

## ***STATS Player-Tracking Makes North American Debut at MLS Cup***

By **Carolyn Braff**, Managing Editor, Sports Video Group

Since acquiring SportVu in December 2008, STATS Inc. has worked with a number of broadcasters around the world to incorporate its player-tracking technology into soccer broadcasts. The motion-capture technology allows the network to create unique graphics illustrating such statistics as player speed and distance traveled. Last week, for the first time, American audiences were treated to those graphics when STATS' player-tracking technology made its North American debut during ESPN's production of the MLS Cup.

"We had a half dozen graphics go up during the match," says STATS EVP Steve Byrd. "That is more than any of us anticipated, given that it was something new. The broadcaster had to figure out where it works for them, how to use it, and how to speak to it."

### **A Running Start**

Two weeks prior to the broadcast, the STATS team sat down with analysts Julie Foudy and Alexi Lalas, who anchored the pre- and post-game commentary as well as the halftime studio shows for ESPN's MLS Cup coverage. Foudy and Lalas immediately took to the technology, especially the player heat maps, which are visual displays of the relative position of a player throughout the match. Bright red indicates that the player spent relatively the most time in that spot, and the map cools down to green where he spent the least time.

David Beckham's heat map shows where he spent the most time on the pitch.

"As soon as they saw the player heat maps in the truck, Alexi Lalas and Julie Foudy were drawing conclusions; these two analysts really got it," Byrd says. "When you find something that the talent engages with, you're already a couple steps down the road [with] broadcast enhancements."



### **A New Dimension of Coverage**

ESPN created heat maps of Real Salt Lake star Kyle Beckerman in a previous game and used them in pre-game analysis. During the match, the network revealed side-by-side heat maps of Beckerman and David Beckham, providing a new dimension to the match coverage that had never before been seen in American soccer.

The motion-capture technology was also used to track time of possession for each team, and ESPN was able to show graphically the lop-sided nature of the match.

Because ESPN was unfamiliar with the capabili-

ties of the system, a STATS operator was placed in the production truck to help smooth the integration.

“We tried to make ESPN aware of everything that the system was capable of doing, and the producer began asking for specific player information,” Byrd says. “We came up with a lot of different ways to display the information, once everyone was in a live environment thinking about what they would like to show and what they have access to.”

#### Teaming Up With Vizrt

STATS player-tracking technology interfaces with the Vizrt graphics-rendering engine that ESPN uses for its broadcasts, so the STATS team worked with ESPN’s creative services group to integrate the STATS graphics shells into the ESPN look prior to the match.

“Down the road,” Byrd adds, “we probably don’t need to have a person in the truck because once they understood what was capable of coming out of that system, they could use that graphical interface themselves.”

#### All-American Creativity

Because the MLS Cup was the first time ESPN had worked with the player-tracking technology, Byrd assumed that the broadcaster would use the graphics only a few times — perhaps during pre-game and then again at halftime. But ESPN was so pleased with the system capabilities that the network deployed the graphics during the match as well.

“I think that there’s going to be more uses for this than anybody thought going in,” Byrd says. “We also learned that we will present the graphics differently in this country. UEFA has our system in place [in Europe], and they do basic textual graphics. I think U.S. broadcasters and the American sports fan will be open for more-creative presentation.”

With one successful broadcast complete, STATS will return to discussions with ESPN about further partnerships down the road. Integrating the player-tracking technology into ESPN’s World Cup coverage is certainly not out of the question.