



## Football's own goal

**One of the most influential figures in European TV Sport is Stefan Kürten. German-born Kürten is Vice President of TV station ZDF and Chairman of the European Broadcasting Union, (EBU) which represents public TV stations in 50 European countries. Addressing the Play the Game conference, he asked whether viewers are beginning to tire of TV's current coverage of sport**

»Viewers don't want to see more sport on TV,« he said. »All over Europe we are witnessing a drop in the popularity of TV football. Only the top games come close to attracting the large audiences of the past. If TV stations wish to avoid a major drop in interest, they must limit their transmissions and concentrate on quality.«

According to Kürten, TV soccer's enormous costs are increasingly forcing the major channels to extend their transmissions far beyond the length of a football match. A 90-minute Champions League clash can typically take up 140 minutes of broadcast time - including lengthy analysis and plenty of advertisements, which help the TV station foot the huge cost of the broadcast rights.

Kürten pointed out that while many channels broadcast sports events, very few show events of high quality. He suggested that TV sport is approaching a point where viewers are starting to lose interest.

At the moment, he said, a large number of TV channels are competing with each other for the rights to broadcast big sporting events such as top football games. The sports clubs and associations

that own the rights hold all the cards, and there is no shortage of TV stations willing to do business with them.

However, he warned that many commercial channels are now on the verge of reaching the economical "pain barrier" - a barrier that has already been reached by many public broadcasters, which are often the only channels available to many households.

»We have certainly not yet reached the final breaking point,« he said, »but the growth in the cost of broadcast rights will certainly be slowing down in the future.«

One consequence of the high cost of sports transmissions is that major TV stations are choosing to concentrate on what they see as the most important events - football's Champions League being a prime example - leaving viewers and the broader sporting community as the losers. If the public TV stations cannot even afford to broadcast minority sports, these sports' popularity will drop further due to lack of exposure.

What would it mean for a country if the national football team's important matches were only available to a select few, he asked. Should the average fan be forced to pay the often very high costs of following the game on satellite or cable? In an effort to avoid this scenario, Kürten revealed that the public TV channels in the EBU have already secured the rights to cover a number of important sporting events in the future. UEFA, for example has decided to deal with EBU-affiliated public TV in a different way than its commercial counterparts. ♦

# A small number of sports will dominate the future

By Karen Balling Radmer

**W**hat is the future of sport? Can TV stations continue to pay larger and larger fees to transmit the big sporting events? Who makes the decisions - the sports clubs or the sponsors? In the intense fight for TV airtime, minority sports are facing a fight for survival. The effect that the Internet will have on sport is still unclear. And in the future, sports journalists will be faced with conflicting loyalties.

A number of media representatives attended the Play the Game conference, each with their own prediction for the future of sports coverage in a globalised and increasingly money-fixated world.

## Defending freedom of expression

**Sports journalists of the future must work to safeguard their right to free expression, says Aidan White, General Secretary of the International Federation of Journalists**

In his address to Play the Game, Aidan White of the International Federation of Journalists predicted a complex future in which sports coverage includes many different forms of communication. As a result, he said, sports journalists could be forced to work even harder to safeguard the right of free expression.

»As a former newsman whose career has included reporting from the touchline and editing big match reports, I understand why there is no popular movement around the world that can match the cultural richness, economic clout and political power of sport,« said Aidan White.

»Sport means much to the people who play and someti-



mes a lot more to the audience - it inspires childhood dreams, national passions and feelings of community that help people to identify themselves in a world which is changing rapidly and in ways that are not always for the best. The ability to reach global audiences through television has created a billion-dollar sports industry involving powerful multinational corporate sponsors, advertisers, sports organisations, consumer goods producers and media companies.«

»The globalisation of sport has created wealth for many people and institutions in the sports and media world. It has also changed the role that sport plays in society. In the quest for market share, the cultural, democratic and community values previously synonymous with sport are steadily losing importance,« he continued.

In spite of daily pressure from sponsors, sports clubs, associations and their own employers, Aidan White pointed out that ensuring truthful and objective coverage of the world of sport is still the ultimate responsibility of each individual journalist.

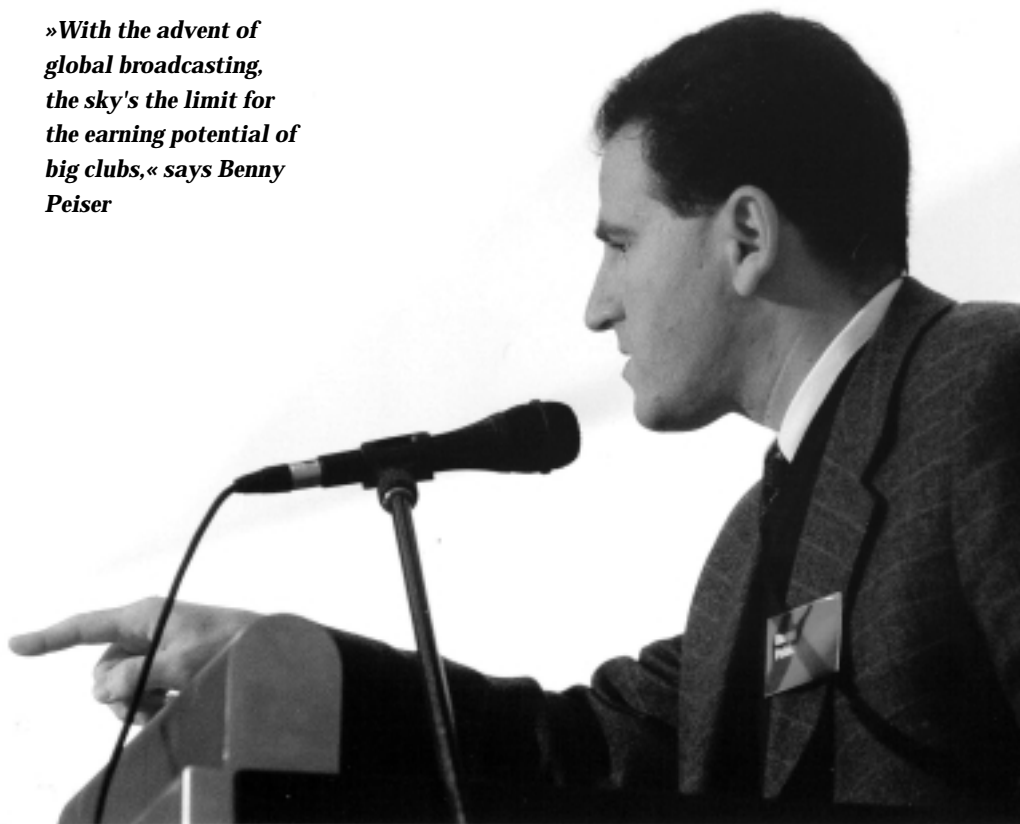
»It is not unrealistic for us to picture a world where money does not mean everything for sport,« he said. »Democratic values also exist that are essential for sport's well being. We must take these values into account in our reporting. We have a responsibility to the society we live in.«

He warned of a future in which sports coverage is controlled by fewer and larger media giants, each with the financial muscle to buy a controlling stake in any number of professional sports clubs. This, he said, represents a challenge to the journalistic principle of free speech. In the world of sport, too few journalists are willing to speak out against wrongdoing, and many feel the pressure to comply with the interests of the commercial organisations they represent.

»Therefore we must act as a watchdog,« he added. »At the moment we are not doing this as well as we could. We all know about big stories that for one reason or another have never made it into print. We must ensure that there is a clear dividing line between journalists and the economic interests of sport. We must fight for independent sports journalism that retains the three basic ingredients of truth, objectivity and accountability.« ♦



**»With the advent of global broadcasting, the sky's the limit for the earning potential of big clubs,« says Benny Peiser**



## The big boys take over

**»In the future, information will be globalised. Larger and fewer media giants will own the lion's share of the market. This can mean only one direction for sport,« said Benny Peiser, Sports Historian and Sociologist at Liverpool's John Morris University**

»Professional sport - whether viewed on the TV or the Internet, read in the newspapers or transmitted through other media - will be more popular than any other form of entertainment. But this will not include all forms of sport. Just a few disciplines such as tennis and football will dominate the market, because more and more viewers across the world will be watching the same satellite channels owned by just a few media organisations. In other words,« claimed Peiser »we are heading towards the global standardisation of sport.«

### The Sky's the limit

At the same time, larger football clubs will start to transmit their games through their own media companies. And with more and more Internet users, the clubs will also be able to sell and market them-

selves across the world. In such a situation, Peiser expressed fears that objective sports journalism could vanish, to be replaced by homepages and publications biased in favour of the clubs they represent. »With global broadcasting, the sky's the limit for the top clubs' earning potential,« he said. »In the future global market, the big clubs will employ journalists to report from their own games - and this is where journalistic principles will be threatened.«

With the growth of global media companies, many lesser sports will experience a drop in popularity, and in some cases, traditional sports will vanish altogether, he added. Research shows that many viewers enjoy watching the less-popular sports - but would be unwilling to pay for the privilege of doing so.

On the other hand, he also saw fresh hope in the Internet and other new technology, which could allow minority sports their own niche in the form of a channel or homepage. »Not only will we see English football become popular in India,« he said, »we could also see Indian football clubs achieving cult status in England.« ♦

