

The Innovation That Grew and Grew



Score boxes in the corners of TV screens first appeared in the U.S. during the 1994 World Cup. Above, Germany's Jurgen Klinsmann in the opener. *Espn*

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Could anything be simpler than a box in a corner of a TV screen continuously showing the score of a game and the time remaining?

Until mid-June 1994, though, the score box did not exist in the United States. Viewers had to rely on announcers mentioning the relevant information or wait to see a line score flash on the screen.

The World Cup, which took place in the United States that year, changed that. But ABC and ESPN's primary goal was not to gratify fans. Instead, they were out to solve a dilemma: satisfying five sponsors that wanted their advertising messages to be heard during the games but were hampered by the fact that soccer has a running clock and no breaks — except for halftime — in which to run commercials.

So ESPN and ABC crafted a constant element on the screen that was also a running ad: the box in the upper left-hand corner, featuring a sponsor on top with the time and score below.

“It was a way to satisfy the sponsors’ needs to have some measure of acknowledgment that they were attached to the Cup,” Jed Drake, a longtime ESPN executive who was then a senior coordinating producer, said last week from Rio de Janeiro. “It was a sales necessity, but we realized it had great production value.”

The sponsors — including Snickers, Canon and Coca-Cola — got about 18 minutes of exposure apiece during each game, with their logos alternating throughout the contests in larger type than the score and the time.

The technology did not work perfectly early on. During the games in the first two days, at Soldier Field in Chicago and Giants Stadium in East Rutherford, N.J., glitches knocked out the box for substantial periods of time.

“We had two machines in the truck at Soldier Field and two back in Bristol as backup,” Drake said, referring to ESPN’s Connecticut headquarters, “and they started shutting down. The salespeople were not pleased. The next game, I assumed everything would work, but we had no machines working in the first half, and I was losing my mind.”

Drake was so angry that he punched the side of the production truck and broke a hand.

A rewriting of the software code fixed the problem, Drake said, and the score box recovered — and thrived.

ESPN and ABC, although pioneers in the United States, were not the first to come up with the idea. The score box was devised about two years earlier, in England, by David Hill, who was running Sky Sports and was soon after named president of Fox Sports. His inspiration came as he watched, with growing frustration, a soccer match on the BBC.

“I had been walking the dogs near the Wormwood Scrubs prison,” he said by telephone from Los Angeles. “I got home and sat down around 20 after 3 and wondered what the score was, and for 20 minutes I was never told, and I got angry.

“If I were on the football ground, I would have seen the score. So I said if we ever got soccer, I’d do it. And when we got the Premier League in August 1992, I did it, and my boss called and said: ‘That is the stupidest thing I’ve ever seen. Take it down.’ Two other guys talked me out of it.”

So, Hill said, when his boss called the next week to again order that the box be deleted, he ignored him.

By August 1994, Hill was at Fox, and he introduced what was labeled the Fox box in a preseason N.F.L. game, with John Madden offering his Telestrator analysis of it. Hill recalled receiving five death threats and contacting the Los Angeles police and the F.B.I.

One letter said something like, “You’re a foreigner, and you’re fooling with football,” said Hill, who was born in Australia. “We’ll have to kill you.”

However, the anger abated quickly as the utility of Fox’s box — then transparent enough to see the field through it — became evident.

ESPN next used the box for its Sunday night N.F.L. broadcasts. Fox deployed it for baseball in 1995, and other networks developed their versions. They are now ubiquitous, in myriad sports on national networks and regional sports channels, and are more often dashboards stripped across the top or bottom of screens than boxes, containing all manner of statistics and ads that drop down or pop up out of them.

Some make sounds when they appear on screen, and some flip to reveal promotions, as when NBCSN used N.H.L. playoff games to promote the Belmont Stakes.

At ESPN, a small group of employees devotes much of its time to determining how to improve the look and impact of these information strips. Spike Szykowny, senior director of motion graphics at ESPN, said there had been debate for years about where to put dashboards (top or bottom?) and

boxes (which corner?), about adding sponsors to the graphics, about what information to add and about how much of the screen the box or dashboard should occupy.

During an interview last month, Szykowny said, “We were working on our new college playoff graphic package the other day, and I said to somebody, ‘You’d think we were preparing to do major surgery.’ ”

ESPN is using a relatively modest dashboard for the World Cup in Brazil, which began Thursday, with the names of the national teams flanking the score and a sponsor’s name sticking out of its right side. The design is dictated by FIFA, so the network cannot tinker too much, but the teams’ jersey colors are there, and information like upcoming games drops down from the dashboard.

Looking back, Drake said he was surprised that it took until the mid-1990s for the score box to appear and become an essential part of the viewing experience.

“It’s one of those things that when you see it, you realize, O.K., it makes a lot of sense,” he said. “Why didn’t somebody think of it before?”

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