Soccer Needs More Television Coverage

Column by Michael K. Chung

With the World Cup underway, I am now convinced that soccer coverage is feasible on American television. With soccer as one of the most popular sports not only in the United States, but all over the world, the television industry has long owed adequate coverage to the American people. The efforts of the ABC and ESPN broadcast stations demonstrate that commercial-free broadcasts are certainly worthwhile.

Soccer has been long neglected on American television because the structure of the game does not allow for time-outs or other stoppages of play (other than injury). Due to this lack of "commercial room," television stations have not broadcast soccer events on a regular basis, with the possible exception of Olympic coverage. But even then, what little of the sport was shown usually appeared in the form of abbreviated highlights; and since this is the United States, the coverage focused primarily on the Americans.

ABC's uninterrupted, live coverage of the U.S. soccer team's first-round game versus Switzerland showed considerable competence in televising the game. From what I understood, European coverage of soccer (or "football," if you prefer) posts the sponsoring advertisement at the edge of the screen. In and of itself, this was refreshing and worthwhile.

During half-time of course, commercials can be shown. Perhaps using this model of European coverage, commercial-free games sponsored by the United States would attract more viewers than a 30-minute game with constant advertising. Commercial-free games can be broadcast not only on their own station throughout the tournament, but also on ESPN. Never before have we witnessed one station announce the coverage schedule of a competitor. This is most admirable, and I am quite pleased that the World Cup coverage is not monopolized by a cable company for the simple reason that not everyone who watches the game of soccer has the access to such cable programming. Network channels, on the other hand, are accessible to all television viewers, and it is fair that the entire country have the opportunity to watch part of the festivities.

While I am unsure of what soccer leagues on the amateur and professional level exist in the United States, it is certainly worthwhile for American television producers to look into the coverage of the sport. Whether such coverage becomes a monopoly (e.g. the National Football League), or shared between stations (e.g. major league baseball) can be determined later.

The most important thing is to broadcast soccer's great sport to the public without distorting the game itself. Since it is an international sport, it is unlikely that it will become inflated with television time-outs, rock-and-roll music broadcast at every possible non-game moment (as during National Basketball Association coverage), and other potential distractions. With so much television coverage is general and soccer's popularity in the United States, soccer undoubtedly deserves its place on the American television lineup.

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