



## NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Rights holders are investing more and more in producing unique, video-intensive content for their official websites. Andy Fry looks at the commercial rationale and asks: is website media content becoming more sanitised and less interesting?

**IT'S RARE TO FIND** a sport-based website which doesn't carry some video these days. Whether it's newspapers, sponsors, retailers, gaming companies or content aggregators - they all try to enrich their offering by adding moving imagery to the mix.

Against that backdrop, it's no surprise to see sports federations and rights owners follow suit. After all, it would be something of an aberration if the original source of the video didn't have a way of creating an emotional attachment with young fans - the demographic that increasingly turns to digital media for content.

Andrew Walker, the Women's Tennis Association (WTA)'s senior VP marketing and communications, estimates that 75 per cent of the WTA's online fans are aged between 13 and 24 - whereas the television audience skews more towards an older demographic. This makes online significant both as a way of refreshing the fanbase - and as a communications tool for brand partners.

So far, so good. But once you decide to go down the video route a number of issues arise. For a start, what do you put up on the site? With the premium content (live, highlights etc)

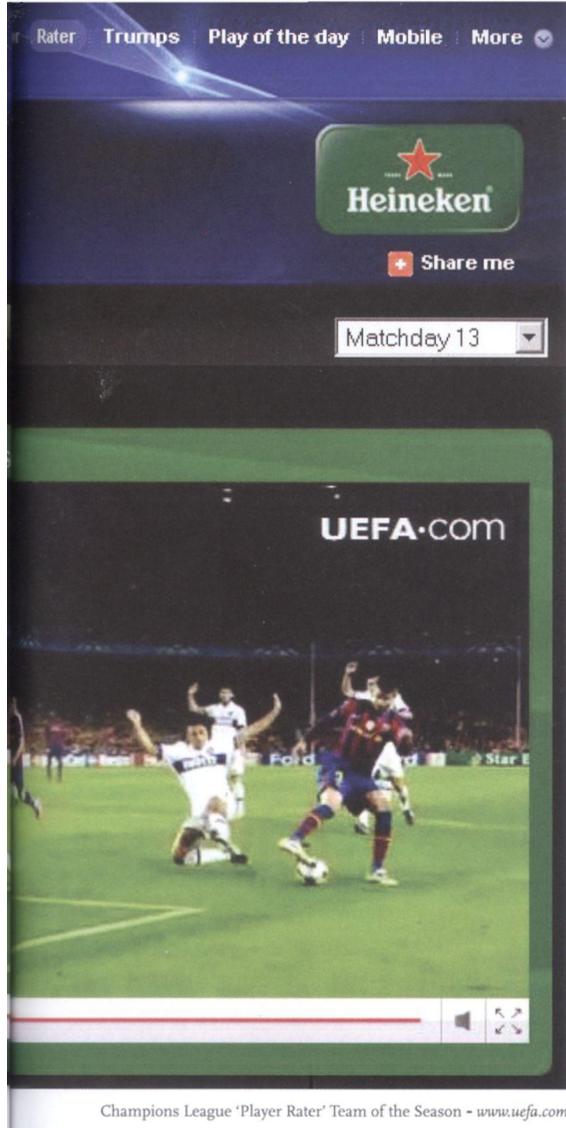
already licensed to broadcasters and their digital subsidiaries, what is compelling enough to draw audiences?

Perform Group CEO Oliver Slipper says some rights holders do manage to hold back live and near-live rights for their sites: "But beyond this there are still some valuable video assets to work with. If you factor in archive, player interviews, behind-the-scenes diaries then there's still quite a lot of video content for rights holders to leverage."

### Editorial skills

There's no question that this kind of magazine content has become a pretty ubiquitous part of the online sports landscape. But it has its limitations, argues Iolo Jones, chief executive of leading consultancy TV Everywhere: "Fans are interested in this kind of content - especially in the build up and aftermath of live events. But sports federations don't have the same editorial skills as traditional media outlets when it comes to exploiting this content. At the same time, the video they stream tends to be safer."

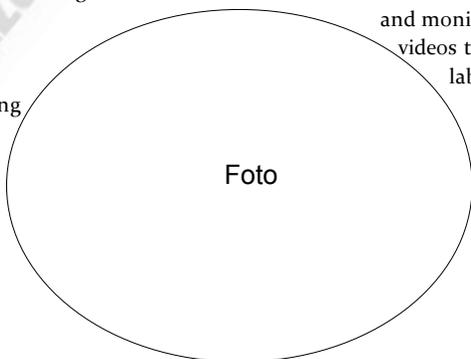
This latter point is critical. While audiences are captivated by the kind of fast-cut, semi-hysterical,



vaguely-sourced, transfer rumours, salacious behaviour and industry feuds that news channels and tabloid papers thrive on, most federations are only interested in video which promotes a positive image, says Jones: "In multi-billion dollar sports, control has to come first - otherwise you're in danger of jeopardising valuable sponsorship and TV rights deals. The danger, of course, is too much control makes content bland."

Perform's Slipper acknowledges that interviews with, and snippets of players trotting through training can be boring. But he also believes that it is possible to deliver positive content that is of interest to fans: "Obviously the bigger rights holders are going to be careful with their content. But I think the stuff the English Football Association did with [its online video platform] FATV during the 2010 World Cup was interesting. It did provide insights into the life of players on tour."

There's also something inherently interesting in scenarios such as the signing of new players, the launch of a new kit or the surprise addition of a player to a national team squad, adds Slipper: "A breaking story may be flagged up by the



mainstream media, but the first major interview is almost certainly going to come via the rights owner's platform if they get their strategy right."

Besides, says Slipper, it's a mistake to focus too much on the elite end of the federation spectrum: "Rights holders tend to be more precious the higher up the value chain you go. But I've seen some great spontaneous content where cameras have been allowed into pre-match team talks or where players have been allowed to go off alone with cameras. If you trust people you can get some amazing results."

### Connecting with the audience

Over at UEFA, a lot of energy has gone into how best to utilise video assets on its website. This has led to properties such as 'Weekly Edition', a regular video bulletin which splices together match analysis with big name interviews. Free-to-view, it's a highly-polished 22-minute digest which uses UEFA assets to maintain a relationship with hardcore fans. This, in turn, provides UEFA's commercial partners with another way of reaching out to their audience.

It's not bad as far as it goes - and is clearly of value to fans in markets where UEFA content is hard to come by on mainstream TV. But more interesting are the video-based applications which UEFA is building around fan engagement. Last year, for example, it launched 'Player Rater' - an online activity which centred on fans providing feedback on performances during the UEFA Champions League. This was then collated and placed alongside relevant video clips and editorial.

As the season progressed, fan feedback enabled UEFA to create a team of the season, using video to illustrate the exercise. This kind of approach, says Slipper, is nearer the mark: "You're looking to use video as one tool among many. The key to making video work hard is for it to be in an interactive context. And the good news for rights holders is that this doesn't really conflict with broadcasters."

Of course, activities which involve any kind of original production have a cost implication - particularly where the rights holder also decides to bolt on some kind of user-created content or crowd-sourcing component. Once you start factoring in the cost of refreshing content and monitoring/verifying uploaded videos then the job can be pretty labour intensive.

So how do federations play the game without going belly-up? "At TV Everywhere we think working with existing sponsors or introducing a

new tier of non-conflicting sponsors is the way to go," says Jones. "Brands are increasingly looking for quality content that they can associate with."

That is certainly the way UEFA is approaching the issue. Speaking at the recent SportBusiness Sport and Technology Conference in London, UEFA's digital marketing manager Dejah Meldem explained how this kind of video-based activity is now an essential part of the package it offers to commercial partners. Player Rater, for example, had Heineken on-board - while next season will see a new video-based initiative designed to fit Ford's strategic objectives.

The beauty of this approach is that it relates online video directly to a return-on-investment. It also gives rights holders access to the creativity which brands can bring to the party. Furthermore, the right fan application can be used to drive traffic back to the federation site from the brand's own online portals (or from sites like YouTube and Facebook for that matter).

At this point, it's worth reiterating Slipper's point - which is that the existence of video, and its technical quality - is actually less important than whether it is a value-add for fans. It's a theme that is also picked up by Jones: "Technically, platforms such as our own VidZapper video management system provide a huge degree of control over the building and distribution of video content, including the integration of social media. But the reality is that it is the access and uniqueness which is more of an issue. I often find myself watching the scorecard on the Cricinfo website if I don't have access to Sky Sports."

This thesis is backed up by Nielsen - which has just released its first analysis of user activity on the FIFA website during the 2010 World Cup. Here, the most compelling point to observe is that fans - mainly men aged 18 to 49 - were primarily drawn to the website for stats.

"The FIFA site had a highly engaged core of US consumers who averaged more time on the site than fans in traditionally soccer-mad nations such as England, Germany, Spain and France," says Alex Burmaster, VP of global communications at Nielsen's online division. "The website provided a huge buffet of information from which US fans could satisfy their appetite over and above the relatively light offering in US media."

The core point, then, is that emphasis on video should not distract rights owners from the real reasons fans go to official websites (games, stats, insights, fixtures, offers, merchandise, tickets etc).

"Castrol," says Burmaster, "scored a masterstroke in sponsoring the statistics section of the World Cup website. Consequently, they will have connected with large numbers of this elusive audience across a wide range of markets at a time when they're notoriously engaged - checking out soccer stats."