



ESPN Integrates 3D, 2D Resources at Winter X Games

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The Winter X Games have always been a massive undertaking, with multiple production crews working multiple venues on the side of a snow-covered mountain. This year in Aspen, CO, ESPN added yet another level of complexity by heavily integrating the first-ever 3D production of the Winter X Games into the 2D show.

"More than anything, we relied on a huge sharing of resources," says Phil Orkins, ESPN coordinating producer for both the 2D and 3D production. "So much of the 2D coverage was reliant upon the 3D cameras because 2D was taking [the left-eye feed of] eight 3D rigs. We also share a dozen 2D cameras amongst three different venues and production teams. It's sort of a stack of dominoes that you hope doesn't fall."

The Beauty of Sharing

During the four-day event last week, ESPN 3D deployed a total of 15 PACE 3D camera rigs, eight of which were shared by the 2D production: three jibs, an 86-ft. Strata crane, an RF FollowCam strapped to a camera operator on skis, a two-point aerial FlyCam system, and two robotic cameras mounted on a 50-ft.-high scaffolding. The 2D crew took the left-eye feed of these 3D rigs and had directorial control over them.

"It's a very shared operation, but, when you're trying to shoot a jump, the directorial aspect of it is pretty easy to share," says Orkins. "It's not like a football game where [2D and 3D] are looking for very different shots. You basically just shoot the jump over and over again."

ESPN VP of Event Operations Chris Calcinari adds: "For certain shows and venues, the success of this [sharing] initiative at X Games continues to prove out the viability of producing shows with one set of cameras supporting both 2D and 3D."

ESPN 3D produced 18 total hours of programming at the Games, including coverage of the Big Air, Slopestyle, and SuperPipe competitions. According to Orkins, 2D coverage of the Big Air and Slopestyle was "almost 100% reliant" on the 3D camera rigs.

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"The Big Air only has two cameras that can really see the whole jump — the FlyCam and the high robotic on scaffolding — and they were both 3D cameras. So, without those two cameras, you literally wouldn't see the jump in Big Air," he says. "For Slopestyle, four of the seven jumps are covered by 3D cameras, so the gaps in the coverage would not have been acceptable if those 3D cameras weren't available."

Event-by-Event Report Card

The Big Air and Slopestyle also packed the biggest 3D punch, delivering consistently compelling 3D images for nearly every jump.

"I honestly think the coverage of those two events is the best 3D experience I've ever seen," boasts Orlins. "They are huge events but also very predictable, so all our cameras were placed exactly where we wanted them to be. It's just one spectacular shot after another."

The SuperPipe, however, presented more of a challenge. The event's unpredictable nature — a 570-ft.-long half-pipe where snowboarders can pull tricks at any point they choose — made for a hodgepodge of excellent and mediocre 3D coverage.

"Unlike the other events, where they go over specific jumps, it's impossible to predict where they will jump in SuperPipe," Orlins points out. "We had four cameras covering an almost 600-ft. pipe. There were some amazing close shots, but, at the same time, there were also shots where the athlete is 100–150 ft. away. It's hard to set up a 3D camera to be perfect at 4 ft. away and at 40 ft. away."

Fly, Follow Cams Impress; Mega-Mo Makes Comeback

Among the highlights of the ESPN 3D coverage was the two-point aerial FlyCam system, which covered the Big Air course exclusively and spanned 1,600 ft.

"For this type of event, it's perfect for us," says Orlins. "It was a really cool shot because, a second before the athlete takes off, it's about 100 ft. away and then, at the apex of the athlete's jump, it's 20–40 ft. away, so you're eye to eye with the athlete. It's a very high-impact 3D experience."

The FollowCam, long a staple of ESPN's 2D Winter X Games coverage, provided many of the most gripping 3D images of the four-day event. The FollowCam is an RF camera system mounted to a handheld-camera operator on skis and follows athletes as they complete a run, providing a first-hand tracking shot of the competitors.

"There was a little bigger rig than [the 2D FollowCam], but we had our ace guy running it, and he got it done," says Orlins. "The quality of the shots was excellent. We had full interocular and convergence control on that rig. We wouldn't mess with that while he's skiing down the hill at 30 mph, but it does give you more flexibility before the run starts. In terms of RF, the latency was basically non-existent — maybe two frames — and not enough to be apparent to the viewer."

Because of some technical issues earlier in the week, ESPN 3D was without its ultra-slo-mo system for Thursday and Friday. However, the system was up and running again by Saturday. Dubbed the Mega-Mo by ESPN, the Fletcher Sports-engineered system features twin I-MOVIX SprintCam Vvs HD systems in conjunction with a PACE 3D rig and provides replays at up to 1,000 fps in 3D.

"We battled with the ultra-slo-mo for the first two days," says Orlins. "But we got it back for the weekend, and it delivered some unbelievable shots for Saturday and Sunday."

No Walk in the Park

The Winter X Games are unique for ESPN 3D in that they are the first event ever covered by the network that doesn't take place at a stadium or arena. Rather, ESPN is forced to build a massive compound (including nearly 150 scaffolding structures this year) with separate venues for different competitions. This requires Orlins and company to come in with a very different mindset.

"We did some similar things at Summer X Games, but, no matter how you slice it, you're working on a mountain instead of in a stadium," says Orlins. "You don't have any stable resources, and you have to build everything, including a tremendous amount of scaffolding. You're talking about jumps that are 30, 40, 50 ft. high without a stadium to shoot it. So you have to rely on jibs, Stratats, and scaffolding, or you won't see anything — especially for 3D."

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