

Review: World Cup watching easier, less fun

June 16 2014, by Jonathan Fahey

World Cup games typically don't line up well with the North American workweek, often taking place when you should be in bed or at work.

As much as it's fun to go to a bar then, I appreciate having more options for watching games online this time around. Think about it: The first iPad came out just two months before the start of the last World Cup, in 2010. I had neither a smartphone nor a tablet then. Now I have both.

In the U.S., all of the matches are available online through the World Cup's official television networks. For English-language coverage, that's Disney-owned networks ABC and ESPN through the WatchESPN website and app. For the Spanish broadcast, it's Univision's website and Deportes app.

To access the games on WatchESPN, you must have a cable or satellite TV subscription with a participating provider—DirecTV is notably missing. You must already get the ESPN channel as part of the package, and you'll have to enter your username and password from the pay-TV provider. Univision Deportes is showing the first 56 games for free. The rest of the games, starting with the quarterfinals, will also require a pay-TV subscription.

Unfortunately, you don't have the option to simply pay for online streaming, the way you can in some other countries. You're also blocked from those foreign streaming sites, just as ESPN and Univision is restricted to U.S. viewers.

Both apps streamed the games smoothly and clearly. I found the picture quality terrific on an iPhone 5, an iPad, a Nexus 7 Android tablet and a 5-year-old MacBook Pro laptop. With both ESPN and Univision, I was getting the same feed I would have gotten on television, though with a delay of about a minute because of how streaming technology works.

This has changed things for me, for better—and for worse.

During the 2010 World Cup, I left the office with two co-workers just before 10 a.m. because we had to watch the U.S. play Algeria in a do-or-die [game](#). In the waning seconds of the tense, scoreless match, the U.S. star Landon Donovan knocked in a goal that sent the U.S. into the next stage of the tournament. The bar erupted; strangers high-fived each other and even threw a few hugs around. It was simply impossible to avoid having another beer, though it wasn't quite noon.

Last Thursday, I watched the opening game between Brazil and Croatia, partly on my iPhone, partly on my iPad as I picked up the kids on the way home. I watched Friday's mid-day game between Mexico and Cameroon on the Android tablet at my desk.

I wasn't able to catch Friday afternoon's superstar-studded Spain vs. Netherlands game live. So I logged out of Twitter, ignored news sites and stopped checking my personal email. Later that night, when the kids were in bed and all was quiet, I watched Robin van Persie's balletic header and Spain's collapse on my laptop, in what seemed like real time.

All of the games had moments of high drama, but none was accompanied by midday beers or cheering companions.

As much as I miss that camaraderie—and the beer—there's no doubt that these new viewing options will allow me to watch more games than before. It's incredibly convenient. Aside from a few nitpicks, the

interfaces are simple and clean.

WatchESPN offers replays of every match, which is great for those who can avoid finding out scores as they happen. The replay interface is a bit clunky, though. When you click to start watching a 90-minute game, you get a feed that is more than four hours long. Much of it is a static screen saying the game is coming. The actual broadcast starts near the middle, and there might be a half-hour or more of hype before the actual game play. As you move a slider to forward to the actual game, you might accidentally see the score if you move it too far.

There are some other interesting features, though they aren't particularly useful.

A "highlight reel" of the 90-minute Argentina vs. Bosnia-Herzegovina game is longer than the game itself. It has no play-by-play announcement, and it starts with aerial shots of the Argentina bus arriving at the stadium. Not exactly a highlight.

Meanwhile, the "tactical cam" is a video feed from high in the stadium. The players look like brightly colored insects, and the ball is a pin-prick, but soccer coaches can presumably gather something from the shifting patterns of play.

Full-game replays aren't available on Univision Deportes, but its interface makes seeing what happened, or re-living the big moments, much easier and more satisfying. You get a meaty highlight video that lasts about four minutes and includes play-by-play announcements. You also get short clips of important plays, from many angles.

I found myself sharing great moments of the games with my kids with Univision rather than WatchESPN, even though they don't speak Spanish.

Now, just because there are great mobile apps for watching the games, it does not mean bars should be shunned completely. In fact, I plan to duck out early to meet friends for a few early evening games. Shhhh!

More information: WatchESPN: espn.go.com/watchespn

Univision: univision.com

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