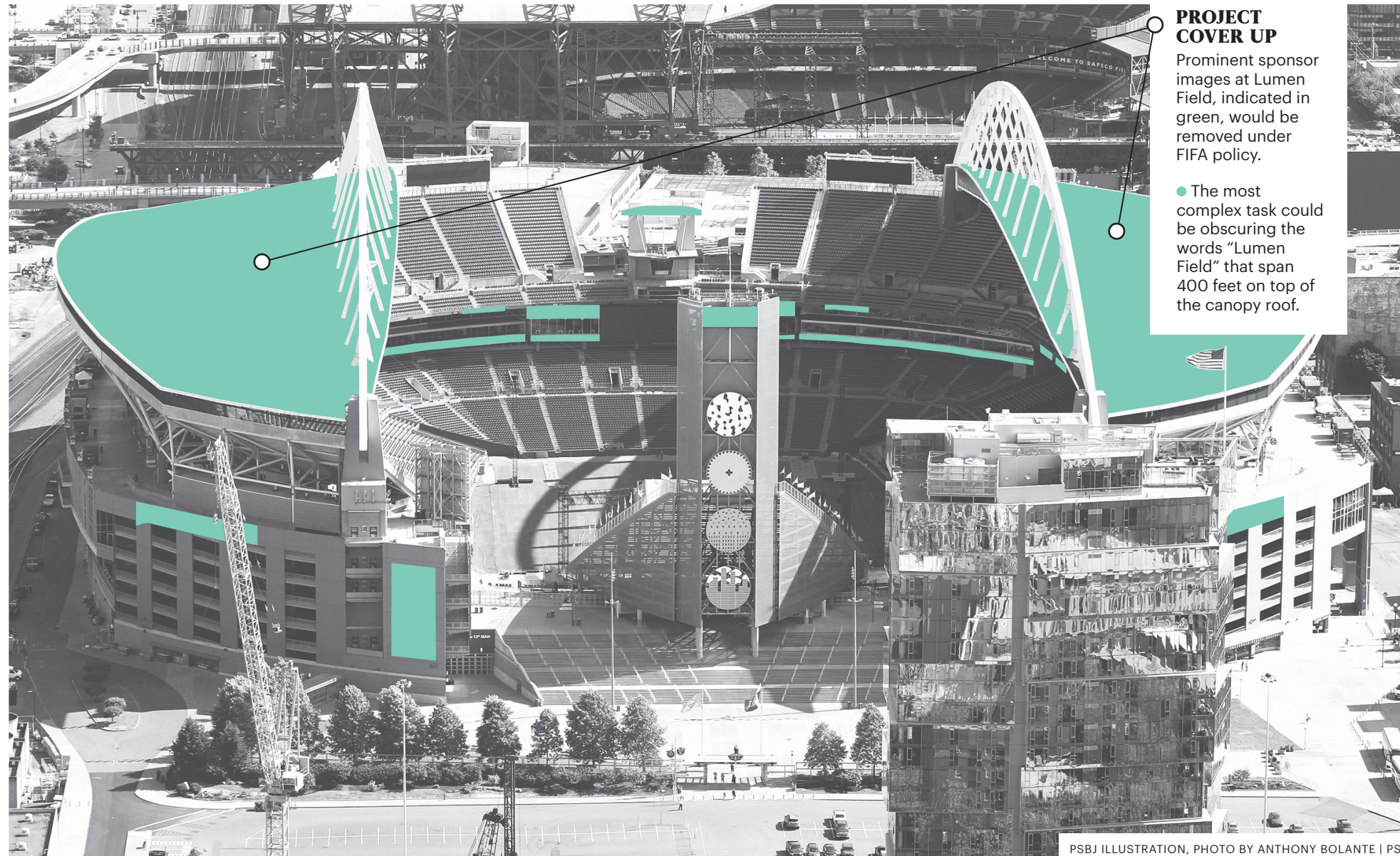
throughout the competition as New York New Jersey Stadium.

Many naming-rights deals, particularly those signed in recent years, have carve-outs for major events like the World Cup to ensure the stadium operators don't have to compensate those partners when an entity like FIFA takes over its venue. In some cases, however, events like the World Cup weren't considered when the deal was signed.

"Generally speaking, there is a willingness (from the brands) to work (with the stadium operators) and an expectation for some level of compensation," one World Cup venue official said of situations without an existing carve-out.

"If they told Hyundai-Kia that they would be playing in and talking about Mercedes-Benz Stadium, Hyundai-Kia wouldn't have paid what they paid. And that goes for every brand."

Ricardo Fort,
founder of Sport by Fort Consulting
and executive with FIFA partners
Visa and Coca-Cola



PROJECT COVER UP

Prominent sponsor images at Lumen Field, indicated in green, would be removed under FIFA policy.

● The most complex task could be obscuring the words "Lumen Field" that span 400 feet on top of the canopy roof.

PSBJ ILLUSTRATION, PHOTO BY ANTHONY BOLANTE | PSBJ

Referring to the venues by FIFA's unbranded names is just the beginning. According to contracts reviewed by Sports Business Journal, stadium owners have promised to turn their venues over to FIFA "free and clear of any and all advertising, marketing, promotion, merchandising and brand identification." This includes branding on "any stands, scoreboards, seats, seatbacks, time clocks, staff uniforms, accreditation passes, fences or elsewhere inside, surrounding or in the airspace above and around the stadium."

Logos for the teams and leagues that typically occupy the venues must also be removed. All 11 U.S. venues are primarily home to NFL

teams. Any exception to these rules would have to be granted by FIFA.

FIFA wasn't in a position to pursue the same level of de-branding for the 2025 FIFA Club World Cup given the short time frame in which the event came together and the unproven nature of the newly expanded competition, sources familiar with hosting discussions said. It's also unlikely that many naming-rights deals would have included carve-out language broad enough to include the Club World Cup. FIFA didn't force the issue and even referred to the stadiums by their corporate names in its official materials.

FIFA tapped two companies – The Look Company and Wasserman Live

– formerly Bluemedia – to help execute the Venue Dressing Programme for next summer's World Cup. That involves developing the look and feel of the various World Cup venues and physically bringing it to life. The firms will use subcontractors for various parts of the job, including height access specialists and engineers. The dressing program intersects directly with de-branding the stadiums, creating some gray area about how much of the bill FIFA, the host cities and the stadium owners will each have to cover.

FIFA, host city and stadium officials are in agreement that the individual host committees and stadiums, depending on their relationship in each city are responsible for the costs associated with cleaning the stadium of existing commercial signage. Meanwhile, a FIFA spokesperson said the governing body would cover certain branding elements through its own dressing program and coordinate with cities and stadiums to avoid duplicating costs.

Chris Canetti, president of the Houston 2026 World Cup Host Committee, said his committee is budgeting more than \$1 million for the process of commercially cleaning NRG Stadium to meet FIFA's guidelines. That figure, however, is based on FIFA's dressing program doing a lot of the work and covering the expense.

"We've got some exterior signage to cover and probably some concourse stuff, but FIFA is going to do a lot of branding," Canetti said. "FIFA is already decorating to make it look the way they need it to look in the service areas and the player tunnels and all that kind of stuff."

Where de-branding ends and dressing begins will be key to determining how much of the financial burden will fall on each party. It's a critical issue given the struggles most host cities have had raising money through FIFA's host city supporters program.

"The biggest question here on a city-by-city basis is who's going to pay for the work," Fort said. "A lot of them are looking at the event and thinking, 'I have to 'clean' the venue, I have to do a public viewing, I have to ... decorate and dress up the city to promote the event, and I haven't sold enough sponsorships.'"

VENUE NAME CHANGES PLANNED

Only one of the 16 North American venues that will host the World Cup next year does not have a naming-rights deal: Vancouver's BC Place. The other 15 will each undergo a significant name change for the 39-day event:

U.S.
Current: AT&T Stadium
FIFA: Dallas Stadium

Current: GEHA Field at Arrowhead Stadium
FIFA: Kansas City Stadium

Current: Gillette Stadium
FIFA: Boston Stadium

Current: Hard Rock Stadium
FIFA: Miami Stadium

Current: Levi's Stadium
FIFA: S.F. Bay Area Stadium

Current: Lincoln Financial Field
FIFA: Philadelphia Stadium

Current: Lumen Field
FIFA: Seattle Stadium

Current: Mercedes-Benz Stadium
FIFA: Atlanta Stadium

Current: MetLife Stadium
FIFA: NY NJ Stadium

Current: NRG Stadium
FIFA: Houston Stadium

Current: SoFi Stadium
FIFA: Los Angeles Stadium

Canada
Current: BMO Field
FIFA: Toronto Stadium

Mexico
Current: Estadio Akron
FIFA: Estadio Guadalajara

Current: Estadio Banorte
FIFA: Estadio Azteca Mexico City

Current: Estadio BBVA
FIFA: Estadio Monterrey