

THE BEST SEAT IN THE HOUSE



Those not lucky enough to be at Wembley in person for the UEFA Champions League final may get the best view of all as TV coverage takes the game to a new dimension



Backstage with the Rolling Stones at the Glasgow Apollo. Champagne flows for Mick and Bianca Jagger's fifth wedding anniversary. Mick, set to strut, sports a jacket with frills from wrist to shoulder. All eyes are on a white plastic TV set: the 1976 European Champion Clubs' Cup final, between FC Bayern München and AS Saint-Étienne, is playing three miles down the road at Hampden Park. "The French have hit the bar twice," says Bill Wyman. The only difference between Jagger and fans transfixed by TVs across Europe is that the next day Mick will be introduced to Franz Beckenbauer and Gerd Müller.

It can be as inspiring watching a football match from the couch as from behind the goal – or even from the pitch. Sandro Mazzola, the FC Internazionale Milano icon, is still stirred by the voice of the celebrated commentator Nicolò Carosio. "I listened to the commentary of the final in Vienna in 1964 when we won our first European Cup against Real Madrid and I got excited again because Carosio was truly unique," Mazzola says. As a boy, the great playmaker had pretended to be Carosio in a commentator's 'kiosk' under the kitchen table.

Klaus Toppmöller, preparing to coach Bayer 04 Leverkusen in the 2002 UEFA Champions League final against Real Madrid CF, thought back to his eight-year-old self, engrossed by the television. "I'm a fan of Real Madrid," he said. "I have been since 1960. My first images of football were the European Cup final against Eintracht Frankfurt. Those memories of

around 20 metres, but before the game you can come down to as low as three metres and get a good view of the players. After the match when players are full of emotion you get very dramatic shots looking down. When the Barcelona players gave Guardiola the bumps after the 2011 final, having the spidercam above, you wouldn't have seen that angle before."

The other Star Wars-style device sometimes seen at UEFA Champions League finals is the rail camera, but Oakford favours man over machine for flexibility. Steadicams, strapped to a cameraman, contain a stabilising unit that produces a smooth picture while the operator runs by the touchline.

Ultra-slow-motion cameras (adapted for sports coverage from vehicle crash testing) are usually run at 400 frames per second, as opposed to 75 frames per second for super-slow motion (normal footage is at 25 frames per second) so viewers get to savour every detail of a dramatic moment.

Vertical sliding pole cameras behind the goals peer through and over the net, dropping the viewer into the goalmouth action or providing a keeper's-eye view. Remotely-operated cameras behind the goals increase the sense of being in the thick of the action. Two cameras are dedicated to capturing the emotional maelstrom of the stands. Surveying it all is the helicam, spying on the hordes swarming up Wembley Way, and gazing down at the opening ceremony and post-match spectacle.

Co-ordinating all these feeds must be a technical

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Di Stéfano and Puskás are still with me today. That started my passion for the game and planted the seeds of a dream."

The young Toppmöller saw pictures filmed by a camera that swung frantically from end to end. Sometimes the ball went out of shot as the cameraman struggled to keep up: at one point he missed a fine save by Frankfurt keeper Egon Loy from Ferenc Puskás. The boy Klaus even lost four minutes of the match when the transmission failed. He was luckier than some: Real fans in Spain didn't see the first half due to technical problems.

Closer to the action than ever

In 2013, viewers will miss nothing: from the ultra-slow-motion rippling of a player's muscle to the rapture on a winner's face. Host broadcaster ITV will use 35 cameras for their 2D broadcast (and a further 12 for 3D coverage). This compares with 20-25 for a high-profile domestic match. Only six or seven cameras follow live play; the rest ensure replays from every possible angle, close-ups of corner-takers, a third eye for off-the-ball incidents.

"Spidercam is probably the biggest innovation in the last decade in big-game coverage," says ITV's match director Jamie Oakford. "It's a three-dimensional aerial wire system. It takes several days to install. There's a lot of health and safety provision because it flies above the players. There's a man who 'flies' the camera, called the 'pilot'. It's like a PlayStation innovation. Instead of being side-on with the action, you can be above it and feel the pace and movement. You have to fly it at

mind-melter? "I'm not technical at all," says Oakford. "My background is in football: I've played football, watched football, love football. A good director should read the narrative of the game and tell the story of that game. I'm a fan, so I try to imagine I'm a fan of the clubs in the final and try to give them what I think they want to see.

"The challenge, especially for a big game that doesn't involve teams from my country, is to get ►

Close up: Nwankwo Kanu shares his victory celebrations with Big Ears with the cameraman after winning with AFC Ajax in 1995



inside the culture, to deliver a product that suits everyone – this is a game for the world.”

This means knowing the clubs: which coaches will provide dugout drama, which luminaries should be picked out in the stands. It also means looking after the 81 UEFA Champions League broadcasters in 140 countries and broadcasting regions from Albania to Venezuela, some of whose commentators will be “off-tube” – operating from distant studios. Oakford cannot show replays during injury and substitution stoppages and leave his commentator to update viewers, as the off-tubers would be left in the dark.

Far-flung fans were invited to watch the final at 3D cinemas in Hong Kong in 2012, while Time Out Shanghai published a where-to-watch guide, including one bar with screens in the staircase. Even the US is finding the round ball harder to ignore: in 2010 Fox broadcast the final live on network TV for the first time. They have enlisted American basketball play-by-play announcer Gus Johnson to cover the UEFA Champions League. Before Manchester United FC met Real Madrid in this year’s round of 16, he said: “I’m developing a real interest in the games. The game I’m preparing for has Cristiano Ronaldo facing his old team. It’s like Michael Jordan in his prime going back to play against the Chicago Bulls.”

Johnson would do well to pin down Marcel Reif if he passes him in the Wembley TV gantry. Reif has commented on every UEFA Champions League final – bar 1997 – for German TV, not to mention several



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European Champion Clubs’ Cup finals. In almost three decades of broadcasting he has seen football’s audience change. The football refusenik is, he says, a rarity in dinner-party conversation: “It has become an event, so you have the football aficionados and you have the people who say: ‘It’s a Champions League final, we have to see it.’ When you have a Bundesliga game, you know your audience is football-specific. But when it comes to the Champions League final you know mothers-in-law will be watching. I have to think of those people, too. How much do I help them, and how much does that annoy the ‘coaches’ watching? That’s the gap you have to close.”

The other question is not what, but how much to say. “Bayern won it in 2001 on a penalty shoot-out and Kahn saved the last one, which made them

champions,” says Reif. “I said, ‘Kahn. Bayern champions.’ Just three words. Words wouldn’t have made things on the pitch better. Two years earlier, after Bayern lost against Manchester United, I said: ‘I know I should analyse now, but I cannot. I don’t want to.’ You cannot heighten the emotions of a situation just by talking about it. I have to talk because that’s my work, but only as much as is necessary.”

The art of commentary

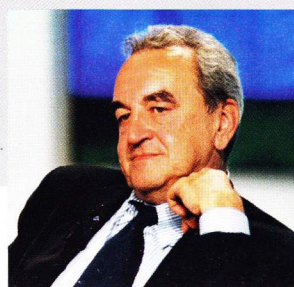
Michael Robinson, co-commentator on the final for Spain’s Canal +, is of like mind. “I have some information ready, which I rarely use because I don’t want to bombard people. I don’t want them to say, ‘When on earth is this guy going to shut up? I’m trying to watch the TV.’ But I like to have it there in



“The whole Camp Nou is a flash bulb! This unforgettable moment is being immortalised from the stands! Milan are champions of Europe!”

BRUNO PIZZUL (RIGHT), ITALIAN COMMENTATOR, GETS EXCITED BY THE ROSSONERI TRIUMPH IN 1989

“The prince becomes king in the Madrid night!”
COMMENTATOR MASSIMO MARIANELLA LAUDS MILITO



“The £1m man puts his name on the scoresheet, and returns a great deal of the cheque”

BARRY DAVIES AFTER TREVOR FRANCIS SCORED IN 1979: NOTTINGHAM FOREST FC 1-0 MALMÖ FF



Stars on film: cameras follow Lionel Messi during live match coverage (left); crowds gather around communal TVs thirsty for news and action

case a player is injured and play stops. Some commentators are commentating for themselves. They think they're clever. It's always data you can find on a computer; it's not the essence of football."

He regards the "non-stop narration" of his partner, Canal + commentator Carlos Martínez, as the hard-to-imitate exception. "Other channels with different styles think we might be the noisiest: when a goal goes in, the way we celebrate is extravagant – in northern Europe they're more sedate. They work on the fact viewers are watching the football and you don't need to know what's going on because you're watching it. I understand that but I would also recommend listening to the way Carlos does it. I can't imagine watching football now without hearing Carlos's voice because it's so musical."

Robinson feels the "visual description" imparted by modern camera technology has made his job easier. Reif prefers to look away from the screen when he's working. "If I see a foul live, I can say that was

a bad foul, or no it wasn't. The gadgets make things easier and nicer to watch for people who are not that involved in football, but as a commentator I try to look away from the screen as much as I can. I'm not watching television, I'm watching the game."

Robinson has played in a European Champions Clubs' Cup final – for Liverpool FC in 1984 – but is careful how he uses his experience. "It helps on an emotional level, you know what the players are feeling and perhaps how they'll react. But I try never to think about when I used to play because football has advanced – the players are more skilful, fitter, the boots are different, the ball is different. I don't like it when you hear ex-players harp on about when they used to play because it's a different game now."

Robinson played for Liverpool for only one season, but that extra-time appearance in the victory against AS Roma was the culmination of the Boyhood Red's dream – 21 years later he found himself slightly compromised in his new profession. "In Istanbul in 2005, I remember opening the commentary by saying, 'I'm sorry, I'm a Liverpool fan. There's no way I'll be able to hide the fact I want Liverpool to win, so let's not go along with the farce.' When they lifted the cup I couldn't speak for a while. I got so emotional."

Reif has been hindered by more practical concerns. "If I don't get to go to the toilet before the game and then it goes to extra time and spot kicks, which was the case when Bayern won the final in 2001... I commentated the last 20 minutes virtually dancing on my feet. So before going up to my commentary position I always visit the little boys' room."

Both men are still boyish in their anticipation. "I go to every game expecting it to be the best I'll ever see," says Reif. "If I didn't still think that, I wouldn't go." Robinson says: "It's not by chance that a football game lasts 90 minutes and when I was a kid films lasted the same amount of time. I would watch a cowboy film and the goodie always finished up with the girl and the baddie died or went to jail. But you have to watch football right to the very end because you never know the way it's going to end." ■

"WELL, I HEARD SOMETHING ABOUT THIS HAMPDEN SWIRL, THIS HAMPDEN SURFACE BEING ROUGH SO YOU COULDN'T PLAY FOOTBALL ON IT. WELL, WHAT ARE THESE BOYS PLAYING?"

KENNETH WOLSTENHOLME IN 1960: REAL MADRID CF 7-3 EINTRACHT FRANKFURT

"The curse of 38 years is lifted, a French club have finally won a European Cup"

THIERRY ROLAND IN 1993: OLYMPIQUE DE MARSEILLE 1-0 AC MILAN