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Photos by Duncan Riley

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Brazil, while a footballers paradise of a tournament, was also the next step in local broadcasting technology with the refurbishment and upgrade of SuperSport's Studio 6; their flagship production centre.



Supersport is no stranger to football. With its myriad SD and HD channels (both locally and to some 40 sub-Saharan African countries), its long list of broadcasting rights of many high profile football tournaments the world over, its ownership of multi-championship winning SuperSport United to bringing the FIFA World Cup 2010 to the world at large, you wouldn't be ostracised for saying they are the overseers of broadcasting football culture in South Africa.

Indeed, while we're on the topic of the 2010 World Cup, many are unaware of the feat that was accomplished by our local boys to bring the tournament to world from Africa for the first time in history. So, before we get into the upgrade of the new Studio 6 for the 2014 FIFA World Cup broadcast, let's take a look at what they were building on.

Foundations



The 2010 FIFA World Cup was a giant leap forward, not just in football broadcasting, but in South

African broadcasting in general. All 64 matches were broadcast in SD and HD in four languages across the world and SuperSport was the gateway. In a FIFA TV interview at the time, then SuperSport senior producer, Max Tshunungwa remarked: “In terms of scale, it’s very big. It’s the biggest thing we’ve done to date.

We definitely had to up our game, especially on the HD front. We had done some smaller, lower-scale productions already in HD but now to cover the whole tournament for the whole duration in HD was a big challenge and a big learning curve for us as well.”



Of course, if you’re the host country you want to make your mark and that includes the set where you’re broadcasting from. The set had to have a professional, cutting edge look and that certainly was accomplished at the time. It was primarily based around shades of dark blue to match the SuperSport corporate identity and featured large narrow-bezel display walls throughout the backdrop of the two-level set, backlit Perspex floorboards and wall panels and multiple zones of presentation. While great looking, four years is an aeon technologically speaking so when set designer Michael Gill and his team at Michael Gill Designs were once again approached to design the new set, the bar had to be raised once more.

While the new set was designed by Gill and his associates, it was installed by Craig Pretorius and his team at Gearhouse SDS.

Out with the old, in with the new

Accordingly, building on the foundation laid during the 2010 FIFA World Cup, SuperSport’s aim was to commission a set that was in accordance with the growth they had seen over the past four years and essentially to make it future proof. Therefore, it had to age well. For the actual layout

and design of the set, Gill was inspired by stadiums found throughout the world. He felt this would keep the look of the set current and lend an aesthetic to the material that was set to be broadcast there.



“[SuperSport asked us to make it] bigger, better and more technologically advanced,” explains Gill. “Previously we had just one single set, which had to be used for multiple purposes, but the thing was that it always looked like one and the same set. What we have put into the new design is a number of smaller ‘sets within a set’, which will each suit different purposes, and look like separate sets while at the same time still looking very much a part of the bigger picture. On the wide shot you’ll see the set in its entirety but then we can go in close into the smaller sets. We have the main presenter set, an entertainment stage and some interview areas.”

While other set designers, including Gill, use 3D drawings to create models of their sets, Gill is known for his additional scale-model recreations that he pitches to clients, enabling them to get an up-close, tangible view. This was something he picked up in university while studying architecture. In this case, Gill met with SuperSport head of production Alvin Naicker and showed him the scale model in of the SuperSport passages between meetings. Naicker was instantly sold on the idea and approved the plans with minimal changes and negotiation.

In comparison to the real set the scale model is precise. Indeed, the model took two months to build but once Gill was given the go-ahead it took Gearhouse SDS three months to build the set in its entirety and the set itself was CNC cut. The entire project, from conception to realisation, took

eight months and the finished product was quite big at 25m wide by 10m deep and 7.5m high.



An interesting aspect to the new set is that it can be shot in 360 degrees and has seven areas of presentation. Previously, it was only possible to shoot from one angle along the panorama of the set but now, because of the added interview areas and the entertainment stage, it is possible to shoot from the reverse angle which offers viewers a new background in the same studio space. According to Ryan Toerin, SuperSport director, producer and project manager for the new set's construction, the camera count remains the same but "the versatility of the area has been dramatically improved".

In many ways, a TV set and lighting go hand in hand. Gill has had a long time relationship with leading South African lighting designer Joshua Cutts because to him, lighting is what gives a set its allure and produces a live, dynamic environment that pops on screen. The goal was to create dramatic, switchable ambiances with the application of lighting through a clever layout of the lighting installation. One of these aspects was the liberal use of LED backlit light boxes, of which Gill has been at the forefront for years.



The emergence of usable LED technology over recent years has enabled Gill to accomplish what he set out to; forgoing the traditional way of lighting a set with white Tungsten light which tends to dull the definition of the set and causes it to look 'flat' on screen. The new set has a more open and brighter feel with a primarily white trim, which doesn't usually work so well on television under Tungsten. However, because of LED technology, this was made a possibility.



“With the technology of LED fixtures for camera,” says Cutts, “the light spills everywhere and as much as that spill can sometimes be negative, if you use it positively it can spill and wash your set and your audience very quickly and easily. With white Tungsten light things become flat very quickly. The challenge was to keep the lighting contained in all the areas.”

While LED lights – 272 Anolis fixtures; most of them ArcLink 3s – are installed in the wall and floor panel boxes finished with opaque Perspex and glass fronts, Cutts' responsibility was lighting up the set, which was accomplished via Robe CitySkapes 48 LED Washes and Robe Robin Actor 6s to light up the presenters while Martin Mac 401s handled back lighting. Interestingly, the Anolis fixtures all run on a bespoke ArcPower transformer system constructed specially for the Studio 6 set: five ArcPower 16 x 12s and four ArcPower 144s.



Additionally, 1.3km of LED strips were used, both in the studio and in the refurbished studio garden; these were used to display team colours of the duelling teams on any given match. However, this proved to be one of the challenges for DWR's team under Bruce Riley as each strip had to be on an individual, dedicated circuit to differentiate their identities.

The wrap

Once again South Africans show that we can design, build and light sets with the best of them. While Gill and his team, along with Cutts, were integral in bringing the new Studio 6 set to fruition, Gill humbly admits that it was a team effort. Indeed, with DWR's support, Gearhouse's set building expertise and the camaraderie between all involved; the result was slick, professional and delivered the look SuperSport was looking for with precision.



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