

GAME CHANGER

Eurosport's first forays into Asia-Pacific gave an indication that there was demand for a sports TV product coming from Europe but over the last few years the growth of Eurosport's channels in the region has been beyond expectation – simply phenomenal. We talked to **Arjan Hoekstra**, Managing Director of **Eurosport Asia-Pacific** since 2005, about his strategic approach and what's left to conquer

The Eurosport Group has had a broadcasting footprint in Europe since 1989, when it started out on its journey from TV channel to today's leading multi-media sports group. Back then, as now two decades on, its mission was to provide the best possible sports experience to its ever growing fan base. With bags of talent, creativity and an unwavering belief in the power of live sports the group has always believed in conquering new technological and geographic frontiers. So, in the mid-1990s, Eurosport's forward-thinking management saw that new market opportunities lay beyond their heartland of Europe.

"As a leading sports entertainment group this opened up our choices: a) launch more products in our 'home market' in Europe, which we have done very successfully since with our online products and Eurosport 2 and Eurosport HD, and b) look for new markets."

CLEAR CHOICE

Asia-Pacific, its economies growing rapidly and with a strong sports fan base, was the clear choice. Eurosport's first foray was into the difficult China TV market in 2002 with the Eurosportnews channel,

when it became the first private broadcaster to receive a landing licence. Eurosport had planted its first flag in Asia-Pacific. And it was a game-changer.

"It is extremely rare for a foreign broadcaster to receive one of those licences from the Chinese government; there are only 32 in the world," says Hoekstra. "Getting one showed clearly that there was a demand for a sports TV product coming from Europe. We had a product that was desirable and approachable, and we added excellent value to China's media landscape."

Success followed quickly. Distributors across the region from Malaysia to Australia soon began snapping up Eurosportnews. Bolstered by this, a fully fledged sports events channel, Eurosport Asia-Pacific, was launched in 2006. Hoekstra admits it was a challenge: a huge logistical investment to open offices, set up a production facility and establish a rights acquisition arm to negotiate sports rights specifically tailored to the region. "We were encouraged by the positive feedback from the operators, but it was big, and a risk for us. But a calculated one."

American business magnate Warren Buffett once famously quipped that a premium brand must always be delivering

“**We are about variety - this is why we are so important in the Asia-Pacific market**”



something special or it will fail. This is thinking that chimes with Hoekstra, who believes Eurosport's ability to constantly give its fans a viewing experience par excellence has been the reason for its success.

DIVERSITY

"We have tried to position the channel in a completely different way than the existing sports channels," he says. "Our intention is to expand the horizon of the sports viewer in Asia-Pacific. In this market there was a large focus on football and American sports, and we really wanted to show a lot of different sports so we launched with a portfolio of around 50 sports. I think that was important to the operators, for them to be able to offer choice and variety to their subscribers. Eurosport is not about one or two sports, we are about variety, and this is why we are so important in the Asia-Pacific market."

This is where Eurosport Asia-Pacific's mission connects with that of the Eurosport Group, or 'the mothership', as Hoekstra jokingly refers to it. Embedded deep into



the Eurosport.com brand which already has a partnership with one of the biggest online providers in the world, QQ.com, as well as a range of popular apps for iPhone, iPad and Android users.

THE LAST FRONTIER

Hoekstra is also still committed to conquering new markets. Top of the list: India. "India is the last frontier; it is the only country where we have not yet launched our channels. India is very different to all our territories in the region. It has a very high pay-TV penetration, about 125m households. It is the biggest pay-TV market in the world."

On the way to achieving these goals in Asia-Pacific, Hoekstra can call on a hugely successful model in the Eurosport Group's 22 years of sports expertise and experience. "We want to replicate the success of Eurosport in Europe," he says. "We have two decades of experience behind us and, for sure, we are going in the right direction. I'm proud of what we have achieved from scratch. I think there is massive potential for us to grow in the future, and I'd like to remain a part of that. We are always looking at ways to give our viewers something different, a unique sports viewing experience. As long as we continue to do this, Eurosport will always be successful."

A sentiment that would surely chime with a certain Mr Buffett. ■

Eurosport's DNA at every level and in each of the 82 countries it broadcasts in worldwide is the idea of sport diversity (the group covers around 150) and providing its fans access to sporting action at the highest level - and live, wherever and whenever possible.

A Eurosport viewer in Asia-Pacific has access to 526 live hours of top tennis action, from the entire WTA tour to the recently acquired rights for the US Open, and all of cycling's biggest tours and classics, a total of 388 hours of live. Also popular are athletics, motorsports and wintersports, which together accounts for 1071 hours of live broadcast.

NINETY PERCENT EXCLUSIVE

But where Eurosport Asia-Pacific carves out its USP, where it stands out as its own media entity, is in broadcasting events which are not available to Eurosport's European viewers. Events such as the IAAF Diamond League and especially rugby, where Eurosport Asia-Pacific offers 300 live hours from the best of Northern hemisphere club action, such as the Top 14, the

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Heineken Cup, the English Super League and the Asian Five Nations. In all, this year Eurosport in Asia Pacific will broadcast over 60 events at world cup and world and European championship level - 90% of which is de facto exclusive.

"The growth of our channels in Asia-Pacific in just six years has been phenomenal. Today we have around 3,700 hours of fresh programming, almost half the channel's annual output, of which 80% is 'live'. We started in 2002 with two countries and now we have 19. Last year we launched an HD channel, which allowed us to penetrate markets like Thailand and Korea which are completely HD. So we are going from strength to strength and are an integral part of the Asia-Pacific pay-TV landscape. That's quite an achievement after such a short time. But there is a lot more to do."

Such as developing its burgeoning rights portfolio and improving the quality of the channel in terms of content and technology. Hoekstra wants to develop the online operation in the region, which means building on

Hoekstra on doing business in Asia-Pacific

"One of the biggest challenges is to adapt to all the different cultures out here, as the differences are more pronounced than in Europe. You are dealing with different civilisations, with different customs and different ways of doing business, but also with different ways of consuming sport and TV in general. The biggest challenge in the beginning was to understand those markets, to understand where Eurosport could play a role and also to understand how I should be in my relationship with clients."