

Revolution — one at a time

DENNIS BAXTER decries the audio quality of football on TV and asks when it was decided that video was more important than sound.



London, 2009. A broadcast convention with 10,000 or so of my peers. Soggy weather. Soggy fish and chips. Soggy attitudes. I was shocked (once again) at the lack of interest in audio and the quality of sound of football on TV. I get to feeling like revolting.

OK, I admit being from North America and that I have been told that I don't know squat about football ... and they're not talking about the NFL (America's National Football League.) But I do know this: a sport where the principle means of moving the ball has to do with kicking it — I mean, I want to hear it! Consider this: half of broadcast is audio. When was it decided that the video is more important?

I began my investigations into the football kick sound and found that the Sports Federation and Stadium Owners will not allow microphone operators on the field. Why I asked? Because the Sports Federation and Stadium Operators do not want anything blocking the sponsor signage that lines the entire field.

At the end of the day, the powers that be have decided that four microphone operators, one in each quarter of the field of play carrying pistol-grip microphones, will visually impair the effectiveness of sponsor advertising. But what about the quality of the viewer experience? If it sounds like a bad recording, most people will change the channel to get a better feed ... no? The reality is that I have used microphone operators at the Olympics and, in reviewing the footage of football I could find my microphone operators, but the game camera was focused on the player. The microphone operators moved along the sideline and had little impact over the home viewers detecting and absorbing the signage.

I was talking to a talented German mixer about microphone placement for boxing. I told him that I hung four microphones directly over the ring and tried to get them as low as four meters. He gasped and announced that his producer does not want to see the microphone in the picture and for him the microphones had to be so far away that they were ineffective. I cannot begin to tell you how many times you see camera operators in the frame and on-air, particularly in boxing. So the argument about microphone operators causing visual interference is weak at best. Camera people are in the line of vision of the field, so why not audio operators? Maybe it's time to buck tradition. Look around at the next generation of broadcast consumers: the gamers and screamers.

Our job as audio practitioners is to fulfil our audience's expectation and, by the way, the next generation is listening these days. The 'Gamers' experience sound in a new dimension and have high expectations for their entertainment investment. In their digital world, the 'visual' is graphic animation. It's not a photographically-recorded image. The 'audio' is supercharged realistic sound and music synchronised to the animation to produce a virtual reality. In fact, in this gamer example, the sound is equally as important as the visual in terms of the visceral experience for the gamer. 'Screamers' are everywhere on television. From Reality TV to financial news networks, commentators and guests interrupt and over-shout each other in rudely disguised arguments. In line with this thinking, perhaps we need more sports reality. Inject the gamer/screamer standards into the sports production philosophy. In a sense maybe our jobs depend on it ...

So how can we change an industry bias toward audio? First, broadcast production teams need to behave like the teams playing on the field. Each member has an opportunity — and responsibility — to deliver the goods and it requires a cohesive effort from the producers, engineers, and yes, the sports federations, owners, athletes and advertisers. Second, we need television-friendly sports that are audience-oriented, not advertiser-oriented. Television is what got us to these unbelievable rights fees, salaries and hopefully profits. We all have to understand that the expectations of the viewer are higher and we, all of us, have to deliver.

The coach and athlete are the drama in sports production and hearing their interaction involves the audience and challenges the sports enthusiast and arm chair coach. It takes work and cooperation from everybody involved in the production, but it also takes the initiative of the audio guy. The desire to create a more enhanced experience for the listening audience generates ideas, new methods and results — good or bad. Let me give you an example: I mixed the first London Monarchs American Football Game from the old Wembley Stadium and convinced the producer that it would be so cool to get a wireless microphone on the quarterback and coach. The audio delivered an exciting element to a new game and brought the viewer into a game that they (the English) had no real understanding for. There was only one problem. The London coach was so foul-mouthed that the audio had to be censored. Oops!

Nonetheless, my microphone placement on the coach stimulated more ideas and innovation leading to enhanced audio for broadcast. But it all started with the audio guy's desire to take the initiative and not just collect the cheque.

The future of sports coverage will be different. It will require a new level of cooperation with federations, officials and advertisers to create television-friendly sports with progressive ideas. Television is fighting for entertainment eyeballs and advertising dollars and must present an entertaining, compelling product. Look at how audio has changed sports coverage and think about how audio can change things. Wireless microphones on athletes, miniature microphones on equipment and certainly microphone operators will give new excitement to sports sound.

We gotta start a revolution to change the *status quo*. One audio guy at a time. ■