

ESPN's 3D Team Comes Into Its Own With Home Run Derby

By: [Ken Kerschbaumer](#), Editorial Director | *Published: July 13, 2010*

Last night's MLB Home Run Derby gave ESPN's 3D production team a chance to finally sink its teeth into its own event, with staffers and freelancers working closely with NEP and 3D expert Vince Pace and his team from PACE, to produce one of the most popular events on the MLB calendar for the fledgling ESPN 3D network.

The core of the production was NEP's Supershooter 32 production unit, complete with PACE 3D camera rigs outfitted with Sony cameras and Fujinon lenses.

"We've been building it with NEP for more than six months, and it is a powerful resource that can handle up to 20 3D cameras," says Chris Calcinari, VP of event operations for ESPN. "It also has 10 EVS units with up to 60 channels of record and playback."

3D Super-Slo-Mo

The production logged a number of industry firsts, including the use of a 3D super-slow-motion system. Rented from Fletcher Chicago and using iMovix cameras to capture images at up to 1,000 frames per second, it was located down the third-base line.

The production also featured a 3D graphics package based on Vizrt 3D graphics systems. Built by the in-house ESPN staff and graphics house With A Twist, it offers a true stereoscopic experience that takes full advantage of 3D.

To date, there is has been a belief that 3D productions would rely on fewer cameras than a typical production, but that didn't stop ESPN from using an impressive number of cameras.

"We have 11 native 3D camera systems with a 12th shooting the booth," says Phil Orins, ESPN, coordinating producer. Five of those systems were robotically controlled. One robotic camera was mounted on the backstop, and two cameras located near the batter used small Iconix cameras and were mounted in the ground. Another robotic camera was mounted on a 15-ft. pole behind the pitching mound.

Three 3D camera systems were sited in the upper deck to capture the flight of the ball as players like the Boston Red Sox's David Ortiz, who won the contest, launched baseballs into the stands and beyond.

All-Star Watching

The Home Run Derby is very different from the typical baseball event because many All-Star Game participants sit on the field to watch the action. That gives producers a chance to get great reaction shots and shoot interviews.

"We also have a Steadicam handheld unit with a beamsplitter," adds Orlins. The beamsplitter rig allows the images captured by the left and right cameras to overlap, making them ideal for shooting closeup shots, an important capability for an event like the Home Run Derby.

From the beginning, the goal of 3D is to deliver a unique experience, but the production team cannot afford to sacrifice documenting the game and action. "You can't back away from the storytelling," says Orlins. Having 12 cameras is a step towards ensuring that the storytellers have enough resources.

"The Home Run Derby is a great place for us to launch," he says. "3D is at its best when you have proximity to the subject and when the action is predictable."

ESPN plans to produce 3D events with a completely separate production staff from the 2D production. But, during each event, both staffs will attempt to figure out how the 2D and 3D productions can come together, allowing the 3D production to become more cost-effective. That could be range from simple steps like the one during the Derby where the 2D production took the left-eye output of the 3D super-slow-motion system on the third-base line to sharing shots from blimps and airplanes.

Tonight, Fox Sports takes to the 3D stage, producing the All-Star Game in 3D from the same production truck ESPN used last night.

"The competitive side [of sports broadcasting] is not on the technology side," says Anthony Bailey, VP of emerging technology for ESPN. "We want to help each other come to one 3D standard to make it easy to pull a truck in and do a 2D and 3D production."

A Question of Money, Too

For all of the interest surrounding 3D productions, there is still the all-important question of revenues. The current state of 3D production relies almost exclusively on the sponsorship efforts of consumer-electronics manufacturers like Sony, Panasonic, Samsung, and LG Electronics. Eventually, however, there will need to be a shift, with revenues coming not only from 3D-set manufacturers but also from general advertisers (Gillette has already stepped up as an advertiser on ESPN's 3D network), cable and satellite subscribers, and others.

"We are making an investment in this product because there is a direct corollary and effect on the distribution partners to drive new revenue services," says Sean Bratches, EVP of sales and marketing for ESPN. "It also opens up 3D to a new set of fans, as well as advertising."