

Pay-per-view that makes sense

MLS's Shootout Package is one of the best deals in sports television.

By **Mike Voitalla**
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Fans who are likely to begrudge having to shell out extra money for pay-per-view events would be hard-pressed to complain about the MLS Shootout Package.

Of MLS's 140 regular-season games, the opener was on ABC, ESPN2 has 25 and 99 are broadcast locally. Only 15 are not televised.

For \$49, the Shootout Package gives fans access to regional broadcast outside their reach. It's available to small-dish owners and subscribers to digital cable that offers iN Demand. The deal, which translates to a couple quarters per game, is priced so reasonably that fans who sign up as late as August would still be paying less than \$5 per match. The

package also includes the playoff games that are broadcast locally. (ABC is showing the MLS Cup final Oct. 20.)

MLS action, such as the Crew's Jeff Cunningham outjumping D.C. United's Brandon Prideaux, is easy to track down with the MLS Shootout Package.

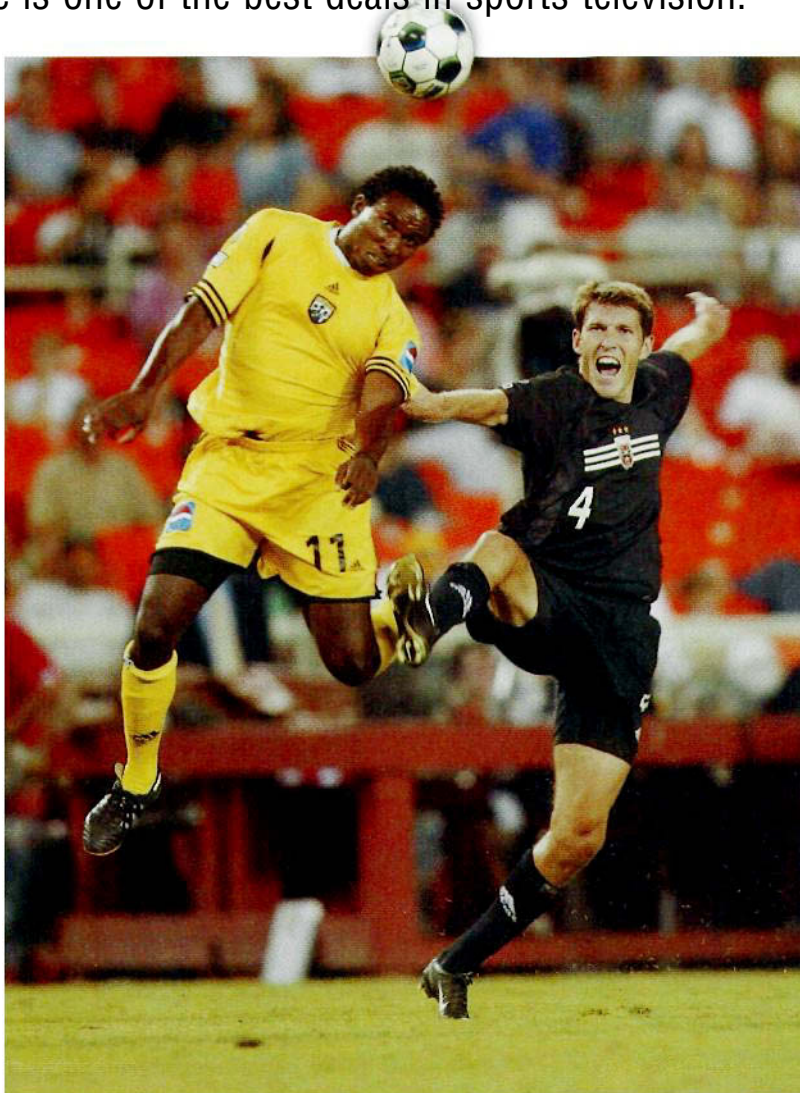
Brad Pursel, MLS's senior director of broadcasting, says a confidentiality agreement prohibits him from

releasing subscriber figures. But he says that they've increased since the package was introduced in 1997 and that MLS makes "a decent chunk of money" on it.

"It's good exposure, and the fans are delighted," says Pursel. "About 100 games for \$49 is a pretty incredible deal. There is a group that really supports it."

Because the Shootout Package relays regional telecasts, production costs are minimal.

There is a slight difference between providers. DISH Network shows only Saturday games, making DirecTV's and iNDemand's packages more extensive. Still, midweek games are relatively rare in MLS.



TONY QUINN/SOCCERPIXUSA

POST-WORLD CUP RATINGS.

MLS TV ratings for nationally televised games received a significant bump from the World Cup, but the effect has peaked.

In the 10 games played prior to the U.S. opener against Portugal June 5, the MLS telecasts averaged a 0.16 (approximately 134,000 households).

Four MLS telecasts in June — while the World Cup was underway — drew an average rating of 0.19 (162,054), an increase of approximately 20 percent over the first 10 telecasts.

The league drew its highest rating the day after Germany eliminated the United States, 1-0, in the quarterfinals: The MetroStars-Fire match June 22

drawing a rating of 0.25 (215,242 households).

Three post-World Cup telecasts in July have averaged 0.17 and 157,110 households.

Two games played just prior to the first U.S. World Cup game received very poor ratings: Matches May 26 (Galaxy-Revolution) and June 1 (Galaxy-Rapids) both drew 0.09 (roughly 75,000 households). The May 26 game was televised on tape-delay rather than live in the 4 p.m. Eastern time slot.

Evaluating the ratings is complicated because so many telecasts featured the MetroStars in June and July. Five of the six telecasts from June 15 to July 20 were MetroStars games. ■