

NBC Sports, ESPN Shift Into Overtime For  
U.S. Open Playoff  
Jun 16, 2008 - 6:46:13 PM

*By Ken Kerschbaumer*

Torrey Pines was supposed to begin its transition to post-U.S. Open life this morning but, instead, a fleet of production trucks and personnel spent one more day for coverage of an 18-hole playoff between Tiger Woods and Rocco Mediate that eventually spilled over into a sudden death playoff. For NBC Sports, ESPN, and providers like NEP, Total RF, Corplex and others it meant more TV action and a tighter window to break down. "The biggest challenge is getting everything out of here on time," says Ken Carpenter, golf technical manager. "We had a team breaking down the set-up behind the players."

The playoff capped off a week of golf coverage that Carpenter says went great as the weather held out, despite occasional cloud cover and fog. The only downside to the playoff was shrinking the breakdown window by about five hours.

NBC Sports and ESPN relied on NEP Supershooter ND3, a truck unit that is used for Sunday Night Football and golf coverage, to handle the Open. International production duty was handled by NCP VIII and Lyon Video with Corplex tapped by BSkyB. Game Creek Intrepid was on hand for ESPN Sports Center while Golf Channel used NEP SS5 and Total RF supplied five trucks to meet the RF needs of all involved. All told 25 production trucks and seven uplink vehicles were on hand to broadcast an event whose planning process began much nearly a year prior to the event.

While the coverage of the first four rounds was an-all-hands on board production with nearly 50 cameras and camera people Monday's playoff was completed by a minimum level of staffing. "A couple of years ago we planned for how many cameras, tape operators, utilities, and audio people we would need for a playoff," says Carpenter of a plan that was put into use the first time Monday.

With only two competitors on an entire course camera crew was roughly half of a typical event. The camerapeople leapfrogged around the course from camera to camera.

Work on the Open began nearly a year ago. "We worked with the USGA to find the best locations for camera towers not only for the millions of TV viewers but also for the bleacher and

hospitality needs,” says Carpenter. Part of that process also involved playing the course to get a better sense of camera positioning for the 29 Sony HDC1500 hard cameras and a robo cam mounted on a tree at the 16th hole.

All the prep work couldn't ready the crew for the challenge of dealing with a sea of humanity as thousands of spectators followed a player grouping during the first two rounds that featured the world's top three players and two biggest names: Phil Mickelson and Tiger Woods. Even during the playoffs the crowd was roughly 30,000 strong.

“It posed a challenge even for planning lunch because we had to allow for travel time to get to the physical camera positions,” says Carpenter.

Torrey Pines location near protected environmental areas also required some tricky footwork. The 14th hole, with its green dramatically located on the bluff of a coastal cliff, required a camera crane instead of a camera scaffold to get shots from behind the green. “But instead of the crane being straight up it was extended out behind the green,” says Carpenter.

And while weather can sometimes be a challenge at Torrey Pines it was the weather's impact on RF transmission that caused the biggest headaches. Because of its location on the Pacific Ocean and low-hanging coastal cloud cover RF signals would be amplified out over the water and extend for many more miles than expected. As a result, Louis Libin, Michael Smalls of BroadComm and a team of RF coordinators had to work diligently to make sure interference was minimized with entities like the Los Angeles Police Department and Los Angeles TV stations.

In terms of innovations at the Open RF HD handheld cameras topped the list. Supplied by Total RF, they transmitted HD pictures wireless at about 18 Mbps. “This is our championship. This is the biggest golf tournament we have ever done,” says Kurt Heitmann Senior VP Sales and Marketing for CP Communications & Total RF Productions. “This is larger than our Super Bowl coverage.”

NBC used seven RF cameras for the U.S. Open, and ESPN used five RF cameras with four cameras used for the international feeds. “The wireless RF cameras from Total RF were very good,” says David Culmer, BSKyB production/tech manager. Three Sony HD cameras sent back signals wirelessly for BSKyB as well as a super slo-mo system that shot at 300 frames per

second and made its BSkyB debut outside of Ryder Cup or Solheim Cup coverage.

“That system is amazing,” says Culmer. “It allowed us to really slow down the action for amazing reaction shots.”

Total RF also laid out 250,000 feet of fiber cable to get signals back from around the course. “If you take the 12-strand tactical fiber (Telecast Fiber Systems TAC-12) that is embedded in the glass and you multiply 12 times the 250,000 feet of glass we have on the course there is actually three million feet of glass on the course,” says Heitmann. “That is almost six hundred miles of fiber.”

For BSkyB a staff of 68 keyed BSkyB’s coverage of the U.S. Open golf championship this past weekend as David Culmer, BSkyB production/tech manager and his team made sure international golf fans saw their favorite players.

Two changes this year from last year’s tournament at Oakmont Country Club were the use of a production truck from Corplex and the addition of wireless HD cameras. “Because of demand for HD vehicles NEP, who usually supplies our OB unit, subbed it out to Corplex,” says Culmer. “The truck has been superb and we’ve been very pleased.”

Having its own EVS units was the difference for BSkyB coverage. “Because the EVS units record everything if we missed something during a commercial break we could build up replays fairly quickly and then pick up the live action,” adds Culmer.

With the U.S. Open now in the past NBC Sports and BSkyB turn to the next biggest golfing challenge of the year: the Ryder Cup in Louisville, KY this September. It is one of the most challenging golf events to cover thanks to a wide variety of playing conditions. Expect 100 or more cameras to get the job done and wireless HD to be a major part of it.