

ESS undergoes massive upgrade

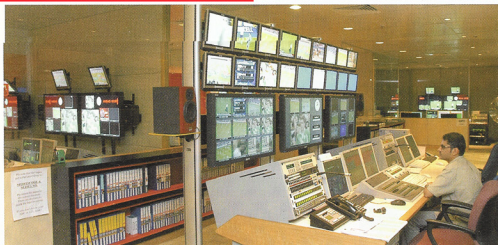
BY MILLETTE BURGOS

ESPN Star Sports (ESS), a joint venture between major cable and satellite broadcasters ESPN Inc and Star, has given its transmission-and-production facility in Singapore a major upgrade.

But it was not until after many years of consideration that detailed planning finally took off in February last year and the tender was drafted, said Andy Rylance, ESS' director of engineering.

ESS provides Asia with a wide selection of all-day sports programming, with ESPN reaching over 110 million households and Star Sports over 54 million households. It has 13 networks in the region: ESPN Asia, ESPN India, ESPN Taiwan, ESPN Philippines, MBC-ESPN (South Korea), ESPN Singapore, ESPN Hong Kong, Xing Kong Sports, Star Sports India, Star Sports Taiwan, Star Sports Singapore, Star Sports S.E.A and Star Sports Hong Kong.

Said Rylance: "We [decided on] Television Systems Ltd (TSL) as the systems integrator last April, shortly after NAB2004, and the equipment-ordering process began in June.



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The upgrade in the ESS Singapore facility has involved the rebuild — from the ground up — of the ESS transmission (TX) area, TX supervisor area, master control room, ingest area and engineering workshop. Two smaller central tape areas have also been combined and renamed the Media Recording Centre.

The broadcast system ESS ordered was pre-built mostly at TSL's headquarters in the UK last July and shipped to Singapore in early September.

One of the biggest challenges that Rylance and his team had to face throughout the project was continuing to go live to air even as upgrading work was going on.

"Our operations and engineering staff members, especially our transmission staff, were fantastic," he commended. "They put up with walls being pulled down around them, old desks being ripped up and replaced, and open floor tiles as hundreds of kilometres of cables were being pulled — all this while learning to operate a brand-new system."

The TX area, which remained in the same location, has been converted from eight separate TX rooms to an almost "to-

tally open" concept, said Rylance. Two empty rooms had allowed the first new TX suites to be built in the area, with new equipment gradually replacing the old, he said.

The master control room, which has remained in the same place, has been expanded, while the ingest area and engineering workshop have swapped locations to directly link the ingest system to the new TX area.

ESS' previous TX facility in Singapore was fully manual. Although the broadcaster had a SeaChange 1653 server controlled by an Encoda (now Harris) automation application, the system was used solely for the playout of break material and a very small amount of programming.

Now, with the new upgrades in place, ESS is playing pre-recorded material on a fully-automated channel. This means the network can run more channels without additional transmission staff.

Rylance added that with the new system, ESS was able to install nine spacious TX desks, with room for three more, in an area previously occupied by six TX rooms.

The broadcaster has also installed a multichannel desk, providing overall monitoring and the capability to control any number of channels.

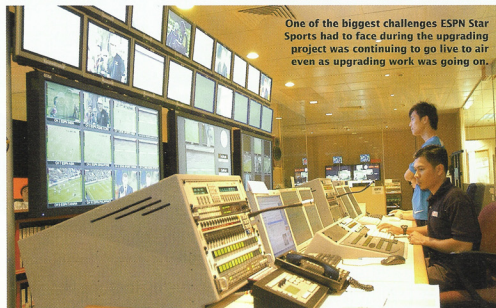
Each channel now has its own Quartz QMC master control and own Miranda Imagestore channel-branding graphics generator, said Rylance. Hence, sponsorship-insertion capabilities and programming arrangements have become more flexible, enabling the broadcaster to customise channels for specific markets.

Using a server for programme playout has also cut down ESS' dubbing requirements.

In the past, several TX suites carrying the same programme at slightly different times had meant a number of tape copies were required. But now, with the server, material ingested can be played out to several channels.

Other equipment installed at ESS' upgraded facility include:

- SeaChange 60005 video server, with eight encoders and 28 decoders;
- Harris automation control of the SeaChange server, Quartz QMC, Miranda Imagestores, Sony's DVW VTRs and Flexicarts for ingest;



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- Clarity Bobcat 40-inch LCD monitors;
- Crystal Vision's 'digital-glue' products;
- Tektronix WVR610A waveform, vectorscope and audio meter rasterisers;
- Lund Halsey desks; and
- Storagetek Powderhorn L700, fitted with 9950B tape drives.

The final phase of ESS' upgrade will be capped with an archive server. The broadcaster has already purchased storage equipment Storagetek Powderhorn and is finalising a deal for an archive manage-

ment system to drive it, Rylance said.

This will give ESS near-online functionality, which will avoid re-ingesting material. It will also enable the broadcaster to start archiving certain material to data tape.

"Now that the transmission area is complete, we are looking to the next phase — to install a production server system," said Rylance. This will eventually lead to a tapeless environment for ESS.

"It is always good to have a challenge!" the engineering director enthused.

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