

Taped games don't draw

It's no surprise that ABC, which aired only one World Cup game live, saw a drop in ratings.

By **Jim Murphy**

Amid all the World Cup 2002 TV coverage in the United States, only ABC's telecasts saw a ratings drop compared with 1998. But ABC's approach toward the two tournaments was as different as, well, night and day.

A valid comparison can hardly be made, so varied were the circumstances.

In 1998, every game ABC carried (14 total) was live, and all were either weekend games or 3 p.m. midweek U.S. games. All three of its U.S. matches were live. The 14 games averaged 2.55 million homes compared with 1.48 million for ABC's 10 games in 2002.

This year, ABC showed two U.S. matches, both of them more than 24 hours after the games had been played — and after they had been broadcast live elsewhere. Same-day tape delay is a fairly common in TV sports, but a

next-day replay is unheard of.

ABC wanted to maximize its potential deliveries by showing U.S. games, but it probably should have passed. Same-day coverage of the Spain-South Korea quarterfinal — ABC's plan before the United States surprisingly advanced — probably would have done better than the next-day coverage of USA-Germany, which had already been watched by 3.77 million households on ESPN.

Had the USA-Germany match taken place Saturday morning at 7:30 a.m. ET, instead of Friday, ABC may have taken the game from ESPN, and very possibly could have set a soccer viewing record.

Even ABC's performance with the final — the only 2002 game it carried live — can't be accurately compared to 1998. Four years ago, the final started at 3 p.m. ET; the 2002 final kicked off at 7 a.m. ET. With start times ranging from 4 a.m. on the West Coast to 7 a.m. on the East Coast, ABC was limited to hitting the pre-sold, diehard soccer audience.

ABC's chance to reach more casual soccer fans came with its replay five hours later, and the combined delivery of these two telecasts was seen in roughly 4.2 million homes. This is down about 25 percent from the 5.6 million that watched in '98, but it's likely many of the casual fans heard the score prior to the replay and lost interest.

Moreover, several big-market ABC stations, including WABC-New York and WPVI-Philadelphia (stations ABC owns) chose not to carry the replay, shutting out millions of potential viewers.

(Spanish-language Univision's live broadcast of the 2002 final reached 1.86 million Spanish-speaking households, up from 1.72 million in 1998.)

ABC can be optimistic about the 2006 World Cup in Germany. By being able to promote the United States as a legitimate contender — and with live, daytime games — it can expect ratings far higher than the last two World Cups. ■

More than 6 million households tuned in to ABC or Univision to watch Brazil — with Ronaldo (left), Juninho Paulista (center) and Rivaldo (right) — beat Dietmar Hamann and Germany in the World Cup final.

