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Axis Providing Virtual Views Of Euro 2008

ESPN May Deploy Replay Technology For Other Sports

By Mike Reynolds -- Multichannel News, 6/26/2008 3:36:00 PM

BRISTOL, Conn.--Only two games remain in Euro 2008 for network soccer analysts to illustrate key plays with virtual replay technology ESPN Axis. But if things go as expected, ESPN may soon give viewers access to Axis for other sports.



Working in conjunction with Swiss company LiberoVision, which developed the graphic enhancement, ESPN's production team here has added elements to Axis converting the world feed provided by the IBC.

From the UEFA championships, "ESPN Axis" has created "virtual" replays by converting the video captured by live-action cameras shooting the event from Switzerland and Austria. Images fed from the game cameras are calibrated and stitched together in Bristol to create virtual freeze-frames from multiple angles. These angles can tilt upwards by 90 degrees -- from pitch level to direct overhead shots -- creating three-dimensional, birds-eye views of key plays from multiple vantage points.

Within the three-dimensional frame, ESPN analysts have telestrated the locations and movements of players on the pitch to depict and explain how plays develop and what actions lead to scores, offsides and other key moments during matches. ESPN analysts have also highlighted players and graphically moved them on the screen to illustrate their performances during matches.

For instance, ESPN soccer analyst Julie Foudy spun Axis through its paces for Turkey's opening goal during the June 23 semifinal loss against Germany. With the replay, Foudy pointed out that the Germans were late to set up defensively on the sideline throw-in, before illustrating that defender Arne Friedrich was slow to react to the shot by Kazim Kazim that rebounded off the crossbar. Turkey's Ugur Boral moved past the essentially flat-footed Friedrich to bang the rebound through goalkeeper's Jen's Lehman's wickets and give the Turks a 1-0 edge.

The Axis first aired during halftime of the match and then in post-game coverage, as well as on *SportsCenter's* highlights of Germany's 3-2 triumph.

Before the Turkey-Germany match on ESPN's Euro 2008 studio set, Foudy talked about Axis' advantages.



"It's a great tool to present the sport from different perspectives. You can look at things aerially; see the distances involved; see how plays developed; and whether players were in or out of position," she said. "The feedback I've received from viewers is that it has brought them a new awareness of the game."

Throughout ESPN2's coverage of Euro 2008, Foudy said she has used Axis between 15 and 20 times. "It's not something you want to overuse; that would take away from its dynamism," she said. "When you have great stuff, it provides new perspectives and understanding for viewers. But you don't want to use it just for the sake of using it."

ESPN executives also seem poised to proceed judiciously in developing Axis for use with other sports.

"We're very happy with what [ESPN Axis] has provided us," said Norby Williamson, ESPN executive vice president of production, who mentioned that with Skycam, HD and other isolated cameras, the programmer has been able to bring viewers closer to the action. This technology, though, offers the "most holistic view" yet, he said.

While the technology was "targeted for this tournament," Williamson said "your creative mind starts to wonder" about the "opportunities to migrate it from sport to sport." In a discussion with a reporter, Williamson talked about Axis' potential to showcase pass patterns developing in American football.

He said ESPN would get “feedback from fans, our talent and producers” before making any decisions to move forward and explore the kind of applications/modifications that might be needed to adapt the technology for other sports and, perhaps, its inclusion within game-coverage.

ESPN media operator Susie D'Amico, who has been working on Axis throughout Euro 2008, said it had taken anywhere from seven to 20 minutes to prepare the virtual replays.

Noting that soccer's continuous run of play doesn't lend itself to in-game Axis replays, Bob Toms, ESPN vice president of production enhancement and ITV, believes that as producers and analysts become more familiar with the application, they would be able to reduce the replay creation time and it could be used as in-game element.

“We have a lot of good toys; this is a very good toy. It came as promised right off the bat. The only hiccup has come in learning the system,” he said. “I think we can turn it around more quickly.”

In his view, Toms -- although he wouldn't place a time frame on when it might be deployed -- foresees Axis playing a role in ESPN's football, baseball and basketball coverage.

“There's a lot of development ahead, but we're going to do what we can to get ready,” he said. “I'm confident, it will be ready for primetime.”

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