

Up close and personal

Putting mics on athletes is certainly one way of upping the entertainment value of sports programming, says DENNIS BAXTER.



Micro cameras, powerful lenses and incredibly agile technology that moves cameras around — such as the aerial cam — get the spectator closer to the sport than ever before imagined. Getting closer to the athletes is interesting and entertaining but getting microphones on athletes has been an ongoing struggle for many decades.

My first experience with microphones on athletes was with the now defunct London Monarchs — a British team playing American style football (*He doesn't mean 'soccer' readers. Ed*). Already sensing the viewing public's scepticism towards the sport itself, and subsequent poor television viewer ratings, the American Football Federation pressured the team to allow microphones on the Coach and Quarterback to provide a participant's viewpoint of the game and to teach the British about the sport of American Football. While the wireless microphones worn by the Coach and players presented an up close and personal viewpoint of the game, the colourful language spoken in the heat of the game proved a little strong for the broadcast audience.

At the beginning of the 2000 Sydney Olympics, I was successful in getting wireless microphones on the sculling boats at the rowing events, but once again the language used in the heat of the race became

a little noxious for an international audience — especially for those countries with obscenity regulations for their broadcasters.

Today it is commonplace for broadcasters to use in-car audio from the driver and the crew radios at motorsport events. And, as recently as the 2010 season of American Football, you heard a new level of sound from the playing field. Two wireless microphones were placed on one player. It was so interesting to experience the action firsthand. The more I heard, the more I wanted to hear. Predictably, after a couple of games, someone complained and the innovative practice was stopped. Strangely, now I find the sport boring.

Recently, for my University broadcast students, I played two clips of an American Football game, one with microphones on the players and one without. Then I asked them to describe the experience. Everyone agreed that the sound made them feel like they were on the field: a much more involving and entertaining experience for the viewer. Close microphone techniques work and certainly microphones on athletes are an interesting solution to sound. Think about it — what if there had been wireless microphones on the athletes at World Cup 2010? You might have heard the game instead of all those vuvuzelas.

With the internet morphing into a preferred entertainment and information vehicle, it is cutting deeply into traditional broadcast advertising revenues. I believe that audio and video on demand will continue to erode the viewing audience

of traditional broadcasters in all categories except live news and live sports. For now. Teaching at the University has given me access to the rising generation of entertainment consumers — and generally fewer than one in ten has a television. Most of their entertainment is consumed online. The reasons they often cite are the fixed scheduling determined by the broadcaster (instead of programming the way you want it) and most significantly, they find the content boring. Never forget that this is the generation that grew up on games — interactive, interesting and involving — games that have hyper-sound for the hyperactive.

A new level of cooperation between broadcasters and sports is an essential strategy for the survival of free-to-air television. Many sports federations like FIFA, the Olympics and the NFL believe that the future of their sport is the franchise. But sports will come and go despite the egos of old men who dictate what you can and cannot do with your cameras and microphones as well as what spectators can do in a stadium to irritate each other and the viewing audience. But rich entertainment needs to be the topic of conversation between everybody: the sports federations, the athletes and the broadcasters.

It would be a sound decision to get up close and personal with sports. ■