

HOST OF INNOVATIONS

It's 10 years since the formation of Host Broadcasting Services, a subsidiary of sports marketing agency Infront Sports & Media, created to produce coverage of the 2002 FIFA World Cup. **Andy Fry** reports on a decade of host broadcast developments.

BETTER KNOWN in the world of sports television as HBS, the Franco-Swiss Host Broadcasting Services has had a profound influence on the sports TV business over the last 10 years - delivering world-class coverage from Asia, Europe and South Africa.

By its 15th birthday, it will have added South America to the list - thanks to its role at the 2014 Brazil World Cup. Go back to the origins of HBS and it wasn't certain the company would be around for this many years, says chief executive Francis Tellier, who has been in charge of HBS since its inception (having previously run the broadcast operation at France 1998).

"Originally we were appointed by FIFA as a one-off operation to provide coverage of the Korea/Japan 2002 World Cup. But just before the final, FIFA's steering committee told us we would also be doing Germany 2006. That moment still stands out as a career landmark for me," says Tellier. It is this relationship with FIFA which sits at the core of the HBS operation.

Although the company has now branched out into other sectors (of which more later), its role as the independently-run host broadcaster at successive World Cups (and other important FIFA-backed competitions) is its crowning achievement. At Korea/Japan 2002, for example,

HBS overcame the logistical difficulties of working in two countries simultaneously to produce 1,000 hours of fully digital coverage. An increase of 400 per cent on France 1998, this enabled rights holders around the world to deliver a quality and variety of pictures not seen before by fans. FIFA was so pleased with the event that it described coverage of 2002's key goals as "technically perfect".

Rolling forward to Germany 2006, HBS took the decision to shift to full HD coverage. "That was a risk," recalls Tellier, "because we had to take the decision in 2003 before HD had really taken hold in the international market. I remember being supported in that move by Infront's late chairman Robert Louis Dreyfus -

but by the time of the event itself we are up to around 2,000 people."

There are too many examples of HBS World Cup innovations to list here. But good examples include the development of mobile technical operation centres and the introduction of the multi-feed concept in 2002. Over the last decade, one of HBS' great skills has been to sense the optimal point between innovation and ROI. While HD was a bold move, Tellier was not convinced that mobile coverage was ready for full-scale investment in the run up to Germany 2006. Instead, HBS developed an ad hoc solution which involved repurposing its main HD production feed using Pan & Scan technology. This allowed editors to zoom in and capture core action from the HD feed, which could then be adapted for mobile, a far more cost-effective approach than attempting to set-up dedicated mobile production.

Of course, there's no time in this business for resting on your laurels. So talk to Tellier now and the biggest thing on his mind is the build up to the 2010 World Cup in South Africa. As in previous World Cups, HBS will be responsible for every aspect of the World Cup production signal as well as providing production services and facilities to rights holders and licensees.

If there is a step-change this time it is not in terms of technology but in the service that the company plans to offer. All told there will be 29-32 cameras for each match, enhanced information management and the biggest-ever team of ENG crews. This means HBS will be able to gather more in-depth features and colour coverage on teams and cities than ever before. With South Africa hosting the event for the first time, does Tellier feel that HBS is prepared for the challenge? "We have just produced coverage of FIFA's Confederations Cup from South Africa so have had a chance to produce an event on the ground. We covered 16 matches in HD format with up to 21 cameras. So, for our part, we are now ready to do the best job we can in terms of covering the 2010 FIFA World Cup."

Not only that, but HBS is willing to pass on its expertise to universities and technical schools in the territories where it is working. As a result, lucky students get practical, hands-on training under the supervision of HBS experts, in the context of the greatest international sports competition on earth.

Many of the above decisions are operational in nature, but as a mature company, HBS faces important strategic decisions as well. For example, the company has started exploring ways to diversify its business base. In part, this is because it makes sense to avoid over-reliance on one piece of business. "But it is also about keeping the HBS team stimulated and excited," says Tellier. "After the 2002 World Cup, things inevitably went a bit quieter for the next year. And I realised that the future of HBS depended a lot on our ability to keep the

core team together as much as possible - to provide expertise and continuity. So we look for interesting challenges."

Examples include HBS' work with IMG on the 2006 Asian Games in Qatar. "That was our first move into multi-sport events - so it was very important for us," says Tellier. "I'm hoping we'll also have a role in the 2010 Asian Games which are being held in China."

Perhaps even more significant has been HBS' appointment to handle weekly production of live Ligue 1 coverage in France. Starting in August 2008, HBS was given a four-year contract to act as host broadcaster of Ligue 1 - delivering a nine or ten match multiplex every week. Operating as HBS Production France, 500 staff and 100 cameras deliver tailored digital media production of around 342 matches for TV, Internet and mobile. In addition to live coverage, HBS has also introduced a searchable clip database featuring content such as match highlights, interviews, contentious incidents and slow-motion action replays.

Cross fertilisation

Another innovation is being implemented: All Ligue 1 matches are logged and encoded into a dedicated web-server and made available on the spot to the French League Commissions (Referring, Disciplinary...) and to the clubs via a simple web access (on a limited subscription basis) to cover the needs of strategy and game analysis and Web TV.

Domestically, innovations like these have made it possible for Orange to join Canal+ as one of the league's key media partners. As for the international market, the appointment of HBS means that Ligue 1 now has a first-class multi-platform world feed. This, in turn, has allowed the governing body to revisit the way it markets its main rights to foreign broadcasters.

For HBS, the addition of Ligue 1 means it can now cross-fertilise ideas between the two main projects. "The two contracts are handled by dedicated teams," says Tellier. "But the fact that we are producing French soccer all year round means we have ideas in areas like mobile and live 3D that we may be able to take on to the FIFA World Cup in a tailored format."

Tellier believes the company's success shows that there is a strong future for outsourced service providers like HBS. However he is not interested in growth for its own sake.

"I think the development of HBS shows the benefits of out-sourcing to an experienced team which can keep up with new developments in the market. If it had not been for FIFA's decision to opt for a private enterprise solution, the pace of change might have been slower.

"As for our strategy, I think the market is polarising between the big events and low-cost sports production. Our specialism is in the big events so that is where we will look to focus our group expansion."

who was willing to trust our judgement." Tellier and HBS do not take risks without good reason, however and this is one reason why the company is trusted by partners. "HD was the right decision," says Tellier. "But we don't innovate for the sake of it. The most crucial thing at an event like the World Cup is to provide robust coverage so we are always advising directors against trying to do too much. For viewers, the most important thing is not small onscreen innovations, but whether they experience the event without technical interruptions."

Comprehensive coverage

In many cases, says Tellier, the best innovations are the ones that help broadcast clients but are not noticeable to viewers. "We have had innovations like super slo-mo coverage which directly transform the viewer experience. But much of what we do is not immediately obvious. For example, the introduction of our Media Server at Germany 2006 allowed licensees to access broadcast quality material at will and paved the way for new media coverage."

Indeed, Tellier has often made the point that logistical expertise is the key to HBS' success, with 11,000 separate tasks to be completed in advance of a World Cup. "What the viewers sees represents only 20 per cent of host broadcast operations. The other 80 per cent is dedicated to the design and management of the host operation. Usually our team is about 40-strong