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Can TV soccer kick second-class status?

Ratings rise, coverage grows, but U.S. league is key

By Josh Chetwynd



David Beckham of the Los Angeles Galaxy, left, has done his part to boost U.S. interest in soccer.



More international matches are being broadcast in the U.S. including this June 30 exhibition between Barcelona and Manchester United on ESPN2.

Last month's Women's World Cup illustrated just how quickly soccer can catapult itself into cultural relevance in the United States. ESPN drew 13.5 million viewers for the final between the U.S. and Japan, the net's largest audience ever for a soccer match --

outperforming Major League Baseball's All Star Game, which had averaged an audience of 11 million five days earlier. Twitter users set a record for the most tweets per second during the dramatic Cup championship, won by Japan on penalty kicks.

"World Cups are big events that transcend sports and are driven by nationalism," says ESPN's top soccer programmer Scott Guglielmino, "if ... you have a horse in the race."

Indeed, soccer has shown a propensity to draw impressive ratings for the game's most prestigious event, then return to second-class sports status after the Cup has been won or the U.S. team is eliminated. But thanks to improvements in coverage, increased availability of top games and innovative strategies that reach out to advertisers, that's starting to change. And while many feel the success of a domestic league is imperative for the sport to truly flourish on U.S. shores, ratings are up for international telecasts that do feature a U.S. national team.

For example, Europe's 2011 UEFA Champions League Final pulled in 4.2 million viewers combined on Fox and Fox Deportes -- an increase of 91% over its 2010 numbers. And while ESPN2's telecasts of the English Premier League earned a relatively modest 301,000 viewers a game this year, that represented a 14% increase over the previous season.

One important sign of growth of soccer on television in the U.S. is the broad array of major international leagues available, something U.S. networks couldn't boast just a few years ago. For example, ESPN's family of networks (primarily ESPN, ESPN2, and ESPN Deportes) offer not only the English Premier League but also Spain's La Liga, the Dutch Eredivisie, Germany's Bundesliga, Mexico's Primera Division and FIFA's major championships, among others.

Fox Soccer (along with Fox Deportes and premium sister channel Fox Soccer Plus) features a lineup that includes matches from England's top soccer league as well as Italy's Serie A and both Europe's (UEFA) and the Americas' (CONCACAF) champions leagues. If you want Brazilian soccer, there's GoITV, which also provides games from Spain, Germany and Colombia among other nations in its mix.

Despite the overall surge in popularity, many observers believe soccer's fate as a TV property rests largely on the performance of the U.S.-based Major League Soccer.

Every week, MLS execs convene to talk statistics -- and not those tallied on the field. They huddle with broadcast partners ESPN and Fox Soccer, along with regional sports nets that carry each club's local contests to discuss every aspect of the league's coverage on television, including timeslots, promotional packages for fans and even which players to highlight in interviews and features.

"We are aware that in order for a professional sports league to grow in popularity and relevance, it needs to grow on TV," MLS spokesman Dan Courtemanche explains. "We are focusing on television ratings every week."

So far, America's top league is not keeping up with the improvement shown at the international level.

Last year's MLS Cup championship between Colorado and Dallas drew 1.1 million viewers, down 44% from the previous season's final, featuring Real Salt Lake and a Los Angeles team that included English star David Beckham. Viewership for ESPN2's MLS coverage this season has averaged 237,000 viewers through the end of July, a drop of 6% compared with 2010, according to ESPN.

Sports media consultant Lee H. Berke believes that until the domestic game can be viewed on par with the best leagues abroad, no one should expect a significant uptick in soccer's overall U.S. viewership.

"To paraphrase the political axiom, all sports is local. ... The sports that are played the best in America are the ones that draw (the greatest) viewership," he says, adding that if the top players came from the U.S. (think a team of Landon Donovans), ratings would skyrocket. "Until MLS reaches that point, it isn't going to be hugely attractive as a viewing property."

Nevertheless, there has been a concerted effort by those in the soccer world to lift the sport out of the niche status it has been relegated to for years in the U.S.

To hook viewers into its English Premier League coverage, soccer broadcaster ESPN has ratcheted up sideline interviews and features geared to the American audience. (ESPN also owns some domestic rights for the EPL in England.) The hope, says ESPN's top soccer programmer Scott Guglielmino, is to "get (viewers) connected to the characters."

Later this month, Fox Soccer Channel is upgrading its studios, consolidating all of its shows for European soccer onto the Fox lot in Los Angeles, and retooling its set for MLS Soccer Night in America, including a new look and improved graphics. Fox Soccer general manager David Nathanson calls the changes "massive."

Broadcasters also have spent extensive time contemplating ways to make advertisers more welcome. Ad buys have long been a big issue in soccer matches. Without traditional TV timeouts to allow for a break in the action, there has been a fear that revenue would be constrained.

"Certainly there are limitations because we have less commercial time," says GoITV VP of Network Ad Sales Ivan Perez. "But you can turn that into something positive. Because there is less commercial time, there is less clutter. It has (also) made us get more creative."

GoITV touts its "silhouetting" practice, in which the screen zooms out and it appears as if you're watching the game from a distance in someone's living room, in which actors

are seen using an advertiser's product, such as Coca-Cola. At the same time, the game never leaves the screen.

The moves toward product improvement aren't lost on the MLS, which has consistently reinvested revenues into local player development academies as well as into contracts for high-profile athletes from abroad -- though stars like Beckham and Thierry Henry were brought to the States in the twilight of their careers.

"This is a major topic, and our stated goal is to become one of the best soccer leagues in the world," Courtemanche says. "Will it happen in the next year or two? Maybe not. But in the next 10 to 15 years? Most certainly."

How long it actually takes may very well determine the future growth of soccer on TV.

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