

*Reigning NZ Soccer Media Broadcaster of the Year Simon Milton asks...*

# Are we being short-changed on TV?

With soccer's increasing profile, and a resultant increase of coverage on TV, this seems a good time to comment on the "state of the game" in relation to television broadcasting.

I have an obvious bias in this area, as a football fanatic who watches a lot of TV, and harbours ambitions of working in that field.

But my purpose here is to prompt thought and debate, rather than serving up some sort of potted analysis. I have some opinions as to the standard of fare offered to fans, and am keen to hear those of others.

In considering coverage of soccer, or lack thereof, on New Zealand television, it makes sense to start at the beginning (as I remember it!).

Like most football-obsessed kids in New Zealand in the 1980s, my TV habit was dominated by Big League Soccer. Once a year, the FA Cup final would

screen in the middle of the night, and my existence in Standard 4 was completely and utterly dominated by the World Cup in Mexico (I still cringe at the thought of Denmark's loss to Spain).

The 90s ushered in the "SKY" era — a lot more football, but only if you had the money to pay for it. It was a barren start to the decade for me, and TV3's TWI-sourced weekly wrap-up on Sundays, while greatly appreciated, never sufficed.

I scraped together enough cash for a decoder just as the 1994 World Cup kicked off, and when it was over, I got used to a diet of English Premier

League highlights, European Cup matches, and the chance to see my beloved Inter in action on a relatively regular basis.

TVNZ even helped out occasionally in the late 1990s, with Summer National League highlights and the World Cup in



France, but it became apparent to any semi-serious soccer fan that SKY was a necessity. Following football on TV in New Zealand has traditionally meant watching stuff from overseas, which never particularly bothered me, especially when both the programme and the football were of a high quality. But at the end of 1998, my wildest dreams came true (well, the football related ones :) a New Zealand-made soccer show, with overseas and New Zealand football on it, as well as other random news, features, and highlights.

Forget the fact it was fronted by a cockney and a Thunderbird, The House of Football was long overdue. Devlin and Davis were an effective combo, and, although they irritated a few people, the underlying influence of producer Alex De Jong made for a great half hour's viewing each week.

The fact that there had never been a homegrown show like this (at least in my memory) made De Jong's achievement all the more impressive. Although Alex, Miles and Martin were embarking on largely uncharted territory, they did have — thanks to years of overseas programming — an idea of what the show should look like.

De Jong had an instinct for what would work and what wouldn't, and remained passionate about his sport. Despite working in a notoriously carnivorous industry, his fresh and original shows reflected the effort he put into them.

Quite simply, the House was the goods, and positively promoted football in this country (the fact I won a trip off them is irrelevant). Sadly for us, Alex's departure for greener pastures meant a steady downward decline in the standard of the House's content.

His successor was forced to work in very trying conditions, unable to express the same finesse and technical ability in building on the platform Alex had left.

But out of left field, a replacement appeared. Soccer Central was formulated in late 2001 as a vehicle to promote the Kingz. Produced in house by SKY itself

(as opposed to the House which was made by Uplink), the show uses a live studio format fronted by Dennis Katsanos — touted by SKY as the new face of New Zealand football.

With regular in-studio guests, Soccer Central aims to promote the Kingz in the NSL, and package up other football for viewing fans and subscribers to enjoy. It has now been on our screens

for several months, expanding from its original half-hour slot into its present hour-long format.

Thus, in the space of my brief existence, soccer on TV has progressed from an hour of delicious Brian Moore commentary each week, to a seven-day schedule of live matches, highlights programmes, and two New Zealand-made magazine shows.

Plenty, one would think, to get excited about. But sadly, I feel that football fans continue to get short-changed in this

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country, especially in comparison with other codes.

This happens in several ways, for several reasons.

Firstly, let us consider the state broadcaster. TVNZ's commitment to football has never extended much beyond telecasts of All Whites matches, and some rather special pre-fabricated sets from which World Cup matches were introduced – who can forget Doug Armstrong's turquoise jumper, or Murray Allison's tie/jacket/hair? (*And deadpan voice - Ed.*)

These broadcasts ceased around 10 years ago (1998 excepted), and their long term prospects remain questionable – bear in mind that the All Whites qualifying matches from 1981 were taped over by the TVNZ archive.

Last year they re-ignited a previous role as Chatham Cup final broadcaster – gifting us a commentator who couldn't identify half the players on the pitch, and then cutting away to the News during sudden death extra time.

Now they are on course to present regular weekly National League highlight packages on Saturday afternoons, and

we wait with bated breath to see them (lest we forget Brendan Telfer's post-synch commentaries from the old Summer League days).

On the positive side, their coverage is free-to-air, and their total dearth of sport at present might play into Soccer New Zealand's hands in the near future.

Realistically, soccer broadcasting now revolves around pay TV. This is the way of the world, as rights and broadcast costs – especially for European football – are beyond the means of any other network in New Zealand, and I would rather pay a monthly subscription to watch soccer than miss out altogether.

That said, I also feel that as a paying customer, I am entitled to certain expectations of the service I pay for. At present, I don't believe those expectations are being met.

As far as coverage of overseas football goes, there is little to complain about. Obviously, it would be better to have a feed for European and international matches that didn't involve Tommy Smyth and JP Dellacamera, and I would personally like to see a return to the Italian Highlights show from Channel 4 in

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The Soccer Locker, Howick  
Accent Magazines, Hamilton &

Gotham Comics, Onehunga  
Hamilton Airport Shoppe

Magnetix, Wellington

Canterbury Mags, Armagh Bookshop, Edgeware Books  
(all Christchurch)

**and...**

**Mr Gordon's Laundry Service 115 Valley Rd, Mt Eden**

England.

Otherwise the amount of coverage is pretty good. My real concern is with the two New Zealand-made programmes.

The House of Football has continued its downward spiral since Alex De Jong's departure. What was, for two years, my favourite show on TV, now appears as a half-hour synthesis of sexism, racism, and beer-consumption, with the football almost an afterthought.

Much of the material now is just plain offensive, and the show as a package is appalling. With chief sponsor Adidas particularly unhappy, and a number of complaints being registered, it seems I am not alone in this opinion.

Above all, I find the show intensely frustrating, as its unfulfilled potential is apparent for all to see. The days of the American special and the South Melbourne feature seem so long ago...

Unfulfilled potential is the phrase that leaps to mind every time I watch Soccer Central. The initial complaints when it began were the lack of actual football, and boring discussions/interviews.

These faults were understandable and excusable for a brand new show still finding its shape and pattern. The fact they are still there at this stage is frustrating.

I personally have a lot of time for Dennis as a host, and Fred De Jong's contributions are, on the whole, outstanding. He is insightful and opinionated, with the "cred" of someone who has definitely "been there, done that".

The problem, in my opinion, is with the structure and flow of the show. Dennis often seems unsure of the order of events, and the focus and/or discussion

often leaps about randomly from one issue to the next.

Current football news is often overlooked, and too often articles that are featured in the show's opening sequence do not appear.

And while I am pleased that local National League highlights are included, I don't feel they are accorded due consideration. So again I stress this word "frustration", as I think these things are easy to overcome.

The early House of Football had defined segments and structure that aided viewing, and by the end you felt informed and entertained. With Soccer Central, I struggle to see the relevance of certain guests, and often wait in vain for certain issues/news/highlights to appear.

As an example, it took 40 minutes of an hour-long show for the issue of Wynton Rufer's testimonial match to be raised, and that was only thanks to Fred De Jong's prompting.

While I'll probably be written off as some whingeing, detail-obsessed trainspotter, my aim with this article is

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positive.

I am trying to encourage people to think more about what they see, to salute positive efforts in soccer broadcasting, and to not settle for something just because "it is better than having nothing".

I think it is fantastic that there are two New Zealand-made soccer shows on TV, and I want to prod and promote them until they reach their full potential. At the moment that is not happening, and I believe it is an easily-rectified situation.

And if no one is up to that task, well, I've been dreaming of such an opportunity since I was 10 years old...