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ESPN All About 5D at Winter X Games

Posted By [Jason Dachman, Managing Editor](#) On January 27, 2012 @ 10:17 am In [Insider, TOP STORIES](#) | [No Comments](#)

The Summer and Winter X Games have always served as a workshop for ESPN to demonstrate its latest technologies, but rarely have technology and an event been so closely intertwined than X Games and 3D production. This storyline continues this week at Winter X Games 16 in Aspen: ESPN 3D will deliver the largest-scale 3D production in network history (in terms of total 3D rigs), sharing nearly 100% of its 36 3D rigs and production resources with the 2D telecast.

"This is an unprecedented show, the largest of its kind ever done," says *Paul DiPietro, coordinating director, ESPN Event Operations*. "There has never been a [combined 2D-3D] show of this magnitude. Add in the fact that you're on the side of a mountain at 8,000 ft., and that makes it quite a difficult — and impressive — feat."

5D Means More Compact Compound

The event marks the network's most extensive use yet of its 5D production model, in which both the 2D and 3D productions use one unified crew and mobile unit and the 2D telecast is derived from the left-eye feed of the 3D show. Although the 2D and 3D sides shared a handful of cameras and resources at last year's Winter X Games production, the two shows are almost entirely united this year.

ESPN has deployed 36 CAMERON/PACE Group (CPG) 3D camera rigs in Aspen, the most ever on a live sports production, as well as 14 HD cameras. Despite this army of cameras, the network has rolled out just two mobile units to the Aspen broadcast compound this year, two fewer than in 2011. NEP SS32, ESPN's dedicated 3D truck, is covering the SuperPipe and Slopestyle events (for both the 2D and the 3D telecast, of course), while NEP SS21 is teaming up with CPG Shadow 15 to cover Big Air, Skier and Snowboarder X, Snowboarder Street, and Snowmobile Best Trick and Freestyle.



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Covering Winter X Games 16 in Aspen takes 36 3D camera rigs and only two trucks.

"The geographical and topographical challenges we have here make it an extremely complex show in the first place, before you add in the 5D element," says Severn Sandt, senior operations manager, ESPN. "We have never done anything in 5D that would even approach this. The Little League [World Series] had about 10 cameras less than this, but it was a set camera arrangement at [a single venue]. Here, we are repositioning cameras between multiple venues depending on the day."

In 2011, SS32 produced the 3D telecast almost entirely on its own, sharing few cameras and resources with the 2D show. However, the 5D model, along with the decision to have SS21 take over events previously assigned to NCP10, has allowed ESPN to whittle down the number of trucks in the compound to just two.

"From an infrastructure standpoint, there are obviously less shared signals between the two trucks since we are now doing 5D," says Larry Wilson, technical producer, ESPN Event Operations. "Even still, we are pretty much at our maximum number of transmission inputs, because now we have to send left and right eye, whereas before it was only a single signal."

More 3D Rigs Than Ever

The 36 3D rigs on hand at Buttermilk Mountain include several wireless handhelds and jibs, 11 Fletcher Sports robotic cameras, a FlyCam on the Skier/Snowboarder X Course, four I-Movix ultra-slo-mos (capable of recording up to 5,800 frames per second).

"Just look at the sheer number of cameras and replay sources we have going here and then consider that we have just two mobile units running full-time doing back-to-back events," says Steven Raymond, associate director, ESPN Technology Division. "I don't think any other 3D program has ever come close to that level."

In addition, ESPN has deployed three 3D Followcams, a Winter X Games staple in which individual cameras are attached to engineered rigs and carried by camera operators on skis. ESPN and vendor BSI continue to perfect RF cameras in the 3D world, which, Raymond says, still have "a few wrinkles that need to be worked out."

ESPN has also brought out two 3D Strada Cranes to provide sweeping views of the X Course, SuperPipe, Big Air, and Snowmobile courses.

Emerging Technologies Leaves Its Mark

This year, for the first time, ESPN's Emerging Technologies unit is handling all Summer and Winter X Games scoring, which was previously run by technology vendor SMT. Although the unit has handled several international X Games events, Winter X Games 16 is its first U.S.-based X Games event.

X Games telecasts are featuring Neartime Visual Effects for the second consecutive year. Developed by Emerging Technologies, Neartime VFX allows the production team to display virtual graphics that seem to blend seamlessly into the environment in near real time.

The Huck Tower has become a staple at both the Summer and Winter X Games over the years and is back in Aspen this week. The 30-ft.-high LED tower instantaneously displays the height of individual jumps on the SuperPipe. Viewers at home also see graphic inserts that display the amplitude of each jump live and in replays. ESPN Emerging Technologies powers this technology.

This year, the Huck Tower is being driven by video tracking. Five small-form-factor HD cameras have been placed and calibrated down each side of the SuperPipe (10 total cameras). Proprietary software identifies, isolates, and tracks an athlete for the entire run. Height data is displayed in real time on the Huck Tower.

Looking To Xpand

On Thursday in Aspen, ESPN announced the nine finalists for three additional X Games locations that will debut in 2013. The winners will be announced in April, but ESPN production and operations staffers are already planning for them as much possible.

"Depending on where these events end up being, there are all sorts of logistical challenges. Securing equipment, what format or standard you are working in — the list goes on and on," says Raymond. "That said, it is definitely a challenge we are excited about."

X Games take place Jan. 26-29. In all, ESPN, ESPN2, and ABC will feature 16 hours of live HD coverage, and ESPN 3D will deliver 25 hours. In addition, ESPN3 will carry more than 23 hours of live competition, including more than nine hours of exclusive coverage. The event will be televised in more than 192 countries and territories to more than 232 million homes.

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