

Chasing the big '99 numbers

Phenomenal TV ratings of the last Women's World Cup set high standard.

IN THE WORLD OF TELEVISION ratings, the mark hauled in by the 1999 Women's World Cup final on ABC — 11.1 — is large. It equates to roughly 40 million viewers. It was the third-best rated broadcast between June 19 and July 10 that summer, eclipsed only by two NBA Finals games in that span. For perspective, the NFL's opening game this fall, standing alone in prime time and marketed via Britney Spears, Aerosmith and Pepsi Vanilla on the national mall, drew a 14.5. So perhaps better than any number, that 11.1 captures what a phenomenon the 1999 tournament became.

But that momentum grew rapidly during the course of the tournament, as evidenced by the smaller, but still remarkable ratings earned by the U.S. quarterfinal against Germany (2.2) and its semifinal victory over Brazil (3.8).

From a television perspective, this fall's edition of the Women's World Cup faces a multitude of challenges that the '99 tournament did not. First and foremost, the late switch of venue from China to the United States left networks scrambling to make space in a schedule already booked and crowded with fall sports programming. Ultimately, the soccer-friendly trio of ABC, ESPN and ESPN2 decided it will broadcast 18 of 32 games — all live — and re-air two of them. Three games are on ABC: the United States' first match against Sweden on Sept. 21, its third match against North Korea on Sept. 28, and the final on Oct. 12. ESPN2 will show 14 matches and ESPN will show one. All four quarterfinal matches, both semifinals and the third-place game will be shown.

"You have to give a lot of credit to ABC, ESPN and ESPN2 for finding or making as many windows as they have," said Mark Noonan, executive vice president of marketing for MLS and Soccer United Marketing, the company which holds the U.S. English-

language broadcasting rights to the Women's World Cup. "With the time frame they had and the schedule they produced, it is close to miraculous what they did. It shows their commitment to the event and to the sport of soccer."

With much more time to prepare and a much less cramped summer calendar to work with, the trio of networks broadcast all 32 games of the 1999 tournament, 27 of them live. That the event garnered such widespread appeal by its end surprised many. The lone advantage this tournament has over 1999 is an established familiarity.

"Anybody who says the success of the '99 tournament did not exceed expectations is lying," Noonan said. "I think [this edition] will do well, but there has been less planning and ability to market because of the venue change and it's in a busier time. But you can't underestimate the fact that Americans like big events, meaningful events, and in women's soccer it doesn't get any more meaningful than this."

— Will Kuhns

Approximately 40 million viewers watched U.S. keeper Briana Scurry's penalty-kick save that helped win the 1999 Women's World Cup.



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