

Best of both worlds

Despite the daily stress of traffic and the grueling and exhausting pressure-cooker of his job, Brace feels he has the best of both worlds — he loves Mississauga and he thrives on the challenges of TSN.

These days with TSN's bread-and-butter professional sports hit by labor disputes, Brace is more than earning his money.

Disaster first hit the sports network when major league baseball players went on strike back in September. Then, as if to prove that lightning can, indeed, hit twice in the same spot, the National Hockey League locked out its players in October.

Of the two, the absence of live Blue Jay telecasts posed the greater challenge. Suddenly, Brace was faced with the problem of having to fill a lot of air time while keeping the ratings from bottoming out.

"Hockey posed an entirely different problem for us," he says, explaining that it's not so much a "bulk programming" problem as baseball with only Monday night (and the occasional Thursday night) games on tap compared to five or six Major League encounters a week.

Creative programming

Filling lost air time meant that Brace and his crew had to dig deep into their bag of tricks to come up with creative programming. If ratings represent any sort of accurate measuring stick, they managed to do it well.

"Funny enough, ratings have not decreased (since the start of labor hostilities)," he says.

TSN offers a specialty focus programming where both the specialty and the focus are the same — sports. It means Rick and his crew can't reach for any handy oldie-goldie movie to fill lost air time; they must replace it with a sports program. Baseball and hockey's labor strifes enabled TSN to show events viewers otherwise wouldn't have had a chance of seeing, like the historic Canadian college women's basketball game in which the University of Manitoba Bisons halted cross-town University of Winnipeg Westmen's quest for a North American collegiate win streak.

Brace is proud of the fact that TSN has covered 130 different sports since it first went on the air 10 years ago. "Anything from bocci ball to snowmobile racing," he says.

One of the network's biggest challenges came earlier this year and it turned into one of TSN's major accomplishments.

The network had exclusive Canadian rights to telecast every single game of the month-long 52-game Soccer World Cup schedule from the United States. As it turned out, '94 USA ranks as the most watched World Cup in soccer history, a picture that's also reflected in the Canadian ratings.

"This is the most successful long-term project we have ever done," says Brace.