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> Talking Point

Winning the

With its ViewerTrack service, Initiative has developed specialist research skills in the sports field. This is especially useful during a World Cup year.

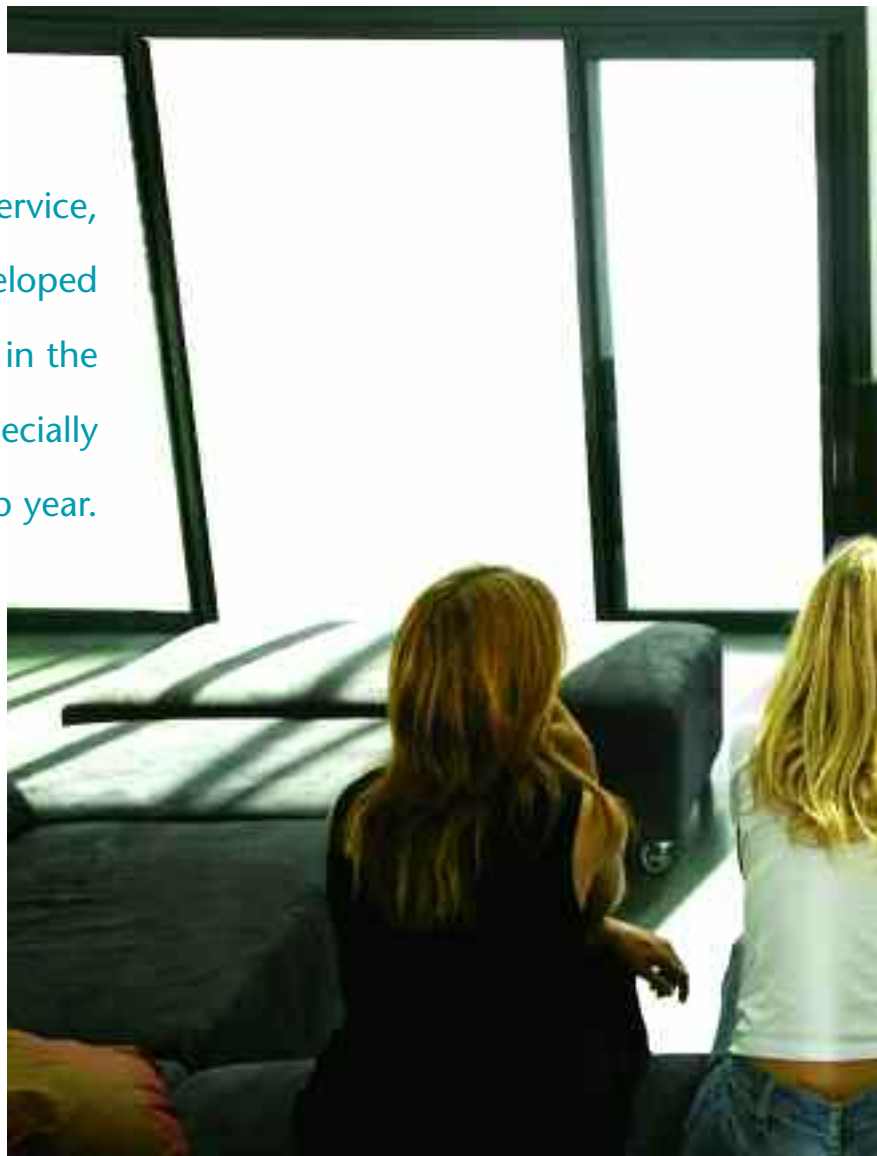
For almost ten years, Initiative has been one of the closest observers of the intersection between sport and media. Formula 1, rugby, cricket, the Olympic Games, soccer – thousands of global sporting events have fallen under the scrutiny of ViewerTrack, which can pass analysis of worldwide viewing figures and their implications on to the agency's clients.

PASSIONATE ABOUT SPORT

"It's an excellent example of global coordination," says Kevin Alavy, Senior Analyst at Initiative Futures. "The whole network pulls together to analyze media

consumption of sport across 50-plus markets. A dedicated researcher in each country provides figures and commentary. And while national characteristics vary, there's one thing you can be certain of: people are passionate about sport."

Few sports, however, attract as many obsessive fans as "the beautiful game" – a description thought to have been coined by legendary Brazilian soccer player Pele. It's also worth quoting Scottish footballer Bill Shankly,



pitch



“For some, soccer is a far more serious matter than life and death.”

who said: “Some people think football is a matter of life and death. I can assure them it’s much more serious than that.”

Combine that passion with patriotism, and it’s easy to see why the World Cup is a prized media property.

“This will be the fifth major international football tournament for which we will have ViewerTrack viewing data,” says Alavy. “We will be able to compare it to the figures for the 1998 and 2002 World Cups, as well as the European Championships in 2000 and 2004.”

Alavy and his team will gather viewing data for all 64 games played in Germany this summer. As well as average audience, audience share and reach, Initiative will collect demographic data by age, gender and social class. National characteristics will also emerge, enabling Initiative to find out exactly which countries are the most fanatical about football.

“We will provide The Times newspaper in London with a daily box containing viewing figures, but what we’ve been asked to give them is a mere pinprick compared to the amount of information at our fingertips. Our knowledge would fill many newspapers. Over the years, we’ve tracked a real evolution in attitudes to the sport.” For instance, Alavy reveals, women are an increasingly important audience. “Soccer used to be a very male sport, but now the figures have almost reached parity in some markets,” he says.

PATRIOTISM REACHES FEVER PITCH

Less surprisingly, patriotism plays a large part in attitudes to the World Cup. “I’m always amazed how fickle people are,” laments Alavy. “I would watch the World Cup even if England didn’t qualify, but I am by no means typical. Once their team has been knocked out, people turn off in droves. There’s a direct correlation between

what happens on the pitch and in homes. In 2002, ratings were even higher in South Korea than they were in Brazil – traditionally a fanatical football nation – because the South Korean team vastly exceeded expectations when it reached the semi-finals.”

As a media property, football is becoming more rather than less powerful. "Audiences are growing, which has been fantastic for the development of the sport. Because of fragmentation, most TV genres are losing viewers – but elite events like the World Cup are holding steady or even growing. And as the World Cup is considered an event of national significance, it is shown on terrestrial TV in most countries, making it accessible

to the widest possible audience."

Needless to say, many matches are watched out of home. In London, at least, it's almost impossible to avoid a TV screen when the World Cup is on, unless you swear off pubs and cafes.

"If past figures are anything to go by," confirms Alavy, "we can expect the World Cup to show the highest ratings for any event in the entire year." ■

Patriot games

Americans don't like soccer. Or do they?



Many Europeans, almost all Brazilians and millions of other citizens across Latin America and Asia are crazy about soccer – but "the beautiful game" leaves American viewers cold. In the US, baseball, basketball and football far outweigh soccer among the concerns of sports fans. At least, that's the perception – but what's the reality?

"The US national soccer team is rapidly gaining support as it grows in talent and confidence," reports Kevin

ced to compete with baseball, the NBA, the NFL and NASCAR (that's stock car racing, for our European readers).

Americans are also dismayed by the drunkenness and violence occasionally displayed by soccer fans, often seen on the rampage in European capitals. Not in our back yard, buddy. Finally, the nation's non-soccer heritage means that many of the best players end up abroad.

But that's only one side of the story. New converts to soccer emerge every year. Alavy suggests Hispanic viewers are particularly keen on the game; women are becoming an important segment of the audience too.

"Plus the US team has a genuine star in the form of Freddy Adu, who's one of a handful of players around the world described as 'the next Pele'. Certainly, great things are expected of him."

A GLOBAL SPORT

Initiative's evidence shows that soccer is increasingly becoming a global sport. "In Australia, where historically it has been of limited interest, it is rapidly growing in popularity. It helps that the team has qualified for the World Cup and will be playing against Brazil."

Everyone, it seems, wants to get hold of the ball.

Hispanic viewers in the US are keen

Alavy, senior analyst at Initiative in London. "FIFA [the international soccer federation] ranks it as one of the top ten national teams in the world, and it reached the quarter finals in 2002. And in terms of participation at a grass roots level, soccer is booming in the United States."

Even so, it's fair to say that most Americans aren't exactly glued to their sets for domestic Major League Soccer games. Some believe it's because soccer isn't fast enough ("A whole match with only one goal?"), although this seems an unfair criticism given that, to a European eye, baseball and football matches are long ad breaks with the occasional bit of sports inserted. In terms of TV audiences, MSL is also for-

