

Numbers that demand respect

MLS is poised to profit—in the future—from the World Cup's fine cable ratings.

By Mike Voitalla

When MLS patron Phil Anschutz orchestrated the league's purchase of U.S. English-language TV rights for the 2002 World Cup, it was clearly with an eye to the future.

The deal, which includes the 2006 World Cup and the 2003 Women's World Cup, could hardly be justified based on how much cash could be earned from a World Cup that would be televised in the middle of the night and early-morning hours.

However important it was that the maneuver solidified a commitment by ABC/ESPN/ESPN2 to MLS for five years, real financial success would hinge on whether the next two world championships could attract profitable advertising dollars.

Thanks to surprisingly high ratings, it appears that Soccer United Marketing—the Anschutz-inspired, MLS-affiliated group that acquired the rights—will be in a good position to negotiate higher advertising rates for the 2006 tournament.

"The ratings have far exceeded anything that we could have hoped for," said Mark Quenzel, ESPN's senior vice president of programming.

Here are some highlights of cable ratings for the 2002 World Cup:

- The 963,000 households that ESPN averaged for 24 telecasts is a 39 percent increase from the 691,000 households it averaged during France '98, when it showed 27 games during the day.
- ESPN2 had a 52 percent increase from four years ago (489,700 for 34 telecasts vs. 322,900 for 23).
- ESPN's early-morning telecast of USA-Germany was seen in 3.77 million homes, making it ESPN's highest-rated soccer telecast. It was ESPN's most-viewed program in the second quarter of a year (April-June).
- USA-Germany was ESPN's highest-rated program of the year among men 18-34 (5.32 rating).
- USA-Germany was cable TV's most-viewed morning (7 a.m.-1 p.m.) program ever among men 18-34 (1,351,571 impressions).
- USA-Mexico (ESPN), 1.98 million

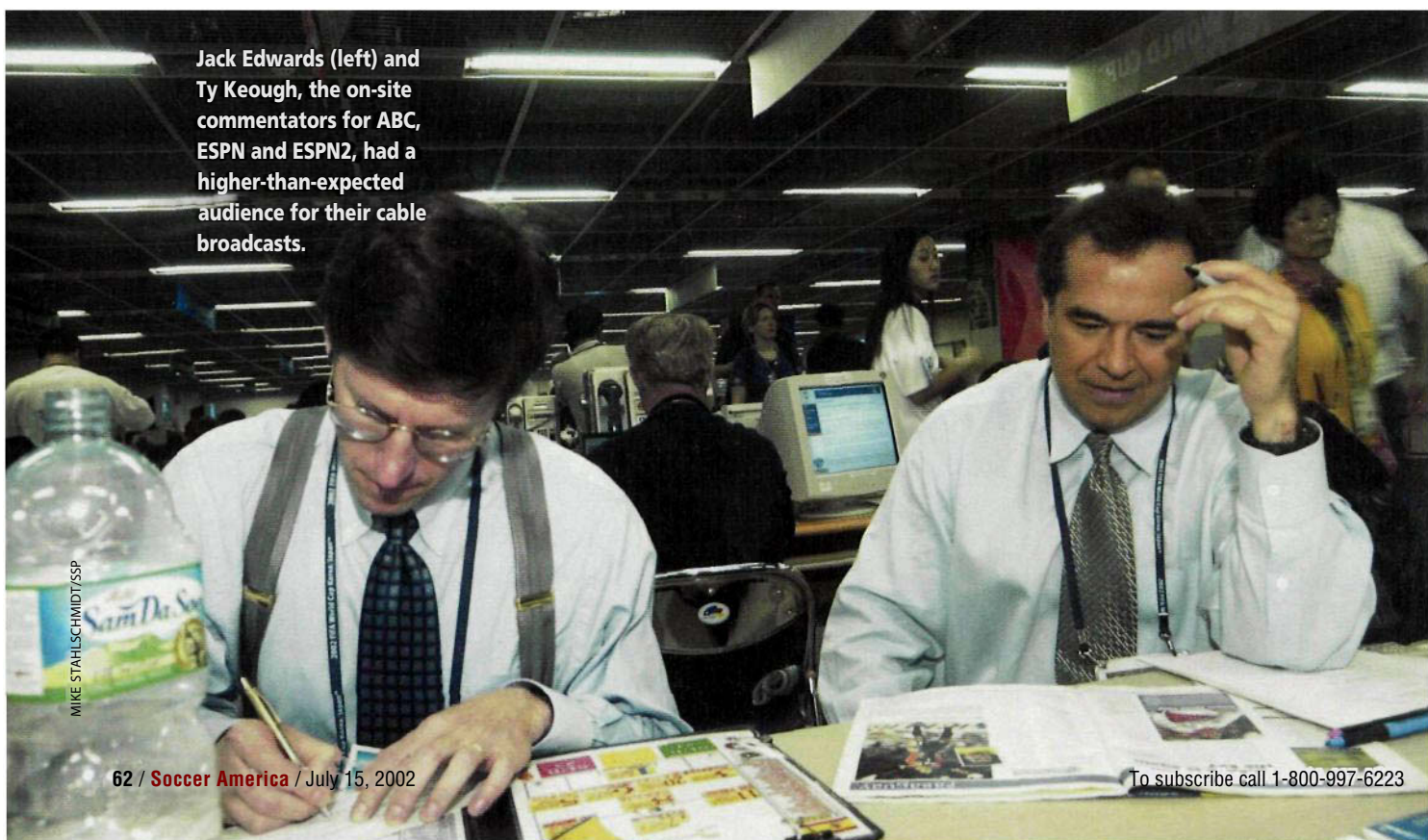
households; USA-Poland (ESPN), 1.63 million households; USA-South Korea (ESPN2), 1.36 million households; USA-Portugal (ESPN2), 998,000 households.

Indeed, the steady increase in ratings underscored the importance of U.S. success. It also enabled MLS to achieve another one of its aims in acquiring World Cup rights—promoting its league to the hilt. Hence, you saw a lot more features about MLS players in the World Cup than on the United States' foreign-based stars.

Still, the fact that rights are sold based on language continues to frustrate English-language efforts. Spanish-language Univision drew higher ratings than ESPN and ESPN2.

For example, Univision's broadcast of USA-Mexico on its Los Angeles affiliate had an incredible 41.2 rating—higher than the combined ratings of Los Angeles' eight over-the-air English-language stations—and a 75 share among Hispanic households. The total Univision viewership of the game was estimated at 4.2 million viewers. If only they had to watch ESPN, is what the MLS brass must be thinking. ■

Jack Edwards (left) and Ty Keough, the on-site commentators for ABC, ESPN and ESPN2, had a higher-than-expected audience for their cable broadcasts.



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